

Blockbuster Resonance in Games:
How Assassin's Creed and Magic: The Gathering Simulate Classical Antiquity

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Abstract

Blockbuster Resonance in Games: How Assassin's Creed and Magic: The Gathering Simulate Classical Antiquity

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Over the past two decades, AAA game studios have refined corporate strategies for the adaptation of real-world cultures in analog and digital game technologies, as commodities met with enormous success. Among these, Ubisoft's *Assassin's Creed* and Wizards of the Coast's *Magic: The Gathering* series have burgeoned from novel experimental projects into multi-decade franchises that constitute their brand backbone. Each franchise provides audiences with regular, unique, instalments simulating specific cultures, while also celebrating technological innovation. Further, the industrial strategies of each company have led to the formation of what this project theorizes as *blockbuster resonance*: a corporate strategy based on closely matching the perceived expectations of core audiences, overdetermined by motifs present in broader cultural trends and legacy media successes, articulated through technical maximalism and persistent marketing.

Prior scholarship on *Assassin's Creed* has focused on individual installments' stakes, while research on *Magic: The Gathering* has centered on the audience formations around the game, to great effect. However, this dissertation argues that each company's franchises development unfolds over a decades-long span, where articulated resonance is instantiated at a macro level and requires the analysis of multiple titles to understand how resonance is sought and deployed. That level deals with the development of a technical structure of simulation. Therefore, this project also circumscribes *resonant simulation*, an applied simulation form simulation (in a cultural studies sense), arising from adherence to blockbuster logics, which reconstitutes cultures through references to legacy media and entrenched institutions.

To discuss the twin concepts of blockbuster resonance and resonant simulation, this project centers four case studies as mirrors inside and in-between each franchise: *Assassin's Creed: Origins*, *Assassin's Creed: Odyssey*, *Amonkhet* and *Theros: Beyond Death*. These examples examine the reconfiguration of Egyptianness and Greekness: iconic simulations of Ancient Egypt and Classical Greece, themselves often juxtaposed in imperialist manners across legacy media, classical history, and museum exhibition, and here through photorealistic and systematic renditions popular culture references. The purpose of this juxtaposition is to demonstrate how each culture is simulated anew, according to the resonance present in today's popular media, along orientalist or exceptionalist lines, for the enjoyment of modern Western audiences.

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I. INTRODUCTION

1.1 From Egypt to the Console

As this project started to take shape in my mind in 2018, I was interested in recontextualizing videogames set in Mediterranean antiquity by examining previous adaptations of that time period and geographic locale from decades prior. Having spent my childhood surrounded by compendiums about antiquity, pop-up books, foam block puzzles, DIY papier mâché temples, movies, and games, *Assassin's Creed: Origins* was the first large scale game in nearly a decade to portray Egypt, garnering accolades from critics and fans alike. Certainly, no game at the level of fidelity I had grown accustomed to in my teenage years had made such an impact. Looking back on the 2000s, Egyptian-inflected adventures in television programming like *Mummies Alive!* (1997), the French-Canadian *Papyrus*¹ (1998), and genre movies like the *Mummy* (Sommers, 1999) and *Stargate* (Emmerich, 1994), box-office sensations in their own right, had grown scarce following their moment in the limelight, which now seemed to shine on Egyptian cultural adaptation once more.

In tandem with the development of museum exhibits and films, among others, the Western videogame industry had rapidly developed from the 1980s² onwards, and antiquity was a virtually endless mine of tropes and iconography, without licensing obstacles for producers. Early Egypt-focused game titles like *Valley of Kings* (Krischan, 1982) had tried to narrativize Egypt in maze-like tombs, seeking to mimic the success of text adventure titles like *Adventure* (Robinett, 1980). Almost a decade later, *Big Karnak* (Gaelco, 1991) adapted the locale's exoticized aesthetic to support the 90s platformer genre, incorporating elements from Nintendo's hit franchises *Castlevania* (Konami, 1986) and *Metroid* (Nintendo, 1986). By the end of the 90s, Sierra Studios' *Pharaoh* (1999) would capitalize on the widespread rise of personal computing, merging the nascent city simulator genre, popularized by *Sim City* (Maxis, 1989, 1993, 1999), with distinct periods of ancient Egyptian history; Simcity, but Memphis, or Rome, or Athens. In *Pharaoh*, players could manage the Nile's flooding, agriculture, festivals, and pharaonic rule in a highly systemic fashion (Chapman, 2016). Sierra would also produce *Zeus: Master of Olympus* (2000) the following year, capitalizing on a parallel trend of Greek representation, notable in the 1988 platformer *The Battle of Olympus* (Infinity), the 1994 adventure game *Wrath of the Gods* (Luminaria) and *Papyrus* (Ubisoft, 2000).

Throughout the 2000s, however, noticeable shifts in design trends began to crop up. Videogames in general were growing more centralized at a corporate level, expensive to produce and dependent on the kinds of trade shows I'll discuss hereafter. At the time, games like *Age of Mythology* (Ensemble Studios, 2002) and *Titan Quest* (Iron Lore Entertainment, 2006) shifted

¹ Adapted from the Belgian comic strip and later adapted into a videogame by Ubisoft (Dupuis, 1974; Ubisoft, 2000).

² As a contrast to the Met's Egyptian Temple exhibit, which opened in 1980.

away from the systematic representations of antiquity that were popular in the 1990s, towards action film narratives and forms that were more focused on a specific protagonist for players to navigate that world with, often mixing Mediterranean cultures, most often Greek and Egyptian, together with a stronger focus on their mythological aspects. In addition to this juxtaposition of Egypt and Greece, simulations of classical antiquity were shedding the technical languages of the 1990s, in favor of genre connotations that were popular in other media. By technical language, I mean the game mechanics and simulation styles of city simulators, real-time strategy and platform games that transformed into a general third person focus on specific protagonists navigating these worlds. So, in the media landscape of the 1990s and 2000s, Egypt and Greece had become twin suns for conveying antiquity.³ With both cultures, early games drew from the adventure or platformer genres, and eventually transitioned into complex management simulations, before slowly becoming more homogenized into action-adventure and tabletop games.⁴ By the 2010s, the period of development this project is concerned with, both Greek and Egyptian cultural simulation had mostly left behind its early experimental aspects and genre connotations and become formalized in the blockbuster genre conventions that Ubisoft and Wizards had spent the better part of the two decades refining. Yet, Greek and Egyptian connotations were not homogenized in the exact same fashion.

1.2 Antiquity Ascendant: Digital and Analog

On June 11th, 2017, a new vision of antiquity was unveiled to the public. After a year away from the public eye, *Assassin's Creed*, Ubisoft's multi-billion-dollar franchise was returning with a new installment set in Ancient Egypt, with its *Discovery Tour* museum mode in tow (2018b). To date, the franchise had covered many cultural locales and world conflicts: The Holy Land during the Third Crusade, Renaissance Florence, the American Revolution, the Republic of Pirates in Nassau, Paris during the French Revolution and London during the Industrial Revolution. This new title, *Origins* (Ubisoft, 2017), would go back much further in history than the franchise ever had, and it would trade the series' focus on one main city with the promise of showing an entire country (Guesdon, 2017). The game, and its promotional material,

³ Notably, games about Rome followed a different trajectory that often emphasized the military and civic history of the region, as opposed to the mythological aspects of the culture. Further, the development of games focused on Rome would either favor the conceptual simulation style in titles including: *Centurion: Defender of Rome* (Bits of Magic, 1990), *The Settlers* (Blue Byte Software, 1996), *Nemesis of the Roman Empire* (Haemimont Games, 2003), *Praetorians* (Pyro Studios, 2003), *Caesar I-IV* (Sierra, 1992, 1995, 1999, 2006), *Imperator: Rome* (Paradox Development Studio, 2019), *Rome: Total War* (Activision, 2004), *Total War: Rome II* (Sega, 2013) and *At the Gates* (Conifer Games, 2019). On the other hand, realist simulations often portrayed gladiatorial arenas, following the global success of *Gladiator* (Scott, 2000), including: *Gladius* (LucasArts, 2005), *Shadow of Rome* (Capcom, 2005), *Ryse: Son of Rome* (Crytek, 2013), *Colosseum: Road to Freedom* (ERTAIN, 2015). In sum, Rome appears representationally divorced from other cultures in antiquity with a focus on its own internal conflicts.

⁴ One crucial exception to this general trajectory lies in the longevity of the *Age of Empires* (Ensemble Studios, 1997) and *Civilization* (Firaxis, 1991 to 2016) franchises, that tend to deal with the interplay of dozens of cultures at once. Though both series are important, they're not dealt with in the main text of this project as neither franchise is focused on a specific culture at one time.

boasted an unprecedented scale that remains to this date one of the largest single-player games, in terms of game topography and narrative scale. If institutionalized UNESCO cultural preservation can be considered archaeological rescue, Ubisoft's work might be considered the great effort in archaeological simulation (UNESCO Courier, 1980). More conspicuously, by going so far back in time, Ubisoft could probe archaeological records and historical documentation to simulate Egypt *as it was* two thousand years ago. My eyes widened during the announcement stream. Zone after zone of Egyptian flora was shown and the technical, and overtly cinematic, scope and visual language of the game was far above its previous series entries. This was the first game portraying Egypt exclusively since *Titan Quest's* 2006 release⁵, and the scale was orders of magnitude more complex.

Ubisoft also made a great deal about consulting historians and archaeologists to produce an Egypt that was as accurate as possible. As cinematics and gameplay intercut in a spectacular announcement at E3, one of the most prominent industry trade shows, the company's tour de force was evident on-screen. Franchise director Jean Guesdon would later go on to compare this reinvention of the series, from stealth parkour toward a complete open world, to the industrial transformation from gas-powered automobiles to the electric car of the 21st century (Guesdon, 2018). In that decade-long retrospective, Guesdon, who had also been the one to announce *Origins*, described the process of making *Assassin's Creed* as changing the chassis of cars, and the technical movement between games as working on the undercarriage and engine (2018). The idea that cultures wholesale were chassis is indicative of corporate views on how specific peoples are meant to be marketed and sold.

One month after *Origins's* announcement, another game company, Wizards of the Coast (WotC), released its own take on Ancient Egypt, in card game form. Its perennial game franchise, *Magic: The Gathering*, would ship out a new product called *Amonkhet*, adapting Egypt as a looser set of connotations than *Origins*. It would not feature real-world landmarks, but it would remodel the Egyptian aesthetic to suit the card game's mechanics and franchising needs. 2017 was perhaps *the* year of Ancient Egypt in modern games history, as these two corporate magnates dominated the field of both digital and analog games. Moreover, each company was experimenting with new ways to translate Egyptian aesthetics for novel forms of audience pleasure: a playable Egypt, but in different ways. Ubisoft aligned itself with museums, marketing a new kind of game product, *Discovery Tour: Ancient Egypt* (2018b), with the free museum tour included in the game⁶. Additionally, Ubisoft's efforts in working with Egyptologists was positioned as a boon to practicing Egyptologists everywhere. First, it would provide new models of temples and the pyramids that outshone even Oxford's celebrated 3D models (Arbuckle-Macleod, 2019). Second, Ubisoft also announced its *Hieroglyphics Initiative* (*Assassin's Creed* UK, 2017), which would eventually become Google's *Fabricius*, a machine learning engine for

⁵ Titan Quest is a Greek/Egyptian/Chinese mythological take on the Diablo 2 (Blizzard Entertainment, 2000) game formula, featuring top-down action and a small protagonist character.

⁶ Also distributed as a standalone project.

automating hieroglyphic translation (Google, 2020; Ferrari, 2020; Figure 1.1). Ubisoft was now in the business of archaeological and museum assistance. Wizards had no such aspirations, and it was content to produce a game product that audiences would enjoy based on decades of fan requests and public interest in Egyptian mythology, mummies, and archaeology, which they rooted in 1930s Universal monster movies. Both companies would be drawing from Egyptian locales, aesthetic traditions, nomenclature, language. Ubisoft would overtly align with historical epics like *Ben-Hur* (Wyler, 1959) and museums worldwide. Wizards would retrace pop culture tropes. In response, the core of my research project crystalized around Egypt, and especially the clear desire to make ancient Egyptian culture playable in some fashion.



Figure 1.1: Google and Ubisoft joint hieroglyphics translation project: *Fabricsius* (Google, 2020)

1.3 Industrial Patterns and Expanding the Study: The Greek Mirror

However, one early issue facing this project was a risk of remaining uniquely focused on a single locale, while these game companies, much like the museums and film studios they were gesturing to, might think in longer arcs of franchise or spatial development. This issue was particularly prompted by the industrial strategies of both Ubisoft and Wizards of the Coast, which had both been in the game of cultural adaptation since at least 1993. In other words, both companies were set on adapting every real-world culture they could into their respective game technologies and systems. For Ubisoft, one notable step forward in the company's industrial trajectory came with their 2001 purchase of The Learning Company's *Prince of Persia* series, resulting in the acquisition of intellectual property that suited its technological infrastructure and

the sociocultural context of the 2000s. Shortly afterward, Ubisoft found massive franchise success in rebooting *Prince of Persia* (Broderbund, 1989, 1993; Mindscape, 1999). This franchise's previous success, and perceived safety as an investment, was attributed to its roots in perennially successful and recognizable works like *The Arabian Nights' Entertainments* (Mason, n.d.), *Raiders of the Lost Ark* (Spielberg, 1981), and *The Adventures of Robin Hood* (Curtiz and Keighley, 1938), according to series creator Jordan Mechner (2011). In parallel, Wizards had found similar success with its 1993 product, *Arabian Nights*, which Richard Garfield credited to his appreciation of Neil Gaiman's *Sandman* comics, particularly issue #50 titled *Ramadan* (1993), and *The Arabian Nights' Entertainments* as well (which was itself the inspiration for Gaiman's comic) (Garfield, 2009). Although Hasbro and Ubisoft were operating in different arenas at the time, their purchase of Wizards' card game systems and technical language (*magic-ese*), as well as The Learning Company IP (respectively) is indicative of an industry trend towards capitalizing on pre-existing media successes, and the late 90s singling out of orientalist and Mediterranean cultural tropes as ripe for good business.

By 2003, when Ubisoft released its rebooted *Prince of Persia: Sands of Time*, both Ubisoft and Wizards of the Coast had begun converging in terms of production strategy, despite being entirely distinct in terms of the space they occupied in the games industry. Each company produced stereotypical orientalist adventures and leveraged proprietary technology to do so, while at the same time participating in the broader formation of relatable representations of those stories and cultures. Since the intellectual property of these cultures was freely accessible to all, it stood to reason that companies would capitalize on free sources of inspiration, but it was the synchronicity of each company that is a tipoff to broader shifts. Products like these only appeared once interest in the subject was stoked by popular culture and resulting audience demand, reacting to longer trends in legacy media circulation. These companies were drawing from the same cultural well, but at different speeds, for different products and different design affordances. Among these trends, the parallel formations of and Greekness and Egyptianness in popular media stand out. Notably, the film industry's mid to late 1990s revival of sword and sandal epics, for the former and genre horror, for the latter, as well as game design experimentation, all diffusely contributed to this trajectory, despite seeming discontinuities between media forms and norms of cultural representation.

Ubisoft's *Origins* became a smash success in 2017, and that burgeoning excitement would lead to an even bigger success: *Assassin's Creed Odyssey* a year later (2018). Wizards on the other hand had tried their hand at Golden Age Arabia (1993a), Greece (2013) and India (2016), among many others, and were slated to release a salvo of cultural adaptation products. As this research project's early stages developed in tandem with industry releases, it was becoming increasingly clear that many cultures from around the Mediterranean, among other locales, faced similar issues of cultural appropriation as those of Egypt, in regard to their antiquities, and the expropriation of material and symbolic wealth from these locales in media adaptations. Although I was initially prompted to consider Greece as a potential case study because of Ubisoft's

announcement of *Assassin's Creed Odyssey*, I should've begun my analysis from the perspective that both cultures are presented as twin pillars of antiquity in popular culture. In my own life, I had actually learned about antiquity through Romanian playwright Alexandru Mitru's *Legendele Olimpului* (lit. Legends of Olympus), a redux of Greek Mythology (1990). I had been surrounded in my youth by just as many examples of legacy media about Greece, as I had about Egypt: ranging from Disney's *Hercules* (Clements & Musker, 1997), to *Hercules: The Legendary Journeys* (1995) and the *Clash of the Titans* remake (Leterrier, 2010) – to name but a few.

Even the Metropolitan Museum, where I had begun my critical thinking, structures its ground floor layout with one choice: go left for the Greco-Roman wing, or right for the Egyptian wing, as an inroad to universal culture. Likewise, the formation of archaeology, and classics more broadly, belies this twinning of Egypt and Greece. As classicist and religious scholar Barbette Stanley Spaeth notes, “scholars have come to recognize ever more clearly that the cultures of the ancient Mediterranean world were interconnected in complex ways and therefore should be studied with an interdisciplinary methodology that probes both significant similarities among cultures and yet recognizes important differences among them as well” (1, 2013). Spaeth's work deals with ancient religions, but it considers the development of an “artificial division born of academic specialization” that has constructed Greek classicism and Egyptology more broadly(2).

As I discuss in chapters hereafter, ancient Egypt and Greece are often positioned as mirror images of each other, twin sites of Mediterranean classical antiquity, one sitting as the foundation of European cultures today and one as the locus of proximate Orientalism, *the* faded empire (Said, 1979). Further, Greece has a unique archaeological history, often dovetailing and contrasting with what occurred in Egypt in the 19th and 20th centuries. A prime example of discourse about Egyptian antiquities is the 1960s relocation of the Temple of Dendur, part of a much broader UNESCO operation subsequently called “The greatest archaeological operation of all time” (The UNESCO Courier, 1980). Regarding the relocation of Egyptian antiquities, in the words of UNESCO director-general Vittorino Veronese: “it is not easy to choose the heritage of the past and the present well-being of a people, **living in need in the shadow of one of history's most splendid legacies**, it is not easy to choose between temples and crops” (emphasis mine, 22). Veronese's thinly veiled chauvinism would position Egyptian relics and sites as “treasures of universal value [that] are entitled to universal protection,” while asserting in the same communique that “these monuments whose loss may be tragically near, do not belong solely to the countries who hold them in trust” (22). *In trust* was certainly a unique way of describing Egyptian and Sudanese cultural heritage sites located in Nubia⁷ that had existed for millennia. The cost for Veronese's assistance, along with the governments of 109 countries in total, was great: half of everything excavated and the opening of Lower, Middle and Upper Egypt to foreign expeditions once more (28). This was undoubtedly better than the toll of colonial

⁷ Ancient Nubia, the zone in question for archaeological rescue, crosses the southern boundary of Egypt and modern Sudan (which at the time, in 1959, was still a British protectorate).

archaeology in the prior century, but noticeably different than the respect afforded to Greek archaeological finds.⁸

Excavations like Heinrich Schliemann's discovery of the royal palace of Mycenae, for instance, as opposed to the general archaeological apparatus that developed in Egypt, were donated in full to the Greek crown and are celebrated in Greece, today (National Archaeological Museum, 2022).⁹ Notably, archaeological engagement with Greek antiquities often, though not always, foregrounds a much more respectful tone between European scholars, and institutions, and the Greek culture that they study. Another example, the Antikythera Shipwreck, famous for the discovery of the Antikythera Mechanism¹⁰, a sort of orrery mechanism, is reverently described as the "oldest known computer" (Efstathiou & Efstathiou, 2018). It is often called the "Ancient Greek Computer", a "treasure from the sea" and a quintessential example of "craftsmanship, inventiveness and beauty" (Vallianatos, 2012). Although the methods of archaeological discovery at Antikythera were critiqued by other European archaeologists for its perceived lack professional acumen, the Greek sponge divers who discovered the wreck were also celebrated as industrious heroes, aided by "intermittent archaeological supervision" and a Greek military warship (Weinberg et al., 1965, 3). Archaeologists like Derek de la Solla Price, who theorized the Antikythera Mechanism's use as an analog computer¹¹, would publicly thank the National Archaeology Museum, the Greek Atomic Energy Commission for *even allowing him access* to work on the device in the first place (1974, 1). The Antikythera Mechanism, which today rests at the National Archaeology Museum, and has models in the Herakleion Museum of Engineering across the city, in Athens, was remanded to the Greek government. At a case-by-case level, as well as an institutional level, archaeology and museum curation noticeably takes a different tone when Greece and Egyptian are concerned.

In parallel, archaeologist Debbie Challis notes that the "cultural ancestry of ancient Greece [...] played a role in informing notions of Britishness (and more generally European identity) in the 19th century" and that the archaeological recovery of Greek antiquities has been crucial in forming that identity (38, 2006). Challis explains that Britishness is marked by the idea of "honorable asylum" given to antiquities, especially antiquities like the disputed Elgin marbles that tie "a cultural and political expression of the modern nation state" to "the power of a sea-faring ancient Greek city, an empire and a free state" (34). What Challis locates in the Parthenon Marbles conflict, which persists to this day, is that Britishness, European identity in general, and especially the kinds of identity championed by museum exhibits such as these, necessitated the

⁸ This is to say nothing of the geo-political context around the UNESCO operation, the necessity of the Aswan High Dam, the Suez Crisis and the nascent socialist regime of Nasser which heavily pressured the newly-independent Egypt to fight back against the colonial legacies of France and the United Kingdom.

⁹ Schliemann's reputation is however much more complicated in general, as his finds have been exceptionally damaging to antiquities. One notable example is the dynamiting of the alleged ruins of Troy, which have been called barbaric.

¹⁰ Notably, most archaeological excavations conducted in Greece, as well as finds like the Antikythera Shipwreck are reported to and remain the full property of the Greek government (Davidson Weinberg et al., 1965).

¹¹ The only one known in the ancient world (Davidson Weinberg, 1965, 3).

appropriation of the material goods and the incorporation of abstract stories from those cognate cultures (37). In contrast, she remarks that Greeks were able in the 19th century, with leading figures such as the philosopher Adamantios Korais and the author, and Ephor-general of Antiquities of Greece Kyriakos Pittakis, to set up and secure a model of “archaeological nationalism” based on “the belief that the material remains of Greece were a crucial legacy for modern Greece and Greeks, who were the true heirs of classical antiquity” (38).¹² So, in terms of the archaeological and museological perspective, Greece presents a different case, where the nation-state in question attained independence earlier and managed to nationalize its antiquities more aggressively than the Egyptian state. Though, Ubisoft and Wizards were more than happy to produce game products simulating classical Greece regardless.

1.4 From AAA Studios to Blockbuster Games

Recontextualizing these kinds of archaeological debates in terms of videogame distribution can seem like a jarring affair. After all, museums enjoy an institutional attention rarely afforded to games, often seen as a subfield of media studies (Chess and Consalvo, 2022). However, it would be a mistake to simply dismiss *Assassin’s Creed* and *Magic* as *just games*. In reality, the juxtaposition of museum institutions like the Met and the British Museum, should be considered with respect to Ubisoft and Wizards of the Coast, as corporate entities that extract value from cultural content. Where UNESCO had to settle for half of the antiquities they dug up in Egypt, these companies don’t need to do anything of the sort. Further, the economic scale of these companies is staggering to consider. Wizards of the Coast, which is a subsidiary of Hasbro, is often masked in terms of magnitude. In part, this is because its revenues are merged with those of its sibling franchise, *Dungeons and Dragons* (Hasbro, 2018). The Hasbro 2017 annual report listed *Magic* in a series of intersecting ways. *Magic* was presented in Hasbro Gaming portfolio, as the primary earner, in a \$1,497.8B portfolio comprising both franchises, up 8% from the previous year. Hasbro also lists it as one of its seven “franchise brands”, which account for 49% of Hasbro’s aggregate revenue (Hasbro, 2018). After a troubled quarter capping 2022, Hasbro reported that Wizards was nevertheless leading its pack, with a year-over-year revenue increase of 3%, to 1.33B (2022). Comparatively, Ubisoft’s net revenue was listed at \$2.471B for 2022 (Macrotrends, 2022). However, the revenue numbers, insofar as they are a measure of cultural adaptation commodities, are really only useful when compared to the national contexts of Greece and Egypt, especially when it comes to tourism. Egypt for instance reported, according to the Central Bank of Egypt, a tourism revenue of 3.8B USD in 2020, and 13B in 2022 (Trading Economics, 2022). As for Greece, Vassilis Kikilias reported Greece’s 2022 tourism revenue at a near-record-breaking 18B Euros. Although still a length behind, these companies are so

¹² This is a stance that persists in Athens, in places such as the Byzantine and Christian Museum, which was flanked in September of 2022 by a massive “STATE MUSEUMS ARE NOT FOR SALE” SIGN. Further, UNESCO never excavated sites like the Acropolis, the Olympian Temple of Zeus or the Kerameikos (potters’ village) and relocated them to another country.

enormous that their revenue numbers, for games that adapt the cultural sites of entire countries, now compete with the actual tourism revenues of entire national economies.

Another aspect to consider, as framing for how each company makes games is the extent to which revenue accounts for net worth. For instance, in a 2022 legal filing by Alta Fox¹³ asserts that Wizards of the Coast actually accounts for “roughly 70% of the company [Hasbro]’s value” (Businesswire, 2022). Considering this statement, Hasbro’s reported start of 2023 net worth listed at 8.97 B USD would position Wizards somewhere around 6.28 B USD (Macrotrends, 2023). Ubisoft’s net worth was 2.59B at the end of 2022 in comparison, with *Assassin’s Creed* listed as the primary earner for the company across 2020-2022 (Macrotrends, 2022). In short, Ubisoft earns more than Wizards yearly, but Wizards as a stable of intellectual properties, is worth more than three times as much. Broadly speaking, both Ubisoft and Wizards of the Coast are engaged with practices of cultural adaptation and selling culture as a commodity, competing with nation-states at an institutional level, but perhaps of equal importance is the fact that *Magic* for Hasbro, and *Assassin’s Creed* represent, for each company, the lion’s share of revenue. Political economist and platform scholar David Nieborg has discussed a similar situation concerning the practices of Activision-Blizzard, which leads to a focus on “proven strategies” and “growing recurring franchises” (Kotick in Nieborg, 202, 2011). Nieborg notes that the goal of the publisher is to “(re)capture as much market share in a genre as possible, and find a development studio, preferably an in-house one, to work on a concept” (203). Nieborg locates this as the core goal of the AAA-scale game studio, but these operations, which are quintessentially averse to any risk, appear in legacy media as well.

In the case of legacy media, this kind of entrenched reliance on tentpole productions and safety to shoulder revenue for studios has produced “a gradual erosion of the differences between media” matched with a growing “distributive scope” intended to increase the consumer size year by year (Acland, 2020, 39). Media scholar Charles Acland has described this industrial arrangement as “the ‘blockbuster strategy’ [which] describes the corporate rationale that substantial financial investment in a film, with various appended and trailing commodities, will result in substantial financial success, **assuming one is able to appeal sufficiently to mass audiences**” (emphasis mine, 41).¹⁴ Notably blockbusters are, in this view, formed by superlative technological spectacle, often meshing discourses of progress, realism and artistic virtuosity to produce a *hit*. Acland further notes that the blockbuster strategy championed by these sorts of studios has led to a “timidity” and “conservative strategy” where large studios would expressly avoid any deviation from the proven successes of the past, and current zeitgeist (39, 41). What Nieborg located at the economic scale of the game studio, and seems self-evident in Acland’s account of blockbuster films, is also visible in the homogenization of cultural institutions like museums and most importantly in the operations of Ubisoft and Wizards. This would position

¹³ A shareholder of Hasbro.

¹⁴ Though the term blockbuster and its application to games merits closer engagement and will be the subject of much of this project, this definition is intended as an entry towards the potential overlap to discuss in terms of how hit films and games are marketed and produced.

game franchises like *Assassin's Creed* and *Magic: The Gathering* as blockbuster games, only possible with extreme financial investment and inevitably circumscribed by corporate anxiety. More importantly, it would also position games companies of this magnitude as crucial actors on the stage of cultural adaptation, and media production more broadly; companies that subsequent chapters discuss as strong adopters of the blockbuster strategy mindset.

1.5 Core Research Questions

Thinking through games as blockbuster products would entail shifting my thinking from a focus on the dichotomy between museums and games, to a more freeform framework that could navigate between state actors, museums, films, television, and games in the way that studios might be operating. At the time I was developing this study and considering questions of cultural simulation, staging, authenticity, expropriation and hegemony, *Assassin's Creed Odyssey* (2018d), set in Classical Greece, was nearing release, reinforcing my growing interest in and criticisms of Ubisoft and other games companies accessing wholesale cultures, their artifacts, their temples, their history for profit. Steeped in the above questions, about cultural heritage, filmic adaptation, and the uneven power relations between institutions, the central research question at hand became **how do blockbuster games simulate culture?** This question has since been subdivided into a series of smaller questions, largely due to the theoretical density of the main research problematic.

First, **what is a blockbuster game as a media object?**¹⁵ Understanding this kind of game as a media object would require deep analysis of both *Assassin's Creed*¹⁶ and *Magic: The Gathering*, as different instances of an underlying model of game development. Second, **how is culture simulated in a blockbuster game world or system?** Answering this question would necessitate appropriate theorization of simulation and culture as cultural studies and media studies terms. Likewise, it would involve theorization of blockbuster qualities insofar as games are concerned, which I would position as emblematic of this scale of studio (AAA) and game product (blockbuster) (Nieborg, 2011; Acland, 2020), to accommodate a framework more attuned to the corporate strategies, and media object construction undertaken by these companies.

This project was always already positioned through novel *Assassin's Creed* releases, *Origins* simulating Egypt and *Odyssey* simulating Greece, and between an array of media about ancient Egypt and Greece: museum exhibits, card games, digital games, movies, music, and books that surrounded each game. It was therefore also immediately apparent that relying exclusively on a game studies method would risk missing the cohesive unity that game producers were drawing on. So, a fourth, more methodologically oriented question, that developed early in

¹⁵ Here understood as games of the scale produced by Ubisoft and Wizards.

¹⁶ Notably, classicist Ross Clare has surmised that the “*AC* games are simply *too big*, and unfinished as a developing narrative” to include as a book chapter in his work, *Ancient Greece and Rome in Videogames* (2021).

the project was **how can game studies incorporate semiotics and cultural studies frameworks to strengthen game analysis?** This call for developing a method for studying games of unprecedented scale that could be attentive to the media particularities of games (digital and analog), while bringing in much larger socio-political considerations discussed in this introduction.

1.6 Project Structure: Egypt-Greece, Realistic-Conceptual, Digital-Analog & Trade Shows

The dual focus on Egypt and Greece described above could only be achieved by answering the stated research questions with at least two case studies, one for each country. Ubisoft's slate of games provided easily transferable structure in this sense. *Assassin's Creed Origins* (2017) and *Assassin's Creed Odyssey* (2018d) were conceived and developed together by the Ubisoft studios in Montreal and Quebec City respectively. Further, the two games represented a reinvention of the franchise (Guesdon, 2018) and a direction towards open, dynamic, and complex systemic worlds. Early drafts of my work only considered that franchise, but this risked losing track of how large game companies operate more broadly. Conversely, the project could have focused on *Magic: The Gathering*, its Egyptian-themed *Amonkhet* product (2017) and the Greek-themed *Theros* (2013), but it would run into the same issue. Just as the project was in the planning stages, Wizards announced that it would be return to its Greek world, with a new product *Theros Beyond Death* (2020). This provided another mirror to the Ubisoft games, on the basis of different simulation styles¹⁷ (Chapman, 2016). So, the Egypt-Greece structure would intersect with the simulation analysis, producing four distinct case studies combining a locale and a simulation style: Realist Egypt (*Origins*), Conceptual Egypt (*Amonkhet*), Realist Greece (*Odyssey*) and Conceptual Greece (*Theros: Beyond Death*) (Figures 1.2 and 1.3).

Lastly, the project's inclusion of trailers, reveals, industry shows, video documentaries and other assorted paratexts during the data collection process brought up how each company markets their products prior to releases: Wizards does not participate in traditional industry events to promote *Magic*, instead generally opting for informal announcements that highlight the convivial aspects of the game and podcast post-mortems describing design philosophies, while Ubisoft heavily relies on trade events, and incorporates explicit discourses of technological innovation. These four case studies, and the emerging vectors would provide the schema for answering the research questions I set out with. This resulted in the division of the project into two broad components. First, a theoretical engagement with the notions of culture, simulation, and a new perspective on *resonance*, discussed hereafter. Second, the application of that theoretical engagement with cultural studies, semiotics, and game studies, along with newly

¹⁷ Originally realist simulation, which favors photorealism, presence and the perspective of contemporary subjects, and conceptual simulation, which works through abstract macro-systems like the economy, religion, and historic events.

tuned methodologies brought to bear on the four case studies. These two components would map onto eight chapters.



Figure 1.2: Assassin's Creed case studies; Origins and Odyssey (Ubisoft, 2017, 2018d).



Figure 1.3: Magic: The Gathering case studies; Amonkhet and Theros Beyond Death (Wizards of the Coast, 2017, 2020).

1.7 Chapters Hereafter

Following this introduction, chapter one details prior research on *Assassin's Creed* from its first installment in 2007 to the most recent work in 2022, as well as the relative lack of analyses conducted on *Magic: The Gathering*, in particular regarding any cultural studies engagement with the series. The fifty plus studies discussed in the next chapter paint the larger arc of *Assassin's Creed* development, its approach to various cultures, its use of game technologies, its rocky history with colonialism and gender and also its formation as a franchise. *Magic* is discussed more as a counterpoint which mirrors Ubisoft's logics, but works along its own technical trajectory of development, often under the predominant supervision of Mark Rosewater, the person responsible for running the game since 1995. This chapter reviews as much existing literature on each game as possible to shape a broader picture of how the games have been studied, the consensus that has formed across disciplinary lines (including literary studies, art history, archaeology, history, religious studies, sound studies and geography), and what has remained elusive despite the myriad engagements with both series.

Chapter two discusses a particular concept that has become increasingly apparent as the project has advanced: resonance. I describe it first in its more colloquial sense, as an example of vernacular critique (Acland, 2012). I then move to engage with notions of industrial reflexivity (Caldwell, 2008), where the term shifts in its uses from the games industry to hybrid industry-academia texts, and with a more theoretical underpinning of resonance in games studies work (Apperley, 2010; Chapman, 2016). Then, resonance is juxtaposed with seemingly different, but nonetheless proximate concepts and terms across media and cultural studies that reshape it as a core idea of this project: *articulated resonance*. That term is contrasted with culture, as a usable term, drawing on further cultural studies work to contextualize the uses of resonance, its subsequent formations, as *blockbuster resonance*, and how it sits in a larger conjuncture.

Chapter three deals with the concept of simulation, from earlier cultural studies work in the 1980s to today. This broader constellation of simulation theories moves through its modulation across film, television, theme parks, resorts, museums and finally games, to provide a more pointed transmedia view of *resonant simulation*, resulting from the interplay of resonance and simulation. Resonant simulation is also discussed as a form and approach that intersects with conceptual and realist simulation, binding together all the case studies despite their differences. Likewise, this resonant form of simulation is considered as a compatible type of simulation that meshes together with other forms to produce complex representations, in the cultural studies sense.

Chapter four discusses the game studies and semiotics methodology used in the study of each game, as well as the research protocol more broadly. This shorter chapter largely focuses on methodologies attuned to systematic study of large constructs bearing thousands of smaller objects, as is the case for each game. Those methods are then used to produce a workable data collection technique that focuses predominantly on the structure of these games, due to spatial

and time constraints that the project faced. The methodology also briefly discusses a game studies methodology pioneered here for use in research on trading card games like *Magic: The Gathering* (Zanescu, 2022). Semiotics work is brought in to contextualize the broader approach of the methodology towards processes of signification, icon construction, mythologies, and particularly thematic construction.

Chapter Five, where the project shifts from theory to application, comprises the case study of *Assassin's Creed Origins* (2017). Beginning with a short history of the industrial trade shows that surrounded the game, and its revival of the franchise following a fallow period in 2015-2016 (Guesdon, 2018), the game is discussed with an eye to franchise reinvention. Then, *Origins*' play structure is broken down as a series of elements, including game world, menus, activities, protagonist position, customization, music, and an account of every point of interest in the game. These series of elements are then recombined to analyze the broader narrative, and construction of culture using a systematic structure. The downloadable content for the game is then discussed in a similar fashion. Lastly, the *Discovery Tour* is analysed as a contrast point that both supplements and reinforces the core game. This chapter approaches the construction of Egyptian culture, as an Egyptianness rooted in 19th century Egyptology, and with a predominant focus on a museum-adjacent approach that intersects with Egypt at the movies, in their more adventure-oriented form.

Chapter Six covers the analysis of *Amonkhet* (2017), *Magic*'s Egyptian-themed set. This analysis begins by contextualizing how *Magic* developers scope products, and how they brainstorm which cultures, which features and which game systems to design as a key part of design processes. Card analysis is discussed in brief, in order to outline a different kind of systemic structure, one that constructs culture as a complex whole, comprised of: historic persons that are adapted, specific resonant motifs serialized in broader card groupings, and the broader diffuse formation of culture on cardboard and in play patterns. This generally entails discussing the predominant role of mummymania (Day, 2006), a discourse rooted in the mummy trope popularized in the 19th century, which has become a resonant motif for modern audiences. In other words, this chapter describes the formation of Egyptianness drawn from mythology and misinterpreted funerary practices popularized by Universal's horror films.

Chapter Seven switches' gears from Egypt to Greece. This time, *Assassin's Creed Odyssey* is analyzed as perhaps the largest single player game ever produced, and the maximalist design philosophies that underpin the game. From trade shows to an extensive promotional campaign and the game itself, the early stages of *Odyssey*'s rollout are used to contextualize the game. The game itself is then analyzed using a similar framework to *Origins*, with the added caveat that the game is nearly three times the size of its predecessor and is replete with thousands of elements organized into cascading systems. In contrast to *Origins*'s focus on Egyptology, this chapter describes the formation of Greekness, as a kind of photorealistic Greek cultural aesthetic fused with classical history, philosophy, natural science, cartography, and mythology. The arising issue is an aversion to dealing with any perceived problematic aspects of Classical Greece,

leading to an enduring elegy of militarism and Westernness. The downloadable content and *Discovery Tour: Ancient Greece* are also discussed in order to complete a macro-level overview of the game as a construction of Greek culture.

Chapter Eight, the last case study, analyzes *Theros Beyond Death* (2020), the sequel to *Magic*'s 2013 hit *Theros*. This chapter mirrors the sixth chapter, by analyzing the Greek-themed card product from its announcement onwards, discussing the magnitude of the series, the implications of designing Greekness in a game already understood as Greek-themed broadly, and the necessities of analog game design. Further, the sequel aspects of the game are studied with respect to the configuration of *Magic* as a series of interlocking products that need to adapt culture, without breaking a much wider language of simulation. The conceptual simulation of Greece, as an abstract series of connotations concerning Greek arts, religion, mythology and characters is described to provide an account of Greekness as an atmosphere of perpetual adventure and a paradisiac locale.

Lastly, the conclusion brings together all four case studies to discuss Egyptianness and Greekness as composite discourses that produce resonant accounts of both cultures, as they are understood by Western audiences and makers. The discussion here covers a micro-trajectory of game development regarding Greekness and Egyptianness to reconsider where Ubisoft and Wizards games sit in a larger context. Further, the projected evolution of both franchises is discussed with an eye towards the next half decade. General project limitations are covered here, as well as limits regarding author positionality are discussed once again. As an aside, the notion of the blockbuster game is also touched on as a result of intermingling game development with the language and traditions of blockbuster cinema, which runs through every prior chapter more broadly. To wrap up the entire project, *blockbuster resonance* is described in a more vernacular and industrial sense, as an outcome of this study, before opening the analysis towards future directions in the study of blockbuster games, Ubisoft and Wizards products, cultural simulation and the emerging common ground between games and film as commodities intended for a Euro-American monoculture.

It is my intent that these studies, the emerging theories they present, and the retrospective of cultural expropriation in Egypt and Greece over the past two centuries will provide games, culture, and semiotics scholars new perspectives in the study of culture as an ever-evolving system of identities and meanings that is bound up with issues of imperialism, capitalism, and hegemony. Perhaps these case studies will produce opportunities for reflection in game designers who conceive of similar projects. More so, I hope that the following chapters will give support to communities that have felt underrepresented, exploited, and objectified across all popular media forms, and especially in games, as the trajectory of Egyptian and Greek representation becomes apparent. Not Victory in Egypt and Greece, but victory *for* them.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW: ON ASSASSINS & MAGIC

2.1 Approaching the Subject

The *Assassin's Creed* franchise has become a recurring subject of discussion in both academic and journalistic works. Between the fields of education, history, geography, religious studies, literary studies, tourism, postcolonial studies, game studies and archaeology, the franchise has garnered sustained academic and journalistic attention. The discussions each discipline entertains are as distinct as each discipline is from the next, but they also converge on key themes, such as the simulation (and its perceived faithfulness) of the peoples and places that are part of each installment. There is also widespread discussion about the games' value as factual accounts, pedagogical tools, and archaeological models, which also differ between when the discussion happens across fields. The breadth of work should come as no surprise given that the *Assassin's Creed* franchise is concluding its 12th full installment, along with several larger DLC standalone expansions, and a further 3 full games announced just in September of 2022. The main issue, given the span of the franchise, is finding a cohesive way to even approach the academic work already done in a way that is sensical for this project.

On the other hand, *Magic: The Gathering* elicits much less academic attention, despite its nearly 30 year-long history, and its titanic presence in the tabletop scene. The Hasbro-owned card game, developed by Wizards of the Coast, has seen over 140 sets¹⁸, which have somehow evaded analysis in terms of what the game accomplishes at the level of cultural representation. There is however a throughline of academic attention from the analog game studies field where research has largely focused on the player and aftermarket artisanal cultures forming around the game. Despite the broader relative lack of attention, *Magic* engages in cultural simulation that resembles legacy media, and which parallels Ubisoft's practices, while remaining distinct from *Assassin's Creed*. This is most notably discussed in the work of Nathan Altice, focused on the cultural function of cards, and *Magic*'s head designer, Mark Rosewater, who has written and recorded a staggering body of work on the subject (exceeding 50 articles, 900 podcast episodes and published speaking engagements at GDC). *Magic* is ripe for analysis, and the designers are more than eager to discuss their design process. Despite their perceived technological and genre differences, these two game franchises are more proximate than their distinct development histories and ecosystems might indicate.

Therefore, this chapter is separated into two asymmetrical sections, largely due to the dearth of material on *Magic*. First, it moves through academic work focused on *Assassin's Creed* in order to construct a broader constellation of academic discourse surrounding the franchise, its potential and its failures. This section is subdivided in groupings that roughly equate to academic fields and their respective stakes. As may already be evident, such groups limit the academic

¹⁸ Give or take, depending on a handful of product sets that are not always counted as *main sets*.

works by compressing them and placing them in batches that the authors may not have considered important or appropriate. This is an unavoidable limitation of this literature review since my primary focus is considering how the series has been received and more importantly the overarching discussions that have taken form around notions of accuracy (historical or architectural), authenticity and cultural representation. So, each subsection proceeds through a different field and its main contributions to *Assassin's Creed* analysis, before drawing larger parallels between fields. Second, it brings in the literature concerning *Magic* to draw parallels and distinctions between the two franchises. As mentioned above, this literature is highly concentrated in the field of analog game studies and so will constitute a smaller portion of this review. Academic literature will be joined with some of Rosewater's in-vivo and post-mortem analyses which serendipitously resemble the processes documented by Khaled et al. (2018). This literature will focus on the broad design paradigms and tools employed by *Magic* developers which are applied to all installments of the franchise's unique sets.

2.2 Assassin's Creed: Many Fields, One Franchise

Since 2008, with the publication of the first academic article on *Assassin's Creed* (El Nasr et al.) a year after the original *Assassin's Creed* was released, various academic fields have turned their attention to the series as installments relevant to their interests have been released. However, the reasons why each field has come to contend with the franchise are sometimes wildly divergent. There are numerous perspectives that come from humanities fields broadly, and they have largely come to the series in waves, such as the most recent group of archaeologists who have turned their attention to *Assassin's Creed Origins* and *Odyssey* (Arbuckle MacLeod 2021; Bondioli et al. 2019; Casey 2021, 2018; Politopoulos et al. 2019; Poirron 2021; Reinhard 2018). In the manner I've chosen to parse the academic works, there are roughly six humanities fields that have attended to the study of *Assassin's Creed* so far¹⁹: Religion, history, education, communication studies, postcolonial game studies, and archaeology. Of these six, education will be discussed perhaps all too briefly, as its interest is less focused on what or how the series represents, instead discussing the series value in terms of pedagogical impact. All authors discussed hereafter are grouped in these fields and in the cases where their work sits between of these fields, their overriding concern is the deciding factor in where they've been placed.²⁰ A final note to reiterate before traversing these fields is that many of the works have emerged in disciplinary waves that largely mirror one of the franchise titles' releases. This is presumably because each group of authors has been spurred to action by specific titles, like the postcolonial studies responses to *Freedom Cry* and *Liberation*. Thus, there will be fields that predominantly

¹⁹ As discussed above, this framing of the literature is a necessary constraint to foster meaningful dialogue between all of these authors. There are of course works that might fit into multiple fields, not least of which is game studies which could be considered to run through all of these texts. There are also a few singular texts that will be discussed as inflections on the broader approaches.

²⁰ Such as Wainwright's work which concerns using *Assassin's Creed* in teaching methods for history, and where the concern is historical methodology, rather than pedagogy.

respond to specific titles, and a few that are more specifically engaged with the franchise as larger project.

2.2.1 Religion and AC: Secular Pleasures in Sacred Spaces

First off, religious studies' approaches to the study of *AC* have gravitated towards analysis of the spaces, especially the representation of divine and profane characteristics, as well as the use of rituals. These works also run the gamut in terms of installments, covering anything from the original title to *Origins*. Frank Bosman's work from the theological perspective sets the scene for how religion is critiqued throughout the series (Bosman 2016; 2018). In his first foray, Bosman discusses how *AC* portrays Nizari Isma'ilis, the second largest branch of Shia Muslim faith, within a Western cultural paradigm which "has always been very susceptible to anthropological, ethnic, religious and Eurocentric prejudice against Arabo-Islamic peoples and their cultures" (2016, 7). Bosman further argues that Ubisoft has been somewhat proficient in "discarding the stereotypical representation of Muslims/Arabs associated with Western orientalism, at the cost, however, of multi-leveled but functionalistic view on the phenomenon of religion in the video game series" (2016, 8). The focus of some authors on representational inconsistencies, such as the main Syrian character's decidedly American accent and incongruous body language are "superficial" gripes to be left behind (2016, 11). What matters most, from a religious studies perspective appears to be the representation of the assassins as a religious group. For evaluating this correspondence, records about the Nizaris from Marco Polo's journals and Christian chronicles are examined and compared with the game's narrative and characters. The conclusions are then that the religious libertinism of the historic Nizaris is converted into a "kind of postmodern liberalism, which allows a modern audience to embrace the Assassins as medieval champions of individual freedom and autonomy" (2016, 20). Bosman goes on to explain that the Assassin main character functions as an atheistic/agnostic position which is subsumed into the player's sensibilities, and that the "same principle that helped Ubisoft to overcome the Hollywood stereotype of Arabs/Muslims, [positioning the Assassin as a third party in the religious divide between Assassins and Templars], helps the game attain the largest group of players" (2016, 22). The end result is that the Arab ethnic stereotypes found in Western film is somewhat counteracted, but "religion is treated as nothing more than an ingredient"(2016, 24). A pattern of essentializing cultural, religious, and ethnic characteristics which will become a recurring motif.

Subsequent work by Bosman has moved to engage with the series more broadly, looking at the function of religious ritual throughout multiple installments (Bosman 2018). Here, the series is described as a "multi-level allohistorical complex with multiple narratological levels" (2018, 3). There is a first level at which the game is about a precursor civilization, a second level at which the struggle between Templars and Assassins is dominant, a third level at which the main character of the game is portrayed and the fourth where modern assassins are using the

Animus machine to explore genetic memories (2018, 3-4). Of particular interest is Bosman's discussion of how these multiple levels are held together throughout the franchise: rituals. He describes the initiation ritual where the protagonist joins the Assassin Brotherhood, which has varied greatly throughout the series while still having a stable format (2018, 6-11). Then, there is also the "Assassination Ritual", which usually involved a cutscene with increased focus in a "memory corridor" and religious prayers (2018, 11). One notable instance of transition is in *Assassin's Creed Origins*, where the prayers to Egyptian deities are replaced by a final invocation of the "rest in peace" formulation featured earlier in the series, indicative of the use of ritual as a binding agent tying the franchise together (2018, 13). Ritual's primary function is to make the series "more compelling to the audience" (2015, 18).

Where Bosman is focused on people and what they do in these games, Andrew Atkinson's main interest from a religious studies perspective is the use of space, and in particular sacred space, like cathedrals (Atkinson 2017). He remembers engaging in combat inside the Notre Dame Cathedral in *Assassin's Creed Unity*. His focus is on the nature of the religious experience with the space, which is described as "virtually sacred" (emphasis in original, 2017, 55). He explains that because of the gameplay featured within, the site itself was empty of religious awe and observance, and the "symbolic meaning is confined to the margins, yet the structure remains" (2017, 56). Part of the critique is that players are allowed to move through these spaces, and even damage them, in ways that are inconsistent with real world observances and behaviours permitted in them (2017, 56). Most notably, he describes "two contrary movements here—one attracting the player to the sacred space, the other allowing the player to negate the 'set-apartness' of such space by transgressing the rituals of reverence" (2017, 56). Atkinson is describing that games that use religious sites in this manner offer them up as playgrounds for consumers, which creates a "pressure zone" between religious observance and secular expectations (2017, 56). There is another consideration as well, which he refers to as "a secular god—the far-reaching restrictions of copyright" which have greatly limited much of the cathedral's interior 'virtual imitation' (2017, 57). The liturgical nature of the church is undercut by the broader franchise requirements of *AC* which is inspired by the 1998 film, *The Red Violin*, which produces "a secret and tumultuous history" to increase dramatization (2017, 58). Atkinson's critique goes on to say that the game "seems to project the greatest hits of twentieth-century existentialism" onto the character's background and the makers are "advancing a secularist ideology by inviting players to transgress the norms of sacred sites, while at the same time, celebrating their aesthetic form" in "flag planting" which is meant to convey that "the sacred is ours to play with" (2017, 59-61-66). Here, there is a much more critical perspective on what exactly the game makers might be doing to the cultural objects there are mimicking.

More recently, there is the work of Özge Mirza and Sercan Sengun, which approaches the representation of religion in *AC* in a more holistic way, including Islam, Christianity and Ancient Egyptian polytheism (2022). As they explain, "in videogames, religious elements can appear in two forms: distinct (focusing on one mythology) and indistinct (amalgamation of multiple

religious imagery or employing multiple religious mythology)” (2022, 249). They further describe that religion is useful as both “reference and motivation” in order to frame and drive videogame narratives, and with particular emphasis on *Origins* (2022, 249). The result of using religion in this way is producing “instantly recognizable lore” when it’s used as the backdrop of the game (2022, 249-250). They further argue that games are a perfect vessel for religious doctrine because they share many structural elements. At a more mechanical level, Mirza and Sengun track how specific game elements like narrative, visuals, audio, context, environment, architecture, gods, characters and even lighting are interwoven with the use of religious symbology.

Using an autoethnographic approach, the authors tracked the deployment of religious themes and symbols in *Origins* and separated them into the mechanics mentioned above. Crucially, they explain that *Origins* “uses religion to *feed* its narrative and characters’ stories and uses different religious symbols to maintain a realistic world view” (emphasis mine, 2022, 252). They also tie their analysis back to Henry Jenkins’ juxtaposition of games and “older stories, which have taken the form of hero’s odysseys, quest myths, or travel narratives” (Jenkins in Mirza and Sengun, 2022, 253). There is a broad positioning of *AC* games as a form of new mythology amalgamated from a slew of religious symbols and practices, which map onto older media forms handily. They also explain that in the broader deployment of religious themes, the game constructs a “consistent and well-defined language” that indicated to players what faction (cultural or religious) is located in what area of the games, with sharp distinctions between Roman and Egyptian architecture (2022, 255).

Perhaps most importantly for my engagement with simulation, the authors describe using Clifford Geertz’ cultural theory on religion to explain how games like *Origins* produce a “similar system of symbols that aims to capture its players in a self-contained reality through interaction” (2022, 258). The implication is that these kinds of games are built almost like a trap for players, and the religious symbolism running through all aspects of the simulation “increase its realism and historical authenticity²¹” and lead to the formation of “cultural or subcultural patterns” that fold players into the game’s representational aspects. Religious studies’ engagement with the *AC* franchise is deeply concerned with the use and appropriation of religious elements, peoples and places, and largely from the perspective of authenticity and catering to player expectations. This is a recurring observation across other fields as well, including history, which I turn to next.

2.2.2 History and AC: The Problem with Accuracy

Cordoning off the field of history in this literature review is particularly challenging because in some ways every single author is addressing historical representation or the idea of historical moment to an extent. However, the authors in section are more explicitly engaged with

²¹ Note the use of authenticity, and not accuracy, which is a recurring distinction to keep in mind as we move into the work historians have produced on Assassin’s Creed.

the study of history as a process, historiography, or publish their work in history-focused venues, indicating an accord between their peers that their work is relevant to the field. There are two kinds of works discussed hereafter. First, game reviews for history journals, such as the works of (Bazile 2021; Magra 2021; Hattem 2021). Second, longer form academic inquiries (Dow 2013; Chapman 2016; Hammar 2017; Banker 2020; Joyce 2022).

All three of these reviews were published together in the *American Historical Review*, and each deal with a different installment in the series. They respectively cover *ACIII* (Hattem 2021), *ACIV: Black Flag* (Magra 2021) and the large scale expansion to *Black Flag*, called *Freedom Cry* (Bazile 2021). Further, they appear in this order as well, constituting a broader engagement with the franchise, which the issue editor has flagged as a an “initial impression of epochs, characters, and events in this visually compelling ludic format” (Wang, 2021). Michael Hattem’s review of *AC: III* judges the game based on its “relatively accurate depictions of everyday life” and the fidelity of Boston and New York in terms of “the actual and social geography of these urban settings” (2021, 215). He also remarks that the game’s systems, places and focal events “incorporate the ethos of the neo-Progressive interpretation of the period, which has focused on the conflict between class interests” (2021, 215). In his view, the game is indicative of the progressive historiographical program of the “New Left” and “inclusion school” through “its foregrounding of the racial and ethnic diversity of the colonies in this period” (2021, 215). Hattem is attentive to how the game is broadly structured to appeal to more modern sensibilities, which he compares to the breakout musical *Hamilton*, though he imputes more historical expertise to the game (2021, 216). Or in other words, “the spirit of recent academic scholarship” combined with “Founders Chic”²² sensibilities. The game is self-critical, but only to the extent that it’s still appealing to contemporary audiences.

Christopher Magra’s review of *Black Flag* is similarly positioned, questioning whether videogames “[perpetuate] myths and fantasies for the sake of entertainment” (2021, 216). Here, the game is positioned in the context of the famous *Treasure Island* (Stevenson, 1883) and Disney’s *Pirates of the Caribbean* franchise (2003-2017). Magra’s focus is on how the game is big business, with an estimated 1.38B in gross revenue, wondering how much academic research *actually* makes it into the series. There’s a critique of how “Ubisoft marketed the game for its historic accuracy”, which was touted by creative director Jean Guesdon as a selling feature, allowing players to meet and play with famous characters like Blackbeard (2021, 216). What Magra draws attention to is that makers of *Black Flag* didn’t read academic or expert material on the locale or era, nor did they consult with faculty specialized in the field (2021, 217). Rather, lead writer Darby McDevitt visited Costa Rica and the Dominican Republic to “get a feel for tropical regions” and read about Caribbean sugar plantations (2021, 216-217). The resulting tension is that the game has a “degree of historical authenticity baked into [...] people and places”, while not being very historically accurate (2021, 217). Magra further notes that

²² Founders Chic is a general term for referring to neo-federalist reverence for American founders, which is positioned as an anti-liberal reaction from the Reagan administration to promote patriotism (Brands, 2003).

“geography is condensed for the sake of convenience”, and that the languages present in the game (French, English, Spanish and Portuguese) have “all been modernized to appease consumer sensibilities” (2021, 217). There’s also a degree of disappointment because the characters appear as “largely apolitical violent outlaws who use illicit and bloodthirsty means to attain wealth”, which is largely removed from their real-world social program of forming a “moral economy against the rising capitalist tide” (2021, 217). The game is about real pirates insofar as *Pirates of the Caribbean* (Verbinski, 2003) is about them. Magra’s final observation is that Ubisoft is a for-profit company, and they are less committed to “absolute authenticity”, than they are to “[drawing] revenue from entertaining consumers”, which leads to the use of history as a tool for boosting profits (2021, 217).

Much like other authors in this review, Julien Bazille’s review of *Freedom Cry*, a large DLC for *Black Flag*, is focused on the tension between “fictional creation” and “historical reference” which the game filters through the subject of “the trade and exploitation of slaves” in the Caribbean (2021, 218). This piece discussing *Freedom Cry* is part of a broader engagement with this installment *in particular* from postcolonial scholars as particularly challenging and controversial. Bazille is concerned with analysing *Freedom Cry*’s narrative and representative aspects in its context as a “simulation”, with the acknowledgement that “stylistic realism does not always imply accuracy” (2021, 218). As he explains, the “plantation machine” is presented as the game’s “playground” (2021, 218). Conversely, to the main protagonist, Adéwalé, a freed-slave, quartermaster and now captain, “the world is a playground, an environment not to be feared but to be discovered and mastered” (2021, 218). Bazille gives the makers some credit for avoiding obvious stereotypes of slavery through the integration of historical expertise, and Creole languages, songs and individuals (2021, 218). On the other hand, he also explains that “their [Ubisoft] reliance on details sometimes acts as a misdirection, a means to avoid difficult debates or to engage only shallowly with them” (2021, 218). For Bazille, this misdirection is locked in because the interactive medium of games, and the franchise’s commitments, lead to the linking of the “figure of the (resisting) slave” with that of the protagonist assassin (2021, 219). He views the game as a “touristic exploration punctuated by bursts of violent liberation”, while positioning the player as “savior” (2021, 219). The focus is on providing modern players with an “engaging” fantasy with Caribbean colonial exploitation as window dressing, which sometimes verges on something more profound (2021, 219).

The reviews discussed above set the scene for the broader analyses that historians and history-focused media scholars are conducting on the *AC* franchise. The stakes often tie back to issues of simulation accuracy, historiographic manipulation, and hegemony. Broadly speaking, the field is concerned with the representational fidelity of the series. For instance, Emil Lundedal Hammar discusses *Freedom Cry* as a modern hegemonic production of the past in line with the underlying cultural norms running through our societies (2017). Moreover, he explains that institutions like museums and modern media depict historical events as “entertainment or documentary” (372-373). Hammar’s work is situated in a cultural memory approach, which he

views as compatible with historical methods. Most notably, his view of the *past*, as an extremely broad category, is “an image [...], dependent on the *articulation* of certain selected variables and the exclusion of possible alternatives” (emphasis mine, 373). The idea of articulating content derives from the “multiple pressures and aims” of modern corporate game development, and broader “existing power relations in the form of hegemony” (373). Hammar cites Antonio Gramsci’s definition of hegemony as a catalyst for stabilizing power relations (373). Insofar as this idea of articulated hegemony applies to *AC*, Hammar singles out Ubisoft’s employment (materially speaking) of historians to produce an “in-game textual encyclopedia”, filled with detailed representations of “tangible material architecture, fashion, technology, landscape, flora and fauna”, and whose purpose it is to conjure historical “realism and authenticity” (376). The use of experts in the field “invited players to accept the authenticity of the games’s simulations of historical events, cultures and geography” (376).

Hammar further describes Ubisoft as a brand “curator” which uses a “double-binding mechanism – reliance on correspondence to established historical fact, while being concurrently able to claim that the narrative is purely fictional with made-up characters and events” (376). The series is thus able to market itself as historical, while dodging historical critiques by claiming to be a work of pop-culture fiction. Ubisoft gets to have their cake and eat it too. *Freedom Cry* steps into this arena of discourses as a counterfactual narrative that “instrumentalizes and quantifies the liberation of slaves as a resource upgrade” (381). The more you free, the stronger you get. Yet, as Hammar notes, “the subject of transatlantic slavery and how oppression is depicted in *Freedom Cry* is uncomfortable, but it is never *too* uncomfortable” (emphasis in original, 382). This point is echoed by Souvik Mukherjee in his discussion of cultural imperialism (2017, 68). Adéwalé is described as tough against colonial oppression, which invariably dovetails with stereotypical depictions of black men as “menacing in hegemonic media narratives” (382). Hammar ties this representation to Stuart Hall’s “binary structure of the stereotype”, where the representation is always bound to respond to existing cultural stereotypes (Hall in Hammar, 382). Like other franchise offerings, *Freedom Cry* must “meet consumer expectations of the established brand as an entertainment product” (383). In this, the past is positioned in a way meant to “relate to use in the present” (384). Recounting a review by games journalist Evan Narcisse, the text draws attention to the potential and inherent limits of *Freedom Cry* as a “placebo for [...] historical voids” which manages to soothe the people who see themselves and their “ancestral line” on the screen, yet offers little more (Narcisse in Hammar, 388). The historical double-bind is unavoidable then, and the act of representing the culture in *AC* consistently articulates stereotypes at a comfortable distance for audiences to explore a fantastic past. Their emancipatory potential is either yet another strategy for capturing consumers, or a by-product of that strategy.

In parallel with the other works discussed here is Bryan Banker’s discussion of historical appropriation of Egypt and Greece in various media, which projects modern ideas of race into antiquity (Banker 2020). He describes racial historical inaccuracy such as those in the

blockbuster movies *Exodus: Gods and Kings* (Scott, 2014) and *Gods of Egypt* (Proyas, 2016), as a backdrop for the more recent *Troy: Fall of City* (Farr, 2018), where a Black-British actor cast as Achilles was subject to racist campaigning claiming that the mythical character was actually portrayed as white in Homer's *Illiad* (2020, 1). Banker deploys Fields and Fields' concept of *racecraft*, "patterned on witchcraft, to explain how ensembles of racial beliefs, concepts and practices are 'crafted' onto lived realities, that [...] are accepted as real and are recreated through their own continuing acceptance practice" (2020, 2). The main result of racecrafting is that the crafted racial representation is taken as true (2020, 2). Banker asserts this as the case in *AC: Origins* which also faced racist claims of "'blackwashing' ancient Egypt, as Egyptian characters in the game have notionally dark skin, in contrast to their notionally white Greek and Roman counterparts" (2020, 2). Banker explains that this division of black of white, as racial categories, arises out of a modern "preoccupation in popular culture," rather than social views at the time represented (2020, 2). Although the representation of race is in line with documentation of the period, Banker refers to the game as "faithful, white fictionalized" (2020, 3). The result is that the racecraft present in *Origins* is understood as an attempt to undo Hollywood whitewashing, which ironically "reproduces mystification about race and racism" (2020, 3). There is a deeper discussion to have about the mechanics of this racecrafting in Chapter VI, but for now it should be noted that this process occurs at multiple levels of "visual materiality", including showing the everyday lives of ancient Egyptians (2020, 7-8). What interests Banker is that the game doesn't shy away from depicting "racial difference between Egyptians and Greeks (as well as Romans" which maps onto religious practices, symbols, power, wealth, and land ownership by game characters (2020, 9). Though, whether Bayek occupies a social position that corresponds to modern racecrafting practices or is external in a similar manner to *Freedom Cry's* protagonist is an equally important matter to consider in my analysis. Banker's final point is that "while not realizing it, players accept racecrafted diversity as real" at a foundational level for the game (2020, 10). It is more positive than the kind of racecraft discussed in films and tv, but the "mystification of race and racism that the video game produces, from the historical speculation that inspired it, is done with political intent", which is subject to Ubisoft's prerogatives (2020, 11). Though, what motivates Ubisoft is less evident here.

If the stakes for historians lie in historical accuracy, authenticity and the manipulation or re-enactment of history, then Adam Chapman's work on historical simulation is perhaps the foremost example, in terms of analytic breadth and depth (2016). Chapman's *Digital Games as History* runs throughout this project, and it is impossible to attend to the many complexities of his discussion of simulation here (though is the subject of Chapter IV). Despite not being a text uniquely dedicated to the *AC* franchise, Chapman discusses it as an exemplar of what he calls *realist-reconstructionist* simulation, so-called because of "their high-degree of visual specificity" and their "aim and/or claim to *show* the past 'how it was' [in other words] as it appeared to historical agents of the time" (2016, 61). For him, games like all *AC* installments display a tendency towards absolutely perfect representation, which is an incompletable task (2016, 61). Despite this, these games take a very narrow slice of the world, located at a particular time and

place and drive towards simulation maximalism. They try to build that maximal level of technical detail using “existing realist visual discourses and tropes from [...] film or television” (2016, 62).

Perhaps more worryingly, Chapman argues these kinds of games “carry an inherent ‘effect of reality’ and subsume their own status as *representations*” (2016, 68). In other words, they are readable to audiences in a way that naturalizes the representation for a variety of reasons, and as will be discussed later, they are actively built to elicit this kind of reaction. Much like photography and film, this level of maximal and assumed objective detail makes them “authoritarian [as] they still involve selection and therefore represent a particular perspective” (2016, 68). Crucially, open-world realist games, of the scope found in this series, offer access to “heritage experiences”, which are supported and structured by series specific mechanics (2016, 177). The *AC* franchise’s claims of showing the past as it was or making history the audience’s playground morph into an invitation to reconstruct cultural spaces for the enjoyment of modern, and most often Western, audiences. However, Chapman’s *realist-reconstructionist* category can also be turned into a tool for deconstruction, as is the case in Stephen Joyce’s work.

Joyce critiques Chapman’s account of realist reconstruction, by introducing a typography of *authentic-deconstructionist* games, and his specific emphasis on *AC III* (2022). Here, much of the discussion concerning historical representation in the series has been misguided, as “complaining that media representations of the past are inaccurate misses how they can give a more tangible sense of the past than official histories” (2022, 136). Here, the promise and limitation of the franchise is the “realist-reconstructionist promise to show players an accurate representation of the past”, while setting the whole thing in a fictional setting, with fictional characters (2022, 137). Here, the game’s main proposition to the players is “less accuracy, than authenticity, an experience that approximates the past rather than captures a particular reality” (2022, 137). Certainly, this is how *AC III* positions itself by folding players into a high-fidelity representation of colonial era America. Most importantly, Joyce explains that “like historical film, the game’s claim to authenticity lies in the details of the *mise-en-scene*, yet the freedom to control the camera and navigate the space in one’s own way brings it closer to a *museum*” (emphasis mine, 2022, 137). The juxtaposition of the game with film and museums, or more precisely a fusion of film and museum modes of viewing and accessing culture is crucial. Even Joyce is hard-pressed to find another example that resembles the series and describes it as if *Schindler’s List* was folded into *Inglorious Basterds* (2022, 140; Spielberg, 1993; Tarantino, 2009). The result is a spectacular, obviously inaccurate, yet nonetheless compelling game world.

What interests Joyce most is the notion that the *AC* games broadly are not reconstructionist in Chapman’s sense, as they don’t really trick or convince players by immersing them. Rather, the complexity and detail of the realistic simulation can be used to question the very process of historical representation (2022, 139). This is what he refers to as *authentic-deconstructionist*, “games that offer convincing simulacra of the past while simultaneously calling into question their own construction and relationship to historical sources” (2022, 139).

In other words, the games are so obviously not real that somehow they are taken as authentic in terms of cultural fidelity. They're *real enough*. The game is positioned by Joyce as a specific articulation of American patriotism for sale to non-American fans. The game's Mohawk protagonist, Ratonhnhaké:ton, is even described as "more 'foreign' [than settler Americans] [...] to normal audiences", whatever normal might mean to Ubisoft (Ubisoft in Joyce, 143). While Joyce examines this choice of protagonist as bereft of financial incentives because the "Indigenous gaming demographic is not lucrative enough", I would argue that it is precisely this choice on an indigenous protagonist, as opposed to the American context, which makes the game appeal to different sensibilities outside of America (2022, 144). The game's production crew consulted with Mohawk cultural consultants and hired Indigenous actors, which Joyce highlights as a bizarre fusion of "traditional high-school textbook history of the American Revolution [...] while at the same time trying to make an Indigenous person the protagonist in this history" (2022, 145). And, like other protagonists in the series, Ratonhnhaké:ton is the only character with some form of agency in the game, indicating a similar position of power for the player relative to the game-world and its cultural groups (2022, 148). The issue here isn't that the game succeeds or fails at representing history accurately, it's that the game is trying to incorporate a progressive standpoint inside a regressive apparatus which celebrates Founders Chic. Further, the franchise "offers the opportunity to reach a massive audience, but it also comes with in-built restrictions regarding financial viability", which dictates how the company positions the game for specific audiences by "rethinking the metanarrative frame itself" (2022, 155). Joyce is optimistic that the game heralds a new steppingstone in Indigenous representation, which is certainly possible, but the use of cultural authenticity in the imperialist mode is never erased.

Historians' stakes in discussing the franchise are tied to the potentials and pitfalls of historical representation, and the impossible target of full accuracy. Joyce views it as a potential for deconstruction, while Chapman might understand it as the vanishing point towards which realist simulation tends. On the other hand, Hammar and Banker are more concerned with the uses of racial stereotyping and racecraft, either as packaging meant to sell the franchise to new audiences, or as legitimate critique of other Hollywood media. The three-set of reviews discussed above also gesture towards the commercial logics that underpin the franchise and how older media influence the representational language of the games. In fact, all the authors discussed here have used specific films, and blockbusters at that, to discuss the franchise's structure and aims. From this perspective, the stakes shift from actual historical accuracy, towards the use of history as window dressing that modern audiences will be enticed by, while also never becoming *too uncomfortable*.

2.2.3 AC and Education: What We Learn and Where

Where religious studies scholars are concerned with the modification of spaces for secular consumption, and historians critique the accuracy of these simulations, educators have a

different focus altogether: learners. For the scholars in this section, the *AC* franchise offers an opportunity to educate people about material considered difficult or not engaging enough for modern audiences. From high school students to university classes, the following texts cover the use of *AC* in teaching, whether that occurs in the classroom or outside (Wainwright 2014; Ethier & Lefrancois 2018; Gilbert 2017, 2019; Karsenti & Parent 2020; Desouto 2020). The stakes for educators concern the impact on learners and whether or not this kind of education is productive or harmful. Though some of these issues play out outside of the field of education, the primary focus is on their pedagogical value. It can appear strange to address texts dealing with players more directly given my focus on the games as cultural objects, but the perceived players are always present in the design process as these texts discuss. In that sense, the players, or rather a constructed idea of them, is at the root of how the franchise is designed.

In that respect, Lisa Gilbert's work (2017) has been focused on reconsidering *AC* games which are perceived as relatively neglected in terms of educational potential (145). Part of the argument is that the games possess some vaguely useful media techniques similar to historical films (145), which is amplified by the franchise's monstrous financial success, which she locates in Ubisoft's 1.4 billion euro revenue in 2014-2015, its 82 million copies sold and the production infrastructure that spans 29 studios in 26 countries (146). For Gilbert, at least latently, *AC*'s pedagogical weight is a matter of brand recognition. As she paradoxically explains, Ubisoft "has a dedication to history, even though the company is clear it is creating entertainment first and foremost" (147). This is interesting because contrary to the views expressed by historians above, Gilbert is sympathetic to a dual commitment from the company: historical accuracy and sales. Conversely, Gilbert also remarks that "Ubisoft has developed ways to capitalize on players' dedication to the field of history" (147). Rather than the company being dedicated to history, it has a strong commitment to capturing player interests as Ubisoft understands them. In this first piece, Gilbert locates the flavor of *AC: Syndicate*, the industrial London installment, in its "deeply immersive visual experience" and its original musical score composed by "Grammy-nominated [...] Austin Wintory" (148). Technical maximalism and industry pedigree set the stage, which is once again plagued by issues of representation.

As Gilbert moves through her analysis, it becomes clear that successes in portraying the female protagonist (in a duo), Evie, do not extend to representations of different races and ethnicities, noting that "people of color must be exceptional to be included" (149). The lack of historical accuracy concerning the protagonist's gendered identity is understood to "serve the needs of escapist entertainment better than historical education" (149). This is understood as both emancipatory for women, but deeply flawed when the same protagonists are miraculously bereft of any racist beliefs of the time. She explains that such "an idealized portrayal [...] misses an opportunity for players to become more aware of the racism in both the past and present" (149). In effect, by omitting or altering this content to avoid offending the sensibilities of a modern audience, the game papers over a deeply problematic part of cultural relations of London at the time. This is what Gilbert refers to as the inherent promotion of "ahistorical thinking" (150).

This is both present in the narrative elements, but also in the mechanics which “work against its explicit plot” (150). More precisely, “even while it keeps up a drumbeat for social justice, the internal logic of the game implicitly teaches capitalism” (150). This is the *Freedom Cry* problem transposed in a different locale.

Following her 2017 work, Gilbert secured a round of long-form participant interviews with high school students to determine how they engaged with the franchise beyond the confines of history as it is taught in American schools (2019). As she explains, her motivation was the “high rate of exposure to the portrayal of worlds and peoples represented in games” (109). Once again, Gilbert’s framework focuses on the learning opportunities which are considered “analogous to those fostered by historical films” (110). The results of the study relayed that “many allowed *Assassin’s Creed* to rewrite their school-based understanding of history”, even in the cases where the game showed negative aspects relative to their own identities (119). The concerning implication was that “students perceived so many positives in their emotional engagement with *[AC]* that they often uncritically trusted that their gameplay experiences translated to real insight about the lived experiences of people in the past” (119). The lack of critical awareness of whether or not the games present accurate or faithful information is crucial and leads Gilbert to assert that “none of these students stopped to problematize their visceral sense that they ‘actually saw’ or ‘felt’ what happened over the course of actual historical events” (120). The issue is less that the games aren’t factual, but that the students perceive them to be. Gilbert also locates this learning “not through historical evidence but via popular, entertainment-based portrayal of history”, which is perceived as more immediate than books (123). She further describes the *AC* franchise as both “a corrective” and a “ballast” to other historical documentation, which anchors and stabilizes prior beliefs and information the players had (125). The point I want to draw attention to, and where Gilbert’s work is most productive, is that the *sensation* of empathy was so strong that “it was a double-edged sword [where *the AC*] games’ narrative structure proved exceptionally useful for achieving gains in shared normalcy” to the extent that the students did not exhibit any sense of otherness (129). In other words, they were convinced they fully understood the experience of the people on the screen by virtue of the narrative and technical detail, which produced strong *presentism*. Simply put, they filtered the game’s simulated world and cultures into their own beliefs and experiences. As Gilbert concludes, the franchise is not effective at teaching ideas like historical causation, but it excels at “[exercising] a profound impact on [...] historical imagination” (130).

Contrasting Gilbert’s study of how students used *AC* in their own time, Thierry Karsenti & Simon Parent’s work focused on the classroom deployment of the games as an educational tool in high schools (2020). The games themselves weren’t played, but teachers selected stills and clips “that resonated” with concepts and competencies the Quebec Education Program valued (28). The study’s questionnaire sample size boasts 329 students across four classes, who played the game below the ESRB recommended age of 17 (33). Their findings are broader than the deep experiential accounts of Gilbert’s work, but nonetheless show interesting results.

Crucially, Karsenti and Parent explain that “almost all of the learning was in the form of declarative knowledge, except where it concerned cultures, which were less clearly defined and more open to interpretation” (37). Students were able to recognize and point out (in descending order): events (n=205), characters (n=63), places (n=33), monuments (n=33) and cultures least of all (n=13). The indications are that students were roughly fifteen times more likely to comprehend a specific event than the culture surrounding it. This is exacerbated by students claiming that “they were sometimes confused between actual history and the game’s virtual version” (38). On the other hand, the students indicated being stimulated in learning more and they formed associations between their ideas of culture and the game’s simulation (39). Karsenti and Parent place unequivocal importance on the educator, and the use of the game is both positive and negative with the need for an expert to determine the impact (40). The language here presumes the risk of presentism or the games overriding the student’s knowledge gained once again from conventional schooling.

Although there is much emphasis on the necessity of the educator at the level of high school students, there are also scholars thinking through the benefits and limitations of using games like *AC* in undergraduate teaching. For instance, Martin Wainwright, who teaches history at the University of Akron, sees potential in historical videogames where teaching complex historical systems is the goal (2014, 579). Although, he does remark that using and requiring games like these in the classroom risks alienating African American and Latin American students due to their presumed access to “fewer financial resources,” which would make the games and machines required to play them prohibitively expensive (580). His class teaches history focused on a multi-point system that covers topics like cultural bias, world systems and world history, among others (581). *AC* is part of the cultural bias rubric and is folded into postcolonial analysis driven by Edward Said’s concept of *orientalism* (585). Though, Wainwright uses *AC* to teach that the original game “manages to avoid offending modern sensibilities” at the cost of “[avoiding] much history], he does feel that that its “successor set in Renaissance Italy captures the flavor of the time” (587). Though critical of historical omissions and exclusions, Wainwright approaches the potential of these games in their inaccuracies with the idea that “sources can reveal as much about their authors’ perspectives through what they leave out as from what they include” (591). His final provocation is asking whether or not historical games avoid the subject of American slavery in order to avoid offending African Americans, or whether they do so to promote a “positive image of American history”, with the final thought that perhaps developers and audiences see “ancient slavery and violence [as] less taboo, because it singles out no modern ethnic groups as victims (or perpetrators)”, or both (597). Though *Freedom Cry* might be an exception to this rule, even it is not primarily located on the American continent, and more recently, *AC: Origins* is more comfortable in excavating these taboo topics for the enjoyment of the Global North. Wainwright, despite his lack of focus on the idea of cultural flavor approaches the franchise’s central appeal.

From the perspective of Quebecois historians, Marc-André Éthier and David Lefrançois shift their attention away from students and towards the opinions of historical experts including those employed contractually by Ubisoft (2018). Their article bridges the critiques of historians with those of educators, by asking if the franchise's historical accuracy has educational stakes. As they explain, schools don't exercise a monopoly on history, and that games and new media (including movies, television, and historical sites) are part of "profane history" (trans. mine, 2). Though, they caution that new media forms still perpetuate a "winning team's version of history" (trans. mine, 2). Éthier and Lefrançois even view "the cultural industry's mass media products that use the past as theme" surpass conventional historical accounts in terms of representing marginalized groups (trans. mine, 3). Much like other authors discussed above, they assert that for *AC*, "the fundamental narrative is always, by and large, contemporaneous to the player (trans. mine, 5). For their study, they interviewed 10 historians who were asked to consult on the games by Ubisoft, coming from academic backgrounds, TV production, journalism and one who is employed by Ubisoft directly (brand historian Maxime Durand). Notably, most of the participants attributed Ubisoft asking them to consult because of their media notoriety, rather than their academic work (11). As Éthier and Lefrançois recount, while the consultants "indicated feeling that the content they brought [to the games' production] was received with great respect. Though, with one exception, they underlined [...] that the decisions on the script had already been made and that they were immutable, even if it contradicted" expert opinions (12). What is interesting here is that the historians feel that they were employed as an insurance, for the game makers to be able to say that the work of consulting with experts had been done, while not really engaging with any of their contributions. For instance, one historian who consulted on *Freedom Cry* felt that there was potential to address a "marginalized history in historiography", that of Saint-Domingue, but that the representation of slavery ended up being "totally unacceptable" and that "it would be a great error to show slaves prostrated thus" (13). The consultants felt that the games were "as accurate as a work of fiction can be" and that they were actually more attentive to issues of marginalized agency, material culture and daily life than most historical accounts published recently (15). However, they also explain that the historians view the franchise as a good tool for displaying these settings, but not for developing critical thinking and that some of them "doubt that students could even analyse these games as a source about the proximate past," mirroring the need for experts discussed above (16).

The final account in terms of pedagogical perspectives is emerging work from David DeSouto on deploying *AC*, and in particular *Odyssey* for teaching art history (2020). DeSouto's aim is to offer lesson plans for educators that leverage *Odyssey*'s "faithful reconstruction of the Parthenon" (1). DeSouto also explains that the games are useful because "many students receive their first exposure to the world of the past through these games", which he views as more "colorful, engaging and contextualized" models that interactive than other media and pedagogical forms (2-3). He sees a lot of potential in the franchise, explaining that a prior installment like *Origins* "has the potential to dispel myths about Egypt that other cultural phenomena have perpetuated, for example the idea that life in Egypt takes place mostly in the

desert” (13). The games’ power is understood by DeSouto as an opportunity to form curricula around the games, not just to use them as a tool, much like Wainwright.

To do so, the focus is using the Parthenon’s construction as a 3D model for introductory level analysis (18). In yet another contribution to a recurring pattern, the author explains that at surface level “the game’s representation [...] *is* accurate as far as the structure [...] disparities occur in the sculptural elements” (24). There are numerous instances where broad consensus on how materials and sculptures in the Parthenon were historically constructed has been disregarded and that the game “instead favored a more streamlined approach with repetitive images” (24). DeSouto is hopeful that the game’s successes in showing Greek architecture as colorful and not as modern ruins will be able to give players “an authentic experience” (28). He views the Discovery Tour, the game’s museological violence-free mode, as a useful tool for educators precisely because it is lacking in accuracy and detail (33). From a different perspective, the failures historians view as crucial, educators may view as teaching opportunities (33-36). For DeSouto, this franchise is particularly useful because of its popularity on the one hand, and “Ubisoft’s goal of providing a *believable* experience of the past” (emphasis mine, 39). This idea of believability also shows up again in a claim that videogames like *Odyssey* “make art and architectural history a discipline that is *alive* and *relevant* to their experience of contemporary life” (emphasis mine, 42).

Educators are aware of the positive potentials of the franchise and such games more broadly, but *only* with the guiding hand of experts. Some, like Wainwright and DeSouto use *AC* as a teaching tool and others, like Gilbert, Karsenti & Parent, are more concerned with figuring out how the games are already impacting and even shaping learning about the histories and cultures that they feature. Almost unanimously, there is an underlying anxiety that the games are skewed and that what they’re teaching is not accurate, but faithful enough to be mistaken for accuracy. In some more overt cases like those covered by Éthier and Lefrançois, it is the case that historians feel the games are particularly damaging and disrespectful to marginalized groups they purport to celebrate and honor. Across the board, educators also recognize, like historians and religious scholars, that the games are relatable, believable, and relevant to the players in the way they’re built. The question that arises from that observation is *who* they are relatable to, which is a central topic of discussion for postcolonial scholars.

2.2.4 AC and Postcolonial Studies: Orientalism, Others and Foreclosed Representation

Postcolonialism²³ as a concept is difficult to circumscribe, especially as it is instantiated in game studies. Throughout this literature review, various scholars have discussed the accuracy

²³ For this project, I concern postcolonialism from the vantage point of Edward Said’s work (1978), Spivak’s theorization of the subaltern (1988), Sharpe’s refinement of that concept (2008), as well as the work of Homi Bhabha’s discussions of hybridity (1994), as a corpus of work that can structure hegemonic subordination of non-Western peoples by and for Western peoples.

or lack thereof when it comes to *AC* and how the franchise represents history and religions, or how it can be used to educate. However, discussions of the game developers' positionality relative to the who, where and when they are representing has not been the primary focus. This is where the postcolonial game studies scholars attend to the operations of power inherent in *AC*, its development and its perspectives (El-Nasr et al. 2008; Komel 2014; Shaw 2015; Murray 2017; Steenbakker 2022; Mukherjee 2016, 2017; Gray 2018, Lauro 2020; Sepinwall 2021). The stakes at play for the following authors and texts are the power relations between the peoples doing the representing and those are being represented, as well as the myriad forms of oppression (and a few hopeful avenues for resistance) that are perpetuated by the games. Furthermore, these scholars are particularly attentive to their own position relative to the games they are critiquing, as a way of producing situated accounts of the games.

This is certainly the case in Magy Saif El-Nasr, Maha Al-Saati, Simon Niedenthal and David Milam's multicultural analysis of the original *Assassin's Creed* (2008). This piece is, in game studies' development as a field, less contemporary than other works in this list, but it points to a crucial fork in how we play and critique *AC games*. El-Nasr et al. focused on reading the game with two researchers more familiar with the culture, and two who were not, in order to highlight points where the experience would be deeper for one group or the other. The authors also highlight the voyeuristic, vicarious, or visceral perspectives discussed in Janet Staiger's work on film, and how they are applicable to this game, noting that "the interpretation in a film is shaped through the audience's mind and is influenced by 'aesthetic preference and practices, knowledge and expectations prior to'" the viewing or play experience (Staiger in El-Nasr et al., 2). For them, enjoyment of the game is deeply influenced by these cultural viewpoints that precede ever turning the game on.

The authors were also able to interview Jade Raymond, producer on the game on where the story of the game originated. Raymond explained that the development team wanted the game to be "speculative fiction" that was ground in reality to "increase its credibility", by juxtaposing historic places and characters that "everyone knows", while also accepting that the events are so remote in the past that "there's plenty of freedom to take a revisionist approach, [to] tweak people's personalities and motivations" (Raymond in El-Nasr et al., 6-7). The developer approach, as expressed by Raymond, was to treat the makings of medieval Syrian culture as blocks, to be shifted and arranged in a way that *everybody knows*, but that worked for the games. As the authors explain, that everybody is not so monolithic as the game makers may expect, and that "the experience of playing the game is transformed to a search for references of the historical legend" (10). Additionally, the authors admit that some of the references may even be unintentional in this respect. Comparing back-stories, myths and places, the authors explain that "occasional references to actual historical facts and figures are undeniably interesting propositions that add depth to the game play experience and integrate a puzzle to be solved" (12). Those puzzles include buildings and objects, but they also include the people who have been designed at times "as a living and breathing obstacle" for players to manipulate, and which

has roots in epic films like *Braveheart* and *Kingdom of Heaven* (Raymond in El-Nasr et al., 13). As the authors explain, “every corner, every shadow, every detail in the environment carried with it many nostalgic feelings” for the authors who were familiar with the locale (13). This was not the case for the authors who weren’t proximate with the culture, though it did remind them of trips they had taken. As Raymond indicated in their interview, the developers also made alterations to give each city “a more modern look and its own personality” so that players would have no trouble in telling them apart (Raymond in El-Nasr et al., 14). Once again, small persistent alterations are made to the locale with audience enjoyment in mind, though they extend beyond the architectural aspects.

As the authors explain, the game’s protagonist “fails to convey the Middle-Eastern culture or behaviour” and more strikingly that “his actions, behaviours, mannerisms, complexion, and clean-shaven face portray him as an all-American hero” (25). Raymond says that the character was played by a Middle-Eastern American actor, Phil Shahbaz, and that the character was modeled on the idea of “a modern American guy” processing the middle-eastern life of the assassin (Raymond in El-Nasr et al., 25). Moreover, other characters did display “gestural patterns [...] more reminiscent of Arabic culture” (26). The authors explain that “non-player characterization and authenticity was unclear” and viewed the game as a subtler version of a “Disneyland ride such as Aladdin’s adventure [which] raises obvious cultural stereotypes” in a way that is difficult to describe (26). Things are off. Not so much that it jumps out to players, but enough that it can increase the game’s exoticism for Western audiences (26). So, there is a deliberate choice to center the *Americanness* of the audience avatar. El-Nasr et al. propose their review as that first stab at understanding how “choosing the market for the game and understanding the cultural “or sub-cultural norms, knowledge, and attitudes is of extreme importance as such variables have direct effect on how the game is accepted viewed, and played” (28). The game is certainly *about* Arabic peoples and places, but it may in fact not be *for* them; a crucial distinction that is the recurring theme of postcolonial critique.

On this position of the audience, Mirt Komel’s work on the *self-orientalizing* aspects of *AC* is equally fruitful because it examines what the game asks of players (2014). For Komel, the original *AC* is a strange case where “the game distinguishes itself by an intriguing self-orientalistic character”, but one that continues “fruitfully exploiting the Arabo-Islamic Orient in terms of landscape, its peoples, their culture and their cities” (72). He draws back his analysis to the failures and successes of Hollywood films like *Prince of Persia: The Sands of Time* (Newell, 2010) and much older literature like the 1938 Slovenian pulp novel *Alamut* (Bartol, 2007). Orientalism, as a genre, still proliferates across many media forms. *AC* however has become a juggernaut spanning “novels, graphic novels, comic books, short movies, animated movies, action figures, clothing” which he views as having attained “nothing less than cult status” (73). The question then, is where does this self-orientalist character come in? For Komel, where most Orientalism, especially in videogames would “represent the Muslims as enemies and threat” and “forerunners of modern Islamic fundamentalism and terrorism”, the series subverts those beliefs

(73). Komel traces this idea of “neo-Orientalism” that links Islam to terrorism in the “massive connection with the entertainment business, boosted by a cultural industry where ideology can easily disguise itself as a neutral non-ideology” (74). In other words, media businesses treat Orientalistic tropes as fact, not opinion. The author explains that self-Orientalism is an offshoot of Orientalist modes of representation, where subjects perform stereotypes about themselves, and where it becomes a “distinctive reversal of Orientalism through a peculiar process of self-othering” (75). Crucially in *AC*, this process operates by asking players to *play the other* or to “play for the other side”, where the Occident is viewed as the offender in colonial violence (76).

The problem is that merely reversing the stereotype and playing for the other side, might not subvert the stereotypes, but reinforce them in another way. Komel explains that the assassin becomes “a positively self-orientalized alternative-self, depicted as an Occidentalized Oriental hero” (77). Once again, the faithful representation of othered people is compromised by the need to shift the representation in a way that will *speak to* Western players. Here, the game’s issue lies not so much in “the game’s historical inaccuracy, but rather how the fascination with the game’s story is derived mostly from the legendary aura surrounding the historical sect of the Nizaris” that the assassins in the series are based on (82). There is a *set-apartness* of the world that is contingent on “exoticism [...] mixed with an equal measure of fear” (82). The assassins are scary, and perhaps thrilling, in part because they are exoticized. Komel also gestures to Raymond’s mentioning that the inspiration for the assassins comes not from historical documents or primary sources, but from “a book called *Alamut*, by the Slovenian author Vladimir Bartol” (Raymond in Komel, 83). On this book as the root of *AC*’s assassin mythology, the author explains that:

Alamut’s racist depictions of suicidal assassins were changed, not to respect primary sources, but for “obvious reasons of game-play”, where any such attack would lead to a game over (83). Like El-Nasr et al., the author agrees that Altair is “a typical American hero, more commando soldier than secretive Assassin” (84).

Moreover, the series overall “presents itself as an allegorical representation of the gradual transformation of the figure of the Assassin from an ultimate Arabo-Islamic Other into a completely Occidentalized hero” (86). In this view, the game strips the protagonist of the negative connotations of Orientalism and transforms them into traits *leading into* Occidental characters and values, “enabling a specific self-othering of the western subject”, allowing the players to enjoy “an anti-imperialistic and pro-freedom character, while at the same time keeping a distance” from any thorny cultural debates (88). In this instance, for Westerners at least, the games sanitize *Arabness* in a way that is readable. Though, the original game is certainly not the only installment to do so.

Assassin’s Creed III for instance (and its standalone DLC, *Liberation*) have drawn stark critiques from postcolonial theorists like Adrienne Shaw (2015). Perhaps running on a collision

course with historical scholars above, Shaw's perspective is that "the games' claim that they offer players with a critical view of history is undermined by their focus on a dominant view of history", which "makes it clear that designers have *constructed* their imagined audience" (emphasis mine, 4). This is immediately visible in the game's self-purported effort to portray the American revolution through the lived experience of the "Mohawk/Kanien'keha:ka protagonist" while being built for "the constructed player [who] is assumed to be non-Native (largely), which results in a disjuncture" (5). Shaw doesn't mince words and explains that the game's "realism is more often used to pre-empt criticism than it is to reconsider the *telos* of history" (emphasis in original, 5). She also explains that the most emotionally and culturally raw moments "appear along others that recreate tired tropes and assumptions about who is expected to be playing the game" (5). Shaw's insights dovetail with what other authors have pointed out in other games. The games are *about* one culture but meant for consumption by *another*. Moreover, the studio deploys expert advice and historical accuracy to shield itself.

Shaw's analysis highlights three theoretical and practical aspects: constructed identification, constructed authenticity and constructed history. In this view "constructed identification refers to the way the game encourages players to identify with or as particular characters", "constructed authenticity [...] reveals what, from a production standpoint, constitutes authenticity" and that through constructed history "even if the player-character of *AC3* is an authentically rendered Mohawk protagonist, the historical narrative, and ludic elements of the assume a non-Native player (5). In other words, "the game reinforces dominant views [...] imagined to be of most interest to the imagined player" (5). Stereotypes are considered here, not in terms of how much they conform to factual accuracy, but rather how they "are typically used as disciplinary forces, which clearly demarcate the norm from its 'Other'" (6). Stereotypes which are used and shaped to "appeal to an imagined primary audience" (7). This imagination of the audience forecloses any progressive hope that the game might offer transformative actions of any kind. Though, identification might not be the correct term when players are catered to so brazenly in this form of racial tourism "without being asked to take on the perspective of marginalized groups" (10). Shaw also explains that "developers seem to have very clear ideas about who players are *willing* to see themselves as related to" (10). The importance of this fact is that makers, not the othered peoples being represented, *have deciding power* in who and how audiences are understood to identify with, and developers don't pull challenge these preconceptions, but rather feed them. Another aspect of the developers' position relative to othered peoples and their cultures is their infamous disclaimer that explains the game was developed by a multicultural group of individuals. Shaw critiques this disclaimer as "anchoring their right to portray groups in their group's [developers] diversity" (11). This makes it difficult to critique the games because they are not made by any one person but by a collective.

In terms of how history is constructed, Shaw gestured to Salvatti and Bullinger's work on the *Call of Duty* games, and their "technology fetishism, cinematic conventions, and documentary authority" which "synthesize a historical realism—a selective authenticity—that

situates immersive gameplay by satisfying audience expectations” (Salvatti and Bullinger in Shaw, 13). To this thorough structure of historical realism, the author adds *architectural fetishism*. Here, better tech and better historical accuracy feed into each other, producing the same kinds of maximalist pleasures that films also produce. They help “naturalize the narrative predeterminedness” of the hegemonic judgements the game rests on (13). By maximizing how much information, how much detail, how much authenticity the game’s technical advancements allow, the game’s historicity recedes into the background. It might not be real, *but it seems real enough*. Shaw draws our attention to an interview with one of the series level design directors for Paris in *Unity*, Nicholas Guerin, where they described their Paris as better than the real Paris (for gameplay) and that the city, and its landmarks were spaced using a new scale that would better fit the gameplay needs (14). Paris was the subject of such reworking because there were more sources to draw on, and that implies that “media representations of the past will always be more detailed for those whose language and archives survived intact” (14). This is all the more problematic when the places and cultures that do get included reflect “a colonialist view” even when players are asked to embody a subaltern person. This undoes any of what Shaw refers to as “emancipatory possibilities” (18.) The conclusion is that the game can never actually represent the player character in their proper cultural context, due to the need for players to occupy an exceptional *outsider* perspective, which “always feels out of sync with who [the character] is” (18). This is what Shaw terms the *tyranny of realism*, “indicative of how imagined audiences over-determine the stories companies are willing to tell” (21). The negative impact of these imagined audiences continues to be felt, and in many ways increases in force, as we move to ever more remote cultural contexts.

Liberation, *Assassin’s Creed III*’s standalone DLC is even more bizarrely mired in these issues, which Soraya Murray (2017) and Margaret Steenbakker (2022) have discussed. Murray’s analysis of *Liberation* rests on a notion that these games, among others, allow people to understand the cultural contexts in which they live and what worlds are possible to them “through complex persuasions and social engineering” (2017, 78). Murray’s interest is using this game as an example of “playable representation” to uncover a “poetics of form, and a politics of identity” and to critique games as “the frontline of power relations within a dominant culture” (78-79). In terms of who the game focuses on, *Liberation* is a rare case of a game centering the experience of a black woman, though it is important to note that *Liberation* didn’t even get a full game installment, and that it was released on the PlayStation Vita as opposed to major consoles or the PC (79-80). One of the more interesting aspects of the game is that the subject of race itself is overtly at stake and the protagonist is aware of her own “racial difference, and the precariousness of her position” which is driven by deep cultural trauma (80). Murray describes this kind of representation as a ‘watershed moment in terms of visibility and press coverage of the ongoing culture war around the presence of women and social-defined minorities in games’, which is certainly unique given how little female representation the series has had (81). A fact that is compounded when considering the intersection of race and class. The crucial aspect of this framing is Murray’s assertion that it’s not enough to “merely point out racism, sexism,

homophobia [...] with a base presumption that these exist as a result of ignorance” and that these issues are “the result of a form of essentialism and territoriality—an attempt to assert control over the lucrative and influential sphere of playable representation” (83). She also describes these games as a “form of everyday culture” and a “flashpoint for dominant and subordinate entities to fight for recognition” (83). In this sense, *Liberation*’s production, narrative, release, and distribution are indicative of the struggle between these subordinate and dominant cultural groups.

Like Shaw, Murray critiques the series for claiming to model itself as historically accurate, while “indulging in all manner of speculative fiction”, which she ties to game’s “intersection with tropes of Orientalism” (85). Here, *AC* is once again discussed in the context of cinema, with films like *The Thief of Baghdad* (Berger, Powell and Whelan, 1940) and its connections to the *Prince of Persia* series, noting that originally *AC* was supposed to be “*Prince of Persia: Assassin*.” (85). This title’s approach to sensationalizing and exoticizing New Orleans in particular centers on the protagonist, Aveline and her persona system. Here, the player can switch between three personae: lady, slave, and assassin. Each persona allows players to traverse the world, and be treated by non-player characters, differently. The lady would allow players to traverse white public spaces unimpeded, while the slave person could navigate spaces inhabited by slaves. The assassin persona would allow the players to enter combat but would single them out as suspicious. The implication of the personas more broadly is that systemic oppression and segregation was a matter of changing clothes. When faced with criticism over how these personae intersected with colonialist tropes, the makers replied that there just wasn’t enough time “for a cultural studies course” and that “getting the context right” would allow for sufficient authenticity (90). What bleeds into the game’s systems and narrative is what Murray calls “phantasms”, echoes of colonial ideology that are “persistent, implicit and largely invisible” (91). The implication being that these phantasms are slippages that indicate “how worldviews are built into [...] computational systems” (92). Ultimately, Murray’s point is that any reading of these games has to attend to overt and implicit cultural dimensions and even “the very form of the game’s playability” (98). On this specific point, Steenbakker’s analysis of *Liberation* is particularly incisive.

In her view, the game’s persona system is fundamentally tied to the overall representational economy of the franchise, which contains only three “main” games with female protagonists and *Liberation* as a fourth (93). Like other authors above, she attributes this “underrepresentation” to the “idea of who the *ideal* imagined player might be” (emphasis mine, 93). Likewise, she positions the game within the studio culture of Ubisoft which “has become known for its reluctance to include diverse characters and has even faced repeated above allegations from employees, who were forced to focus on male leads” (96). These aspects set up *Liberation* as a unique case of trying to represent a woman of color within the franchise ecosystem. Steenbakker notes that the game’s persona system buckles almost immediately as the lady persona ignores Aveline’s ethnicity and treats her the same as a white woman would have

been, ignoring “the historical realities of slavery and racism” which the game would need to include (98). At other points, the game also reinforced “the voodoo trope ... once more linking voodoo to people of color within a popular medium” (100). The persona system which can be understood as a form of “code switching, which is practiced by many marginalized communities” is also generally repositioned as a way “to live up to societal stereotypical expectations of a black woman” (101). Although this is intended as progressive, it also reinforces white notions of heteronormativity, where when Aveline is in her white-coded lady persona, she can charm, but in her other guises she cannot (101). Steenbakker’s critique continues to dismantle the game, explaining that “the game makers have used the everyday historical realities of countless enslaved people to create another outfit option” (105). Further, the game doesn’t challenge any of the codes or norms that it purports to and ignores “the historical truth of what slavery really was like, in favor of creating a game that is appealing and ‘fun to play’” (106). Much like *ACIII*, *Liberation*’s cultural context constantly collides with the game’s ludic goals, which is also the case in analyses focusing on *Freedom Cry*.

Where *AC3* simulates the American revolution from a purportedly Mohawk perspective, and *Liberation* attempts to do the same with the experience of a black woman in 18th century New Orleans, *Freedom Cry* takes players to the 18th Port-au-Prince to dismantle the Caribbean slave trade, with complicated results. As Kishonna Gray has discussed for both *Liberation* and *Freedom Cry*, “We appreciate the destruction of the slave economy on the shores of Haiti by Adéwalé ” and “We praise the fierceness of Aveline de Grandpré from the same game, who becomes an assassin to destroy the slave trafficking enterprise in New Orleans” (2018, 12). Gray explains that *Freedom Cry*’s Adéwalé is “distinctly countervisual” in the sense that the game can shape new opportunities for “solidarity and group consciousness” among gaming communities seeking better representation (2018, 64). The kinds of violence that Adéwalé inflicts on white plantation owners can be cathartic, allowing passage from “powerlessness to participatory competence” (64). However, she also cautions that “while black gamers in particular may laud Adéwalé, there is still a replication of the dominant visual paradigm” and that the images that shape this dominant visual paradigm come from reinforcement through narratives that “constantly deployed and repeated” and which requires “*previous encounters* with certain metaphorical language” (emphasis mine, 64-65). This is what Gray refers to as “(white) power in the (black) visual” which operates through a series of unthinking racisms and racialization that feigns “colorblind ideology” (65). In other words, Adéwalé ’s and *Freedom Cry* as the space of play reproduce broader patterns of racialization even when they claim to undo them, and the character may in fact be reinforcing hegemonic ideologies about blackness, slavery, and liberation (among others).

On the difficulties, verging on impossibility, of simulating slavery, I turn to Souvik Mukherjee’s work (2016; 2017). As he explains, through Adéwalé, the player “gets to witness (and disrupt, should he choose to)” instances of slavery in the game (2016, 246). One issue is that the activities and empowerment afforded to players “are those where the protagonist is a free

man and has the agency to change the destiny of those who are enslaved” (246). The exceptionalist position that Adéwalé occupies is fundamentally at odds with the lot of black Caribbean peoples, in a similar light to Steenbakker’s critique of *Liberation*. More so, for Mukherjee, “to approach the experience of slavery in any sensible way, it is necessary to address the issues of selfhood of slaves” which can only be “a *post facto* account and it is only when the transition from slavery to freedom has been made that this can be recounted from memory” (251). Functionally, the game cannot depict the reality of slavery except from the perspectives external to the reality, but which players do not access. Although the games make claims towards immersion or incorporation, players cannot access the profound interiority of the characters on the screen because there are no internal monologues, and they are left to reconstruct these realities as “tourists to the terrible world of slavery” (253). This is most evident when *Freedom Cry* “as directly critical as it is of slavery, nevertheless turns the freeing of the slaves into a rewards-system” and of “converting slaves into currency” (253). Mukherjee refers to this as “distance and ambiguity” between both the makers the represented peoples, and for the players as well. It may be the case that white players reconstruct an altogether different narrative that is contingent on Adéwalé’s inherent freedom to fight back, whereas players of color may resonate with the emancipatory aims of the story. In other words, the game buckles under its narrative aspirations because it isn’t built to truly represent the horrors of the Caribbean slave trade, but to offer players another arena to engage in the power fantasies that run through *AC* more broadly.

The exceptionalism of Adéwalé, as the player avatar, relative to the other Haitian character is described as “the space of protest and of negotiation, a ‘thirthing’ of sorts” where we get to be “a one-man army freeing slaves and uprooting colonial plantations” (2017, 54). Like Gray and Murray, Mukherjee locates the game’s main issue in “a certain kind of ‘showing’” which allows Adéwalé to be both an “other” and a “hero” depending on who is playing (55-56). Contrasted with Homi Bhabha’s theorization of stereotypes and Jessica Langer’s work on *World of Warcraft*, Adéwalé’s representation is discussed as stereotyping which works through ambivalence where the character can be viewed multiple ways and makes “otherness ‘safe’ and comfortable for the colonizer” (Langer in Mukherjee, 58). Mukherjee refers to this positioning of characters like Adéwalé as both a colonial fantasy and a repudiation of those fantasies. This makes the game a weird amalgam where “proximity to European culture” is inherent and where Adéwalé is positioned somewhere between the state of slavery and the freedom of the player (59). This leads to “the colonized [being] forced to understand his or her identity from the point-of-view of the colonizers” (59). Adéwalé exists in a hybridized position that mimics the reality of historical Caribbean slaves, but where “identity tourism is a risk-free experience because the colonizer has the huge apparatus of empire behind his or her back” (62). Therefore, the character is an “agent adventurer” which is both “desired and derided” and “ultimately undermined” by the structure of game (62).

Stemming from discussions of Adéwalé’s position in the broader space of *Freedom Cry*, are also analyses that are more focused on the representation of the Haitian Revolution context

and of Haitian culture (Lauro 2020; Sepinwall 2021). Discussing how the “player’s absorption into the drama” is a fundamental conflict in this game, Juliet Lauro critiques the “commoditization of the history of slave resistance in the only colony where enslaved peoples successfully led a rebellion [...] reeks of an incorporation and anesthetization of Haiti’s history in the form of an entertainment commodity” (2020, 49-52). Further, “revision of history is endemic” to the franchise and it may produce “dangerous *resonances* when it is a legacy of slave resistance that is nerfed” (emphasis mine, 53). It’s not just Adéwalé’s position that is altered for the imagined player’s comfort, but a range of historic characters, places, events and all the microcosms of culture. As Lauro explains, “for the player who neglects to do outside research [...] taking the game’s representation of Makandal [a Haitian revolutionary hero] at face value, any reading of the symbolism [...] will surely be illegible” (54). Much like historians and educators above, Lauro zeroes in on the necessity for deep external engagement with other sources to even be able to make sense of the nuances the game pushes uncritically.

Freedom Cry also exists in a notable vacuum, where there is a “lack of a high-quality epic film on the Revolution” (Sepinwall, 2021, 181). The game’s emancipatory aspect is that it can make the “Haitian Revolution more thinkable than nearly all non-Haitian films”, which is both incredible and worrying in terms of how much space the game occupies (181). Sepinwall’s focus though is on understand if high quality representation means that the game will “lead players to empathize with enslaved peoples and freed slaves” and whether these peoples are characterized as “architects of their own resistance” (182). More colloquially, do these kinds of games produce *Haitianness* as a commodity for the predominantly white audience, or as an expression of Haitian autonomy? Sepinwall locates a particular issue where *Freedom Cry* is concerned as a source of historical knowledge for players which “older generations acquired [...] through films and Disneyland” and which are particularly “high-profile” with “budgets that eclipse their cinematic counterparts” (183). It’s not just that the *AC* games are engaged in the politics of representation, but that they operate at an almost incomparable scale, “unlike a film on the Haitian revolution, which would be released outside of a blockbuster franchise (192). They arrive already inscribed by the representational technology of all other AAA games, and more pointedly the techniques of *AC*. She explains that the *AC* games “offer a more cinematic aesthetic” than lower budget or lower-tech competitors, and they are often trailed by exceedingly high sales numbers (93 million copies for the franchise by 2015) and regular awards nods (193). So, what does that mean for the representation of culture?

In discussing *Liberation* as a corollary for *Freedom Cry*, Alyssa Sepinwall notes that *Liberation* received much acclaim for representing an “intelligent Black woman as protagonist”, but that treatments of slavery were problematic as “slaveowning is presented as incidental” (194). More so, the game is critiqued for “refraining from confronting the slave system’s racist underpinnings” which Sepinwall likens to French slavery memorials that feign acknowledgement without doing any real work (194). As such, *Liberation* “distorted the history of slave revolt in Saint-Domingue”, which the makers sought to redress with *Freedom Cry* (195). Though set in a

DLC and not a full-scale release, the game was well received and welcomed “indicating that Ubisoft was filling a void in the market” (195-196). Bringing in accounts by Evan Narcisse and Haitian American journalist Marc Bernadin, Sepinwall draws attention to the way that the games let Haitian folks feel seen for the first time in games (196). Historiographic inaccuracy, insofar as there “glaring inauthenticities” with historic events out of sync, is reconsidered as the game offers “a much more humanizing” account of Haitian people and slavey resistance of the time (197).

In terms of positive impact, Sepinwall notes that “*Freedom Cry* places players in the role of a subaltern” and they are “led to empathize with caged human beings who they will try to liberate” (197). Further, *Freedom Cry* is in many ways “truer to the historical record than [films], in including a woman of color resisting the slave system” (198). Like Gray, she notes that “Adéwalé fulfills gamers’ fantasies by obtaining the vengeance that enslaved peoples in the 1730s could not” (199). She also lauds the game for encouraging players to learn more about history and rewarding them for doing so, noting that players “are more motivated to read it and to learn about Haitian history than if they were tasked with reading a history textbook” (200). There is a lot of social good in the game’s narrative and structure, and Sepinwall notes that the game “tries to offer Haitian studies immersion” in many other ways that works through “authentic Haitian culture” inclusion (203). This comes in through the inclusion of Kreyol and 18th century Vodou songs from “the famous Afro-Haitian ensemble La Troupe Makandal” (named after the revolutionary hero) who recorded songs for the soundtrack (203). They made deliberate choices to include songs that were contemporary to the period, “using real Haitian music [in] contrast to films such as *Lydia Bailey*, which invented songs that were supposed to sound Haitian” (203).

On the other hand, like Gray’s worries about how the game might in other ways be reinforcing hegemonic imperialism, there are many who saw flaws inherent in *Freedom Cry*. Sepinwall turns to game critic Amanda Kerri who notes that the game elides the “separation and destruction of families” (Kerri in Sepinwall, 206), as well as noting Emil Hammar’s critique of “sanitized slavery” and Gray’s fears about the representation of “Black men as violent killers” (206). In many ways, it is a no-win scenario. If slave resistance is masked, there’s cultural erasure, and if it’s shown in terms of *AC* franchise needs, it may feed broader stereotypes. Notably, musicians from La Troupe Makandal were “disappointed by its fictionalized treatment of Haitian history” and wished the makers had included actual historical heroes “instead of imaginary ones” (206). Furthermore, “though the creators included authentic Haitian music in the soundtrack, they had submerged it in European orchestrations” (206). This recurring issue with *submerging* cultural content that is distant from white Western audiences inside a vat of European-legible content, which Sepinwall notes betrays that “*Freedom Cry* is still the creation of developers of European descent” (208). Haiti, Adéwalé and Haitianness as yet another tourist experience.

Over and over again, the cultures in these games are subordinated to the broader aims and necessities of the franchise and its imagined players, even in what appears one of the series' most laudable efforts. The discussion of *AC3*, *Liberation* and *Freedom* cry that runs through the work of postcolonial or decolonial authors, and the fact that other fields largely evade this work should be an indicator that the representation of non-white, non-European peoples is a thorny issue, especially when the places where these games are made have yet to reckon with the legacies of their colonial empires. It's notable that *Origins*' Bayek, an Egyptian protagonist fighting back against Roman imperialism and despotism is largely discussed in the works of archeologists, and not so much here. This leads to a cleaving of critiques of European imperialism between modern eras (speaking *very* broadly) and antiquity. It's to these works, which are forming the nascent subdiscipline of *archaeogaming* which I tun to now.

2.2.5 AC AND ARCHAEOLOGY: EXCAVATING THE DISTANT

Archaeology, relative to *Assassin's Creed*, is a unique discipline, both in terms of its reception towards the series and how it studies or seeks to incorporate the franchise in its practices. By and large, reception is much warmer than it is in other fields, though it is by no means uncritical. Rather, excitement towards *Origins* and *Odyssey* in particular stems from the technical leaps that the games have brought to archaeological modelling and teaching. Like historians, archaeologists privilege a combination of accuracy and authenticity, and like educators, they seek to apply the games towards pedagogical curricula. Though, they are also critical of the ways the *AC* franchise has begun to reshape the field of archaeology or popular engagement with antiquity more broadly. *Archaeogaming*²⁴, a newer subfield of archaeology, also seeks to engage with the new affordances for archaeological study that so far has been met with skepticism, verging on resistance in the field.

Part of this new engagement with games has come out of necessity, stemming from broader societal shifts and the interests of undergraduate students. Caroline Arbuckle MacLeod mentions that Canadian and American students in general, but in particular those "beginning their study of archaeology, often cite *Indiana Jones*, *The Mummy*, or *Assassin's Creed* itself" as the source of their interest (2021, 102). She views this as an opportunity to engage with students, despite a broad sentiment that "popular depictions of archaeology in film, television, and digital games are full of inaccurate, pseudoscientific, racist, and colonial portrayals of ancient and modern cultures as well as archaeological practice" (102). For her, this isn't in dispute, but there is a responsibility for scholars in the field to "correct misinformation that a student may have unwittingly absorbed while engaging with these sources" (102).

²⁴ The term has been popularized by Andrew Reinhard, in a standalone website founded in 2013 which has been combining archaeological and game studies and which has led to the publication of a book on the nascent subfield (2018).

Citing Chapman's work on historical simulation, in particular the realist simulation of *Assassin's Creed*, the player is positioned as an "unhistorical agent", in each game installment portraying a major event in history with which "the player interacts with [...] somewhat infrequently", while incorporating "additional fictional and fantastical elements that can veer significantly" from accepted academic consensus (103-104). Crucially, if all these facts are accepted, her proposition is to "go beyond a simple identification of errors in representations" and instead "discuss why game designers make certain decision" in their production of cultural authenticity, and its effects on the representation (104). Insofar as *Origins* is concerned, Arbuckle MacLeod explains that the work is both informed by the work of Egyptologists and the brand historian on payroll, where "the ancient world they create is [...] a synthesis of scholarly opinion, with creative additions to enhance gameplay" (104). How archaeology students metabolized the game is another matter.

In incorporating the *Discovery Tour*, with a focus on the great pyramids, there was an assumption that students had been familiarized with the monuments in other classes, which formed a register of background knowledge (105). As Arbuckle MacLeod recounts, many students "noted that games provided a more immersive, sensory experience of the past" and some students reflected on the benefits of using these games in archaeological instruction in particular, while the class expressed unanimous support for inclusion of *Assassin's Creed* (105). They viewed the games as "less accurate, but [...] also more immersive and engaging" than older modeling technologies such as Harvard's *Digital Giza* simulations, and much more than book-based models (106). Students were reflective on simulation inconsistencies and deviations from their prior knowledge, which Arbuckle MacLeod list as a primary benefit for *Origins*. Given other pedagogical studies discussed earlier, it's important to consider the age, expertise, demographic background, and familiarity with the material possessed by these students, which presumably plays an important role. Arbuckle MacLeod's focus on archaeological pedagogy is fairly unique in archaeogaming, but her focus on *Origins* is not.

Mirroring discussions about historic characters in other installments, Nelson Bondioli et al. move through *Origins* from an archaeological engagement with records about Julius Caesar (2019). Equally agnostic to what they refer to as the "fruitless debate of 'original' versus 'distortions'", they want to attend to "all the ambivalences and possible readings of the past, and raise questions about their 'meaning' and different ways of currently 'understanding' them" that they equate to *reception* (2019, 2). Reception is used here in the context of *classics* (as a discipline) to highlight "the active nature of engagement by the receivers" (3). For them, how players view these characters is essential because how their time is divvied in the game and what scenes they appear in is crucial to understanding a representation regime where *Origins* is a "proxy to the past" (3). They remark that the game "speaks not only about life in Antiquity, but also — and quite literally — it tries to speak for the ancient people" by giving them dialogue or setting up scenes (3). Caesar and Cleopatra for instance are given voice external to texts they wrote in their lifetime, and they "express what they want, what they think and what they know"

(3). Likewise, these simulated scenes that may or not have occurred, and “each and every word or action projected by the characters [...] will always correspond to a set of ideas and concepts about the past that the game’s development team had about them” and these ideas are “transmitted to players into the present” (4). Although archaeology is often understood to deal with buildings, environments and artefacts, it is extended here to deal with documentation, historical persons and even language. In that light, there is a deployment force where the script writers are modelling actual human beings in ways that may be foreign to their historic writings.

Another archaeologist concerned with *Origins* and its potential for study, Christian Casey, locates the game’s potential in that idea of *playing pretend*, he views as a form of actual experience (2021, 71). By way of discussing the study of ancient language which require extensive practice, and which is mired by the fact that “we cannot go there”, Casey explains that “the simulated world of a game can provide this experience in a way that no academic work can” (73). Discussing the player position in the game, Casey explains that “we view historical events as any ordinary person would”, that the “experience is hyperreal”, and that “the world of Ptolemaic Egypt is ours to explore (74). At a deep level, “the illusion of a living place with independent people in it leaves a powerful impression on the player” (74). Players can be affected and taught by the game in his view. However, he notes “the world itself reflects our current understanding of ancient Egypt to remarkable degree of accuracy” (74). This is both a technical achievement, and a reminder that the simulation is manmade and biased. On this, he explains that “buildings are partly modern fantasy, as the exact layout of Memphis does not survive clearly enough in the archaeological record to be recreated” (75). As Casey explains, it is a “mistake to underestimate fictional worlds” and that “we donate our time and money for the privilege of spending time in them for good reason” (76). There is a fundamental appeal in experiencing the other, which he locates in the “nerd culture”, and that “underlying [...] superficial indicators of tribal membership is real power” which does not simply disappear when we stop playing the game (76). Media effects critique notwithstanding, Casey’s claim is that players “who have played this game will feel that they have visited ancient Egypt, and in a sense they are correct” (76). Likewise, that experience is “not strictly a rational lesson [...] but also an emotional one,” and that the game brings “ancient Egypt to life in a way that nothing else can” (77). Fundamentally, the game provides an experience to players that is understood to be desirable, and *for them*, for *their enrichment*.

In another piece, Casey argues that this quality of being *for* the audience is broadly enjoyed by Egyptology (2018, 2). For him, the game’s popularity is “directly translating into better support for the field of Egyptology” in multiple ways, some immediate and some not (2). As he explains, players even use the game to produce “vacation photos in Egypt” and that players dress as characters from the game to visit Egypt (4). He also explains that for players, “historical accuracy is a selling point” and that “they value authenticity as much as anyone else” (4). He refers to Bayek, the protagonist, as “the Forest Gump of Greco-Roman Egypt”, implicated in “every major historical event for no other reason that to involve the audience” (5).

Casey's assessment is that the game "[provides] a realistic ancient Egyptian setting while simultaneously communicating to players" key facts about that cultural world in intelligible mechanics and narratives (9). Notably, the game also "actively rewards prior knowledge" by conforming to existing documentation about places (11). The final product is an Egypt that is "not exact, but quite good" (13). Or perhaps more cynically, as a "toy version of ancient Egypt"; "a very sophisticated toy, but the rules of toymaking still apply" (16). At another point, Casey describes the game as "'fan service' for Egyptologists" (25). Ultimately, Casey sees enormous potential in the game, which qualities and deficiencies which will be discussed in chapter 3, but the broad assessment is that the game appears *authentic enough*, which at this point should be the motto of series.

There is of course also the *Discovery Tour*, a museum mode that first appeared in *Origins*, to discuss as well. On this, Perrine Poirron, an archaeologist that participated in the mode's development, has crucial insights (2021, 79). She positions *Discovery Tour* as the newest development in a much longer iteration of the existing *Animus Database*, a digital encyclopedia that first appeared in *ACII* (79). With respect to the franchise, she explains that "the developers wanted to game to be an enhanced historical experience, educating the public about the past in an entertaining way" (80). *Discovery Tour* is then the realization of a longer project that located its best candidate period in Ptolemaic Egypt, and at a time when the game technology could handle development. This period of Egypt was chosen because "there is a still a lot of mystery surrounding this time [...] with its mummies, its pyramids, and its many gods" which "generally *triggers* interest and curiosity" (emphasis mine, 80). Bracketing a discussion of the term *trigger*, Poirron lists elements that are generally stereotypical in popular media. The process of those stereotypes reforming is more complicated, however.

As she recounts, multiple Egyptologists and Hellenists were recruited to build various pieces of the tour, as well as providing expertise on dialects. The catch was that all the experts had to condense their work to short texts, while "fitting all the information known on any given topic" which was particularly challenging. During development, Ubisoft also "learned that a tour must not exceed 20 minutes of reading in total", and that time had to be subdivided into smaller stations no longer than 5 minutes each. During development, the archaeological material grew so overwhelming in breadth that the initial 20 tours grew to 75 tours (82). The solution was to be to parcel out more tours, at the cost of making each individual one more succinct. There were also the twin issues of artistic liberty and censorship to contend with (83). Temple spaces that should've been private were open to players, and statues that should've been presented in the nude were censored, such that "the *Discovery Tour*, in addition to opening the universe of the *Assassin's Creed* games to everyone, its diffusion would go everywhere including to children in the classrooms arounds the world, potential in countries where nudity might be offensive" (83). This was of course immediately realized when Ubisoft exported the tour to museums in "Montreal, Paris, Washington, and Kansas City" so that "it [would] fulfill its purpose to make history everyone's playground" (84).

Although *Origins* has occupied a great deal of archaeological focus, *Odyssey* has begun garnering attention. Aris Politopoulos et al. discuss *Odyssey* as a “richly reconstructed past world” with “a penchant for historical drama”, fitting within academic expectations (2019, 317). They also discuss the game as a “form of virtual heritage tourism” which has been strengthened by its foray into “classical antiquity” and the addition of the *Discovery Tour* (318). Contrary to Poirron’s assessment of the tour, here it is described as a “poorly referenced living diorama lacking interactivity” (318). More specific to *Odyssey* is their assessment of period choice, which they feel is easy given that it “corresponds to the height of classical Greece” (318). They do give credit to the “authentic representation of ancient Greece” and the process by which “developers visited Greece to get firsthand experience of the landscape and locations” (318). They also praise the representation Greek antiquity in primarily painted, as opposed to white, marble and the attention to sculpture (318). Though, when it comes to gameplay, they caution that engaging with the broader premise of the Peloponnesian War does little other than change the color of the map “as a representation of Athenian or Spartan dominance” (321). Further, they surmise that “the promise that ‘history is our playground’ is only fulfilled by these games in a limited way and specific way” where the “only consistent way in which players to interact with the world is through the killing of other humans” (322). Their critique is mainly twofold. First, “Assassin’s Creed’s ‘action’ is that of action movies, not the meaningful and rich set of actions available to a socially and culturally embedded agent” (322). Second, much like decolonial scholars above, they are critical of “ruinous, deathly conflict” enacted for enjoyment (322)? Their conclusion is that the game reductively reconstructs Greek culture for the player, as a “virtual heritage tourist” and “time-travelling murderer” (322). Accurate simulation of Greek landmarks is undone by the limited options for interacting in that space.

The final piece from archaeologists Jonathan Westin & Ragnar Hedlund is both compatible with other works in the field, yet a massive departure theoretically (2016). They primarily discuss *AC: Brotherhood*, the installment set in Renaissance Rome, and the archaeological work done in representing Roman ruins and the city in general as a sort of *in media res* version of Rome. As they explain, “the reconstructions in *AC* represent a shift both farther away and closer to those primary sources they are built upon”, closer because they “bring the primary sources to life” and farther because “they are the result of an interpretation” (4). They also view these simulations as “abstractions of reality, not reality, [though] they present themselves as such to the untrained reader, telling an incomplete story in a way that makes it seem complete” and where these simulations “are also increasingly becoming reference points that physical reality have to live up to, rather than the other way around” (5). Once again, there’s a fear that these games traffic in a kind of hyperrealism that is *good enough*. They also worry about *Brotherhood* sitting at the nexus of “the archaeological record, common understanding and recognizability”, negotiating between “expert and public knowledge” (5). This piece in particular asks “to what extent the representations of the past in popular culture cater to the *expectations* of the audience and the established image of the subject,” dovetailing with other scholars above (6).

Their focus in the game is how the city of Rome is constructed. Like Bondioli et al., they note that “all reconstructions above, from the earliest to the most recent: none have depicted Rome, but rather the knowledge of Rome filtered through the technical limitations of the chosen medium and coloured by the scientific approaches of the time” (7). Presumably, social conventions and hegemonic ideology have also always been at play in these constructions. So, *Brotherhood* is an amalgam and a reinterpretation of a series of reinterpretations in the arts. That fact isn’t at play, but the question of how “time periods can be mixed and the reduction in details can affect whole city blocks – monuments removed in their entirety”, which once again brings up a selection bias. Which monuments? For whom? And as they ask, “true to the time being presented, or true to the expectations of the public” (7)? For Westin and Hedlund, these choices reveal the motives of the developers, by virtue of “the primary characteristics” (7). Concretely, they verified a wide array of landmarks including monuments, gates, churches and temples, among others.

Where things get really interesting is in their deployment of Actor Network Theory to understand inclusions and exclusions. As they explain, assemblages including *Brotherhood*, “can be viewed as a network of actants where influences are flowing in all directions” and not only “from producer to target audiences, but also from audience to artist and produced, influenced by both the realities of technological limitations and the use of efficient symbols through which to communicate” (9). In some ways, they absolve Ubisoft of the critical salvo directed at them, because the game is the “product of a series of actants, both human and non-human” (9). Maybe developers have more good will than we assume, and the tech simply isn’t there. Whatever the case, *Brotherhood* is fundamentally viewed as the “product of negotiations” between all these actants. One ANT term they draw attention to is *enrolment* which arises from “a grid of parameters for the representation” based on negotiations, which decides what “visual signifiers are put to use and others are made away with” (9). The desired result being a Rome that is recognizable as Rome to the public. Crucially, a Ubisoft art director for the series, Mohamed Gambouz refers to this theory by another name: “‘the postcard effect’, meaning that people essentially have popular representations in their minds when thinking about popular places” (9). Converging with communications theory, Westin and Hedlund discuss this as “a past that is carefully articulated to appeal to a wide audience [...] as opposed to a past based on thorough and exact research” (9). There’s more to say about this process, but for now, it’s best to return to discussing Rome in *Brotherhood*.

Westin and Hedlund note that the Rome of *AC* is warped in *scale* (10). Monuments might appear in the city, but distances might be strangely incongruent or they “shrunk down or stretched out without coming in conflict with the *idea* of Rome” (emphasis mine, 10). The logical conclusion is that all inclusions that are exact are “deemed indispensable to the identity of the city or they play a pivotal role in the game play mechanics” (11). This is most strongly contrasting when there are exclusions from what experts deem essential, and inclusions of “certain places and monuments that the general audience [...] know by name or concept” (11).

Everything else can be mass produced, and filled in with inaccurate replica so long as the games satisfies “the audience’ expectations by making reference to a few known ideas” (11). There are many monuments that have their shape warped, such as the Colosseum being circular to match audience expectations, when it is in reality an oval (13). They explain these instances as moments when “places familiar to the viewer have also been manipulated in subtle ways” (14). Often, these manipulations feel like “yet another postcard from a different age [...] squeezed into the representation to make it more familiar” (15). What is the result of these stacked postcards then?

Westin and Hedlund describe this situation as a collision of “conflicting knowledge models, belong to both experts and the public” which arises from these popular/expert knowledge negotiations (15). The result is a Rome that exists nowhere, and which has never existed. At least not totally. It is an amalgam “brought there by the different actants and negotiated into one *coherent* cityscape” (emphasis mine, 16). They coin the term *polychronia*, “a representation of an event, place or landscape, at a certain historic moment, which enrolls aspects and artefacts from later or earlier times in an organized manner to appeal to a common understanding” (16). Rome is one such polychronia. Further, I argue it is possible to consider all of *Brotherhood* a polychronia of Italy, and each game as part of a series of nesting polychronias that work together. Lastly, for the polychronia to work “the details [...] are made to harmonize with the expectations of a present-day audience” (17). Every detail is negotiated “not according to their factual appearance but rather the idea of their appearance and their place in public awareness” (18). Cynically, they conclude that *Brotherhood*’s Rome may be in “some ways the most accurate reflection of Rome – as we know it” (18). Here again, the phantom imagined audience is real insofar as it actively shapes decisions about development and representation.

Although archaeologists are more optimistic than other scholarly fields covered in this literature review, there are lingering issues in *Brotherhood*, *Origins*, and *Odyssey*. All three games are lauded for their attention to technical detail in terms of environment, ranging from the locale to monuments. Though, the closer scrutiny becomes, the more apparent selection bias becomes. It’s not that the games are inaccurate which vexes archeologists, but rather the ways that the games are inaccurate. They provide beautiful, authentic-seeming worlds to play in, but the play they provide is at odds with their historical-humanist edutainment mission. Concessions, both in the landscape and more pointedly in characters and the avenues of play, indicate a preoccupation with appearing *authentic enough* for audiences, in a way that will enrol them into the game. Simulation being good enough for players is a recurring theme in the last field of AC studies: communication studies proper.

2.2.6 AC and Communication Studies: Simulation is the Message

I am blurring the lines somewhat by referring to these works as *communication studies*, because in many ways all the works discussed here dovetail with game studies, and often with

classical communication studies. My reasoning is that these pieces are primarily concerned with the stakes of communication studies, and their methods. From Helena Esser's discussion of *Syndicate* as a Foucauldian heterotopia (2021) to Hassan Taher's description of remediation in *Origins* (2018) and lastly to Lars De Wildt and Stef Aupers' coverage of the franchise logics of *AC* (2021), these works deal with *AC* as a communication structure first and foremost.

Esser's analysis of *Syndicate* positions the game as a hyperreal form of Victorian aestheticization (2021, 1). As she explains, the game's steampunk construction of "anachronistic neo-Victorianism may quite literally re-create London as the archetypal Victorian city", creating what Westin and Hedlund refer to as polychronia (1). Much like my own work, Esser brings in Foucault's notion of *heterotopia*, "a kind of effectively enacted eutopia in which the real sites, all the other real sites that can be found within the culture, are simultaneously represented, contested, and inverted" (Foucault in Esser, 2). Esser explains that the London of the game, where most of the action happens, is fully heterotopic and a simulacra (2). I discuss simulation and simulacra in detail in Chapter 3. However, it's important to note that Esser uses the work of cultural geographer Edward Soja, a more recent simulacra theorist, to define simulacra as "cumulative replacement of the real with its simulated representations" (Soja in Esser, 2). This alter-London is a simulacrum, produced by cobbling together a series of records and maps to produce an artificial polychronia. Esser explains that the city has great verisimilitude to the "realist 'Filmic reality effect'" (Makai in Esser, 5). This "realistic-looking Victorian London" is nevertheless filled with "filler architecture" and that the realism only really works in "an allegorical way that no longer measures itself against the historical city" and that it is "an elaborate project of shared (stereo)types about the Victorian city" derived from collective memory of the place and culture (5). Lastly, the city is heterotopic not only because details are subtly manipulated, but because it built to be experienced by the "primary agent", the player, rather than the people who occupy it (6-7).

In parallel, Hassan Taher adapts remediation theory from Bolter and Grusin, Lund, and Ellestrom to discuss how *Origins* alters the subject of its simulation (2018). Across this theoretical spectrum, Taher highlights Bolter and Grusin's ideas about *Immediacy* and *Hypermediacy* as particularly important (21). In his view, "Immediacy leads to the medium disappearing from the view of the viewer" which dovetails with discussions of immersion, whereas "hypermediacy makes the viewers aware of the medium" as the impetus towards immediacy (22-23). In other words, simulations that appear real are immediate, where those like the *Discovery Tour* are so unreal that audiences want to access immediacy more strongly (23). Notably, he considers the *Discovery Tour* as a form of remediation which enrolls the logics of museums into the game, which themselves were products of colonial Egyptology and exploitation (24). Like other scholars, he views the result of slippages between immediacy and hypermediacy as producing a "believable" setting (26). The game's hypermedia artefacts like the user interface are all used as "indexical signs" in the semiotic sense (33). They point users

towards the aspects of the game where culture is experienced more strongly. The result is both to serve and to reinforce a “focus on ‘authenticity’” (38).

The game is still a simulation achievement, that allows users to explore the lost Library of Alexandria, which Taher views optimistically. Though, like many others, Taher cautions that viewing *Origins* in a semiotic light “with its Middle Eastern cultural depiction, means players of *ACO* in the western world might experience the video game differently than someone living in the Middle East” (42). He explains that for Middle Eastern folks, “this is a more *relatable* representation of Egypt, more so than the stereotypical American explorer in films, who decides to travel to Egypt to find hidden treasures or to excavate mummies” (44). Though, it may very well be the case that the gung-ho Egyptianness of films like *The Mummy* (1999), has rather been replaced with an older form of colonial viewing: the British Egyptologist and museum curator’s gaze.

Perhaps the broadest overview of the series as a media product comes from de Wildt and Aupers coverage of how religion is marketed across the entire franchise (2021). They conducted 22 interviews with Ubisoft developers, including game directors Patrice Desilets and Jean Guesdon who refer to themselves respectively as the father and adoptive father of the franchise (8). The topic of their study was “marketable religion”, a form of cultural production and distribution endemic to the franchise (1). As they describe, “Ubisoft’s version of ‘marketable religion’ comes to be produced for a global, secular audience”, which is a more direct portrayal of the imagined audience (2). They further critique work that positions “‘developer Ubisoft’ into a monolithic entity with underlying intentions” without actually interviewing the makers (3). Notably, they do position the audience, on the basis of prior studies, as young college educated men, and “overwhelmingly—representing 79% of Ubisoft’s sales—From North America and Europe” (Ubisoft in de Wildt and Aupers, 4). Unsurprisingly, *many* choices discussed above in player perspective make sense. Though, there’s still the question of *how* and *why* these religious elements make their way into the final product.

In a rare occurrence, de Wildt and Aupers were given access to the fabled “Brand Bible” for *AC* for this study, which they combine with paratextual evidence (5). They also conducted interviews with various creative directors, brand managers, writers, level designers, and mission designers across the franchise (6-8). The franchise is described by level design director Nicolas Guerin as “a big machine” in terms of AAA production (Guerin in de Wildt and Aupers, 8). Desilets describes the entire franchise as a product of “‘gut feeling’, ‘Zeitgeist’ and some direction by marketing” (9). That zeitgeist came from Montreal culture at the time, the tv series *Lost*, and the *Da Vinci Code*’s popularity (10). It’s not just a polychronia of a culture, it’s a blended mishmash of genres, media, places, times and *gut feeling* for the developers. Desilets was also the decision maker in putting religion into the games, which came from “hostile sentiment towards the Christian church as an institute” and a fascination with the supernatural (9). The original *why* may be clear, but the *how* is certainly also important.

Here, religion is merged with the “fun for everybody” mission, which de Wildt and Aupers describe as the “‘depoliticization’ of religion or [...] shaping a religion that does not offend any consumer around the globe, regardless of their beliefs and convictions”, which led to the infamous franchise disclaimer (10). This process is *heavily* corporate-inflected now and led to what “[the authors] and [their] participants came to call the ‘marketing-brand-editorial’ burger” (11). This leads to the second aspect, “universalization” which has a corollary in the actual brand bible (which has Old Testament-style commandments for employees), such as “Commandment #5”, where *AC* “will always take a revisionist approach on real events [...] and use historical gaps to create [their] story” (11). In many ways, it’s refreshing to see the company engage so overtly with the corporate and colonial structures that run through *AC*. As for the burger model, it leads to brand management *universalizing* the cultural “flavor” of this year’s installment, sandwiched between “marketing [which] provides the base” and “editorial [whose] approval tops the game off for release” (12). Crucially, the point is to *mess with the formula as little as possible*, and to simply churn through these religions so that “everyone can relate to them” (13).

Guesdon is more than eager to explain that the process is to look at “Egypt in entertainment” and how “it’s fantasized”, through various focus groups they call in (13). Marketing makes conclusions on what the popular perception of the place and time is, and “that’s the game they have to make” (Anon-Brand in de Wildt and Aupers, 13). Employees also detailed avoiding controversy, making the best business call and not offending anyone as primary vectors for preserving the brand burger (13). This process is referred to as “state-gate” and “defers to the market and the *largest possible audience*” (emphasis mine, Masters in de Wildt and Aupers, 14). This last notion of the *largest possible audience* is a dead giveaway combined with the 79% Euro-American consumer based listed above. The franchise optimizes sales and tries to remain apolitical, but that apolitical character is really another term for catering to Player 1, the young white men of Canada, America and European nations. This is particularly vexing given the decolonial accounts of Arabic and Haitian resistance earlier.²⁵

Reducing religion to a brand-editorial decision based on numbers has ugly connotations in terms of colonial extractivism. In their interviews, Guerin describes the use of religion as add in “‘oomph’ to something simple” and “*Gravitas!*” (14). Jean Guesdon has explicitly stated that “people are easily hooked by its [religion] magic [...] its symbolism *resonates* with modern societies” (emphasis mine, 14). Writer Russell Lees explained that religious motifs provide “dramatic, inherently interesting, visually sumptuous qualities” (14). Unity Creative director Alexandre Amancio describes “the aesthetics of candles, of stones, of hoods” as “universal things that have existed for a long time” and which “radiate a certain sense of awe and mystery” (14). If my incoming critique couldn’t be any more set up, Russell describes the use of religion as “historical tourism” (15). Guerin further describes the games in comparison to Dan Brown’s novels, explaining that “the *Da Vinci Code*. It’s the same thing” (15). Guesdon also states that

²⁵ This is the paragraph version of me sucking in air through my teeth as I read these interviews.

“the brand’s strategy [is] “tapping into this rampant culture of religious symbolism, of esotericism” (16). Guesdon is even more mercenary with the religious traditions of Native Americans, Arabic peoples, Egyptians, and Caribbean Creole folks, explaining that “that’s the beauty of esotericism. You just give them some dots to connect, and people will create the links [...] the franchise became super strong because we managed transmedia” which played into consumer feelings of “Holy Shit. I understand so much now!” (16). It was never about speaking truth to unspeakable colonial trauma. It was always about feeding the desire for self-gratification of Euro-American players. This is the third step in de Wildt and Aupers’s process: *commodification* (19). The why and the how are plain to see now, and as I close out this review, there’s a much clearer perspective on the methods, motivations and assumptions of Ubisoft developers who lead game branding and editorial.

2.2.7 AC and Unique Perspectives: Towards Other Fields

As I draw to a merciful conclusion on works discussing the *AC* franchise, there are a few texts that don’t particularly fit in with the disciplines described above. Douglas Dow (2013) who discusses simulation but from an art historical perspective, falls in between neatly defined fields. Connie Veugen’s transmedia analyses of the franchise constitute another approach that crosses disciplinary boundaries (2016). Others are simply disciplinarily unique, and operate respectively in tourism studies (Shaheer, 2022), music studies (Lind, 2020) and geography (Jones and Osborne, 2020).²⁶ It is to these last works I turn to now.

Dow’s work mixes art historical concerns about representation and how art pieces might be fundamentally altered, with *AC2* as his subject (2013). Citing Baudrillard and Camille on simulation, Dow’s positioning of reality and simulation puts forward a general anxiety about the real in these games (215). Dow’s assessment is that the game’s popularity is making it difficult to avoid in academia, and that students are exposed to novels by Dan Brown or James Clavell (Schiesel in Dow, 216). Like other simulation theorists, Dow is concerned that the students’ interaction with the game might alter their understanding, and he explicitly invokes Baudrillard to label *AC2* as a form of simulation verging on simulacra, with all the associated anxieties about hyperreality (216). He contrasts this game with films in the sense that the game constructs a cityscape designed to accommodate the parkour game mechanics (216). There is also a notion that the game provides a form of interaction that bridges the gap between players and the simulation, making it less alienating (217). The aspects that make it more welcoming to players also “[efface] the boundary between the medium and the real”, which dovetails with Taher’s notion of immediacy (218). For Dow, the crucial issue is that the simulation becomes “diffracted” into players’ knowledge base, and becomes part of their presuppositions about

²⁶ There are also a handful of sources that have not been included because they are outside of my research languages, French and English, which of course produces some blind spots. In the spirit of disclosure, these sources are written in Italian, Spanish and Portuguese. They account for 4 out of 53 works surveyed for this review.

Florentine buildings and art. At that point, the game coheres with their view, but it “must be seen instead as a simulacrum” full of anachronisms (219). Though, like Westin and Hedlund, Dow states that the church facades in the game were “already a historical simulacrum—a nineteenth century structure designed to resemble a thirteenth century architecture” (220). And so, the issue is not that anachronisms are part of the game, but that they are “nonobvious anachronism[s]” which have been “skillfully blended in” (220). The issue which generally adds to the growing critique, is not that the game’s Florence is false, but rather that it’s real enough to be mistaken for the real-world Florence, which is itself guilty of a similar game of telephone.

Connie Veugen’s work on *Assassin’s Creed* is an attempt at locating the series within transmedia theorization (2016). Veugen discusses how videogames can fit into existing transmedia and co-creation models, which have been deployed by companies at least “since the first half of the 20th century” (3). The primary idea of this work, which I’ll address more directly in the conclusion of this project, is the multimodal distribution of the franchise over various types of media (4). This engagement with transmedia focused on the original *Desmond Saga*, which ran from 2007 to 2012, constituting the first phase of the game franchise (5). Veugen tracked the game over its main console releases, but also in handheld games, books, films and comics, explaining that the saga “did not start off as a transmedia storytelling project but developed to become one” (11). Although she concludes that the transmedia practices of the franchise are still developing and difficult to gauge in terms of efficacy, the methods employed by Veugen dovetail with how I approach the franchise: considering promotional material, franchise development and representation across cultures (14).

In terms of this representational anxiety, Phil Ian Jones and Tess Osborne analyse virtual landscapes in *Syndicate*, as purveyors of “second-hand and potentially flawed insights into material landscapes that suggest how the world was or could be” (2020, 188). What they are most wary of are “questions of power, particularly as designers can rapidly alter virtual environments in response to the ways users engage with them” marked by the “capacity for manipulation (188). They describe interactions with games like *Syndicate* as purveyors of “postmemory” which is an “understanding of how a past that has not been personally witnessed can take on meaningful qualities through a practice of creative engagement” (189). Players who may never visit or study anything else about these places can walk away with a sense of the culture solely based on their play experiences. Jones and Osborne explain that “spaces of memorialization are curated to act as a symbol of a past” that is external to the lived experience of the audience. Further, this manipulation of symbols fixes readings of the places and “alternate meanings of those sites are forgotten and possibilities for changing those meanings are squeezed out” (190). There is a sense that curating the space is fundamentally changing it.

Like other scholars attentive to architecture detail, they explain that “key buildings [...] are reproduced with apparently breathtaking accuracy”, but that they have been “altered to improve gameplay” all the same (191). The purpose is always to *tailor* the space for the players’ enjoyment. In parallel, games like *AC* benefit from exorbitant budgets that “allow for the

creation of much more complex, nuanced and, simply, *bigger* virtual landscapes” than any other medium or even real world architects, which they refer to as “a blockbuster ‘Triple-A’ release” (191-194). There’s a technical maximalism that is only accessible to game makers supported by studios like Ubisoft. And those budgets are deployed as “recursive” models, where “designers react to the ways players interact with these spaces and make changes which in turn alter players’ interaction” (193). I would argue that this recursion happens at multiple levels based on the other texts discussed above. First, there is a focus group phase where players can interact with early builds, second there is internal QA that *smooths* out the game, and third, there is iteration between installments. Landscapes in *Origins* and *Odyssey* are built on the chassis of every installment before them, which is why it has been essential to cover other games than the ones I am focused on. Jones and Osborne further qualify these simulated landscapes as “spatial and performative” where “spatial uses seen in everyday landscapes [are] reworked by the demands of gameplay” in order to provide “harmony” (193). Churches and pyramids can’t simply exist to be seen, they have to be climbed. And on this notion of *harmony*, “the pragmatic pillaging of historical, mythical, and ritual elements” is done to “create situations that are ‘real enough’ to generate intense and personally significant experiences for players” (193). That idea of *real enough* and *being for* the players implies that the harmony is not between users and the space, but between users and their own expectations.

Phil Jones & Tess Osborne interviewed users to understand how they perceived the manipulations of geography and architecture in the game. They allowed respondents little time to interact with the game so as to glean their more immediate responses. They explain that participants “would not immediately understand the compromises and choices” made by developers (195). What participants expressed was surprise at “the scale and seeming photorealism of the urban landscapes” (196). Further, some participants “saw the game more as a factual source of information about how things *would have looked* at this point in history” (196). Jones and Osborne describe these reactions as a “slippage [...] between understanding the game landscapes as merely *evoking* the period and actually giving meaningful insights into society” of the epoch (196). They even refer to this slippage as a “seductive quality”, which is borne from players viewing structuring coherence as a “product of their experiences and positions” (196-197). They note for example, that men did not notice that the female avatar in the game, Evie, would have been arrested for scaling cathedral and monument walls, and whose gender is ignored in “conquered territory” (199). That these realities recede into the background is important because they make the landscape illusion feel real (201). This is because players form postmemories with the fictional space which they imagine and enact (202). Individuals feel “a greater sense of ownership” over these spaces. Once again, that’s fantastic for alienated marginalized people reclaiming their space, but less so when that space is claimed by a cavalier self-orientalizing Euro-American player.

Articulating a more pragmatic take, Ismail Shaheer is interested in discussing what he refers to as “media-induced tourism”, which is the “visits or travel to a destination featured on

[...] related media” (2022, 1356). Traditionally, media-induced tourism has been associated more often with film, leading to a relative dearth of game studies perspective. The core idea is that the success of these games is an important factor because it leads to “preservation, conservation, and restoration [...] applied to heritage attractions” (1356). The premise is that if players consume the media, they will go visit the places, which will in turn fund them and either “slow their deterioration, maintain their original state, and attempt to return them to their former state” (1356). He specifically singles out the *Tomb Raider* and *Assassin’s Creed* franchises as progenitors of “video game-induced tourism” (1357). Tourism is thus understood as part of a “reciprocal relationship” with heritage attractions (1357). Shaheer’s proposition is a general call to begin looking at videogames as tourism catalysts, and to evaluate the social goods they may affect on that basis (1359). This of course brings up the issue of who is profiting from this kind of tourism, and even a question of whether players who play the game might be *sated* by their simulated tourism.

Lastly, and perhaps most uniquely, Stephanie Lind’s work is on the uses of music in *AC* as a form of temporal disruption (2020). Lind’s contribution is invaluable because there is little written about the soundscapes and musical score of the games. Certainly there has been discussion of dialect and the cultural overtones of the shanties and songs in specific games, but nothing at a fundamental level about the musical score. As Lind explains, “the music intentionally does not aim for absolute historical accuracy” and that although the songs “are derived from the time period and geographic setting of the game, these historical snippets are subsumed within modern musical settings” (58). Moreover, “the resultant blend creates a bleeding-over of ancient with modern” (58). So, there’s a part of the culture and a part of *AC* that merged into a strange hybrid. Sound and music are understood to operate at two levels, “diegetic sounds (i.e. sounds that are understood to exist within the gameworld) and non-diegetic sounds (i.e. sounds that are not audible to the in-game characters)” which can be divided into categories such as speech, in-game music performed by characters, in-game music meant for the players, menu sounds and so on (59-60). Lind deploys a “semiotic approach” to understand how the sounds help the visuals in the game and asking what they represent (60).

Discussing the original game and composer Jesper Kyd’s work, Lind explains that the game’s soundtrack “was produced by live-recording vocals, chants, prayers, percussion and Middle Eastern instruments [...] and re-mixing these to include digital effects” in order to merge futuristic sci-fi elements with the *historical score* (Spence in Lind, 63). Notably, Lind explains that much of the score is intended to “produce maximum density and volume” (68). Presumably, the simulation maximalism discussed in terms of peoples and landscapes extends to sounds and music as well. More is more, and more is better. Finally, Lind views “regional and historical elements [acting] as a binding agent between the technological world of the Animus and the historical chronologies the player participates in, drifting in and out” (71). She views this as a buttressing of the historical, explaining that “[i]f the history resonates with the audience then a heightened sense of drama can be built, and the immersion enhanced through authenticity”

(Stuart in Lind, 71). Resonance makes another appearance, this time as part of the sonic elements of the game. Lind's complex method of measuring the musical score are not possible with my expertise. However, the general orientation of considering the deployment and modulation of *Origins* and *Odyssey*'s soundtracks allows for combined analysis of the visual and the aural.

2.2.8 Concluding Remarks on AC Literature

The breadth of material written about the *Assassin's Creed* franchise is staggering. Spanning multiple disciplines, and covering almost all of the major installments, with *Valhalla* being a notable outlier (though that's to be expected given how recent the game is). There is deep engagement with the colonial logics that underpin the franchise, which is often tempered with optimism or constructive critique. Scholars see great potential for both social good and colonial extractivism of cultures for the enjoyment of players. What I've tried to do is structure these works as a broader sweep and engagement with the *idea* of simulation culture. Although many disciplines have entirely different stakes, one aspect has been virtually unanimous: the implicit understanding that the games are built with an imagined audience in mind. The games are *for* someone more than they are *about* a culture or people, which leads to all sorts of representational gymnastics. I would argue at this point that the games exhibit a form of *resonance*, which requires a survey of the theoretical concept, and terminology that is either highly compatible with *resonance*, or simply a synonym. Though, before attending to *resonance* itself, it's important to turn to literature on *Magic: The Gathering* which is substantially less vast, but also *extremely* engaged with resonance in design.

2.3 Magic: The Grandfather of Card Games

Compared to *Assassin's Creed*, *Magic* has garnered less academic attention. In fact, it may appear odd to pair a series so reputed for bombastic fall releases, large scale expansions and revenues that repeatedly break the billion-dollar mark. However, it's not so outlandish given that *Magic* was recently listed, along with *Dungeons & Dragons*, as Wizards of the Coast's "top brand performance", and the reason for its 1B USD revenue in 2021 as mentioned earlier (Hasbro, 2022). *Magic*'s revenue has been increasing for four consecutive years, and for 12 out of the last 13 years (2022). Conversely, this brings up the game's franchise aspect. We expect *Assassin's Creed* to generate scholarly engagement because it has 12 main installments, and 12 spin off titles (or DLC). *Magic* has released 140 unique premium card sets²⁷ and 11 *commander* products²⁸, since the game's initial release in 1993. *Magic* celebrated, in October of 2022, its 30th anniversary and business is booming.

²⁷ Premium card sets vary in terms of card count, between core sets (~250 cards), large expansions (~350 cards), and small expansions (~150 cards).

²⁸ An alternate *casual* game mode that has existed since 2011.

So, the relative dearth of material on *Magic* is surprising, but given its massive franchise structure and its operation under toy giant Hasbro's banner, the game may be much closer to *Assassin's Creed* than is immediately apparent. Equally of note is the fact that *Magic* has printed card sets that remediate cultural motifs and stereotypes from a broad range of cultural locales, including²⁹: the Middle East (*Arabian Nights*, 1993), Japan (*Kamigawa*, 2004; 2022), India (*Kaladesh*, 2016), roaring 20s New York (*New Capenna*, 2022), Scandinavia (*Kaldheim*, 2021) and most importantly for my work, Ancient Egypt (*Amonkhet*, 2017) and Archaic Greece (*Theros*, 2013, 2014, 2014, 2020). Although *Magic* is one game, for the purposes of my analyses I will be discussing it as a franchise of unique games that work individually and together.

Despite the franchise's propensity for churning through real world cultures, there is staggeringly little written about *Magic* in terms of decolonial, cultural or critical studies fields. Much less from fields like archaeology, art history, education, and so on. The game exists in a virtual blind spot, save for one field: analog game studies. Though the work is generally not focused on culture, there are useful aspects to bring up, and to consider in terms of usefulness for my project. However, there is a trove of in-vivo analyses and self-reflexive work done by *Magic* head designer Mark Rosewater. Though Richard Garfield is the original architect of *Magic*, Rosewater has been its steward since he became lead developer in 1997, 3 years after he began working at Wizards. Rosewater's work, although not academic in nature, is so detailed and expansive that it would be impossible to discuss *Magic* without it. And like *AC*'s Jean Guesdon, Rosewater has been more than happy to *extensively* detail his design work.

2.3.1 Magic and Academics: Making Sense of Cardboard

Academic studies of *Magic* are fairly recent, with one early exception (Lancaster, 1999). Cinematographer and communications scholar Kurt Lancaster is perhaps the first to refer to *Magic* as a "postcinematic form" more than two decades ago (47). Lancaster's initial assessment of the game was that it "combines the fantasy appeal of the roleplaying game *Dungeons & Dragons*" with game mechanics usually reserved to casinos or chess (50). However, what I'd like to draw attention to is his insight that the game combined "pre-cinematic" forms of entertainment with "a hungering for the realism of movies [which] games like *Magic* echo in some ways" (51). His work focused on the convention space, but this idea of *Magic* as proximate to films will become a recurring theme throughout later chapters here. The next leap in early work would appear in 2010, with journal articles and conference presentations by Ethan Ham (2010) and Aaron Trammell (2010). Ham's work focused largely on the interrelation between "rarity and power" (2010). This general approach is not necessarily tied to cultural simulation, but rarity is important in considering how certain characters or motifs are more or less rare. As he explains, "the conventional wisdom is that the more powerful a collective is, the more rare it should be", which leads to a general pairing of important characters like heroes and high rarity

²⁹ Locales listed in "place (card set, release year)" format.

(2010). Ham's work is generally statistically driven and concerns notions of metagame balance that aren't at the core of this project. This kind of statistical work has also found a new breath in Daniel Magruder's analyses of card power (2022). Magruder locates the series "long lifetime" to Rosewater's stewardship (722). Though, here that even-handed direction of *Magic* is mostly understood in terms of number balancing. What Magruder's work provides however is shorthand definitions of card parameters that are useful when breaking down each individual card, including the card face, the cost, statistics, rarity and card releases (726-733). Though, my focus is on the cultural and not the statistics of how cards grow stronger over printing cycles.

Conversely, Trammell's early work follows an ethnographic observational format (2010). He observed the *Magic* game community and noted how personal and evaluative the community was (4). Trammell's observations were intended to "[allow] game designers to develop better games suited to integrating player interests with pedagogical goals", which is quite like the pedagogical work conducted on *AC* (4). Trammell also describes *Magic* as an "interesting site" due to its "formal rituals and economic trappings" (5). Although his focus is on the players and how they play, offline and online, there is still a sense that *Magic* players "share a culture" both in practice and in how they communicate and read cards (7). Where Trammell studies the culture at the table, I aim to study culture on the cardboard, but there is nonetheless a sense of *Magic* as signifying system. In a more recent piece, Trammell has also discussed the artistic after-market for *Magic*, where artists modify cards and enter into conflicts with Wizards on intellectual property (2013, 2). Once again using ethnographic observation methods, he explains that *Magic* fans are avid prosumers who love to own, trade, modify and participate in *Magic* culture (4). Here, *Magic* is portrayed in terms of the fan culture it has garnered, "where the affective community of fandom supersedes" economic considerations (6). In this saga of card modifications, and legal action by Hasbro and Wizards, it becomes clear that *Magic* is not just a set of cards, or even a small boardgame, but a juggernaut in the tabletop scene, where Hasbro seeks to maximize profits (10-11). Engaging with *Magic* as a craft economy has led to various lawsuits and Wizards to be frustratingly ambivalent towards fan production (12). They love the publicity, but only if it doesn't ruffle intellectual property mandates.

More recently, there have also been analyses of how cards are acquired and what content is up for sale. In Patrick Maisenholder's 2017 analysis, *Magic* is contrasted with other pay-to-win models and Bourdieu's notion of cultural capital (60-61). Citing work from Caillois as well, Maisenholder's critique is that the game should not be subject to "real economic resources [improving] one's chances to participate successfully" (63). The argument is broadly that all cards are theoretically accessible to players, but many range in the hundreds or even thousands of dollars (63). Maisenholder also subdivides cards by color, rarities and broad categories of mechanics (64). There's also an assumption that a game of magic is a magic circle, which is subject to all the critiques made of the concept in the past decade (66). Maisenholder locates the game's pleasurable aspect in its random card draws and its context-like structure (66-67). This is reasonable given his focus on the value of cards and impact of buying cards. Interestingly,

Maisenholder also refers to “objectified cultural ingame capital” as the power of cards towards winning (69). And here, there is a gap because there’s an aspect of objectified cultural capital where cards represent places, characters and cultures. *Having* one of these cards is a form of pleasure and resonance in itself. He is right to call cards such forms of objectified cultural capital, but there’s much more to be said about what that capital *is*.

In the same issue as Maisenholder, Eric Murnane and Kenton Howard discuss game rules and functions for *Magic* (2018). Although a discussion of the entire rule system is not possible here, a few insights are generative. Murnane and Howard characterize *Magic*’s rule system, through its *stack* system, as “flexible simplicity” (84). The stack concept is not useful here, but the idea that the rule system is both simple and flexible is. Largely, they rely on Jesper Juul’s work to describe magic as a game *intended* for “interaction between players” (87). *Magic* is a game that only works in multiplayer. And yet, *Magic* is also experienced as a text by players. Murnane and Howard also explain that for this game in particular “the application of game rules is handled directly by players instead of by code” (87). This will be essential in my discussion of methods, but simply put, in *Magic* the rules and card metrics are the code. Text and code are indistinguishable, which brings up theories of both forms. They also describe *Magic* as a system of “flexible syntax” that features “over thirty thousand cards”, where the cards and the rules constitute a broader language (88). This idea that *Magic* is a language is echoed by Rosewater in the next section and is crucial for my application of semiotics theories and methods.

There has however been a recent development of literary studies and popular culture studies work on *Magic* (Crutcher, 2017; Dodge, 2018; Torjussen, 2016;). Articles written by Paul A. Crutcher (2017) and Autumn M. Dodge (2018) has begun to rethink the franchise along literary practices. Crutcher has imputed a special status to *Magic*, “which extends beyond its current proliferation in pop culture,” situating it at the center of a constellation of new card games that are literary in some fashion (2017). Further, as Crutcher notes, “it is surprising how little has been done with competitive and collectible card games,” as a literary text (2017). He notes that *Magic* is not necessarily literature, but it surrounds itself with literature, in the cards themselves and in promotional material for the game (2017). Dodge locates the literary aspects of the game in the sort of vocabulary it employs, and the substantial amount of terms that players must learn to understand *Magic* as a language (2019, 175). As she explains, “each card includes text meant to categorize, conceptualize, and understand its functions,” which encapsulates both technical terms and thematic ones (177). Dodge concludes that *Magic* challenges “traditional, conservative, and outmoded literary practices,” which privilege “canonical, long-form texts (e.g. novels)” (188). Both authors locate in *Magic* a practice of textual referentiality, compatible with intertextuality (Ott & Walter, 2000). Along this axis of intertextuality, Stian Sundell Torjussen has discussed how the motif of the Kraken has traversed medieval literature, blockbuster films like *Clash of the Titans* (1981), even games like “SEGA’s *The Ocean Hunter* (1998)” and become a staple trope of the game (1-4). Notably, Torjussen tracks instances of the mythical monster across *Magic* products, detailing how the myths and popular media they inspire have

come to be represented on cardboard, and how the Kraken was transformed by the game from a Norse monster to a Greek one, in one particular setting that appears in this project: *Theros* (the Greek world in *Magic*) (8). What all three authors provide for this project is understanding of *Magic* as a literary, linguistic system that repurposes existing literature and popular media to constitute itself. Though, studying the game at a technical level requires a different kind of engagement with the card as media technology.

Perhaps the most proximate academic works on *Magic*, insofar as my research is concerned, are those of Nathan Altice (2014) and Jan Švelch (2016; 2020). Both authors are focused on playing cards, with varying degrees of focus on *Magic*. In Altice's case, *Magic* is part of a broader engagement with playing cards as platforms (2014). For, Švelch, *Magic* is the central focus, either as a platform for the production of a "cultural layer" where fans make new *Magic* cards (2016), or in its esports mediation apparatus (2020). As Švelch explains, in Wizards of the Coast's new push to "increase the mainstream appeal of the card game", the company unveiled a plan to turn *Magic* into a premier esports, both in its cardboard variant and in *Arena*, its digital counterpart (2020, 839). This is by no means a departure from their previous strategy of reaching new audiences in digital formats, which was previously the purview of *Magic: The Gathering Online*, which leads Švelch to assert that *Magic* is a "complex transmedia cultural object, which at the very least transcends the binary of analog and digital games" (839). Further, Švelch explains that the interwoven nature of analog and digital *Magic*, and its numerous play formats, and novel spectatorial forms, all dovetail with the "official pay-to-win model" which "advantages rich consumers" (842). *Magic* is a much more monetized game than most premium digital purchases and has even "spawned ancillary industries focusing on accessories" such as "[card] sleeves, deck boxes, or playmats", not to mention collector's edition cards and the aftermarket discussed by Trammell (843). Ultimately, these moves towards increased monetization avenues, which consumers have paradoxically upheld as meritocratic despite its inherent classist overtones, and the move into esports mediation is part of a larger strategy to "reach and expand audiences", which is inflected by the recent "board game renaissance" (852). Though Švelch reiterates that *Magic* is so hybridized at this point, that it "resists being classified as either analog, or digital, instead occupying a liminal position between the two in order to capitalize" (852). This attempt to connect with a perceived audiences and to expand it if possible, is largely comparable with the franchise logics that de Wildt and Aupers uncovered in their Ubisoft interviews. Though, what happens on the cards themselves is not as easy to compare with digital games.

On this, Altice's analysis of "the playing card platform" is crucial and underscores my card analysis methodology (2014; Zanesco, Forthcoming). Altice argues that platform studies is a fruitful approach to the study of analog games, like cards, especially those in *Magic*, because they "are platforms too" in the sense that they are computation (2014). Each card has on its faces various metrics for manipulation, and the more values, names, types and verbs have been added the more it has "widened the spectrum of design possibilities", starting with *Magic*'s game

mechanics. Altice also provides “interleaved platform characteristics” that are unique to card game design and which appear across all cards (2014). First, they are planar, meaning they are rectangular with a particular orientation and with front/back sides which helps show and conceal information (2014). This planarity “excels as a support for text, color, pattern, icons and many other forms of art and design”, which I use as the methodological basis for my card analyses (2014). Altice further explains that these planar rectangles are “[canvases] in miniature” and that over time they have diverged from favoring “rule text, game iconography and statistical cruff” as opposed to mere decoration (2014). Second, cards are uniform, and “cut to identical sizes”, at least within their own game (2014). This means that uniformity “breeds the deck”, meaning that stacking cards, creating a sensical play pattern and forming larger sets of cards requires a certain standardization of cards as lexical units (2014). Third, cards are ordinal, which means that because they are so uniform, it’s possible for them to “be grouped into sets, counted, sorted, ranked, indexed, and ordered” (2014). Concretely, this means that *Magic* cards can be compared on the basis of numerical differences in power, cost, etc. With respect to *Magic*, Altice explains that “ordinality exploded after [*Magic*], as card games adopted a statistical complexity previously reserved for videogames and pen-and-paper roleplay games”, and where the game “uses a collection of custom cards, replete with an ideographic iconography, to multiply the number of in-game combinatorial possibilities” (2014). Altice sees in the numbers a platformized computer system, but it’s also possible to read these thousands of combinatorial possibilities as a language, which in turns allows for the game to be analyzed using semiotic toolkits.

In this vein, Altice also remarks that “ordinality embodies a hierarchical distribution of cultural capital, a reflection of social stratification represented through centuries through playing cards’ royal visages” (2014). Here, there’s an example given that “kings outrank queens”, but also an example of US military use of playing card decks to illustrate tactical targets in hierarchical order, with Saddam Hussain as the Ace of Spades (2014). This is one example, but what if instead of putting political figures on playing cards, we made *Magic* cards that represent cultural icons? Fourth, and perhaps as a technical constraint, cards are “spatial” and Altice explains that it is “not impossible to design” a card game with ten thousand cards, but that it “strains the limits of player comprehension” (2014). This could explain part of the neglect surrounding *Magic*, as a consequence of its tens of thousands of cards, hundreds of sets and so on. Lastly, he explains that cards are textural, “made for hands”, though since I discuss *Magic* as neither solely analog nor digital, but from its representational aspect, I won’t go into detail (2014). Altice’s work is fundamental to my analysis, and although he focuses on “their material and mechanical restraints”, I apply his work to discuss the cultural iconography of the cards themselves.

The last important academic piece on *Magic* comes from Švelch , responding to Altice (2016). Švelch critiques the priority that platform studies places on “technical aspects of platforms over their cultural and social dynamics” (2016). Further, he explains that “culture sits at the margins of the platform studies discourse”, for which he offers a “(1) hardware, (2)

software, (3) culture” framework that moves from the object to the players (2016). He further argues that focus on the computational aspect of cards has generally relegated “the importance of the cultural layer to reception and operation”, or how we receive and use cards (2016). Švelch argues that what players do, and the metagame they form is crucial to understanding *Magic* (2016). Although Švelch is more interested in the cultural dimension that exists in fan activities, his criticism stands. As I have argued elsewhere (2022), in the case of *Magic*, the production—reception circuit that Švelch proposes can be extended back through the game towards the producers, such that it forms another cultural layer to consider. In other words, the cards were always cultural, it’s just much harder to access the implicit bias of the makers. Švelch’s categories of hardware (what the card is), software (how the rules shape the card game) and culture (what players do with the objects), can be flipped to become software (how makers use the rules to produce cards), and culture (how the makers express cultural ideologies through rules and objects) (2016; Zanescu, 2022). Though, this is hardly controversial as a methodology given how Mark Rosewater has described card design.



Figure 2.1: The color pie, as visualized by Matt Cavotta (2005)

2.3.2 Magic and Designers: Making Cardboard Sensical

Although I've mentioned a relative lack of attention to *Magic* from academics in game studies, one individual who has been paying attention is Mark Rosewater, head designer for the game and ostensibly the steward of how *Magic* functions at a thematic level. Generally, Rosewater has produced a staggering quantity of reflexive design articles on how to design colors and flavor for magic, and how the game structures every flavor aspect, from the smallest ideas about what a soldier is, to broader phenomena like the sensation of flying, and even abstract concepts like the rule of law. These thematic concepts have been divided across *Magic*'s five colors (seen on the back of every card), into a wheel or pie shape, which over time has become known as *the color pie*. This color pie has a thematic version for the concepts, and a mechanical version for games rules and card parameters. For example, what does the concept of law look like as a game mechanic? Well, that's the work of Rosewater and folks who sit on *the council of colors*, a working group dedicated to thematic consistency in the game. This tool has been the skeleton for designing cards for the last 29 years, since 1993. As Rosewater explains, "many people appreciate the genius of Richard Garfield's basic **Magic** mechanics, but another innovation of Richard's that gets less attention but is equally important is the color wheel. The color pie is the source of not just the game's flavor but also its mechanics." (2002, emphasis in original).

Rosewater describes how the color pie segments color broadly and how colors shape each other and their mechanics on the basis of contrasting distinctive themes. For example, *white* and *black* cards structure a series of dichotomies: good and evil, light, and dark, or collectivism and individualism (2002a). Colors that are adjacent to each other tend to work in concert, whereas colors that are not tend to "hate" each other. For Rosewater, the color pie is an essential organizing structure of card game design, and he has detailed his thoughts on its importance in a piece called *The Value of Pie* (2003d). In this article, the color pie's function is considered at the broadest scale, in terms of what it does for the game's overall structure and health. The pie produces thematic flavor, through the color wheel (which it is often mistaken for). It differentiates cards from each other, it creates a game balance (by structuring strengths and weaknesses) and most importantly it creates restrictions (or design boundaries) (2003d). The importance of the color pie is evidently stated, but what is it exactly and how does it differ from the color wheel? The answer is best found by approaching the question in reverse and discussing the color wheel first.

In a *Magic* feature, *Wizards of the Coast* artist and writer Matt Cavotta penned a "style guide" discussing recommended practices for producing *Magic* cards (2005). This refers to both the production of aesthetic card elements, as well as rule-based elements like card text. Cavotta included a new, more visually rich representation of the color pie (2005). The overlap between the wheel and pie becomes an issue here because what Cavotta calls the pie, Rosewater refers to as the wheel. It might be best to simply do away with this early nomenclature and adopt language that Rosewater himself would later use: the stylistic color pie and the mechanical color pie

(2017). The stylistic color pie includes no game mechanics, just abstract themes like law, growth or intellect. As Cavotta details, this pie is different from other iterations, eschewing any kind of rules text one might find on cards. Rather, this representation is concerned with how the pie “shows the philosophies of each color [...] [from which] artists, writers and designers can tailor their creations to fit within the all-important **Magic** color system (2005, emphasis in original). For Cavotta, everything that appears on a card is inflected and overdetermined by the parameters of the color pie. This pie is adapted for *Magic*, but it is an abstract arrangement of potential card combinations and the kinds of concepts that might arise from those mixes. If this version orients broad thematic design, the pie more commonly discussed attaches those broad themes to game mechanics.

Rosewater’s analysis of his own design work is invaluable for considering *Magic* as a broad systema of signification. In *Mechanical Color Pie 2017*, Rosewater conducted a hot analysis of the color pie as it existed at the time, in terms of every mechanic he could think of (2017). Each color is described in terms of which mechanics it has access to, and with what degree of frequency or intensity, which is closely regulated by designers (2017). Rosewater’s explication of how the system signifies themes like those shown in figure 2.1 are incredibly expansive (2002b, 2003a, 2003b, 2004a, 2004b, 2008a, 2008b, 2008c, 2008d, 2008e, 2014a, 2014b, 2014c, 2015a, 2015b, 2005a, 2005b, 2005c, 2005d, 2006a, 2006b, 2006c, 2006d, 2006e, 2006f, 2015c, 2015d, 2015e, 2015f, 2015g, 2021a). From abstract themes and adjectives to specific professions and even pop culture characters like Tarzan or King Kong, the system detailed across dozens of articles is purpose built to accommodate the adaptation of popular culture. These articles are also interlaced with 38 podcast episodes, roughly totalling 30 hours of analysis and reflection, discussing the intricacies of color design as thematic design in even greater detail (2021b). Every mechanic, across every single color or color combination, across 140 card sets, is covered over the span of 30 years and constitutes an archival research project in itself. What is most important here is that the reification of Cavotta’s stylistic color pie has been deployed through abstract design orientations *and* concrete mechanical elements, that is at the root of card systems discussed in the specific case studies, that are deliberately coded into mechanics according to the mechanical color pie that Rosewater and others have meticulously crafter. The formal analysis of card games can therefore be thought of as reverse engineering each card set’s modelling of the color pie to access the stereotypes and ideologies that underpin design.

2.3.3 Magic: Small Conclusions, Big Implications

The sheer breadth of writing and recording by Wizards of the Coast lead designers on *Magic* eclipses current academic engagement. Moreover, the academic engagement with the game has been primarily focused on two dimensions: the player cultures that form around the game, and the game’s statistical dimension. There is a third approach, that of Dodge and

Crutcher, which is more focused on literature and literacy, which is not exactly how my work proceeds, though it is informed by it. There's a final aspect, located most clearly in Torjussen's work on the Kraken, which is where my work pushes: the cultural hegemony shaping card design. As discussed earlier, *Magic* is a game that remediates cultures wholesale through its complex systems. So, the study of the game as a rendition of cultures unfolds by studying the proliferation of cultural motifs and stereotypes that are deployed to simulate a specific locale. The game's systemic complexity has stymied research, and so the more statistical or platform-oriented works may seem far afield, but they actually provide a lot of the methodological basis for reading cards. This has also been the purpose of working through this color-pie centric analysis of the game: to provide an approach to card game studies that is both systematized and thematic.

2.4 Contouring the Subject

This literature review has approached the topics of *Magic* and *Assassin's Creed* as a series of parallel, and sometimes intersecting accounts of how the games remediate cultures. In the case of *AC*, there's a wealth of scholarship that even this review cannot properly attend to. I've selected as many sources as possible, but there are nevertheless pieces that have been left aside due to spatial constraints (Rodriguez, 2014; Jatmiko, 2017; Labrecque, 2017; Majkowski, 2018; Veugen, 2018). There's also the issue of literature that emerged too late for this project to incorporate, even though it dovetails perfectly. I'm referring in particular to Jane Draycott and Kate Cook's *Women in Classical Video Games* (2022). The collected volume contains Draycott's work on Cleopatra in *Origins*, Marcie Gwen Persyn's study of the demographic representation of women more broadly in *Origins*, Richard Cole's study of the protagonist in *Odyssey* and Roz Tuplin's discussion of sex workers in *Odyssey*. All four chapters match with the work conducted later, and where possible, their work has been incorporated, though I wish this project would've aligned with their work by a few more months. All in all, the breadth of research on the franchise may in fact be the result of what classicist Ross Clare as the key issue with these games: they are "simply *too big*" (emphasis mine, 168). Likewise, *Magic* research seems to highlight a similar *too big* quality, where understanding how culture is reconstructed requires attending to dozens of installments and understanding a complex system. My reasoning for including so much of the literature, on both games, has been to highlight how each installment elicits attention from specific fields or perspectives, but that the operations of the franchise may be much harder to grasp. In other words, all the authors are partially approaching the subject that I discuss hereafter: a corporate strategy for constructing and deploying culture as a game product, which I approach through an existing media concept called *resonance*.

III. BLOCKBUSTER RESONANCE IN GAMES: MAKING CULTURE RESONATE WITH AUDIENCES

3.1. Introduction: It Resonates with Us

Like many other broad media concepts, resonance is simultaneously difficult to define in its uses, yet seems to surround us in marketing, reviews, and broadcasts. In our everyday lives, we might hear people say: “that resonated with me” or “I found that resonant” when discussing a book or movie they’ve recently discovered. We might even tune in to a director interview or a games trade show and hear an expression like “we wanted something that would resonate with audiences.” At a fundamental level, resonance and its commercial deployment could be contrasted with Charles Acland’s discussion of subliminal messaging and its *vernacular cultural critique*, which he describes as “an effort to wrestle with bewildering and troubling circumstances” (2012, 33). Like the idea of the subliminal, resonance is all around us and understood as an important condition how we relate to and experience media. We casually use the term in the way it suits us, but not in the way the term might be used critically. Further, resonance is not a commonly discussed communication studies concept, and it has seldom appeared in game studies literature³⁰, in particular as foundational literature has begun settling into a nascent canon. However, the repeated use of the word in the previous chapter, especially in the words of industry veterans is a sign that although the concept hasn’t broken through widely in media studies, it is already ingrained in production processes to the extent that it’s included in industry talks at GDC or discussed as a vector of design in interviews.

Moreover, the widespread use of resonance in the everyday does not match its use by industry practitioners, and even less with the theoretical accounts brought forward by academics. This means that one of two things is occurring, where resonance is concerned. Either one of these three spheres is mistaken about what resonance is, or there are different forms of resonance that are deployed or studied by different actors. In this chapter, I argue the latter by providing an overview of all media studies and game studies literature that engages directly with the idea of resonance. Drawing inspiration from Caldwell’s notion of industrial reflexivity (2008), I begin approaching the term in the works of industry practitioners (at Ubisoft and Wizards) (Rosewater, 2016), academics who have spoken directly with developers (De Wildt & Aupers, 2019), and academics who are practitioners themselves (Klopfer et al., 2018; Schell, 2020). Resonance in this instance is contextualized in its use by academic designers. Following from Caldwell’s definition of reflexivity as “the industry’s own self-representation, self-critique, and self-reflection,” or “critical industrial practices,” I treat industry accounts as a first step in understand how resonance is actively deployed (5).

³⁰ With the exception of two particularly strong engagements (Apperley, 2010; Chapman, 2016) that will be discussed hereafter.

Then, I move to the key academic or institutional texts that had previously engaged with the concept of resonance directly in order to move from industrial reflexivity to a more theoretical framework, including Tom Apperley's discussion of the term (2010) to Adam Chapman's further theorization in historical games as *historical* and *configurative resonance* (2016) and Upal's discussion of government sanctioned resonance (2019). In keeping with Acland's notion of the vernacular, I also bring in texts that have discussed resonance by other names or related concepts to triangulate the boundaries of the concept. Resonance is a term with much broader roots that have faded from view as game studies has formed its own distinct canon over the last three decades. Given its repeated invocation, and many colloquial expressions used by other authors writing about these two games, attending to resonance, and refining its application to this study is necessary. Broadening scope from the central game studies texts, I move towards communications texts that are both theoretical (Bolter and Grusin, 2002; Sclack, 1996; Ryan, 1980) and focused on other legacy media forms which nonetheless rely on resonance (Acland, 2020; Condry, 2013; Benjamin, 1997; Bakhtin, 1986). My intent is to push the concept's more orthodox formulation to consider theories that have been left behind in the development of game studies.

Next, a more applied definition of resonance is proposed as a partner concept to the subsequent discussion of simulation (discussed in the next chapter). Previous theories of resonance and related concepts are brought together to formulate a definition or version of resonance that is more attuned to industry uses. The purpose is not to fix a category or definition of resonance in the academic record, but to update game studies perspectives to how game designers actively think about their own practice. Moreover, the deployment or modulation of resonance may change over time and therefore my work is more of a retrospective interpretation of their work than it is an empirical account. My aim is to produce a vision of resonance that is as rich as possible, in keeping with Geertz' notion of thick description (1973).³¹ I specify this industry-academic hybrid term as *articulated resonance* to describe how developers at these companies conceive of resonance, distinct from previous accounts.

Lastly, discussing resonance in the abstract isn't particularly useful if it isn't tied back to this project's central question: how is culture simulated? One answer arising from industry accounts is: by making it resonant. So, it becomes impossible to move forward without providing a workable definition of what I mean by culture, here drawn from the works of Raymond Williams, Clifford Geertz, Arjun Appadurai, Claude Levi Strauss and Terry Eagleton, among others. More so than resonance, *culture* is an almost impossible term to define neatly and has the animating backbone of anthropology for the better part of its disciplinary existence. It is impossible to provide a full definition of culture in what space I have. However, it is possible to

³¹ I should add a mention that the concepts of *resonance* and *simulation* pose a chicken-and-egg situation where one of the two has to be defined first in order to prompt evaluation of the other term. Simply put, *resonance* and *simulation* are twin concepts that are answers to each other's perceived limitations, and which can only be built up through over time and so I've made the choice to foreground industry focus on resonance over theoretical engagements with simulation as the starting point of my analysis.

circumscribe what developers envision as culture by combining these texts with the notion of articulated resonance. So, not culture in the broadest sense, but culture in how it is deployed in these games. It's to these questions I turn next.

3.2. Resonance & Industrial Reflexivity: What Designers Think

In the previous chapter, De Wildt and Aupers' interview conducted with *AC* godfather, Jean Guesdon, highlighted Guesdon's thoughts that using religious elements gave the series "oomph," which "hooked" players, and the idea that "symbolism resonates with modern societies" by virtue of its exoticizing qualities (2020, 14). Guesdon's words express a notion that *to resonate with* is the same as *hooking* audiences. Other company insiders that were interviewed repeatedly invoked the aesthetics of history or religion, as well as the locales, but always within the broader frameworks of: (1) Hollywood films featuring the same cultures/settings as their games, (2) historical fiction that was involved in similar practices or (3) the allegiances of the *AC* franchise to its own corporate formula. In other words, resonance in *AC* was deployed as a tool to either tighten adherence to the *Brand Bible*, or the *Brand Burger*, and to correspond more closely to what already exists in the broader media spaces of film and television. The very existence of the brand bible and burger models is a tip-off to Caldwell's notion of reflexivity as "cultural sense-making and self-ethnography" (2008, 14). The idea that resonance, hooking audiences, is predicated on following a well-defined set of aesthetic and industrial norms isn't up for debate, and constitutes significant justification to consider that if the developers tell us they use resonance, then they probably do use it.

In this, *Magic's* head designer agrees. In a talk given at GDC 2016 (*Twenty Years, Twenty Lessons*), Rosewater described his experience with designing over two decades and key lessons for attendees to incorporate into their own craft. Among those twenty lessons he described two particular takeaways that are directly applicable here: Lessons three and four. His third lesson, "Resonance is Important" couldn't be more on the nose. Here, Rosewater cautions designers to remember that "humans, your audience, the people that are gonna play your game, come preloaded" and that audiences have "a deep deposit of emotional equity in preexisting things" (2016). Rosewater sees this emotional equity as something for designers to "make use of and build upon" (2016). This is made even clearer in his fourth lesson, "Make Use of Piggybacking," which he describes as "the use of preexisting knowledge to front-load game information to make learning easier" (2016). So, where *AC's* developers compared resonance to proverbially hooking fish, Rosewater describes resonance as piggybacking, along with an endearing picture of a small tortoise riding on a larger tortoise's back.

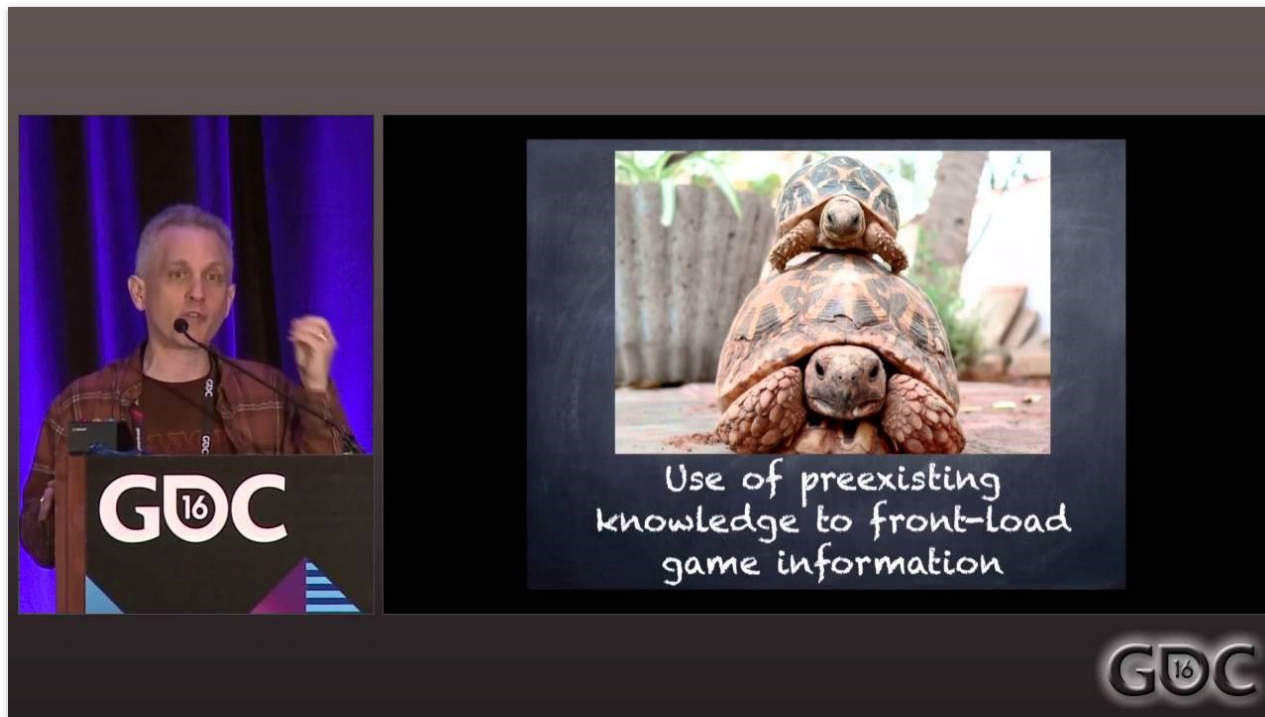


Figure 3.1: Resonance as piggybacking (Rosewater, 2016)

Cute memes aside, Rosewater’s use of resonance is exceptionally fruitful for thinking through what strategic positions *Magic* and *AC* assume relative to this existing emotional equity audiences already possess. Likewise, if that visual metaphor shown in Figure 3.1 is taken seriously, then the game would be the smaller tortoise piggybacking on a reservoir of cultural context. For instance, Rosewater explains that no one at Wizards invented zombies, but that they used existing media tropes present in film, television, and literature to circumscribe what they could be, drawn from “years of watching pop culture” (2016). Though there are more pointed examples I’ll discuss in Chapters 7 and 9, respectively dealing with their Egyptian and Greek stand-in products, Rosewater’s refreshing frankness about what they do is clear enough. They design *towards* what they expect players to already know, because that’s the easiest thing to do.

Though folks like Rosewater and Guesdon sit firmly on the side of industry, with all its economic implications, there are also designers who are more pedagogically minded in their conceptualization of resonance. Klopfer et al.’s *Resonant Games* (2018) is a perfect example work that both dovetails with and diverges from the industrial application above. They describe resonance as a “capacity for larger shared meaning,” which they view as an opportunity for teaching (2018). Though, they also state that resonance is a tool meant to “amplify the systems to which they are connected” which include contextual aspects like ideas about life, the home and family (2018). Klopfer et al. also explain that “resonant games situate the activities and knowledge in contexts that are *meaningful* to the learner” (emphasis mine, 2018). This more optimistic portrayal views resonance as a tool for education and change, but it still shares in core notions that *to be resonant* is in some way *to be meaningful* to the learner. In a similar vein, game

designer Jesse Schell's discussion of game design lenses offers a more intuitive account of resonance, though one which may be frustrating in terms of its imprecise formulation (2020). Here, resonance is a descriptor indicating "themes that touch players deeply" and which *resonate* with our personal experiences or a deeper truth (2020). Further, he explains that designing towards resonance is searching for "hidden power" and that designers have to "feel the resonance" (2020). Although Schell doesn't fully describe what resonance is as a concept, he uses the allegory of pirate games resonating with audiences' desire for freedom as a shorthand (2020). This might strike some as an ironic connotation, given the numerous critiques of *Freedom Cry* detailed in the previous chapter, which chafe at the inherently privileged freedom of the player avatar surrounded by disenfranchised NPCs under the yoke of the Caribbean colonization.

So, in terms of industrial reflexivity, *resonance* is at times a buzzword, but its framing provides clear indications about the terms' use. Resonance is meant to *piggyback* on what audiences already know or expect. It's meant to access deeply held feelings or emotional equity about the subject on the screen. It's meant to be meaningful to the audience. It's meant to provide pizzazz and to hook players. Broadly, *resonance is intended to strategically hook players on the basis of what the designers expect the audience to want to play or see*. Anything outside of that, like equitable representation or new cultural perspectives, are an incidental gain to the franchises at play. However, on the academic side, *resonance* has an altogether contrasting foundation to discuss.

3.3 Academic and Institutional Foundations of Resonance

Perhaps the first game studies study of the term, Tom Apperley directly discusses "resonances" and collects previous work that wasn't necessarily focused on the concept, but that broached the topic (2010, 21). In many ways, Apperley's project is antecedent to mine, though is more focused on the emergent processes of play, as opposed to the reality of the corporate games industry. As he describes, games have "certain rhythms," and it might be possible to think of digital games as a form of rhythm in itself (21). He also explains that there are many distinct kinds of rhythms, with a wide variety, which is nonetheless "prone to particular dominant rhythms" (21). Although Apperley doesn't use the term hegemony, it is useful given the nature of how culture is made resonant to consider dominant rhythms as such. Further, resonance is understood as "specific instantiations of congruence" between the many rhythms of the game and of the "everyday" for the player (21). At this point, resonance is understood as that congruence. Apperley further describes that "resonance may be established through the veracity of the games' simulation, or by way of a congruence of the experience portrayed in the game, and the lived experience of the player" (22). Crucially, that congruence comes in one two shapes: either it conforms to the player view of what's true, or it conforms to the lived experience of the player. Though, what players think is *true* is already informed by lived experience. Apperley

describes resonance occurring through a “sufficiently ‘real’ to resonate” threshold (22). If it’s *real enough*, or *true enough*, it resonates, but that perception is entirely subjective and contextual.

Apperley also provides a retrospective of other authors who’ve discussed resonance, or something akin to it. In his view, King and Krzywinska “argue that players’ pleasure in gameplay may be enhanced if it is located in a recognizable context” (22). He also refers to Mckenzie Wark’s argument that “‘games are not representations of this world [but more] like allegories of a world made over as gamespace,’ where the game rules determine “the realness of this or that” (22). Apperley understands Wark’s view as a critique of the allegorical potential of games, where “every life is an imperfect vision of gamespace, rather than vice-versa” and where “games lack complexity, [though] everyday life lacks the consistency” (22). So, games are a consistent model of real-world ambiguity, though their complexity has increased substantially since 2010. Lastly, Apperley brings in Alexander Galloway’s work on “visual verisimilitude,” which he considers to be secondary to “social realism” (22). Social realism in Galloway’s sense “suggests the need for a strong resonance between the theme and activities in the game and the everyday lives of the players” which is further defined as “‘fidelity of context” (Galloway in Apperley, 22). Apperley views this as players enacting “rhythms of control” (2022). Resonance in Apperley’s thinking emerges as a state of recognition arising from game content in some form matching what players believe about the subject. Crucially, there’s an allowance for player agency in Apperley’s idea of *configurative resonance* (135). Here, the resonance that arises between the game world and the players’ everyday experience, that “fidelity of context,” is understood as something actionable or manipulable by players (135). Apperley explains that “configurative resonance, or dissonance, involves the player deliberately configuring, and/or performing actions in the game [...] in order to create specific resonances” (135). However, Apperley never doubles down on this idea that configurative resonance may have been manipulated by developers for express purposes beforehand.

Similarly, and relatedly, in *Digital Games as History* (2016), Adam Chapman drives the concept of resonance through the subgenre of historical games, and develops Apperley’s notion of configurative resonance, coining the afferent term: *historical resonance* (34-36). Here, the broadest definition of resonance is understood as “the sensation of interpreting the representation of the game as relating to something other than only the game’s rules, as referring to something not entirely contained within the game itself and of the very world” where players reside (35). Functionally, this means that resonance occurs when the player accesses something *through* the game, but it is located outside of the simulation. This is also referred to as “the relation of the representation” between the “*global game*” and “*local context*” of play (emphasis in original, 35). The game is *global* in that it is produced and distributed in multiple locations, but it is accessed in the *local context* of the individual player. Consequently, for resonance to occur, millions of players worldwide must experience the game as *for them*, and not *about something or*

someone else. Additionally, Chapman differentiates this broad version of resonance from a more pointed historical strain: *historical resonance*.

As he describes, historical resonance “is the establishment of a link between a game’s historical representation and the larger historical discourse, *as the player understands it*” (emphasis mine, 36). Chapman goes on to say that this form of resonance “can be as simple as knowledge of the setting” (36). There are gradients in resonance, where the game may be more or less resonant, but there is an abstract threshold for it being resonant at all. This leads Chapman to explain that historical resonance requires players to perceive the game “as in some way sufficiently real (referential) in its relation to the past” and that this is experienced as relatability for the players (36). Resonance can be instantiated along multiple objects/subjects in the game, including player characters, artifacts, and narratives to name but a few. Though, Chapman explains that players’ access to configurative resonance requires the establishment of historical resonance as a condition (44). In his words, “if the player is satisfied with the resonant relationship they can seek to accentuate/maintain it” or if they find the game dissonant, they may try to find extra-ludic goals (44). This means that configurative resonance is contingent on historical resonance, as a foundation. Potentially, it is likely there may even be more latent forms of resonance that underpin historical resonance. Certainly, players remain agents that can refuse to play the game, mod it, or cheat. They may even play against the game to produce counter-historical or dissonant play with a particular social connotation (44). However, what Apperley and Chapman’s theorization of resonances underscores is that the resonance *is* manipulable, and if players can configure resonance, why wouldn’t studios be able to do the same? And for that matter, why only think of resonance in games?

In an entirely different field, the national defense industry in Canada, Afzal Upal has been discussing the design of “culturally resonant messages” in policy papers (2012). In work produced for the DRDC (Defence R&D Canada), resonance is perceived as a tool of marketing and propaganda (2). This is to date, the only time that “cultural resonance” is explicitly mentioned, as “an idea for effective message design and as a post-hoc explanation of the success or failure of a marketing campaign” (2). Like Apperley and Wark, Upal views resonance as “‘a fit’ and ‘a match’ between target audience member’s beliefs and the message [which] seems to capture part of the intuitive notions of resonance”, and where “in order for an individual to understand a message, [they] must be able to retrieve a similar schema from her memory” (3). The crucial aspect here is the notion that the audience is deliberately *targeted* by the media maker. Upal further describes that “catching the attention of the target audience is not enough” and that “people are more likely to be affected by a message if they feel that they have derived it themselves” (5-6). So, resonance works at a fundamental level by instantiating that match, but if players complete the meaning and feel as though they have made the connection, then the uptake is stronger. In many ways, this view of resonance strikes eerily close to Acland’s discussion of subliminal messaging in *Swift Viewing* (2012). Resonance may in fact be designed with some nebulous idea of subliminal influence in mind. Upal’s discussion is useful for considering

resonance, not as a spontaneous or emergent result of media, but as a strategy for constructing the media object or discourse in its entirety in such a way that audiences may even be unaware of its processes.

As far as game studies is concerned, Apperley and Chapman provide a solid framework for considering what resonance is, and for highlighting some of its historical and player-centric dimensions. The notion that resonance requires *relating to* the players, that is a result of recognized congruence between the local context of play and the global context of the game, is interesting because it means that resonance is a result of pre-existing conditions. Upal's work sits somewhere between institutional operations of the state, and industrial reflexivity, and allows thinking about how hegemonic forces can seek to instantiate or shape resonance with specific aims in mind. Players are always active agents, but as Chapman describes, they are reacting to a form of resonance that is already present or naturally emerges from the game/player congruence. Combined with Guesdon and especially Rosewater's discussion of how the industry views resonance, there is a sense that resonance is intentionally produced before the fact, so that players have the least amount of tension with the game product. On the topic of reducing tension, or avoiding dissonance, there are other media studies scholars who can provide insight; not on resonance itself, but on concepts that have been circling resonance for decades.

3.4. Transferrable Concepts: Circling the Square

Part of the challenge with thinking through resonance is how the concept only seems to appear in Galloway, Wark, Apperley and Chapman's work from the mid-2000s onwards. It may almost seem as though resonance had never been conceptualized or discussed before this wave of game studies. There are however authors who were writing about afferent ideas in other media forms, or narrative forms, decades prior. In these works, there are transferrable concepts to foreground. In this section, I discuss authors whose concepts are not resonance, but which share structural features with those theories and industry accounts explored above.

For instance, narratologist Marie-Laure Ryan's work on the "principle of minimal departure" is compatible with the way that resonance has been discussed at a broad level (1980). In her literary critique, Ryan explains that "if we view fiction as a discourse concerning invented events, we will be unable to account for the present in fictional works of statements describing accurately real world states of affairs" (404). Here, her concern is that by waving away elements of narrative, or what she calls "utterances concerning alternate worlds" as constructed or arbitrary, then we risk glossing over ideological elements that are true or false within the narrative. Ryan coined the term "principle of minimal departure" to describe this sort of glossing over function (406). The principle holds that audiences "reconstrue the world of a fiction and of a counterfactual as being the closest possible to the reality [they] know", meaning that the players, in this case, "will project upon the world of the statement everything [they] know about the real world, and that [they] will make *only* those adjustments which [they] cannot avoid" (emphasis

mine, 406). In other words, when audiences consume fiction of any kind, they tend to accept those parts that resonate, and to reconfigure parts which do not, so that the narrative whole will cohere to pre-existing beliefs. Ryan further explains that with the principle active, “hearers are able to form reasonably comprehensive representations of the foreign worlds created through discourse, even though the [narrative] description of these worlds is always incomplete” (406). Although Ryan is mostly discussing semantic statements and how audiences’ complete narratives, the principle dovetails perfectly with the types of resonance discussed above. Moreover, Ryan’s idea of the *minimal departure* audiences make is crucial for understanding why resonance can be problematic if it is apprehended as *sufficiently real* when it may in fact be ideologically positioned falsity.

Discussing intertextuality and its applications in the following decade, Ryan describes two further functions of the principle (1991). She refers to these dimensions as the particular and general forms of minimal departure, which prefigure discussions of resonance in the 2000s. First, she explains that “the frame of reference invoked by the principle of minimal departure is not the sole product of unmediated personal experience but bears the trace of all the texts that support and transmit a culture” (54). Here, the local context that Apperley and Chapman discuss is expanded to include virtually every text (understood in the semiotic sense), meaning that the user is enrolled into a much more complicated discursive framework. Second, the principle of minimal departure also works in reverse. This means that “knowledge about the real world may be derived not only from texts purporting to represent reality, but also from texts openly labeled and recognized as fiction” (54). This entails that audiences can reconstrue the cultures of the real world by relying on fiction they have consumed before, by way of the principle of the minimal departure. Here, fiction and reality come together to the extent that any textual addition to the subject “permits the choice, not only of the real world, but also of a textual universe as frame of reference” (54). Generally speaking, if audiences are trying to make the minimal move towards the subject, towards absolute resonance, they use whatever knowledge they have, factual or counterfactual (1980). This is where molding resonance with the objective of reducing friction takes on a coercive aspect.

If we understand resonance, by way of minimal departure, as a sort of symmetry between the sum total cultural context of the audience and the media object’s subject, then we have entered into a discussion of articulation (Slack, 1996). Jennifer Daryl Slack’s theorization of this concept goes back to ideas of articulation from Lawrence Grossberg and Stuart Hall in the preceding years. Grossberg conceived of articulation as “the production of identity on top of differences, of unities out of fragments, of structures across practices,” as a stitching of “this meaning to that reality” with the result being broad discursive formations (Grossberg in Slack, 115). For Hall’s part, articulation was understood as “unity,” by way of “a linkage, between the articulated discourse and the social forces” that surround it (Hall in Slack, 115). Moreover, Hall saw hegemonic forces at play in the process of articulation, conceiving of articulation as a fundamentally deliberate process, which was the product of and the producer of subsequent

“structured relations between its [articulation] parts [...] relations of dominance and subordination” (115). Slack also invokes Argentinian philosopher Ernesto Laclau’s view that “common sense discourse,” what we could conceive of as the unity resulting from articulation, was produced from “connotative or evocative links which custom and opinion have established,” as opposed to linkages that arise in high culture or academic settings (Laclau, in Slack, 119). In other words, what Acland has called *vernacular media critique* is a way of articulating concepts that are already present in the everyday, in ways that make sense in ordinary contexts, and which have become so ingrained that they are considered common sense. Laclau’s concern with custom and opinion is discussed as class-inflected, which Slack takes up as “the role of specific articulations such as those of gender, race, ethnicity, [and] neo-colonialism” which run through all cultural production.

Slack’s primary argument that I would like to foreground is that articulation has three levels to consider. First, it is an epistemological structure, “a way of thinking the structure of what we know as a play of correspondences, non-correspondences and contradictions” (112). So, it is a way of producing knowledge by association or dissociation. Second, it is political, in that articulation “foregrounds the structure and play of power that entail in relations of dominance and subordination” (112). So, it is a way of understanding power dynamics. Third, it is strategic, in that “articulation provides a mechanism for shaping intervention within a particular social formation” (112). Crucially, this is where the previous notion of resonance that runs through these games, as a deliberate process developers undertake, may have in fact always been the strategic deployment of articulation. Not by cultural scholars for the purpose of critique, but by cultural producers in order to bind together resonant ideas drawn from audience expectations. Slack’s tripartite model is present in all discussions of resonance, even though producers use different nomenclature.

Another instance of resonance, by another name, is Charles Acland’s discussion of *relatability* in blockbuster films (2020). Tracing the long arc of how Hollywood mediates culture, Acland describes a general industrial push towards this idea of making the subject of films relate to viewers. He describes the notion of relating to characters as imagining “a responsive parallelism,” minimizing the distance between ourselves and the subject of the media object (291). Acland describes this notion as relatability, which he understands as distinct from identification. In his view, “to identify, one is drawn out of one’s life, into the temporary conditions of an Other,” whereas “to relate, one applies a familiar set of normative experiences, drawing the representational figure into one’s own life” (291-292). This would certainly explain the idiosyncratic responses to games like *AC: Freedom Cry*, where certain aspects of the game seem built for ease of relatability, rather than the complicated and painful identification with the subject and their suffering. Acland further explains that “valuing relatability in realist cinema is a way to naturalize depictions as obvious and true, timeless and sensible” which positions relatability as a “powerful ideological purveyor of hidden norms” (292). This effectively means that relatability and identification are two aspects of resonance. The former is the kind of

resonance that studios wish to articulate to capture audiences. The latter is the kind that requires work and is either emergent or configured by users. This is true both in how realist films, or realistic simulation games, are sold as forms of cultural tourism, but also in how their new technologies or potentials are sold to users (229).

Many of the authors and developers in the previous chapter alluded to multifaceted gestures towards classical Hollywood blockbusters found throughout *AC* and *Magic*. These games are made *relatable* to players because they remodel the same cultural ground that movies, and particularly Hollywood historical epics, and academics have taken to using those metaphors in their analyses. This is not only true of Hollywood though. As anthropologist Ian Condry has described, resonance is also deployed in studies of Japanese anime, where it is understood as a “kind of intersubjective vibe” and where media pundits ascribe franchise success “by its resonance with a kind of cultural background” (2013, 20). His distaste for this kind of justification aside, Condry explains the assumption that resonance is an indicator of media success abounds in the industry, and that “this style of cultural analysis is widely used, and it relies on a particular assumption that culture should be viewed as widely shared patterns characteristic of a whole society” (20). Resonance, or relatability, seems to be a transnational media industry tool that also runs through multifarious media forms. Film or game, it matters little so long as it can be deployed or cited as a guarantor of success. Though, the focus on new media as a set of communication techniques or protocols, and its relation to legacy media forms and industries, is by no means new.

The potential for new media techniques and forms to make things relatable or resonant hasn’t only been discussed in terms of the cultural aspects. Another potential aspect of resonance lies in its technicity, how *real it feels* based on how *real it looks*, which David Bolter and Richard Grusin have described as “the discourse of the immediate,” or in other words the purported idea that “unmediated presentation is the ultimate goal of visual representation” toward which technological development hurdles (2000, 30). Acland locates this drive towards unmediated presentation in the evergreen developments of filmic fidelity and new advances in videogame technologies, which he calls *technological tentpoles*, linking the “world of tomorrow and the world of yesterday” (2020, 12). The kind of logic that runs through Ubisoft’s games aims for the vanishing point³² of simulation: what I would call mediated realism. The goal of this *discourse of the immediate* is what they call “immediacy,” or the “logic of transparent immediacy,” where viewers aren’t lulled into believing the media object is completely real, but they “marveled at the discrepancy between what they knew and what their eyes told them” (31). So, it’s not real, but it’s real enough to amaze.

Bolter and Grusin also describe that the logic of immediacy runs through hypermedia (like computers), in which “the computer interface fades into the experiential background” and where the media subject is foregrounded (32). This is the sibling concept to immediacy, called

³² The vanishing point is an art historical term for the furthest point on the horizon from the viewer. Bolter and Grusin, tying their work back to Barthes’ *Camera Lucida*, refer to this as the *punctum* (30).

hypermediacy, which “multiplies the signs of mediation and in this way tries to reproduce the rich sensorium of human experience,” stitching together multiple interfaces, screens, and montage (34). Hypermediacy breaks the illusion of realism, but paradoxically reinforces the representational power of the technology. It masks many aspects of the logic of immediacy as natural, while drawing eyes towards its own constructedness. In other words, players may be so focused on how gameplay or menus function, that they don’t critique many of the minute details that shape the simulation, such as narrative or representational choices. Crucially, they refer to European cathedral spaces, with their statues, triptychs, and stained glass, as a “collection of hypermediated spaces, both physical and representational” with “some resonances [that] seem obvious” with respect to computer media (34). They refer to this fusion of two contradicting logics, hypermediacy and immediacy as “immediacy *within* hypermediacy” (37). Further, they explain that this sort of logic has a basis in the work MacLuhan as *repurposing* and W.J.T. Mitchell as “borrowing,” where one media form incorporates another, forming “remediation” (45). Though in the structure of remediation, hypermediacy and immediacy “are opposite manifestations of the same desire: the desire to get past the limits of representation and to achieve the real”, where they explain that *real* “is defined in terms of viewer experience, [as] that which evokes an immediate (and therefore authentic) emotional response” as opposed to any philosophical sense of reality (53).

The end result is that the more we move towards this horizon of immediacy, “transparent technologies try to improve on media by erasing them, [though] they are still compelled to define themselves by the standards of the media they are trying to erase” (54). So, games striving for realism seem to inherently incorporate the impulses and techniques of film, photography, and painting before them, along with all their limitations. Even this drive towards technical maximalism is based in resonance with pre-existing media on a technical level, which mirrors the cultural resonance viewers expect. Games are made to look like movies, but to improve on them. This chain of mediation is what they eventually refer to as “the inseparability of mediation and reality” (55). The idea that everything real is shaped by the media triggers anxieties about Baudrillard’s hyperreal and what Bolter and Grusin describe as “reform,” “a process of reforming reality” (56). This reform is instantiated when “immediacy had been achieved by concealing the signs of mediation,” which paradoxically can also occur when hypermediacy recognizes the “conditions of its mediation” (58). If *resonance* is produced, then there’s inherent immediacy. If dissonance is produced through the technology, it may actually produce immediacy of other background elements in turn, and therefore resonance. So, the kinds of resonance that *AC*³³ and *Magic* produce operates on multiple representational and technical levels that will require dissection in subsequent chapters. Cynically, these technological improvements in the quest for immediacy are described as the “American promise”: the promise that every new media type *reforms* older media by granting better, more faithful representations

³³ This is crucially true now that *AC* has begun to reshape parts of its intellectual property as a digital museum, often spilling over into real museum spaces, which Bolter and Grusin describe as “controlled, institutionalized, and policed as a special, real kind of space” (59).

of the real, when in fact they reposition visual worlds as “the locus of presence and meaning for us” (61). We’ve been mistaking the drive towards realism for the drive towards artificial resonance all along.

This mistake, confusing higher technical maximalism with better representation/simulation is what Erik Champion describes as the problem of “realism versus interpretation” in the study of simulation (2011, 12). He asks critics to consider whether “perfect fidelity to sources and realism improve or hinder the cultural learning experience” (12). The question is warranted given the audience-affirming structure of resonance deployed across media industries. With respect to this project, he describes that “merely creating a reconstruction of a cultural site does not mean that one is creating a platform for understanding and transmitting locally specific cultural knowledge” (12). He sarcastically describes this mode of simulation as “culture understood from the distance of a hotel or guidebook” as opposed to the “dominant culture that guides, constrains, and nourishes a local inhabitant” (12). There’s an insider/outsider dimension to simulation that he explains as the distinction between people who occupy a space and those who view it. On the one hand, cultural lives inside a social world are “lived by the people inside” and on the other they are “projected into the environment as seen by people outside” (67).

Champion’s key example of this dichotomy is the archaeological dig. The “reconstructed palace of Knossos on Crete is a dynamic blend of archaeological dogma and controversial projections” onto what has been excavated (67). And, although his example doesn’t mention *AC Odyssey*, that game features that exact same reconstructed palace flanked by mythological sci-fi-fantasy elements. Champion locates a problem in this where realism, the idea that a thing “appears to be real” is in fact positioned for users to think “I can believe that it exists” (64). This issue comes from the demands of realism clashing with the “need for interpretability” which shapes the drive towards fidelity (understood here as immediacy) (63). *Assassin’s Creed* is more driven by its need to sell and stay on brand, than it needs to adhere to what it is modelling. Champion explains this dichotomy as the idea that these spaces, virtual heritage spaces, the cultural understanding is located in conceptual, rather than visual, fidelity (64). Users may sense a form of “cultural presence,” driven by “social agency, [and] the feeling that what one is visiting is an artifact created and modified by conscious human interaction,” which is distinct from *social presence* where we can see members of that culture interacting (72). Culture for us, as opposed to culture for them. Champion describes how audiences access this form of cultural presence as “transmitted via reading a palimpsest or by participating on a social stage” which is external to that culture (79). This is the “feeling of cultural presence” which may be mistaken for having a sense of how people lived at the time. Resonance with our perceptions and expectations, mistaken social presence which is impossible to simulate.

There is a final and much more remote avenue for approaching resonance in older semiotics work, which is utterly agnostic to games’ technology, but well tuned for resonance, nonetheless. In this, the works of Walter Benjamin on translation (1997), and Mikhail Bakhtin on

utterance (1986), provide fruitful perspectives on how resonance might be constructed at the most abstract levels. Benjamin's work describes the "concept of an 'ideal' receiver" as inherently limiting as it requires the framing of "only the existence and essence of human beings" (1997, 151). His idea, when translating works from one language to another, or from one culture to another, is that translation itself can vary in its quality, which he describes as "inexact transmission of an inessential content" (152). So, representation can be inaccurate or can focus on what translations mistakenly perceive as essential from the outside social context. At a more intrinsic level however, he locates "translation's law, decreed as the original's translatability" (152). When we simulate, translate, or represent, we assume that the playing with the subject is permissible; that it is ours to manipulate by default. Benjamin locates the task of the translator in finding "the intention toward the language into which the work is to be translated, on the basis of which an echo of the original can be awakened" (159). Although his discussion is about the translation of the written word, the framework is applicable when we're discussing simulation at a massive scale in these blockbuster games. In that instance, the echo positioned with intention toward the new audience is just resonance by another name.

For Bakhtin's part, the primary concern is with spoken and written language as imprecise units of linguistic measurement. His novel concept at the time was the "*real unit of speech communication: the utterance*" (1986, 71). The utterance is the structure that lies beneath all forms of communication, and it has a feature that Benjamin takes for granted and which repeatedly appeared throughout this review: an audience, or an interlocutor. Bakhtin locates the beginning and end of each utterance in "the change of speaking subjects" or a "relinquishing the floor" (71). For Bakhtin, the utterance can be anything from a single word to an entire treatise, or in this case a complete game or even game franchise (71). The most important part to consider with respect to resonance is that the utterance is the unit that contains the full message *oriented towards an interlocutor*. For him, all communication *is for someone*, as much as it is *about something*. Utterances have a "*speech plan*" (the media form for us) and "*speech will*" which is the "specific authorial intent" of the utterance (77). All communication is understood to be rhetorical and shaped for resonance at a fundamental level, ranging from the use certain words, to intonation, to formal practices (79). This leads to the formation of speech genres, which have "normative significance" (80). The more we speak with other people, the more we understand how we are expected to speak. The representational force of communication is understood as a "purely individual act" within "the system of language as a phenomenon that is purely social and mandatory for the individuum" (81). We are constantly navigating how we are expected to communicate by others, which leads speakers to "select the type of [structure] from the standpoint of the *whole* utterance" (81). Bakhtin therefore understands that all communication is rhetorical and that "there can be no such thing as an absolutely neutral utterance" since every single communicative act contains "the speaker's evaluative attitude toward the subject of his speech" which "determines the choice of [...] compositional means of the utterance" (84). Insofar as games are concerned, the very fact that the makers are working in an established media form with normative conventions of what *AC* or *Magic*, or even games writ large, need to

look like, and the fact that each game is meant for an imagined audience (a massive group of interlocutors) means that the utterance (the game) is unavoidably shaped and manipulated towards that end. At the most fundamental level, resonance *is* the goal, even if we're not aware of it. So, given all of these strands of what resonance may have been masquerading as for the past fifty years, how can it be defined with respect to the simulation of culture for consumption by an audience?

3.5. Articulated Resonance: A Concept for Blockbuster Games

Part of the ambiguity with resonance is that different authors are referring to a range of structures, from the emerging to the constructed. Much of the theoretical work done by Apperley and Chapman locates resonance as either emergent or configurative (on the part of players). However, much of the work on relatability, articulation, immediacy, the principle of minimal departure and utterance positions media makers in the main configurative position. Likewise, Rosewater's presentation on *Magic* and Guesdon's thoughts about *AC* indicate that game developers are assuming creative control over resonance and that they are actively reflecting on its uses and configuration. If there is a theoretical gap, it lies somewhere between existing theories of resonance, the practices of game developers and the manifold academic discussions that don't directly refer to resonance but converge, nonetheless. Not to mention the vernacular uses of resonance that surround us everyday. Moreover, in the fifty plus authors discussed on *AC* in the previous chapter, there are wide ranging descriptors that sometimes mention resonance directly, and sometimes contour it.

For instance, Lauro refers to the "dangerous resonances" of altering accounts of slave resistance in the Caribbean (2020, 53). Jones and Osborne used postmemory to refer to "emotional resonance to individuals" (2020, 193). Westin and Hedlund refer to the "recognizability" arising from industrial management of academics' recommendations and the public's existing knowledge, which they call "the construction of the contemporary public's collective idea" (2016, 5-7). Moreover, their use of enrolment processes from actor network theory positions all resonance as an industrial negotiation seeking to produce a *postcard effect* "fully articulated to appeal to a wide audience" (9). Though these are some of the more direct engagements with the practice of configuring resonance *for* audiences, there are just as many afferent terms to consider in analyses of *AC*.

These terms can stand in for resonance, or they can be components of its broader construction. Arbuckle Macleod described the idea that audiences have background knowledge as a crucial factor (2021). Casey discussed the value of popularity and a diffuse public gaze that developers seek to meet and to acknowledge (2018, 11). Poirron positioned *Origins* as a "general impression" of Ptolemaic Egypt (2021, 83). Politopoulos et al. describe the technical maximalism, in architectural detail and the inclusion of historic characters, as an indicator of driving for increased authenticity, which may or may not dovetail with accuracy (2019). Esser

discussed *Syndicate*'s London as a sometimes-anachronistic heterotopia and a hyper-Victorian London "configured" for play (2021, 5). Dow critiqued *AC*'s Florence for its nonobvious anachronism, masking its own constructedness as a "historical veneer" (2013). Sepinwall described the process of recreating Haiti in *Freedom Cry* as making the locale "more thinkable" (2021, 207). Mukherjee described the games as producing a hybridized other for the consumption of Western audiences (2019). Shaw viewed *AC III* as overtly produced for an imagined audience with a set of dominant values (2015). These are but a few of the theories discussed above which across the entire board, *unanimously*, describe the games as produced for a hyper specific audience with its expectations, proclivities and ideologies baked in beforehand. Resonance is so ingrained that it verges on being an underlying vernacular even for academics studying these games.

Given all of these theoretical interventions, it's impossible to say that resonance has totally evaded academic inquiry in general. However, this specific form of resonance has remained partially occluded. It appears in the work of each author as a symptom of that peculiar game, when in reality it is a part of both franchises (*AC* and *Magic*) at a blanket scale. So, I would return to the first question: is resonance defined wrongly, or is it the case that there are multiple forms of resonance, and that audiences, academics and scholars are not talking about the same kind? I would answer that it is mostly the latter with some of the former. This kind of resonance's adherence to Johnson and Acland's accounts of franchising and blockbuster logics (2013; 2020), Bolter and Grusin's discussion of immediacy (2002), as well as Slack's theorization of articulation (1996) is an indicator of a different kind of tool altogether.

3.6. Articulated and Blockbuster Resonance

Given the range of concepts discussed above, *this* version of resonance is a subset of Apperley's broader discussion of the term, and which is distinct from both historical and configurate resonances (Apperley, 2010; Chapman, 2016). Though, this form of resonance is nevertheless reliant on the existence of previous resonance and reinforces them itself. Arguably, the one academic closest to how Rosewater and Guesdon have described resonance is Marie-Laure Ryan and her notion of minimal departure. This is what they view perfect resonance as: the perfect hook and the piggyback ride. No departure, no tension, and total uptake. Further, Acland's description of relatability might be the closest description of how they strategically position content: by subtly warping its contours to fit what audiences are expected to know or desire.

I would define this artificial structure as *articulated resonance*, or in other words: **Resonance that is articulated strategically by media makers, to reduce tension between audiences, the media object, and its subject, by modeling or reinforcing perceived pre-existing resonance that players already have with cultural content, in order to serve hegemonic interests or ideologies.** One issue that persists in this definition is that the

independent artists and academics above also discussed using or attempting resonance, with distinct aims compared to corporate studios. It may therefore be necessary in the case of blockbuster media, as a “deliberate and calculated industrial strategy” which shapes “an encounter between industry and culture” (Acland, 2020, 7), like the two game franchises this dissertation examines, to further carve out *blockbuster resonance*, a form of **articulated resonance produced and reinforced to preserve and serve the economic necessities of large-scale media franchises, businesses, and technologies**. This seems to perfectly square with one Ubisoft branding executive who described the production process as “what is people’s perception of a period [...] that’s the game they have to make” (de Wildt and Aupers, 2021, 13). Steven Masters, lead game designer for *AC: Brotherhood* and *AC III* recounts that the process ultimately “defers to the market and the largest possible audience” (14). It is precisely because of this kind of blockbuster resonance that in the later chapters, I study each game’s broader constituent franchise and its blockbuster pressures. However, as Acland’s description of the blockbuster may indicate, there is the recurring issue of culture and its definition which has been percolating for this entire chapter. This is in part because I’ve positioned texts in this and the previous chapter to highlight this theme, though many of the academics and practitioners have overtly discussed the subject of making culture resonant, nonetheless. In other words, what is made to resonate? Culture.

3.7. Culture, Cultural Resonance & Conjuncture

Defining culture as a concept is a task that might be doomed from the start, given how fluid, evolving and particular it can be. Nevertheless, since game producers are intent on adapting or simulating cultures wholesale, and specific cultural moments in their work, it’s time to attempt to define culture in the way that Ubisoft and AC developers may be thinking, and in a way that squares with other academic accounts above. Returning once again to Caldwell’s idea of industrial reflexivity, what do AC and Magic developers tell us that they do? In the previous chapter, and in particular in the work of de Wildt and Aupers (2021), one senior developer recounted using “the aesthetics of candles, of stone, of hoods” (14). Guesdon himself explained that they try to tap “into this rampant culture of religious symbolism, of esotericism” which he subsequently referred to as “the beauty of esotericism” which they structure through giving players some “dots to connect” (16). Further, Guesdon explained that the broad approach to the AC brand was to “minimize the risk of inconsistencies and maximize opportunities for connection” (17). Where *AC Origins*’ Egyptian setting is concerned, the godfather of AC has described the setting as “loaded with expectations, when it comes to Gods et cetera, in terms of pop culture and entertainment” and that “players come to the game with this kind of expectations” (13). Another developer, Nicolas Guerin (level design director) compared the franchise to the *Da Vinci Code* (2009) by Dan Brown, exclaiming that “It’s the same thing” (15). The company brand bible, and its famous Old Testament style even lists the fifth commandment as “pivotal moments in human history are the basis of our Franchise” (capital in original, 11). So,

from the Ubisoft perspective, the culture they're simulating is constituted by symbols, objects, events, and people who are understood to be related to that culture in popular media. So, if *AC* developers think of culture this way, how do *Magic* developers conceive of it? Well, in short, when adapting the Greek setting for example, Rosewater recounts wanting to adapt "Gods, Heroes and Monsters" which needed to be objectified as individual cards (2020). Likewise, he wants to adapt fluid ideas about religious devotion and heroism which have become intertwined with the idea of Greek myths, which Rosewater highlights as "the idea of adventure" (2020). In a comical twist, as work on this set began, developers ran into an unforeseen problem: *Magic*, as a whole, was so infused with Greek cultural symbols that it was quite difficult to distinguish a new setting as particularly Greek. The solution? Rosewater explains it as "raising the volume" of Greek symbols in keeping with the aforementioned discussion of players having pre-existing equity in the cultural aspect of the game (2020). So, culture, as far as these franchises are concerned, is the manipulation and positioning of those symbols and people in an aesthetically or thematically appropriate environment. This is crucial because symbol manipulation is not necessarily what other cultural studies scholars conceive of when the term pops up.

It might actually be useful to aim as large as possible and then to whittle down a workable definition of culture in order to understand how the developer practices listed above differ. In *The Interpretation of Culture*, anthropologist Clifford Geertz remarks that the concept of culture has dominated the very development of anthropology as a whole, all the while presenting pernicious definitional problems (1973, 4). Geertz paraphrases the earliest proto-canonical definition of culture by Sir Edward Burnett Tylor, a 19th century anthropologist, as the "famous 'most complex whole'" (4). For his part, Tylor's definition is a bit more robust: "Culture or Civilization, taken in its wide ethnographic sense, is that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, custom and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society" (1920, 1). The so-called Tylolean view of culture is certainly wide, so much so that Geertz views it as too wide (1973, 4). Simply put, in this model, culture includes every aspect of life and therefore becomes undefinable in any useful sense. Geertz description of culture is markedly more useful for conducting media analysis, in that "culture, this acted document, thus is public" and "though ideational, it does not exist in someone's head; though unphysical, it is not an occult entity" (10). Crucially, Geertz views summary definitions of a culture as "the brute patterns of behavioral events we observe in fact to occur to some identifiable community or other" is "to reduce it" (11).

My starting comparative point for defining culture is Geertz' own definition, as a "semiotic concept": "As interworked systems of construable signs (what ignoring provincial usages, I would call symbols), culture is not a power, something to which social events, behaviours, institutions, or processes can be casually attributed; it is a context, something within which they can intelligibly—that is, thickly—described" (14). Culture not only as objects or events, culture as the context in which everything occurs and makes sense. Geertz reasoning for thinking about culture in this way is that understanding the context of a specific culture more

profoundly “exposes their normalness without reducing their particularity” or that “it dissolves their opacity” (14). Most importantly of all his contributions, Geertz locates the very reason for his semiotic approach to culture in gaining access to the conceptual world in which our subjects live so that we can, in some extended sense of the term, converse with them” (24). In this sense, well conducted cultural studies are anti-exoticizing, or as I discuss shortly, anti-imperialist/orientalist, and decidedly not what the developer viewpoint squares with.

Raymond Williams’ *The Analysis of Culture* is another pillar of my analysis going forward because it offers three distinct models or categories of culture, based on whose perspective is the driving force, and which intersects with the questions this project seeks to answer. The first category is the *ideal*, where culture is “a state or process of human perfection, in terms of certain absolute, or universal values” (1965, 57). This theory leads to totalizing accounts of culture where nothing ever changes and the most that can be done is to discover what that culture is (57). This is the structural anthropological perspective expressed in the early 20th century accounts found in travelogues and missions, like those of Claude Levi-Strauss (Levi-Strauss, 1955). The second category is what Williams call the *documentary*, “in which culture [as] the body of intellectual and imaginative work” is thoroughly recorded (1965, 57). This kind of theorization of culture leads to a “criticism” approach where elites determine what constitutes a particular culture (57). This is seen in works like Horkheimer and Adorno’s discussions of low and high culture in regard to the culture industry (2007), or in Michel Foucault’s critiques of the archive and the canon as acts of cultural construction (1972). The third category that Williams explains is the *social* definition. Here, culture is a “description of a particular way of life, which expresses certain meanings and values not only in art and learning but also in institutions and ordinary behaviour” (57). This category includes the second one as well, but it opens to focus on a series of everyday habits, organizations of labour, social relationships, and all interactions that comprise everyday life (58). So, Williams views the three categories of culture as co-existing and co-extensive. We cannot study culture or define it by defaulting to one or another category, but by contextualizing all three together, “without any concession of priority to any one of them we may choose to abstract” (62).

Much like Geertz, Williams opts for including the contextual relations between elements of a culture in his own formal definition a theory of culture as “the study of relationships between elements in whole way of life,” and with respect to how one might analyse institutions or works through “their essential kind of organization” (63). So, to understand how culture is expressed in the everyday, one would need to analyse how people interact and how they live their ordinary lives. And how people live their lives, may vary altogether from how their culture is codified in great works, or how outsiders interpret it. Accounts of culture from the outside, such as cultures that are remote or lost to time are “recovered in abstraction” (63) because even what remains is bereft of its original context. At most, Williams concedes that we can recover in such instances a “pattern of culture,” which is a reductive model at best (64). Williams explains that when we study the past, we are all in “the position of the visitor, the learner, the guest from

another generation” and that “any formal description [of the culture] would be too crude to express this nevertheless quite distinct sense of a particular native style” (64). This is where Williams famous’ *structure of feeling* appears, in which every culture and generation has its own structure of life and thinking about itself (64-65). As Williams explains, once that generation disappears, the closest we ever get to it is the documentary form of culture, which at best can only make “an approach, an approximation” (or what I call later a simulation) (65-66). This process of approximation ties into what Williams discusses more fully as selective tradition.

Culture, as part of selective tradition, is always in the process of changing or disappearing. The culture of a people today, is different from that of a generation ago. This is because, “theoretically, a period is recorded; in practice, this record is absorbed into a selective tradition; and both are radically different from the culture as lived” (66-67). Williams’ main concern isn’t only with this recording practice, but how “the lived culture would not only have been fined down to selected documents” and how it “would be used, in its reduced form” to produce something akin to what Ryan Scheiding refers to as discourses of the past (68; 2020). Most importantly, this change in cultural perspective leads to “a rejection of considerable areas of what was once a living culture” (1965, 68). Thinking back to resonance, this entails the rejection of all non-essential parts of a culture according to the “contemporary system of interests and values” (68). It would be possible to include most of Williams’ *Long Revolution* (1965) in this section, but it should suffice for now to draw attention to the “growth of an industrial economy” in terms of cultural institutions, which extend to books, film and now videogames (76). That “selective tradition,” articulated by the industrial economy, is made resonant not for the people living in the context, as Geertz would understand it, but people looking in from the outside.

Like Williams, and in conversation with his work, literary critic Terry Eagleton has proposed his own definition and segmentation of culture, spanning an entire book (2012). And like Williams, Eagleton also subdivides culture into fields that are of interest to my work. In Eagleton’s sense, culture can mean “(1) a body of artistic work; (2) a process of spiritual and intellectual development; (3) the values, beliefs and symbolic practices by which men and women live; or (4) a whole way of life” (1). Eagleton swift dismisses the fourth option due to its overly broad formulation. Likewise, he rejects the first option as too narrow, because it usually dovetails with the practices of artistic elites only (2-3). Eagleton approaches a workable definition when he asserts that “a good deal of culture involves less what you do than how you do it” which can “denote a set of styles, techniques and established procedures” (5). Shortly after, he also qualifies culture as “habitual, well-entrenched, perhaps taken for granted and dominated by certain established procedures” (6). Though these qualities seem to dovetail with Geertz and Williams’ ideas about the importance of context, Eagleton moves in a different direction when he explains that culture, here called collective identity, might “depend on the exclusion of others, sometimes necessarily so” (6). Crucially, he also explains that in seemingly innocent acts of description, what might seem factual from one perspective, might be subjective

from another (6). The description here resembles Williams' selective record, and Eagleton locates it more expressly at the level of "the symbolic dimension of society as a whole, permeating it from one end to another" without which he thinks human activity would be nonexistent (10). Moreover, Eagleton differentiates artistic culture as an echelon of the broader culture, one which is "regularly pressed into the service of political hegemony" (19). Ultimately, Eagleton doesn't propose a unified definition, but offers a series of provocations and open questions throughout his engagement. However, his most scathing critique is that cultural politics of the 21st century speak "the language of gender, identity, marginality, diversity and oppression, but not for the most part the idiom of state, property, class-struggle, ideology and exploitation" (160). Dubious attacks on cultural politics aside, Eagleton draws attention to the underlying base of the discussion of culture

Arjun Appadurai's work on this underlying aspect of cultural production is extremely important as it considers commodification (1990). For Appadurai, culture is formed and circulated through multilayered global cultural flows of technology, finance, ethnicity, media, and ideology (296). Appadurai further explains that in this view, culture(s) in this sense are akin to "multiple worlds which are constituted by the historically situated imaginations of persons and groups spread around the globe" (297). The collisions between all the layers inflect how culture is formed and circulated (300). The selective tradition of what constitutes a culture is overdetermined by a range of real-world factors that are not always in the interest of those whose culture is at stake. This is what Appadurai discusses as deterritorialization which displaces both peoples and culture as financial and political interests dictate (302). This expropriation of selective traditions from one culture to another can also be found in the works of Edward Said (1978).

Likewise, Said's *Orientalism* (1979) remains one of the most powerful accounts of how the culture of the other is produced by institutions and intellectual traditions (2). For Said, like Williams and Appadurai, culture as a concept is interrelated to other spheres of life. For Said, culture has two particular meanings. In the first sense, "it means all those practices, like the arts of description, representation and communication, that have relative autonomy from the economic, social, and political realms" and "one whose principal aim is pleasure" (1993, xii). In this, I find it difficult to find such a practice more concerned with enjoyment than games, though they are certainly not autonomous from economic concerns. In the second sense, Said understands culture as "a concept that includes a refining and elevating element, each society's reservoir of the best that has been known and thought" (xiii). Though, at other points, he describes culture as a "sort of theatre where various political and ideological causes engage one another" (xiii). Said more pointedly explains that the challenge of doing cultural studies is to connect these objects of pleasure "not only with that pleasure and profit but also with the imperial process of which they were manifestly and unconditionally a part" (xiv). What Eagleton might call decolonial, rather than postcolonial work.

Said's work on Orientalism also falls squarely in this decolonial project, and ties into cultural work about Egypt (1979). Said presents the Orient, in all its connotations, as necessary cultural and political project of domination for Europeans because it represents an image of the other that is proximate and recurring (1). Said explains that Europe's hegemony grew to the extent that it was able to systematically "manage -and even produce- the Orient politically, sociologically, militarily, ideologically, scientifically, and imaginatively during the post-Enlightenment period." (3). Moreover, this culturally selective discourse is, for Said, so all-encompassing that it is impossible to fully escape. In cases of uneven power dynamics, culture might then be thought of as an imposed selective tradition. Moreover, Said specifically discusses the project of discovering and cataloguing Egypt as supremacy, not located in military or economic power, but in "'our' [the colonizer]'s knowledge" (1978, 32). Although the previous quote concerns the British occupation of the country, Said also discusses the colonial dreams of Napoleon's 1798 expedition, marked with "the resonance of the great names he summons" as a reason for colonizing Egypt: Pompey, Caesar, Mark Antony and, of course, Alexander the Great (1993, 33). This long justification of the French occupation flows from a cultural work, a text from 1820 called *Description de l'Égypte* (Description of Egypt) (33). In this, it's already possible to see what happens when the selective record is produced by cultural interlopers, ones who dominate and sack the land no less. Though, culture in this sense, isn't limited to the study of written texts.

There are studies of games focused on this modelling, or production of culture, especially in othered or marginalized peoples which have begun breaking in through the cracks of the established record. Souvik Mukherjee's *Games and Postcolonialism: Empire Plays Back* (2017), discussed in the previous chapter, is one such text. Mukherjee's subject is the simulation of Indian culture found in games of war (like the *Civilization* and *Total War* franchises) which produce a narrative of India as seen from the perspective of the colonizer. This includes fighting games and sports simulations as well, where American and European companies select -- based on their own tastes -- what the core elements that represent Indian culture will be, inside of games. Mukherjee explains that games often resort to stereotypes to "translate the unfamiliar into coherent terms by seeming to account for the strangeness of other peoples" (17).

The stereotype is a form of cultural production here. Not to delve too deeply, but Mukherjee agrees with many of the authors discussed above when he states that "the culture of the ex-colonies has been portrayed in videogames through lenses that privilege Eurocentric accounts of history and progress" (103). Much of Mukherjee's book is focused on the lack of correspondence between games made in the West and the view of their own culture that Indian people have, which seems like a perfect fit with the theorization of culture that Williams asserts. Similarly, Vit Sisler has written at length about the representations of Arab peoples in videogames (2008). For him, the notion of representation is "the construction of meaning through symbols and images" and one that in this case "exploits stereotypical generalizations" which are fed by broadcast media (203-204). The middle east is then presented most often as

threatening to the West, as engaged with terrorism, engaged in conflict, and rarely featuring ordinary people going about their everyday lives (204). There is no everyday person or everyday experience which shapes culture here. In each of these cases, culture is both lived and produced, but not always by the same people. Though this approach is concerned with the outsider perspective, there is also work consider the self-representation of culture.

In that vein, Rachael Hutchinson's *Japanese Culture through Videogames* (2019) approaches culture from a perspective similar to Eagleton's separation of multiple categories, though in this case it concerns games. Hutchinson locates culture in three categories. First, in the "material objects that surround us," from the domestic to the architectural (2). Second, in the sphere of "the popular arts and artistic traditions of a certain place," with added specificity for each culture (2). Third, "and most amorphous, culture comprises ways of thinking, and ways of doing, often according to age-old tradition," ranging from religious belief to social values and mores (2). So, the account here doesn't differ as much as the earlier ones, with the marked exception of including physical artefacts. Hutchinson gives importance to objects that circulate in our physical spaces as markers of culture, but also the way those objects are replicated in virtual spaces. As she explains, videogames "draw on the fine arts as well as computer code to portray people and places on-screen and are themselves artistic objects" (3). She also likens videogames to other media forms like literature and popular film as a newer entrant in storied arena of cultural representation. So, it is quite easy to include the views of culture espoused above about legacy media and to expand it to the techniques of blockbuster resonance in virtual spaces. The question then becomes, what is included in each game and how? Hutchinson offers a further provocation: to consider genre when thinking about cultural meaning (5). This is of course in addition to the cultural specificity of producers and the forms of technology implicated in the making (5). This form of genre, cultural, technological complex lines up with Appadurai's concept of global flows, but it also brings me to the final piece of this chapter: the notion of the conjuncture and how it ties into both culture and resonance.

If resonance is a state that arises from symmetry or what Acland has called "responsive parallelism" (2020, 291), and culture is the subject or content being made resonant, then the form of culture that will be found in instances of resonance is determined by a wide array of factors. That array will include everything discussed by Williams as part of the selective record, but it will also include stereotypes, cultural objects, mores, everyday practices which make up the basin of knowledge possessed by media makers and expected of audiences. As Lawrence Grossberg has described culture, it "maps the ways we with, within, and against the material (economic, political and social) spaces of the different contexts, worlds and realities of our personal and collective lives" (2019, 40). The material aspect of how culture is circulated and produced is fundamental here, in particular because making culture resonant is part of a commodity process. This is what Norman K. Denzin reminds us about when he says that "always in the background lurks capitalism, the economy, and a theory of social structure and social relationships which presumes some connection between experience, consciousness, and the

material world” and that this capitalism has “placed a premium on only certain kinds of lived experiences, those which authenticate a particular aesthetic picture of the world” (1991, 45-49). So, blockbuster resonance only maps culture which authenticates a desired picture of the world, either for colonialist and imperialist purposes (in Said’s account) or as commodities to sell to audiences. Whatever the case, the version of culture that is the object of resonance is imminently determined by all the pre-existing frameworks that produce both culture, and resonance as an industrial strategy. In other words, this convergence of multiple contexts, norms and practices is the conjuncture that Grossberg is interested in discussing.

Now, Grossberg rightly remarks that the conjuncture is not just context. As he explains, “too often a conjuncture is simply treated as a context defined by some boundary, often but not necessarily a given space and period of time” (2019, 40). So, culture in *AC* or *Magic* might wrongly be thought of as a conjuncture. Likewise, the culture of Ptolemaic Egypt or Peloponnesian Greece might reductively be described of as a conjuncture. What Grossberg defines as conjunctural analysis is a “strategic political choice- to work at a particular ‘level of abstraction’” and where the conjuncture is more like a “social formation as some sort of totality, however fragile and temporary” (42). More specifically, Grossberg explains this form of analysis as bringing together three “discrete analytical critical practices (and their resulting constructions)” (43). The first level is the “conjuncture as a complex context viewed politically as a war of positions” (43). The second level “maps the multiple ‘problematics’ that cut across those various positions to construct a certain kind of problem space” (43). And the third level “attempts to question whether and in what ways that problem space is given its own sense of unity” (43). Conjunctural analysis is modeled as the study of “social relations/cultural identities/coalitions” and “economic formations and structures of identification and differentiation” situated between a moment and an epoch (43). If the social relations and identities constitute culture above, and the economic formations constitute the blockbuster formation of resonance, then resonant constructions of culture are such a conjuncture! As Grossberg calls it, the conjuncture is “a field of power” which sits between small instances of the everyday and sweeping generalisations of historical epochs (46). In fact, Grossberg calls this specific conjuncture the “contemporary” one which is animated by “new cultural technologies of production and distribution (proliferation) (65). Crucially, Grossberg also notes that the current moment is marked by “epochal transformations” that are producing “other modernities” to deal with a broader crisis in the “dominant forms of euro-modernity” (66-67). The modern conjuncture is the conjuncture of resonant culture, and those new technologies that are driving epochal transformations are, among others, videogames.

3.8. Implications of Resonance

What Grossberg’s notion of the conjuncture draws attention to is the idea that cultural resonance is not merely a problem negotiated between two individuals, an audience member, and

a media maker. Around them is a conflagration of social institutions, cultural practices, beliefs, economic arrangements, and technologies, to name just a few. Attention to Said's imperialism and orientalism, or Appadurai's global flows, or even resonance itself cannot be short-sighted. I mean that although I am studying resonance inside of four specific games, those games exist in the modern corporate capitalist infrastructure. Moreover, those games are engaged strongly with legacy media and cultural resonance of previous generations. As Muriel and Crawford have surmised, "videogames appear as one of the most relevant cultural products and objects of our time" and they are, as much as any other media form in the conjuncture, bound up "digimodernism" or "the hegemonic cultural logic of contemporary society" which bind "both the video game and the video gamer [as] its principal object and subject" (4). In particular, further discussions of blockbuster resonance and culture cannot avoid an examination of simulation (both in cultural and game studies terms), the role of blockbuster Hollywood visions of culture (in *Magic*), as well as the crucial position of museums in the discourse of Ubisoft and the structure of their games.

Thinking through these game, museum and film instances of cultural resonance brings up Herbert Shiller's thoughts on the topic of culture and domination in films, which I would extend unequivocally to the blockbuster games industry as described by David Nieborg (2011): "to believe that the product manufactured by the American film industry, for example, is only for diversion and basically without social meaning is to ignore, willfully, one of the most powerful forms of cultural domination" (1975, 115). That domination is what Said critiqued in Napoleon's egomaniacal project of describing Egypt, for instance. Showing, or making a culture playable, traces the imperial logics of Eurocentric colonial archaeology and museum exhibition as it stabilizes older epochs of cultural resonance in our contemporary context. This is in some ways what sociologists Peterson and Anand have described as the process of cultural production, where "the symbolic elements of culture are shaped by the systems within which they are created, distributed, evaluated, taught and preserved" (2004, 311). Cultural resonance as deployed by practitioners is a form of cultural production and domination. Further, if culture and resonance are part of this production/domination process, it seems as though Clifford Geertz' admonishment that thick description is essential has fallen on deaf ears in the blockbuster games industry. In other words, everyday lived culture is thick, blockbuster resonance is thin.

IV. SIMULATION, SEMIOTICS & HYPERREALITY

4.1 Introduction: From Resonance, to Culture, to Simulation

This project began asking how blockbuster games simulate culture. Along the way, resonance emerged as a theoretical pillar that partly answers the question. Resonance is the end goal of these games, and when the games in question are particularly skewed to focus on culture (in all the term's complexities), articulated resonance was the desired result. Articulated resonance is however only one part of the answer. It is the hook that Guesdon, or the piggyback ride that Rosewater talked about; an end state that studios aim to produce. The process is how those companies reach that goal. The process is simulation. Before diving into my case studies over the next chapters, it is necessary to attend to pre-existing theories of simulation. This chapter provides a theoretical engagement with theories of simulation, of the granular selection and modelling of various phenomena, and an overview of semiotics works that open up the medium specificity of simulation texts.

The pairing of simulation and semiotics is meant to take the rigorous accounts of the former, and the focus on culture of the latter, to produce a working theory of simulation which is more flexible and agnostic to medium specificity. My reasoning for approaching a simulation theory that is less focused on computation, is drawing parallels with processes of stereotyping that have discussed across cultural studies texts in the chapter above. Concretely, this means situating the theorization of simulation as a discourse between generations and fields of scholars. The following sections cover historic contributions to simulation, current models and theories, semiotics theories of stereotyping and finally game studies work that, much like resonance above, may be discussing simulation without outright doing so. Finally, this chapter provides an updated definition of simulation that I situate at the core of my project. As was the case with resonance, the purpose is not to produce a perfect definition, but something that will be useful in the particular case of simulating culture. So, where to begin?

4.2 Simulation, Representation & Systems

Simulation, as a concept, a process, and a genre of game, has appeared throughout the development of game studies, software studies, cultural studies (to name a few) and therefore has different points of approach. Given its rich history, one problem with simulation as a term is that it appears throughout foundational and often disciplinarily opposed texts with varying degrees of precision and technicity. By looking examining several of these theories of simulation, it is possible to arrive at a clearer understanding of what I mean when I use the term. The history of the term simulation arguably began with Jean Baudrillard's *Simulation & Simulacra* (1981) and crosses multiple communications studies subfields. It is outside the scope of this dissertation to list every possible permutation of the term. However, it is nonetheless necessary to discuss the

more prevalent perspectives and definitions of simulation, which are applicable to the study of culture in games, because they have informed my approach to applying the concept to semiotic perspectives.

As mentioned above, my first point of entry is Baudrillard (1981) because his formulation originates outside of game studies (and so is less focused on game technologies), while also predating the forming of a nascent game studies canon by 15 years. I've then opted to focus on key games scholars who've been key players in the so-called ludology-vs-narratology debate (whether games are play or stories), that have produced significant work on simulation (Aarseth 1997; Murray 1997; Frasca 2003; Juul 2005; Uricchio 2005; Bogost 2006, 2007; Wardrip-Fruin 2009; Gualeni 2015; Karhulahti 2015; Chapman 2016). Although these theorists are the primary focus of this section, there are also other works that stitch together these engagements to show a widespread engagement with the concept. Lastly, I bring in semiotics work contemporaneous to Baudrillard's theorization of simulation, which is semiotic, not computational and because there is significant overlap between resonance and simulation in the work of Barthes and Bakhtin, among others.³⁴

4.3 Early Theories of Simulation and Hyperreality

Baudrillard's *Simulacra and Simulation* defines simulation as an abstract process of meaning-making in ways that are still useful to this analysis (1981). In the book's first section, *Precession of Simulacra*, Baudrillard outlines the differences between what he sees as representation on the one hand, and simulation on the other (2). Notably, Baudrillard also uses the term *simulacrum* (or simulacra in plural) to describe a final form of simulation. It would be best to treat these three terms in order to most easily understand Baudrillard's intent. First, representation is discussed as the "principle of the equivalence of the sign and of the real", meaning that there is no difference between the representative object and the real object and is understood as a utopian ideal (2). This should be understood as *perfect* duplication, with no alterations or errors. Second, simulation is described as "false representation" or "the reversion and death sentence of every reference" (5). Evidently, Baudrillard holds no love for simulation and considers it to be a corrupting process which he discusses in terms of theology and politics. The third term, simulacrum, is more complicated to address. It is understood as "not unreal" and the moment when "simulation envelops the whole edifice of representation itself" (5). In other words, a simulacrum is the simulation built from other simulations, not from any real referent. It is a simulation of constructed ideas or models. Another formulation is found in sociologist Nick Perry's work, where explains that Baudrillard defined simulacra as "copies without originals" (1998, 1). The most useful part of Baudrillard's framework, as far as this project is concerned, is

³⁴ I should specify that my examination of simulation is from a communication studies, critical theory, semiotics and game studies perspective. It is not from a computation or software engineering perspective where the term has a significantly different configuration or in the philosophical "are we living in a simulation" sense of Bostrom's work (2003).

the positioning of representation, simulation, and simulacra as “successive phases of the image”; as a process (5). Images are first a “reflection of a profound reality”, a representation, then come simulations, which “[mask] and [denature]” that reality, and finally they become simulacra, having “no relation to reality whatsoever” (5). Baudrillard’s anxiety concerning the masking potential of simulation is at the level of its ontological power, where simulation creates what he calls hyperreality.

Provided the chain of simulation has gone on long enough (that there have been sufficient simulations that the original is no longer accessible in any way), he fears that the world around us will belong to the “hyperreal and the order of simulation” (12). He views this hyperreal order as the founding principle of Disneyland, “which is presented as imaginary in order to make us believe the rest is real, whereas all of Los Angeles and the America that surrounds it are no longer real” (12). Now, Baudrillard doesn’t mean that these places don’t actually exist, he means that they’re all artificial constructs and that “everywhere in Disneyland the objective profile of America [...] is drawn” (12). A useful term for this I would use is that Disneyland is exemplary of *Americanness*, which Baudrillard alternatively explains as “the social microcosm, the religious, miniaturized pleasure of real America” and an “‘ideological’ blanket” (12). Consequently, Los Angeles is “surrounded by these imaginary stations that feed reality”, of which Disneyland is but one, and cities like Los Angeles compose America. So, the hyperreal anxiety is really about the idea that whatever was real about American culture has been reduced to what these places can simulate.

Baudrillard’s anxieties about hyperreality, the state of reality where it is impossible to tell what is real and what is constructed, ran alongside work by Umberto Eco in his *Travels in Hyperreality* (1986) and subsequently Nick Perry built on both Baudrillard and Eco’s work (1998). Eco’s approach to hyperreality is located in technological developments, and more specifically Dennis Gabor’s invention of holography in the 1950s, which he legitimizes through its uses by NASA, the medical field, aerial cartography, and artists because it “satisfies the most ambitious ambitions of photorealism” (1986, 4). In his account of holography, which is a kind of simulation to be sure, he explains that it could “prosper only in America, a country obsessed with realism, where, if a construction is to be credible, it must absolutely be iconic, a perfect likeness, a ‘real’ copy of the reality being represented” (4). In some ways, it is useful to consider the development of holography as a simulation technology in light of Charles Acland’s description of the technological tentpole aspect of blockbusters, which embodies “an integrated media economy, characterized by technological wonder, new media relations, and cosmopolitanism” (2020, 91). Eco goes on to explain how hyperreality and holography are deeply bound up with science-fiction stories, such as Superman’s travels to the Fortress of Solitude, where he can witness the past as a simulation (1986, 4-5). I bring up this voyeuristic approach to simulation because it dovetails quite well with descriptions of the *AC* series found in previous chapters.

Eco describes America as a place with “many Fortresses of Solitude”, where we can view “collections of inconsequential wonders”, which he likes to the “Museum of Modern Art and the

art galleries” (6). He even refers to the Lyndon B. Johnson Memorial library as a “true Fortress of Solitude” and a “monument, pyramid, personal mausoleum” (6). Eco’s approach to hyperreality is less extreme than Baudrillard because it isn’t located at a level where *everything is false*, but where “the past must be preserved and celebrated in full-scale authentic copy; a philosophy of immortality as duplication” (6). Further, hyperreality built up through simulation “dominates the relation with the self, with the past, not infrequently with the present, always with History and, even, with the European tradition” (6). In many ways, Eco is positioning the end result of simulation, hyperreality, as a perfect state of resonance between all the aspects mentioned above.

The final aspect of Eco’s account of hyperrealism which is relevant to my work is his predominant focus on museums and exhibits as site of simulation. For instance, his account of the Museum of New York City explains that the institution “does not lack archaeological precision”, but rather than the objects are only contextualized by their explanatory panels beside objects, while the simulated reconstructions “mingle in a continuum that the visitor is not invited to decipher” (7). Where the idea of resonance becomes relevant is when Eco explains that “the designers want the visitor to feel an atmosphere and to plunge into the past without becoming a philologist or archaeologist” and that “the reconstructed datum was already tainted by this original sin of ‘the leveling of pasts,’ the fusion of copy and original” (7). He even expressly calls out, American business magnate, William Randolph Hearst and his refectory as “fake Egyptian with some Empire touches”, with mention that:

The striking aspect of the whole is not the quantity of antique pieces plundered from half of Europe, or the nonchalance with which the artificial tissue seamlessly connects fake and genuine, but rather the sense of fullness, the obsessive determination not to leave a single space that doesn’t suggest something, and hence the masterpiece of bricolage, haunted by *horror vacui* [the horror of emptiness], that is here achieved (23).

Eco’s view of hyperrealism indicates how much is constructed, but also a level of technological maximalism, *of filling in everything* that is different from Baudrillard’s fears. Hyperrealism not as a simulation of the world, but a form of kitsch which he equally locates in Disneyland (47). As he describes Disneyland, “an allegory of the consumer society, a place of absolute iconism” (48).

Considering Eco and Baudrillard’s vision of hyperreality brings me to Nick Perry, who describes Eco’s perspective on hyperreality as “those culturally specific situations in which the copy comes first” (1) and he addresses simulacra as “copies without originals”. Perry’s project is to discuss the circulation, and modification of cultural objects and stories which often “cut across distinctions between indigenous and imported cultures” with the aim of focusing on the “the plurality of [hyperreality]’s determinations and the diversity of its manifestations” (1). For Perry, hyperreality is not a hypothetical technological state, but the condition of our everyday lives, where culture is fabricated, replicated, and circulated constantly. In light of Baudrillard, Eco and

Perry's views, simulation, at an abstract philosophical level, is best understood as the construction of the real in fake ways, which through a sequence of escalating simulations eventually leads to an artificial world of constructed objects and cultures. Disneyland is emblematic of this kind of simulated world and is comparable to the game worlds that will be discussed in following chapters. However, before proceeding to discussions of constructed cultures and locales, it is necessary to step back provide a working overview of simulation as it is more commonly treated in game studies.

4.4 Simulation & Game Studies Foundations

In 1994, games studies scholar Ted Friedman discussed *SimCity* and *Civilization* as conventional “simulation games in which players oversee the growth and development of systems ranging from cities to galaxies” (3). In this sense, simulation appears as a genre often associated with some form of macro or micromanagement. Games scholar Adam Chapman has described these games as part of the “conceptual simulation style”, which stands in opposition to the “realist simulation style”, built on the abstraction “to a macro scope that no human agent could possibly experience” (2016, 69-73).³⁵ Whether it concerns people, cities or civilizations wholesale, simulation games are discussed by Friedman as managerial by default. However, Friedman also refers to the “simulation process itself”, without fully expressing what that process might be (1994, 6). He also discusses how any simulation is “rooted in a set of baseline assumptions” about whichever aspect the simulation focuses on and that it is impossible to be objective when building one (7). Perhaps the most striking moment in Friedman's work is his recounting of Jerry Pournelle's warning that often players and critics are convinced by the subject and its construction by simulations and that “it's a simulation of the designer's theories, not of reality” (Pournelle 1990). Friedman, and Pournelle through this retelling, are engaged in warning prospective audiences about the simulation power of these objects, and the threat of hyperrealism but with a hopeful perspective that simulation games are much more overt than other media about their “structures of identification” (1994, 6).

Notably, simulations of wholesale cultures had existed in the field of games long before the franchises that Friedman describes as harbingers of simulation games. Mabel Addis' *The Sumerian Game* (1964), programmed with William McKay, a text-based simulation of land management in the Sumerian city-state of Lagash was perhaps the first (Smith, 2020, 226). More importantly, Addis' project had foremost been a pedagogical initiative between IBM and BOCES (Board of Cooperative Educational Services) in Westchester County, New York intended for educational, not commercial purposes (225). The success of *The Sumerian Game* would however lead to the development of “*The Sierra Leone Game* and *the Free Enterprise Game* that applied similar mechanics to alternate scenarios” (227). Addis' simulation would eventually be brought to the attention of Doug Dymont, a Canadian employee of DEC (Digital Equipment Corporation)

³⁵ Both styles are discussed later in this chapter in greater depth.

Edusystems, at a 1968 educational conference in Alberta by a woman attending the conference (239). Dymont would subsequently poach the idea and produce his own version internally called *The Sumer Game*, though in articulated resonance fashion, he would rename game and the historical kings Luduga I, II and III (inside the game) to the “more famous Babylonian ruler Hammurabi, though he misspelled it as ‘Hamurabi’ in game text” (240). When Pournelle would reflect on games development some two decades later, he would note that “half the people I know wrote a Hammurabi program back in the 1970s” (1989, 115). By the 90s, Addis pedagogical program had long been erased by the corporate interests that now shaped the simulations Friedman viewed with wonder and apprehension.

The problem with definition simulation as a term is already noticeable in the jump from cultural theory to early pedagogical and industry projects, to early game studies. It is *both* a software engineering or industrial term that refers to simulation games, with a set of technical and mechanical assumptions, as well as an abstract concept regarding the production of truths from the assumptions of the simulation makers. Friedman’s retelling of Pournelle’s anxieties sheds light on the dichotomy between the equally imaginative and the exploitative potentials that all simulations possess. The final word in this early text is to highlight the radical potential, on the basis of technological maximalism, of simulation, as a “map-in-time” that ties together multiple decisions, interactions, and objects into a complex network of interconnections (1994, 10). In this, Friedman is right as the progressive development of computer graphics is discussed as selling point for the AC franchise, as is their integration into legacy media like blockbuster movies (Acland, 2020, 91). Computer simulations create connections between a great variety of elements and meanings, and his stress on their pedagogical potential is found in the works of Gonzalo Frasca and Ian Bogost later. Friedman is cautiously optimistic about simulation games and their technological developments as “where we go to play with the future” (1994, 10). However, what Friedman fails to discuss, and the aspect which Pournelle, Baudrillard and Eco were most anxious about, is that the pedagogical force of simulation is not inherently positive. Simulations model the assumptions and proclivities of the maker, and as I discuss hereafter, in the context of blockbuster games seeking resonance, the systems of intersecting oppressions that underlie meaning-making more generally.

Discussions of simulation in games studies have been a mainstay of the field since Friedman’s intervention 28 years ago and they’ve moved away from the discussion of hyperreality in general. Published a few years later, Espen Aarseth’s *Cybertext: Perspectives on Ergodic Literature* (1997), for instance, positions simulations as “dynamic models that mimic some aspect of a complex process” which are external to the simulations themselves (30). Key aspects of the theoretical description above are found here again. The idea that simulations mimic something more complex is compatible with Baudrillard, Pournelle and Friedman’s arguments. What Aarseth’s specific wording makes evident is that simulations are *dynamic*, meaning they are changing or active in some sense, as far as games are concerned. Aarseth’s model of simulation is plotted out like a machine that is contingent on player input to function,

while also recognizing only specific kinds of inputs based on its code or rules (105). Aarseth doesn't restrict simulation to computers or games, but he nevertheless describes the "computer's potential for combination and world simulation" as exceptionally suited (141). Aarseth's framework for simulation does not move beyond the game proper, but it does provide a useful ramp for considering fundamental differences between games and other forms of simulation.

Janet Murray's work, *Hamlet on the Holodeck* (1997), which was published at the same time as Aarseth's, is more closely related to the core of this project: understanding the simulation of culture more broadly. Although Murray never uses the term simulation as overtly, she discusses the capacity of computers to model complex life worlds, through the example of the *Star Trek* holodeck. The holodeck is a mainstay throughout the *Star Trek* media franchise and is usually shown as a technology that produces high fidelity simulations of fictional or historical settings, characters, and stories for the crew of the starship Enterprise to inhabit and play in. For Murray, "the holodeck is an optimistic technology for exploring inner life" (25). She calls the technology "a protean environment" and explains that "there is nothing that human beings have created that cannot be represented" (27). Murray's focus is clearly on the representational potential of simulations and their potential uses for empathy building and introspection. As she explains, the ultimate aim of simulation is to produce a virtual world that is "as deep and as rich as reality itself" (28). This of course extends to all elements in a simulation including the landscape, sounds, visuals, and interactive characters. Anxieties about hyperrealism are found here as well, when Murray discusses panics incited by the *Eliza* program, and the idea that people might be unable to distinguish if they're speaking to a real person or a program (70).

The final note I'd like to make about Murray's contribution to theories of simulation concerns her view of computer code, rules, and their function in simulation. What Murray shares with Aarseth is a recognition of the unique capacity of computers to produce complex simulations. As she recounts, "the computer can be a compelling medium for storytelling if we can write rules for it that are recognizable as an interpretation of the world" (73). The crucial term to focus on is *interpretation*. Murray implicitly positions simulation as an interpretive, subjective act. Every simulation, no matter how complex, is built by individuals interpreting what to model. The simulation she envisions is structured by "the interpretive framework [that] is embedded in the rules by which the system works and in the way in which participation is shaped" (89). What Murray loads into this interpretive framework is the simulation maker's authorial power. She envisions this authority as a "ruling power in control of an imaginary universe" (284). Simulations are more than just a genre of game. They are an entire "representational medium, a means for modelling the world that adds its own potent properties to the traditional media it has assimilated" (284). The holodeck is comparable, if extremely advanced, with the game worlds of today. It is however notable because it folds within itself literary works, theatre and film as technologies of simulation. And so, we are one step closer to a working definition of simulation, which I believe should contain an acknowledgement of *interpretation* and *authorial power* in some respect.

4.5 Simulation & Modern Games

Another theory of simulation that has greatly influenced this project is found in Gonzalo Frasca's *Simulation versus Narrative* (2003). Although I do not share Frasca's commitment to separating narrative from simulation (quite the contrary in fact), his work provides important clarifications for the concept (as well as connections with semiotics as a disciplinary partner). For him, narrative representations and simulations are functionally very different from each other and should not be confused, stating that simulation is a distinct semiotic structure (1). In his view, the formal study of games at the time was lacking in terms of considering simulation, largely because simulation was not developed enough to consider it as an alternative to representation/narrative (2). Frasca believed that simulation was a much older technology limited by the representational capacity of media, explaining that it was "extremely difficult to model complex systems through cogwheels" (2). The underlying assumption here is that simulation is contingent on some form of *fidelity* rooted in technological development. The more fidelity a simulation possesses, the closer to something hyperreal it becomes.

Frasca proposes a definition of simulation that is much closer to a bounded concept for this project, positing that to simulate is "to model a system through a different system which maintains to somebody some of the behaviours of the original system" (3). Again, the focus is on fidelity, but not solely in the sense of technical capacity. Maintaining behaviours of the original is a useful aspect to highlight, because Frasca is concerned with the function of the simulation. There is also a sense where the simulation need only retain that most useful part which means that the original and the mimic are connected. Like Murray's implicit author, Frasca's *somebody* implies the existence of either an author or a user that has to recognize the simulation as just that. If the simulation is too distinct from what it models, then it will not be treated as such. So, simulation has a resonant dimension at its core.

Frasca's commitment to differentiating simulation and narrative is most visible in his statement that there needs to be a developed form of "simulation semiotics or 'simiotics'" (3). His call to action is rooted in a belief that narrative media like film and simulation media like games can often appear to be the same, "[producing] a sequence of signs [...] [which] could look exactly the same" (3). There's a strong distinction between the linear and sequential nature of more traditional media forms, and games which are understood as more segmented, less linear, with more agential gradients in the activity (5). Frasca's differentiation of other media from simulation is strongest when contrasting the kinds of power makers exert over their creation and what its function is. He explains that "narrauthors have executive power: they deal with particular uses [...] [whereas] simauthors behave more like legislators: they are the ones who craft laws" (7). Like the simulation theorists before him, Frasca carves a special place out for code, computers and those who can manipulate them. His focus on the uniqueness of games is

justified given the extremely wide range of inputs and behaviours that are available to users but divorcing the study of simulation from narrative seems pointless and an oversight.

Jesper Juul has also discussed simulation, though in a more practical fashion in *Half-Real: Videogames Between Real Rules and Fictional Worlds* (2005). Juul explains that “on a basic level, a game with a fictional world can be seen as a simulation, as the implementation of a fictional world in the rules of a game” (171). More generally, in terms of its sourcing, “the fictional world of a game strongly depends on the real world in order to exist, and the fictional world cues the player into making assumptions about the world in which the player plays a game” (170). This point of view dovetails with Ryan’s view of the principal of minimal departure, as the games *cue* the players into making associations between simulations and the real world. Where Juul departs from previous work is his claim that if “the quality of a game hinged on its degree of realism and the detail of a simulation of the real world” this would be detrimental to the experience of play (171). The implication being that enjoyment and realism are not necessarily commensurate. Juul also gestures to work done by Scott McCloud on the iconic aspects of comics, which are also engaged with a form of simulation which readable (171).

Juul’s contribution to the resonance discussion comes through his description of simulation as “oriented toward the perceived interesting aspects”, explaining that “the stylization of a simulation is, of course, a subjective act that must take into account common perceptions of whatever domain is being simulated” (173). So, simulation must be resonant in some way for it to work. Juul also explains that some simulations be incongruous with the real world, for productive purposes, and that rules and fiction “can work against or with each other” (177). This discussion of resonance or dissonance drives towards a “serious game design challenge [where] at least some aspects of the fictional world have to implement in rules, but that some things are easier to implement than others” (178). So, there are aspects of simulation that arise from practical constraints. Juul’s conclusion is that “the formal rules of a game matter greatly to the experience” which he terms as the “half-real” or the “half-fictional”, where every game is construct of fiction and rules. A simulation is therefore the result of the intermingling of rules, fictions and practical limitations, which often plays with the subject matter, and sometimes against it.

4.6 Bogost & the Systemic Turn

Like Frasca and Juul, Ian Bogost differentiates simulations from other forms of expressive media, though with a much stronger focus on the idea units and systems. Of specific interest is his work in *Unit Operations: An Approach to Videogame Criticism* (2006). Here, he compares simulations to poetry, explaining that poetry (and presumably other forms of media) “offer significance by their formal characteristics”, whereas games offer meaning “solely from the generative effect of numerous codified rulesets” (86). Code is like a straitjacket. It provides a horizon of meaningful actions for users in a simulation, describing how players “embody and act

in units of compressed meaning rather than in streams of narrative meaning” (86). In other words, players execute actions that the game allows, rather than actions that are commensurate with the story. This remains to be seen because it may be the case that the simulations discussed here are more concerned with the broader narrative than the units of behaviour themselves. Bogost’s full definition of simulation posits it is the “representation of a source system via a less complex system that informs the user’s understanding of the source system in a subjective way” (98). Moreover, he explains that simulations “leverage simplified principles to render complex scenarios in reference to real-world systems”, explicitly stating that simulation is necessarily simplifying aspects of what it mimics (96). Bogost is much more focused on the modelling aspects of simulation than Frasca and Juul. He explains that “biased nonobjective modes of expression [...] cannot escape the grasp of subjectivity and ideology” (99). Meaning that the process of simplification is inherently subjective and ideological. It grapples with the subjective nature of meaning making generally, while also salvaging Frasca’s emphasis on fidelity and a general focus on systems. Bogost’s invocation of systems theory also considers multiple objects as systems or units with varying degrees of scrutiny.

This approach to games is rooted in other forms of media analysis, like poetry, and Bogost’s tendency to flow from one form to the other is useful because it avoids putting code on a pedestal. Broadly, *Unit Operations* is concerned with the application of *systems theory* to the study of games. Systems theory is generally concerned with the formation of systems and the relationship of all their constituent parts as “the basis for understanding that system” (4). Bogost singles out Ludvig von Bertalanffy’s foundational work on general systems theory (1976), but the interdisciplinary project of systems theory has popped up in a number of different disciplines including linguistics through Bela H. Banathy’s work on social systems (1996), and sociology through Talcott Parsons’ work on a living systems theory of culture (1979). These are a few instances, but systems theory work can be found in sociology, games studies, biology, engineering, management, economics, etc. Bogost’s application of systems theory is comparatively rather modest, explaining how it applies to literary theory and how that framework might be transferrable to the study of games. As he explains, “in literary theory, unit operations interpret networks of discrete readings; system operations interpret singular literary authority” (2006, 3). Bogost offers a richer, but more complex, explanation of units and systems which details how units operations, what a unit in a system actually does, is generally dynamic, whereas system operations tend to be dependent on units, sequential and more static (4).

The purpose of invoking systems theory is to open a discussion on games and game systems. A game is a system made up of various units (maps, actions, resources, goals, characters) that are constantly interacting. However, each one of these units is itself a system. A game map for instance is composed of numerous types of flags, zone markets and points of interest. Simply put, if a simulation is a system, it is constituted and held in check by the units which compose it. Understanding how each system is composed and how it interacts with each other system is the core mode of analysis that this project is engaged in. Furthermore, each game

can be seen as a unit in a broader system of cultural production and circulation. We might refer to this as the system of cultural production of the Global North for instance. Each game is a unit in a system of culture which interacts with other systems of culture in complex power relations (like colonialism). This approach to units and systems underlies Bogost's model of simulation as is necessary to its function.

Another useful aspect of the systems/units structure is brought up when Bogost discusses French philosopher Alain Badiou's concept of *compte-pour-un* (count as one) (11). Founder of the faculty of philosophy at the Université de Paris VIII with Foucault, Deleuze and Lyotard, Badiou's work developed *set theory*. As Bogost explains, Badiou's philosophical model deals with the formation of a set, where things count as one. Such a set is a "collection of elements selected from the infinite possible collection of elements" (11). A similar kind of probe would be to consider what elements make up a set of *Americanness*, *Egyptianness* or *Greekness*. How are those elements selected, on what basis and by who? These questions are found at the base of Frasca and Bogost's definitions of simulation that feature an ambiguous *someone* and *nonobjective* content. What Badiou was concerned with was the arrangement of elements in a set (or in Bogost's case the arrangement of units in a system). How they are arranged tells us a great deal about the assumptions and ideology of those who do the arranging. Each simulation arranges an array of elements to produce a meaningful experience for the user, but the real concern should be with the process of inclusion and exclusion that differentiates that simulation from the original, and what ideological leanings that process indicates.

By the publication of his second book, *Persuasive Games* (2007), Bogost was much more concerned with the ideological function of simulations. This second monograph discusses his now famous concept of *procedural rhetoric*, understood as "the art of persuasion through rule-based representations and interactions rather than the spoken word, writing, images, or moving pictures" (ix). The horizon of media forms and practices that can be considered under the rubric of procedural rhetoric is vast. As Bogost explains, the procedural component in this theory refers to processes, which simply means "the way things work: the methods, techniques, and logics that drive the operations of systems, from mechanical systems [...] to conceptual systems like religious faith" (3). Simulations are loaded with a number of these techniques and logics, and they exert rhetorical force on two levels. At the mechanical level, simulations structure the way we play. If the game doesn't recognize an input, then it does not affect or interact with the simulation. The second part of this rhetorical force is in what is part of the count-as-one set. What makes it into the simulation and what doesn't structure all play experiences before the user ever presses a button. Bogost explains that "processes that might appear unexpressive, devoid of symbol manipulation, may actually found expression of a higher order" (5). Furthermore, he describes processes such as these as part of a set of "nested procedural systems" (5). If we consider the simulations found in games, this means that absolutely every element in the game is salient, if we mean to understand what the simulation tells us about the source system it is modelling. An adventure game set in Hellenistic Greece tells us less about Greece, than it does

about the assumptions, sensibilities and ideological backlog of contemporary makers who are selecting what is part of the simulation.

A final note about Bogost's work is that he remains amenable to the combination of multiple forms of rhetoric. Like the other scholars discussed above, Bogost believes computer simulations to be distinct, in relation to other forms of media. Although he doesn't rank them in terms of force, Bogost differentiates "rhetoric in writing, painting, sculpture, and other media [which] do not necessarily make the same direct appeals to persuasion as oratory" (19). Procedural rhetoric really only takes place in the context of procedural frameworks, found either in computer simulations or in human social networks (10). This is crucial because video games trade on procedural rhetoric, but they haven't done away with the other forms. It is important to consider that as Frasca's focus on fidelity becomes a key standard in blockbuster (game) productions, the more traditional forms of rhetoric continue to exert pressure comparable with procedural rhetoric. More so, these forms of rhetoric are active in tandem with, and form a set of ideological pressures, procedural rhetoric. Bogost thinks back on Kenneth Burke's assertion that "wherever there is persuasion, there is rhetoric. And where there is 'meaning', there is 'persuasion'" (21).

It is important to note that more recent engagements with simulation have opened the door to what Juul characterized as a productive tension between fiction and rules. For example, Stefano Gualeni's *Virtual World as Philosophical Tools* (2015) has provided a more self-reflective account of simulation. As he explains, "the rise of the concept of simulation in contemporary culture is, at least from a qualitative point of view, independent from the introduction and diffusion of the digital platform in social practices" (44). What Gualeni means is that the vernacular use of simulation is distinct from its more theoretical conception. He begins by rooting a definition of simulation in *simulare*, "a Latin verb originally denoting the act of making one thing similar to another" (47). Gualeni situates his work in the context of the interventions made by Juul and Frasca, noting that "If we are ready to accept, as Aarseth did, that simulations cannot simply be understood through their output, then we can start to see how a more thorough insight could be achieved when simulations are aptly embraced and explored as mediators that grant interactive access to behavior-based worlds" (47).

Gualeni proposes his own definition of simulations as "intelligible and persistent, designed interactive ways to disclose complex source systems through less complex, technically mediated ones" (47). He also specifies that "the causal logics and physical behaviours" of simulations "do not necessarily have any logical or behavioral dependent on anything outside of the simulation itself", though he also asserts that other relationships between a simulation and what it models can exhibit a "functional, parental relationship between the actual world and simulated ones" (47). Here, Gualeni is discussing a certain experimental kind of simulation which more focused on its own behaviour, rather than modelling the outside world, or as he characterizes his definition of "simulation that does not rely or focus on its relationships with an alleged reality". He justifies this definitional choice by explaining that it is possible to conceive

of a “source system of a simulation [which] can be a simulation itself” which “would imply that the resulting systems would be progressively more abstract and less recognizable as a descriptive model of behaviours that can be observed in the actual world” (47). His second point of justification is Juul’s similar point that fictions and rules can be dissonant. Although Gualeni’s definition of simulation aims to jettison the real world as a source system because there may be chains of simulation, I would actually argue the exact opposite insofar as my case studies are concerned. It is true that AC and Magic have a number of source systems to simulate (on the game side), and also that they simulate cultures that are prefigured by resonance. However, the simulacrum and hyperreality discussions suggest that instead of evicting the real world from this discussion, that we should focus on how the links between the actual cultural spaces and the simulations we play have thinned and been reshaped. Consequently, it seems virtually impossible to remove the real world from discussions of simulation of culture, since the system being simulated is located in the real world, and the daily lives of people.

4.7 A Working Definition of Simulation in the Abstract

Given Juul and Gualeni’s divergence with my own perspective, and the irreducible nature of culture’s location in the real world, it might be best to recap the theories listed above to come to a working definition. Each of the authors above have approached simulation either directly, or indirectly, in their work. Some, like Baudrillard, Eco and Bogost have discussed it at an abstract philosophical level. Others like Murray and Frasca have focused more on its functions in the context of computer simulations. This is certainly not a full accounting of the history or definitions of simulations. For instance, my work has not engaged with Nick Bostrom’s work on the simulation hypothesis, the theory that all existence is in fact a simulation (2003). The focus of this project is on understanding how humans simulate for other humans, and in that respect, I am more concerned with simulation as a practice, rather than simulation as an ontological truth. So, what I am attempting is to reverse engineer, or jury-rig, a definition of simulation that accounts for all of these perspectives.

Going back to Bogost’s definition of simulation as the proximate full definition that dovetails with my own: the practice is understood “representation of a source system via a less complex system that informs the user’s understanding of the source system in a subjective way” (2006, 98). I’d also like to highlight the focus on units/systems and Badiou’s concepts of count-as-one and sets. Now, let’s bring in some pieces of the theories that came before his work. Frasca’s definition requires that the simulation requires a certain degree of *fidelity* to be effective, which we can refer to as a faithful rendering. Murray’s approach to simulation explicitly states that it is an *interpretation of the world*, which is also discussed in a more nascent form in Friedman and Pournelle’s work. Baudrillard’s view of simulation is that it *masks* key aspects of the object it mimics. Eco’s view is that it produces hyperrealism, a state where everything

constructed and artificial. Aarseth's view is that simulation has to be *dynamic*, or in other words respond to user input.

With all of these theoretical contributions in mind, the temporary definition I propose is the following: **simulations are ideological interpretations, formed by including and excluding meaningful sets of characteristics to constitute a simplified but seemingly faithful dynamic and unified model of the original system (real, virtual, concrete, or abstract).** Although providing definitions can often be construed as turf claiming, I think providing a definition like this one is useful for how this project deals with simulations of culture, and which needs to deal with both the mechanics and the abstract aspects of simulation more broadly. I don't include games or procedural rhetoric in particular in my definition because I intend for the term "faithful" be ambiguous and open a spectrum of fidelity and technological infrastructure. This allows me to consider oration, writing, photography, music, and film, in conjunction with (and as a part of) games in terms of fidelity. By extension, the study of simulation entails retracing these processes of inclusion and exclusion, the ideological biases that shape each simulation, and their function as rhetorical structures. Now that we have a temporary working definition, we can turn to consider the concrete processes of simulation that have so far been discussed more abstractly.

4.8 Applications & Constructions of Simulation: Quantization, Chunking & Complexity

Taking this definition as a useful conceptual model, I also have to establish what parts of a simulation are to be examined and how to do so. From the smallest elements to the overarching construct of the simulation wholesale, there are already a number of works that can shed light on the practical functions of simulation. There are three works that I'd like to bring together, as a foundation for the inquiry that I'll be working through throughout this dissertation. First is Amanda Phillips' *Gamer Trouble* (2020), which generally deals with feminist critiques of game culture and game technologies. More specifically, Phillips provides a crucial framework to consider how faces, ethnicity and gender are simulated through *quantization* and *chunking* (74, 78). Second, Noah Wardrip-Fruin's *Expressive Processing* (2009) covers the range of simulation complexity that systems and nonplayer characters can exhibit. Lastly, I turn to Ryan Michael Skolnik's *Strong and Weak Procedurality* (2013) to discuss gradients in procedural rhetoric, and how overtly a simulation displays its ideological underpinnings. My hope is that by turning to these three texts, the scale of analysis required for each game will become more apparent, as will the implication of inclusion and exclusion processes that simulation requires in such games.

Phillips' intervention is meant to bring in discussions concerning the implications of gender, race and identity more broadly in relation to game production, gamer culture and simulation. She discusses how games and the games industry create and reinforce specific identities (8). She explains that irrespective of how *real* identities are, our job as games scholars is to study how categories of identity are formed, and how the artificial, or man-made, can

become the bedrock for social norms (9). Phillips' work covers a lot of ground in terms of discussing misogynistic impulses in tech and game design, but it dovetails with my project's focus on simulation in her second chapter, *Making a Face* (66). Beginning with game developer Quantic Dream's demo of *Kara*, a simulated human that was displayed for audiences to judge in terms of realness. The simulation's realness came from torturing the avatar and to elicit photorealistic and seemingly-real suffering from the character. This demo would serve as the technological basis of *Detroit: Become Human*, which Phillips singles out as the core motivation behind the demo in the first place. As she recounts, "'Kara' was meant to demonstrate animation technology that surpassed the limitation of what roboticist Masahiro Mori in 1970 called the *uncanny valley*" (70). At its heart, the project of overcoming the uncanny valley is then rooted in creating simulations of humans so realistic that it would be impossible to tell the difference.

What interests me the most is that these tech ventures imply two distinct drives in their simulations, wanting to produce exceptionally advanced photorealistic video rendition and wanting to measure (or manipulate) simulated human bodies through Quantic's projects. Phillips focuses on *Kara*, but also discusses other simulations which didn't feature simulations of white people and in those cases would "fetishize their difference", as is the case with a "tribal Samburu warrior head animated by Image Metrics (based on a recording of an endorsement read by a Black Haitian American actor) or the head of a Black man animated by Cubic Motion to the audio of a speech by John F. Kennedy" (73). These might all seem disjointed projects with only the aim of being tech demos for simulation, but Phillips crucially points out that they were effective at simulating a "cultural interpretation of those faces to legitimize their messages" (73). In other words, Quantic was testing out photorealistic simulation of humans to produce deepfakes and to simulate humans in their games, which was met with acclaim at the initial demo. The implication is that advancements in simulating human faces hide behind the promise of achieving realism and "authenticity", but in a way that reproduces inherent biases and pre-existing knowledge (73). The production of simulations like the *Kara* demo, where realness was only judged on the basis of torture, or the deepfake simulation of the Samburu warrior indicates that simulating humans is an ideologically charged enterprise that inherently models biases, but how does it do so?

The process is two-fold. First, faces must be measured and broken down into workable metrics. This is what Phillips refers to as *quantization*. Phillips provides a general definition of quantization as "constraining an object into a discrete set of units" (74). The language of quantization appears closest to Bogost's use of units, leading us to consider faces as systems of elements, and human bodies are larger systems still. Phillips goes on to explain that in the specific context of digital media, quantization enables "rapid calculation and transmission of different types of data", which might extend to manipulability as well. Once the metrics of a human face or body are quantified, it becomes possible to rig it and place it in a simulated world (74). On the other hand, quantization "reduces the complexity of these data and silos them into a computational logic that historically serves the convenience of the ones writing the algorithms,"

which we can now recognize as the first phase of simulation and producing resonance (74). Phillips builds on the insights of Frasca and Bogost by addressing how the decision of which elements are measured and quantized in a simulation is inherently ideological and therefore prefigures the procedural nature of the simulation.

Moreover, returning to Frasca's earlier point about cogwheels and simulation, Phillips addresses much longer histories of science in terms of bodily measurement. Particularly, she discusses Kaspar Lavater's essays on physiognomy which modernized the idea of interpreting and binding "an individual's personality traits and temperament based on their facial characteristics" (75). The combination of empirical methodologies with physiognomy's pseudoscientific claims led to a structuring of anecdotal and prejudicial observations about othered peoples. Most troublingly, Phillips discusses this phenomenon as the drive to make "communal connections about the people around them," or in other words how a group of people are made *into a group* by an external party (75). Those communal connections were early phrenological measurements of skull size as a measure of intelligence, which would eventually be applied in the colonial for the differentiation of ethnicities (76). By the 1930s, early physiognomy had morphed into scientific phrenology and was advanced by Nazi officials to create mechanisms of identification of the German Aryan ideal on the one hand, and the "physiognomies and moral characters" of marginalized ethnic groups (76). I should specify, as clearly as possible, the practice of measuring physical characteristics, codifying them and producing schemas for these characteristics was a key step in fascist ideological development, and is not altogether different from what Quantic was attempting with its demos. She goes on to state that physiognomy reified prejudices because "if it can be measured consistently, it must be real" (75). Early 18th and 19th century pushes in physiognomy as a method for uncovering "racial truth" were already troubling enough, but the trajectory is much clearer in retrospective (75). Physiognomy, phrenology and quantization are inherently compatible with the mechanisms of colonial power because they provide the measurement necessary for the simulation of self and other.

If quantization is the mechanism for measuring, then chunking is the mechanism for collecting and bringing characteristics together. Phillips discusses chunking by way of digital humanities scholar Tara McPherson's *lenticular logic* (77). McPherson describes lenticular logic as a "covert racial logic" which functions by way of "the fragment or the chunk, a way of seeing the world as discrete modules or nodes, a node that suppresses relation and context" (2012). McPherson singles out the "[management] and [control of] complexity" as a key factor in chunking, and something that dovetails with simulation broadly (2012). Phillips is equally aware of these characteristics of chunking when she discusses how faces in digital contexts are rendered bereft of their original cultural and political context (2020, 77). She further discusses this chunking as the reduction of real life human faces into the low fidelity format of a JPEG (77). Furthermore, Phillips addresses how these losses of complexity are never innocent. She explains that "any quantized face may be said to be a compressed version of its whole,

instrumentalized for some particular purpose” (77). I cannot stress enough how crucial this insight is. Because the face is just one aspect of quantization. Every single aspect of the human lived experience that can be observed and quantized is subject to the same power dynamics and systems of oppression. Human bodies, fashion, food, music, architecture, are, to name a few, equally quantizable and can be chunked. Not only can they be chunked, but they are in each and every game that I’ll be discussing hereafter. Phillips goes on to discuss how in the abstract, quantized data is useful to any who study these data points, but that it is our responsibility to keep track of “whose convenience these measurements serve, and for what purposes the techniques for gathering [...] are being developed” (77). Quantizing is breaking down an extremely complex real-world system, and chunking is hand-picking which aspects of that original get to make it back into the simulation. Phillips framework is invaluable for what this project is observing, which we might refer to as the quantization and chunking of cultures at massive scale. It is in that case necessary to also discuss the issue of complexity, which Frasca, Bogost, Phillips and McPherson all bring up, and for which Wardrip-Fruin provides a useful framework.

Wardrip-Fruin’s *Expressive Processing* (2009), written in equal measure for academics and designers, covers simulation from a maker’s point of view. By way of Michael Mateas’ discussion of “expressive AI”, and the broader question of whether it is possible to simulate a human being, the book refocuses discussions about simulation complexity through the lens of simulation effects. These three effects are the *Tale-Spin*, *Eliza* and *Sim-City* effects³⁶ (146). All three effects have to do with how a simulation’s complexity presents and how complex the simulation is in terms of mechanics. The *Eliza* effect, as a starting point, “creates a surface illusion of system complexity – which play (if allowed) dispels” (146). In terms of how simulation has been discussed above, this effect would correspond to chunking that is rudimentary. The simulation appears to have high fidelity towards the modeled system, but it is much simpler when seen in action. Conversely, the *Tale-Spin* effect produces a “surface illusion of system simplicity – which the available options of play (if any other) can’t alter” (146). This effect is much more pernicious in terms of chunking. The simulation can, in these cases, mask the logics or complex systems that underlie the system that a user is interacting with. For example, the cultural norms of what Williams called the selective record (1965) are at play in the chunking process, as much any other form of cultural creation, and can be masked to the extent that it is impossible to track systemic inequalities, racism or colonialist tendencies that are subtle. Finally, the *SimCity* effect, which purports to teach users about city management while actually teaching them how to manage the simulation’s procedural rhetoric, is most difficult to square with the other effects. Much like with the *Eliza* form, this effect leads to an impression of

³⁶ These three effects are based on early games or software with which they’ve become equated. *Eliza* was an early language processor that would reply to responses written by a user, and simulate a therapy session, designed by Joseph Weizenbaum from 1964 to 1966. *Tale-Spin* was the first story generation program which would spin out fables based on user output produced by Sheldon Klein and collaborators in 1971. *SimCity* was a city management game of unmatched complexity at the time, designed by Will Wright and published by Maxis in 1989.

simplicity, but it teaches users how to manipulate the rules of the system irrespective of the simulation content (302). Its namesake is a perfect example, leading us to consider that *SimCity* teaches users less about how a city functions, and more about the systemic organization of a city according to the designers. As Wardrip-Fruin explains, simulations exhibit varying degrees of complexity, and it is crucial for critics and designers to understand what simulative processes mask or reveal about the makers, their social context and their assumptions (308).

The prevalence of the *Eliza* effect in game simulations is important to note here. Wardrip-Fruin explains that games focused on simulating human beings that are believable, thinking back on Phillips' critiques of such projects, runs into a practical problem. People are exceedingly complex, and groups of people more so. The work required for a few scenes simulating a believable portrait of a human being "will require large amounts of authoring for every minute of dramatic experience" (346). Simulations require constant chunking for everything that is included, from humans, to landscapes, sound, weather, architecture, etc. However, less high-fidelity objects like written text or atmospheric music don't exclude as much as media with multiple vectors to structure simulation. The more complex the system, the more aspects there are to chunk. Chunking in this sense is the selection process of what to include and exclude in the cultural studies sense, and it is the process at work when trying to instantiate resonance. For example, Wardrip-Fruin discusses the staggering amount of simulative work required to make NPCs move fluidly, explaining that each action would require NPCs to check for potential actions "that could move the world from the current state to the goal state" (176). Every single action that NPCs could or should take would run through a pre-programmed list of priorities priority selected and coded by the writers. There have been developments in how efficiently AI can accomplish these tasks, by having better allotment of tasks to each NPC (179). One immediate limitation is that the AI that is being discussed here cannot handle long-term and short-term goals, and cannot replicate the human mind reliably (185). Why this matters is because human cognition, creativity and selfhood are so exceedingly complex and contingent, they are the most affected by the limits of simulation. Simulation chunks most when it is chunking people. And so, understanding whether the simulations we are observing are *Eliza*, *TaleSpin* or *SimCity* effects will be a cornerstone of this project, allowing us to evaluate whether these games mask a lack of complexity, an overabundance of complexity or simply simulate an entirely different system than what they intend. Complexity's masking aspect is also important when considering the strength of a simulation's intervening effect, or in other words, how likely the user is to be confronted by the simulation, what I would call a failure of instantiation resonance, or dissonance.

One of the more recent interventions in the discussion of simulation and procedural rhetoric is the work of Michael Ryan Skolnik in *Strong and Weak Procedurality* (2013). Where Wardrip-Fruin is most concerned with the appearance of complexity, Skolnik focuses on the rhetorical force of a simulation and how users will react to it. In Skolnik's mind, simulations invariably articulate a procedural rhetoric and "guide the player to the intended meaning" which

is “interpreted from the games’ semiotic content” (151). This work lays the groundwork for considering procedural rhetoric as the primary vector of simulations, and something to be read through semiotic analysis. In terms of how users react, Skolnik explains that “strongly procedural interventions in games are less likely to provoke a crisis in the fundamental belief structures of their players” and are “more likely to provoke rejection” (161). The implication is that producing games for impact would be a counterproductive affair. Skolnik explains that when users are confronted with overt interventions, they assess the simulation through their own sensibilities (161). On the other hand, games exhibiting weaker procedural interventions lead users to form their own “subjective associations with the content of the intervention because their range of interpretations is not limited” by the force of the rhetoric (161). Skolnik views these gradients in force as the simulation's capacity to shape users into normative subjects by simulation authors (149). Thinking back on chunking, Skolnik’s argument is that simulations lead to the strongest uptake when they mask their processes, but I would argue that they have the highest uptake when there is articulated resonance and player expectations match the subject of the game. It isn’t about how things are masked, but the quantity and intensity of dissonance produced.

Phillips, Wardrip-Fruin and Skolnik’s works provide a key for targeting and reverse engineering simulations. Skolnik’s work allows us to consider how forceful the procedural rhetoric of a simulation is. Is it overt about its message, or is the message hidden and subdued? By analyzing the force of a simulation we can determine the intent of including certain aspects. Wardrip-Fruin’s framework on the other hand allows us to consider whether simulations are superficially complex, superficially simple or whether they are actually teaching users about a different subject matter altogether. This allows me to consider simulations as vehicles for intended, unintended and unrecognizable rhetoric; in other words, for articulated resonance. Most importantly, Amanda Phillips’ discussion of chunking provides the basis for analysing what is included or not in a simulation and how it is quantized. Quantization and chunking in this context dovetail with notions of signification and connotation found in semiotics work. The basis of this toolset is considering that simulations are loaded with ideological content, intended or otherwise. Understand what makes it into a game or not, and in what way will shed light on the ideological use of simulation and the formation of cultural simulacra: simulations of culture that have little or nothing to do with the actual culture they seemingly model.

4.9 Semiotics: Language, Expression, Culture & Games

There are already multiple existing branches of semiotics to draw on. Semiotics is generally agnostic to media specificity, though historically every theorist tends to work in one core medium. Saussure worked in linguistics. Mikhail Bakhtin dealt with oral language or written text primarily, while also providing an opening for new modes of signification. By the 1970s, Roland Barthes’ work dealt with print and photography, while remaining open to moving

images. Part of this project's aim is to bring together strands of semiotics, like the two mentioned above and put them in conversation with the simulations that are the focal point of this project, AAA open world single-player adventure games.³⁷ The purpose of mixing studies of simulation with semiotics is to accomplish what Frasca called simulation semiotics or *simiotics*. Semiotics as a discipline covers a vast array of signifying modes including language, oral rhetoric, written text, photography, music and film. All of these representational and simulative modes are found in games, alongside the procedural parts of simulation discussed above. Combining these theoretical perspectives, and their methodologies allows critics to evaluate games not just as gameplay, but as complex simulations leveraging all those representational modes.

I should begin by situating a general understanding of what semiotics even is, and which semioticians' work is included in this project. Kaja Silverman's work in *The Subject of Semiotics* (1983) synthesizes much of the pre-existing theories of early semiotics. As she explains, "semiotics involves the study of signification, [which] cannot be isolated from the human subject who uses it and is defined by means of it, or from the cultural system which generates it" (3). At its core, semiotics is the study of how individuals signify, how they associate a signifier (a meaningful form) to a signified (the concept that the form evokes), in order to produce a sign (the cohesive unit of form and concept) (6). Swiss linguist and semiotics pioneer Ferdinand de Saussure's original formulation of semiotics heavily favored language as the best "signifying system", largely because it was the most abstract and because it was required by other semiotic systems to function (16). For instance, it would be extremely difficult to describe an image, its content and form without the use of language, and so language remains the root semiotic system. There was however a recognition that signifying systems often work in concert. Aside from his work on hyperreality, Umberto Eco, in *A Theory of Semiotics* (1978), conceived of semiotics as applicable to a wide range of media, including "visual communication, systems of objects, plot structures, text theory, cultural codes, aesthetic texts, mass communication, and rhetoric" (10-12). Eco's argument opens the way for considering any system of signification insofar as the semiotician is able to break down the elements that constitute form and content. Simulations, more specifically games, leverage Eco's framework because they use all the systems he singles out while producing new modes of procedural signification that weren't in consideration in 1978. These signifying modes include spoken language, written language, stationary images, moving images, while also having their own specific forms of signification found in play (both analog and virtual). Considering the way that signification works generally is essential to studying it in practice, and one generative approach can be found in Roland Barthes' work.

What semioticians like de Saussure and Eco refer to as signification is discussed in the work of Barthes, and built upon through the concept of *connotation*, in *Image Music Text* (1977). Barthes views connotation as "the imposition of a second meaning on the photographic message

³⁷ The reason for focusing on these types of games is because, even though semiotic tools would be usable across genres, their specific applications would vary greatly. Additionally, multiplayer games would introduce the issue of parsing meaning making with multiple competing perspectives in conversation among the players, which is beyond the scope of this project.

proper” which is realized through all stages of image production, and the context of a piece’s circulation (20). The focus is on photographic media, but there’s nothing preventing its application towards more or less high-fidelity media, including simulations. Barthes goes on to explain, “the code of connotation is neither artificial (as in a true language), nor natural, but historical” (22). All aspects of connotation are therefore historical, by which Barthes means culturally and politically bound, and to examine an image is to glean the ideological context of its signifying practices (22). Combining text and image, such as labelling, is another form of connotation, and binding multiple signifying modes together produces “a parasitic message designed to connote [...] to ‘quicken’”, which has great importance for hybrid expressive modes like videogames (25). We can think of this *quicken* function as the function of chunking, which makes connotation easier to read for the user. Here, Barthes combines the historical with the cultural, explaining that “signs are [...] endowed with certain meanings by virtue of the practices of a certain society” (27). The association of images with a specific meaning quickens that connotation for users or viewers. The act of association is inherently cultural, and we can therefore understand connotation in terms of chunking, operating at an abstract level. For the purposes of the simulations I discuss in the following chapters, there are multiple modes of signification that are working in tandem to enforce the logics of quantization and chunking.

In *Rhetoric of the Image*, Barthes moves towards an account of how image genres are generated. Here he provides what we could call simulative genres, or chunking genres. His concern at the time was considering whether visual signs can communicate as well as linguistic ones. Text as a system of signification is understood as having a “*repressive* value” which limits readings greatly (40). Language can only work in certain ways that are culturally specific and commonly agreed upon at a broad level. In the earlier part of this chapter, the notion that simulation is a necessarily limiting process because of complexity and readability concerns was seen as inherently *repressive* to the same way that it is expressive. In any case where a designer wishes to encapsulate a complex reality as a game mechanic, all elements deemed inessential are discarded, truncating the real to produce the simulated. Further, Barthes explains that, in the case of language, “the linguistic message no longer guides identification but interpretation, constituting a kind of vice which holds the connoted meanings from proliferating (39). So, what does the image offer beyond the written word? It affords additional layers of coding, which “immediately necessitates division between the significant and insignificant: the drawing does not reproduce *everything* (often it reproduces very little) [...] whereas the photograph, although it can choose its subject, its point of view and its angle, cannot intervene *within*” (43). Limitations in language can therefore be combined with limitations of photography. The more signifying media are at work, the stronger the *vice*’s force over the content seems to be.

The possibility for inclusion and exclusion is fundamental to the process of image making (or game making) and viewing (or playing). As an example of the kinds of chunking that signification can bring about, Barthes discusses “Italianicity” as a visual expression of abstract notions about Italy, where what is included has enormous shaping force (36). The composition of

what it is to be Italian is itself a semiotic construct that creates meaning for all its constituent elements by virtue of associating one thing to another, and it fixes readings without using text (46). As Barthes explains, “*Italianicity* is not Italy, it is the condensed essence of everything that could be Italian, from spaghetti to painting. By accepting to regulate artificially – and if needs be barbarously – the naming of semes of connotation, the analysis of their form will be rendered easier” (49). Elsewhere, in *Mythologies* (1972), Barthes discussed the “label of Roman-ness” as a signifying spectacle where the film *Julius Caesar* “overwhelms one with evidence, [and] no one can doubt that he is in Ancient Rome” and where that evidence comes from the lavishness of the production as much as its reliance on era-appropriate haircuts and “tense features streaming (with Vaseline) (24-25). This process dovetails with Ian Bogost’s view of the *count-as-one* concept. Individual pieces of a simulation can be understood like lexical units in a larger system, like words in a sentence. Images, text, and simulation mechanics differ in technical aspects, but their function is similar in that they associate meaning to units. The cultural context in which these signs are produced and received is fundamental since games, like images, exist as a communicative unit, composed of “the totality of utterances emitted [and] also the totality of utterances received” (47).³⁸ This means that every game is produced in a cultural context shaping it and it is received by individuals living in a cultural context, which may or may not be the same.

These reductive forms of signification produce an expressive lexicon where individuals, social groups and classes can be easily recognized, and they are produced through a sanctioned process of connotation, “that of *ideology*, which cannot but be single for a given society and history”, which we might refer to as hegemonic ideology (49). Barthes is effectively speaking about stereotyping, but at a level where even including or excluding certain characteristics is part of framing culture. Simulating works in the same way because the process requires quantizing and chunking whatever is being simulated, cutting away the complexity of the real. What remains are only those aspects (language, fashion, ethnicities, gender, foods, music, and so on) deemed necessary to the simulation, as selected by individuals with specific cultural positions. This hegemonic ideology is what Barthes’ articulates as the variance in a specific set of *connotators*, which luckily for us, he refers to as *rhetorics*, and which are compatible with Bogost’s and Skolnik’s views on procedural rhetoric (49). Barthes asserts that “it is even probable that there exists a single rhetorical *form*, common for instance to dream, literature and image”, that we may in effect be engaged in an altogether different endeavor than classical semioticians thought (49). It may be the case that every form of semiotics appears to meet the expressive dimensions of contemporary media, and that simulation is the next step towards such a unified *rhetorical form*, because they are the most advanced in terms of simulating our lived reality.

Although I center Barthes’ work because of his focus on Italianicity and Romanness, which are compatible with my analysis of cultural simulation, the writings of Mikhail Bakhtin

³⁸ The concept of utterance from the semiotic work of Mikhail Bakhtin and will be discussed hereafter.

can bolster my approach by providing a combined semiotic method. Like his contemporaries, Bakhtin was primarily focused on the spoken and written word, but his specific context as a Marxian linguist operating in the USSR produced uniquely class-conscious theories of how signification might function. There are two concepts that recur throughout Bakhtin's works, and which will be of use here: *Heteroglossia*, otherwise known as speech genres, and his notion of the *utterance*. These two concepts need to be broken down so that they can be brought into conversation with the process of simulation. Bakhtin's work on signification as a semiotic construct was highly focused on the social pressures and factors that shape the choices that individuals, and social collectives, make in how they express anything. Where Barthes is focused on advertising images/texts and the cultural formation of motifs and clichés, Bakhtin is interested in the level of thought formation, one step upstream from image making so to speak.

Bakhtin's work dealt with the formation of meaning which worked through "all linguistic manifestations without exception" and the tension between the subjective speech acts and the systematization of "*phonetic, grammatical, and lexical forms of language*" (1982, 26). For him, the medium of signification was always secondary to the normative structures that shape how people think and communicate. Bakhtin explains that the social systems underpinning the expression of ideology "as a system of forms [...] [which] is the product of collective creativity – that it is a social entity and therefore, like all social institutions, is normative for each separate individual" (28). How people communicate, and what they communicate is always prefigured by a morass of social institutions (education, politics, history, material conditions) that shape an individual's choices. If the choice of signifying medium is shaped by this context, then there must be specific factors that orient decision-making during the signifying process. An individual choosing to express something must necessarily choose how they express themselves. It is important to note that Bakhtin first wrote at a time when cinema was nascent and current forms of transmedia textuality and multimodality were not present, but we can also expand his theory to include contemporary forms of semiotic systems (photography, film, mixed media, simulations, games, etc). In the case of games, code exists as a linguistic system that each developer must work with. It is possible to conceive of speech, writing, code, film making, photography and play as a continuum of normative languages that individuals learn and enact (with differing degrees of resistance. It is important to specify that semiotic systems are thus understood as normative, not deterministic, as individuals are not robbed of agency.

If semiotic systems and the sensory modes they rely on (like sight and hearing), are interchangeable between each other (provided we know how to decode the linguistic systems), Bakhtin's argument that all semiotic systems are communal and normative scaffolds the idea that all semiotic forms, and media by extension, are structured by their cultural context. So, what semioticians are trying to uncover is not necessarily the specific media form's characteristics, but what the form expresses and why it has been chosen among all the signifying modes available. The challenge, or as Bakhtin refers to it, "the task of understanding does not basically amount to

recognizing the form used, but rather to understanding it in a particular, concrete context, to understanding its meaning in a particular utterance” (33).

The utterance as a concept is particularly challenging because it is not an easily measurable or quantifiable structure, in the sense of how we will be collecting data about games, or how a film studies scholar might break down a movie. Bakhtin describes the “utterance as a *real unit of speech communion* [which] will also make it possible to understand more correctly the *nature of language units* (as a system)” (emphasis in original, 1986, 67). Although this is the formal definition he provides, it is marked by many contingent concepts, like *speech communion*, leading to significant confusion. Bakhtin further explains that “the utterance is not a conventional unit, but a real unit, clearly delimited by the change of speaking subjects” (71-72). So, in everyday life, an utterance might be equated with a word, a sentence, or a speech. However, the utterance is not necessarily any of these forms, it is actually the message that a speaker is attempting to convey (75). An utterance is exceedingly difficult to measure because it is predicated on that change in speaking subjects. So, the utterance is the content of a communicative act, and it is always intended for someone else’s perception, regardless of whether we refer to speech, written text, or a photograph. One question that arises from Bakhtin’s definition is: what is the formal limit of an utterance? As in, how big can one utterance be? Without a threshold to measure to say what is and isn’t an utterance, it is possible to consider complex simulations as one utterance. Barthes’ comments about *Italiancity* found in a pasta ad would imply that an ad campaign directed at a viewing public qualifies. So why not more complex simulations? Why not an entire videogame? For that matter, why not consider complex systems like videogames as multiple different utterances that form broader utterances? Each simulation holds within it all these multitudes, which leads to a question regarding how utterances, in Bakhtin’s sense, are formed.

Michael Holquist, a translator of Bakhtin’s works, has explained the process by which utterances are shaped. According to him, “[Bakhtin] makes it clear that speakers always shape an utterance not only according to the object of discourse (*what* they are talking *about*) and their immediate addressee (*whom* they are speaking *to*), but also according to the particular image in which they model the belief they will be understood, a belief that is the *a priori* of all speech” (1986, xviii). The mechanics of the process are rather simple. If a speaker wants to be understood, they have to compose a message about their subject that is intelligible to the audience. What exactly does this mean for a semiotics of simulation? The process of shaping an utterance is virtually the same as the quantization/chunking process discussed throughout this chapter. Considering Frasca’s cogwheels metaphor, it is important to consider existing games-centric semiotics work, such as the work of C.A. Lindley and Jason Hawreliak.

Lindley’s work in semiotics focuses on “the imaginative space of all possible ludic systems” which he refers to as “ludic space” (2005, 1). Lindley’s view is that games, simulations, and narratives are distinct types of semiotic structures with their own particularities (1). Lindley’s goal was to dissect ludic spaces and to “establish principled decompositions of the

elements of ludic systems” in order to understand the effect they may have upon players (2). The goal of the analysis proposed here is to conduct that kind of semiotic analysis based on a “systematic framework” focused on “the ways in which meanings are generated”, but to keep the focus on the game structure and cultural context of their make. Lindley’s assessment is that by studying how specific mechanics work by conducting semiotic analysis (looking at what the system is and then what it signifies) it would be possible to deploy a semiotic game design method for making games. He explains that “one game system or structure model might be used across genres, media, and game staging strategies” and this kind of replicability can be traced across multiple games in a similar genre (2). However, instead of using this for prospective design, I would argue for tracking game mechanics as a genre-based language of simulation. For instance, games scholars and semioticians could observe how maps work in a variety of open-world action games, and by comparing their use in multiple different games, it would be possible to understand a broader cultural use of maps as a structuring mechanism. Would it even be possible to establish a priority order between game elements from a semiotic standpoint? What is most important? The story, the map, the mechanics or something else entirely?

Lindley’s view on the semiotic construction of ludic spaces is that one metric towers above all others: time. As Lindley explains, “ludic systems are fundamentally time-based, and temporal structure is a major determinant of the player’s perception and experience of ludic form” (3). In this ludic semiotic system, games are considered in terms of how their temporal structure shapes the play experience. Lindley’s architecture of ludic space-time is hierarchical and works by layering different kinds of temporality. Lindley breaks down the temporal structure of each ludic space into four levels (3). First is the “*discourse* level, [corresponding to] verbal, textual and cinematic narrative systems with the level of narration [...] via one or more discursive episodes” (3). Lindley understands *discourse* as the story, as it is constructed for players. Second is the “*performance*” level, which refers to the process of players experiencing and constructing the ludic world as an active participant (3). This might best be understood as the way that players traverse a game simulation. How fast are they moving through the game? Are they following a specific path or quest chain? Third is the “*simulation* level [...] at which the authored logic and parameters of a game system together with the specific interactive choices of the player determine an (implied) diegetic (i.e., represented) world” (4). This is the level that interests us the most here because it refers to the structure of the simulation and how it has been composed. Lastly, Lindley identifies the “level of the *generative substrate*, the system of functions, rules and constraints constituting a space of possible worlds of experience created by the designers of the game” (4). The main implications of Lindley’s systematic approach are that there is an analyzable continuum of signification in every game that roughly equates to: the discourse about the game story, the experience of the game as constructed by players, the simulation of certain systems found in the real world, and a substrate of rules and code.

As discussed above, simulation is the modelling of a complex system by a more rudimentary system, or in this case, the complex real world quantized and chunked to become

the game world. Lindley identifies a strong distinction in the semiotic study of games “in the traditional semiotics of verbal and written language these distinctions may be equated in terms of the discourse level corresponding with speech [...] and the generative substrate corresponding with the system of language” (4). Lindley is distinguishing the two semiotic forms in the sense that traditional semiotics studies a symptom of language, speech, where this kind of ludic semiotics would study mechanics and code, a system of language itself. He goes on to explain that “for verbal language and narrative, the structural substrate is understood as a space of possibilities implicit within a culture and from which members of the culture may improvise meaningful stories” (4). On this much we agree. However, Lindley distinguishes computer games by stating that “there is a narrower and much more specific generative basis, derived from general cultural understandings but embodied in the software code of the game framework {which supports} a very particular space of possible game worlds that may be created at the simulation level” (4). Lindley’s assertion is that the primary limit on game worlds is what simulation can accomplish. This is certainly an issue at play with AAA adventure games, as the drive towards photorealism and museological correspondence is on the rise. However, Phillips’ discussion of that same drive, in terms of simulating human beings should alert us to the fact that the *problem of fidelity* in a simulation is secondary to the problem of *connotation*. As Wardrip-Fruin’s work shows us, simulation is certainly limited by constraints on complexity, but its functions remain the same: it models human prejudices all the same.

Returning to Lindley’s layered semiotic structure of time is nevertheless productive. The narrative, the play experience, the simulation’s structure, and the code are useful structures to attend to during analysis. Separating and privileging code is less so and creates a hierarchy in terms of importance. Games aren’t exclusively the most robust semiotic structures because they model rhetoric through simulation. It is because all previous semiotic media are still active in the process of forming Bakhtin’s utterance. The system of language does not cease functioning inside the game. Nor do existing social institutions and legacy media. Games like those examined in this project heavily feature the use of spoken and written language that simultaneously structures the design processes prefiguring the game, while also appearing in the game. Language therefore exists in the semiotic substrate and in every one of the levels that Lindley distinguishes. Lindley’s assertion is that the ludic systems that compose the game substrate and generate a narrow range of game possibilities, are analogous to that verbal language is “understood as a space of possibilities implicit within a culture and from which the members of the culture may improvise meaningful stories” (4). However, as discussed in the previous chapters, each game is constructed for maximum resonance between a subject matter (often culturally, geographically and temporally remote) and the expectations of a modern audience, through the knowledge and constraints of modern game development. The ludic systems that compose the substrate are equally a semiotic outcome of the contemporary culture making the game. Game systems which simulate are signifying something about the makers who are always proceeding from the specific cultural context that they occupy.

Where games are concerned, according to Lindley’s model, language, images, cinematics, and rules of play are all working in tandem. As Lindley explains, game, simulation and narrative refer to the content found in the substrate of ludic systems. These “layers” of the ludic system “represent potentially independent semiotic domains having their own design principles and traditions” and “choosing to design at a specific level is to adopt the design conventions and features appropriate to that level” (5). Since my aim is to parse the overall utterance of a blockbuster game, every single game element has to be part of that analysis, with tools appropriate to that analysis. What all these elements share however is the context in which they are deployed: the overall game production. For example, if, as is the case here, a game is meant to simulate Hellenistic Greece, it immediately brings up the quantized and chunked visions of Greece that are circulating in the broader culture: movies, television shows, books, paintings, museum exhibits, maps, sculpture and so on. The elements present in the game, as well as the elements found in the ludic substrate are always held in place by cultural substrate that exists prior to the game’s production.

It might be the case that studying the game space, the simulation parameters and narrative as distinct competing semiotic forms of meaning making, along with code as a substrate is missing the forest for the trees. The cultural substrate that Lindley mentioned as existing outside the ludic system is in fact what every element is replicating. Examining the semiotic meaning of the broader game is not only studying how the game rules are manifested into the game, but also how those game rules, those simulation parameters and those narrative elements convey something from developers as expressive units forming one single utterance. Those utterances can be as simple as a direct political message, or they can be incredibly expansive and complex running the breadth of the fictional world found inside a hundred-hour game. At this point, if we can identify what a simulation (a system modelling another system) is and what the field of semiotics is broadly focused on (the process assigning meaning to forms and objects), it becomes possible to carry these models through to the cultural substrate that Lindley discusses and which underlies so many of the texts here. In other words, what is even meant by the term *culture*? And crucially, how is culture shaped in simulations found in videogames.

4.10 Heterotopias, Museums & Authenticity: Simulation Everywhere

Although the previous section focused on the applications of semiotics to simulation, and to games, it is crucial to contextualize the practice with the colonial and imperial aspects of simulation techniques and technologies. Those perspectives are found in work concerning travel, imperialism, museums, authenticity, which can focus a lot of semiotic frameworks for the study of games as spaces of colonial voyeurism. In Claude Levi-Strauss’ early anthropological writings, which have long been contested as reductive structuralist relics, there is a useful critique of travelogues as he understood them in 1955. As Levi-Strauss writes, “I hate travelling and explorers. Yet here I am proposing to tell the story of my expedition. [...] This kind of narrative enjoys a vogue which I, for my part, find incomprehensible. Amazonia, Tibet and

Africa fill the book-shops in the form of travelogues, accounts of expeditions and collections of photographs” (18). Levi-Strauss’ full travel account found in *Tristes Tropiques* is not my focus here, rather it is his conception of what the book as a project even represents. It is a travelogue, a collection of words and pictures about a remote place for readers, who have no way to verify the information presented to them (18). It is a project of resonance. In much the same way as this book, games can present a mythological and historical place to players, with the added nuances of moving images, music, and interaction in the sense that Hawreliak describes multimodality (2020). The selection of these game elements operates in line with Bogost’s procedural rhetoric, Barthes’ description of cultural connotation and Bakhtin’s concept of utterances. I am referring specifically to games whose game worlds simulate the real world, used as an anchor for all themes historical and mythological. If the game worlds are multimodal utterances, then how are they composed? This question is tricky because they are semiotic constructs that can only exist inside the cultural context of the game makers, yet they have to model a game world that is somehow understood as authentic to the real life analog for the players. For instance, *Assassin’s Creed Odyssey* is a simulated Greece at the time of the Peloponnesian War, and therefore certain elements are selected by the modern game makers as representative of that time and space.

One way to understand this mixture of contemporary and remote cultural context can be found in Michel Foucault’s *Of Other Spaces*. He explains that “we are in the epoch of simultaneity: we are in the epoch of juxtaposition, the epoch of the near and far, of the side-by-side, of the dispersed” (1986, 22). Here, Foucault is speaking about a sort of synchronic mixture of cultural elements that are distant, either in time or space. He calls these places “heterotopias, [where] there might be a sort of mixed, joint experience” (24). Where a utopia is a place that doesn’t exist, a heterotopia mixes mythological, or imagined characteristics with real ones. There are many kinds of heterotopias since each heterotopia serves different purposes. For example, graveyards are one because they merge the imagined space of afterlife with the lived world (25). Two more extreme form of heterotopia listed are those of “brothels and colonies,” which are constructed in the real world as artificial spaces governed by different rule sets from those of other locales (27). A resort would work much in the same as a colony, in the sense that space is segmented where the world works differently from everything surrounding it. Foucault identifies multiple principles for heterotopias, which I will not enumerate at length here, but three characteristics are crucial: “the heterotopia is capable of juxtaposing in a single real place several spaces, several sites that are in themselves in compatible [...], [they] are most often linked to slices in time [...] [and] heterotopias always presuppose a system of opening and closing that both isolates them and makes them penetrable” (25-26). Functionally, these heterotopias are built from multiple spaces jumbled together, they are tied to slices of time, and they are places that we leave and enter at will.

The framework of the heterotopia seems fully compatible with the kinds of games discussed here. Moreover, Foucault explains that their role can be “to create a space that is other, another real space, as perfect, as meticulous, as well arranged as ours is messy, ill constructed,

and jumbled” (27). If we consider the earlier discussions about utterance and simulation, a game that simulates a cultural time and place is more ordered and neater than the real place ever is. They are ideological constructs overlaid onto the real space that once existed and is no longer accessible. So, if a game like *Assassin’s Creed: Odyssey* is a simulation of ancient Greece, it is in fact the ideological arrangement of Classical Greece according to the sensibilities of the modern context in the way that Westin and Hedlund described Renaissance Rome (2016). As Bakhtin explains: “Every word/discourse betrays the ideology of the speaker; great novelistic heroes are those with the most coherent and individuated ideologies. Therefore, every speaker is an ideologue, and every utterance is an ideologue” (1981, 429) An ideologue is the fundamental unit of ideology and so if an ideology is a complex set of rules and beliefs about something, an ideologue would be unit inside the system (Lylo, 2017, 15). It is generative to think of heterotopias like colonies, museums and resorts found in the medium of videogames (or games more generally), because they dovetail with discussions of authenticity and tourism.

Authenticity, as a concept in itself, could be the subject of another project altogether, but here it is studied insofar as it applies to heterotopias in games, and whether those cultural worlds are authentic experiences. Handler has described the authentic cultural experience as “unspoiled, pristine, genuine, untouched and traditional,” which we could understand as the idea of pure representation discussed in Baudrillard’s work above (2). Handler remarks that “in modern society, the temple of authenticity is the museum where we display the objects or pieces of culture that stand for the cultures of their possessors-creators (4). This seems perfectly attuned to how heterotopic games function. Much like museums, they can only hold within them a select number of cultural pieces with which to simulate the culture. *Assassin’s Creed: Odyssey* is no more an authentic representation of ancient Greece than a museum wing is, yet the game’s promotional material is chock-full with sentiments like “Ancient Greece Awaits: Explore an entire country full of untamed environments and cities at the peak of Greece’s Golden Age. Visit Sparta and witness Athens in its full glory, tread in the footsteps of legends like Odysseus and Hercules and uncover the secrets of Greece” (Ubisoft, 2020). The game world functions like a museum of the impossible. Greece’s history and mythology appear stacked up and the geographical map is compressed into a traversable game world. Additionally, the game saw the addition of the “*Discovery Tour*” (Reparaz, 2019) a mode modelled the previous game’s *Discovery Tour* (which had the tagline “Decoding the Ancient World” (Maguid, 2018). In this mode, players are invited to “delve into the past and learn more about the conflicts, philosophy, myths, cities, art, and daily life of Ancient Greece” (Reparaz, 2019). The games are evidently part resort and part museum. Anthropologist Jay Ramaswamy has discussed this museology as perpetuating the patterns of colonial exploitation through which these institutions acquired their collections (Ramaswamy, 2014). Museums appeared in Eco’s critique earlier, but they are recurring structures of colonial domination broadly.

In tandem with Michel Foucault’s description of the heterotopia, Tony Bennett’s work on museums as institutions of power is crucial here. As he explains, museums, unlike prisons are not

“institutions, then, not of confinement but of exhibition, forming a complex of disciplinary and power relations whose development might be more fruitfully be juxtaposed to, rather than aligned with, the [...] ‘carceral archipelago’” (23). Where prisons hide, museums show. In a sense what museums do is include and exclude in the same general way that games do. They confer authenticity and legitimacy to a few actors as curators by virtue of displaying and curating. But museums also exclude and construct narratives. This is what Eco referred to as Hearst’s Egypt with a hint of empire. Donna Haraway has also critiqued Western museums, particularly American ones. As she recounts, “behind every mounted animal, bronze sculpture, or photograph lies a profusion of objects and social interactions among people and other animals, which in the end can be recomposed to tell a biography embracing major themes for 20th century United States” (21). In a sense, the primary goal of the museum is to construct a narrative which reifies the museum’s own cultural expertise, as well as that of the institutions which it serves. She goes on to describe an inscription that reads in bold: “TRUTH, KNOWLEDGE, VISION” (21). Much like Foucault’s heterotopia, this museum is heterotopic, “at once a Greek temple, a bank, a scientific research institution, a neoclassical theatre” (22). These multiple vectors of simulation coalesce and produce a sense that “One is entering a space that sacralizes” the hegemonic cultural order (22). Crucially, Haraway describes the museum as a space “for joining the duality of self and community” (22). Museums are resonant as well, simply along another technological or social axis. That axis is authenticity, an idea which appears as historical accuracy in my literature review. So, what do I mean by authentic?

In the field of sociology, and with a specific focus in tourism studies, Wang has discussed the enduring relevance of authenticity in “some kinds of tourism such as ethnic, history or culture tourism, which involve the representation of the Other or of the past” (350). Citing tourism scholar Richard Sharpley, they explain such touristic experiences are judged as authentic or inauthentic by virtue of their connotations of “traditional culture and origin, a sense of the genuine, the real or the unique (1994, 130). Furthermore, authenticity in this sense operates through two avenues: “that of tourist *experiences* (or authentic *experiences*) and that of *toured objects*” (351). There are then two kinds of authenticity. The first, is that of the experience is predicated on the idea of the touristic experience as the presence of a “real” self within the experience. Accordingly, the experience of playing a game constitutes the experience of such world. Secondly, the authentic experience necessitates the presence of “objective authenticity,” as in “the recognition of toured objects as authentic” (351). However, these objects are the result of “constructive authenticity [...] [where] things appear authentic not because they are inherently authentic but because they are constructed as such in terms of points of view, beliefs, perspectives, or powers (351). Here, the heterotopic nature of museums, resorts and colonies is more directly perceptible. Like the heterotopia is fixed on a set of time-space identifiers that scaffold its construction, so are touristic experiences.

Games add another layer, that of simulation. The space is digital, but the objects simulated within are authentic in the sense that they represent the reality of some remote culture.

Simply put, the authenticity of the heterotopic game world is a constructive authenticity misunderstood as an objective authenticity, where the simulated world and assets are misjudged as representative. As Wang explains the constructivist understanding of authenticity, in E.M. Bruner's work, is theorized among other characteristics as the "'historical verisimilitude' of representation" and as "genuine, historically accurate, and immaculate simulation," which are both used to judge the authenticity of a "copy or reproduction, rather than the original" (354). All at once, Wang has provided a bridge to link Foucault's notion of heterotopia, the game studies understanding of simulation found in Bogost and Frasca's work, and Baudrillard's anxiety of simulation and simulacra. Additionally, the anxieties and hopes produced by heterotopias is found verbalized differently in the work of media scholars Dyer-Witherford and de Peuter. In *Games of Empire*, the authors remark that "in a sense, the slogan of every gamer is 'another world is (temporarily) possible'" and that "Many—probably most—digital virtualities amplify and reinforce imperial actualities [...] But aspects of gameplay can and occasionally do link to radical social potentials" (xxxiii). That symbolic construction of authenticity which Wang describes is not one where the objects are authentic, but one where they correspond to individual perceptions about whether those objects correspond to beliefs and cultural sanctioned norms (356). So, if that authenticity is not necessarily found in a real object, but in the individual perceptions of whether that object is authentic in relation to cultural context, then there is a real problem with gauging authenticity.

Wang provides another intervention in this regard, going back to the work of Baudrillard and Eco. From Baudrillard, on simulation and simulacra as discussed above, there comes again this anxiety of simulation as the contemporary condition (356). Paraphrasing Baudrillard, Wang describes this position as the condition where "Today's world is a simulation which admits no originals, no origins, no 'real' referent but the 'metaphysic of the code'" (356). In short, any idea of objective authenticity is undone because all things can be reproduced, manipulated and replaced ad infinitum and so our access to originals of anything is gone. In regard to Umberto Eco's writing on hyperreality, Wang explains that in this postmodern perspective, authenticity is abandoned "through deconstructing the boundaries between the copy and the original, or between sign and reality" and further, that "it is irrelevant whether it is 'either real or false', since there is no original that can be used as reference" (356). Notable here is that both Baudrillard and Eco referred to Disneyworld as such an example of hyperreal or simulacrum and do so in the language of semiotics (356). The hyperreal heterotopia is after all a semiotic construct of great complexity where every game element is selected to reproduce some authentic site and time. However, objective authenticity is impossible to gauge, except insofar as the user experience. It doesn't matter if the heterotopia found in a game world is truly authentic, because it is experienced as authentic and "if mass tourists empathically experience toured objects as authentic, then, their viewpoints are real in their own right (355). So, Wang's work joins the original threads of simulation and hyperreality with discussions authenticity and museums. The question then, is how game makers design a heterotopia that is experienced as authentic to the cultural context they are simulating. The final piece of this chapter, and my discussion of

simulation deals with that question by way of historical simulation.

4.11 Historical Simulation & A Modulated Definition

The two writers I intentionally omitted in my timeline of simulation are William Uricchio and his discussion of historical simulation (2010), as well as Adam Chapman and his *Digital Games as History* (2016). This is because their contributions to simulation help me stitch together all the previously discussed multifaceted theories of simulation, hyperreality, authenticity and heterotopia to produce a more specific definition of simulation for my analysis. As Uricchio explains, “using the past as a way to understand the future, a time-machine, a rule-bound set of possibilities...these terms resonate with various definitions of history” (329). In terms of technical maximalism, he adds that “the richer the specific historical detail, the more profound and pleasurable the play with the speculative” (329). So, the technological tentpole aspect of simulations is particularly important for historical simulations. Uricchio’s focus is on wargames, but his insight is applicable elsewhere. Further, he explains that “a great deal is at stake in tampering with the contours of historical representation” (331). So, the very aspects imputed to simulation earlier in this chapter become fraught when history is concerned. Like simulation, Uricchio defines history as “inherently partial, deforming, delimiting, and grounded in a ‘presentist’ point of view” where no simulation could ever “do justice the fullness of ‘history’ as past” (331). Likewise, he defines simulation as “a machine for producing speculative or conditional representations” (333). By which he means, simulations produce a form of representation, while representation isn’t necessarily simulative. Uricchio situates a problem in simulation, where the “embeddedness of play” is often at odds with “stubborn adherence to the historiographic status quo” (335-336). So, the necessity of games as playable experiences does not necessarily mesh well with the objectives of historical inquiry. So, how is history simulated at a more granular level?

Chapman answers this question by subdividing simulation into two categories, based on formal qualities (2016). The first is *realist simulation* (61). Realist simulations have a number of characteristics, such as “aiming and/or claiming to *show* the past ‘how it was’, i.e. as it appeared to historical agents at the time” (61). He also characterizes this form with a “high-degree of visual specificity” that is helped by technological advances (61). They also seem to rely on exception audio-visual design and fidelity (62). Crucially, they have to be “relatively easy for audiences to interpret,” which aligns perfectly with the aims of resonant design (62). Realist simulations also “easily engage with existing realist visual discourses and tropes from [...] film or television,” which makes them co-extensive with other blockbuster media forms. (62). They are also exceptionally characterized by a “heavy and detailed visual data [load]”, which I’ve discussed as technical maximalism, and dovetail with Acland’s notion of the technological tentpole. Lastly, they require significant agency in the game space, and “the virtual gaze” (63). He also explains that some realist simulations engage in reconstructivist approaches, which “carry an inherent ‘effect of reality’ [...] and subsume their own status as representation”,

directly referencing Barthes on the matter (68). Chapman seals the affair by outright listing *Assassin's Creed* as a realist simulation, along with other blockbuster titles like *Call of Duty* (military epic) and *Red Dead Redemption* (western) (61). But realist is only one style.

The second form is the *conceptual simulation*, which is mostly equated with games like *Civilization* and *Crusader Kings*, bringing back early discussion of simulator games like SimCity (69). Unlike their realist counterpart, the conceptual style doesn't purport to show the past as it occurred and are generally characterized by "abstract visual representations" (70). They also don't rely on showing "the appearance and aesthetic behaviours of objects, environments and characters" (70). They are however exceptionally complex and favour procedural rhetoric (71). As Chapman explains, "the *aesthetics of historical representation* mostly operate through the *ludic aspect*" (emphasis in original, 72). In other words, conceptual simulations are much more mechanics-intensive than their counterparts and rely on heavy information loads (72). This use of much heavier informational loads makes them well-suited for exploring "complex and large-scale historical processes, systems and actions" (72). They also abstract to a "macro-shape that no human agent could possibly experience", as mentioned earlier (72). In short, conceptual simulations are suited for a different kind of resonance, one that is located at the level of game rules and abstract concepts. So, where does that leave my definition of simulation?

Uricchio's intervention sets the stage for considering the simulation of history as particularly complicated given historical discourses and the requirements of play. Chapman however provides a useful model between realist and conceptual simulation. *AC* fits easily into this framework, if I was discussing historical simulation, or historical resonance. This is complicated because *Magic* doesn't quite simulate history, but a form hyperreal culture discussed in Eco and Baudrillard's account. Both games do rely on some form of authenticity and have heterotopic qualities. They also employ articulated resonance, and not historical resonance exactly. So, my proposition is to consider *Magic* as a form of conceptual simulation, and *AC* as a form of realist simulation, and to focus on those aspects. However, this is a subdivision of historical simulation, and one of the lingering aspects of simulation is Juul and Gualeni's notion that simulation sometimes models other simulations. In fact, I want to take a page out of Juul's book and turn to Scott McCloud's work on the *Icon* (1993). As he explains in regard to drawing on the basis of photography, simulating in a sense, and when we "abstract and **simplify** our image, we are moving further and further from the '**REAL**' face of the photo" (emphasis in original, 29). He qualifies our culture as "in thrall to the simplified reality of the cartoon" (30). This what he calls "**amplification through simplification**" (emphasis in original, 30). This amplification operates by "focusing on specific details" and "stripping down an image to its essential "meaning"" (30). He explains that this process produces "the universality of the cartoon" (31). This is what he qualifies as the movement from "realistic" to "iconic" (46). This is what I would qualify as the production of resonance, and which Juul seems to equate to a form of simulation. So, in keeping with my previous work on resonance, I would pre-emptively define the simulation found in *AC* and *Magic* as **resonant simulation: the production of an**

ideological interpretation that models a complex system, with a simpler system aimed at instantiating articulated resonance through the (re)production of iconic imagery, systems and language. Resonant simulation can be realistic or conceptual, but it will invariably tend towards representation that is perceived as resonant by makers. Now, this is not a final or infallible concept, but an attempt to produce what Karhulahti has called a stabilized meaning, not in the scientific sectors, but in the cultural theory sense (2015, 839).

Discussing simulation has taken many detours across this chapter. From early theories of the term to anxieties about hyperreality and hopes about the potential of games, simulation has been the subject of academic discussion for the better part fifty years. What was missing was the tandem concept of resonance which has been orienting the production of hyperreality across multiple media industries and practices. Once resonance and simulation are taken together, it produces a quandary that I discussed in the previous chapter, a sort of chicken-and-egg problem. It is difficult to say whether resonance was first produced by simulation, or vice-versa, and at this point it doesn't matter. Resonant simulation is the process of producing articulated resonance, which can be defined as the product of resonant simulation. The question now is how to attend to the games' instantiation of resonant simulation from a methodological perspective. This is what I move to in the next chapter.

V. METHODS

5.1 Building the Study

Although the previous chapters have mostly focused on discussing the theoretical perspectives these analyses will be relying on, the analytic methods that follow are equally important. As discussed in the research problematic, this project is committed to answering how games scholars and semioticians can analyse the simulation of culture in a rigorous manner. There is significant risk that the number of games, and their complexity, might stretch the analysis too thin if every aspect of each title were to be discussed. Therefore, the purpose of this methods section is to scope, as neatly as possible, *what* is the subject of analysis, *how* it will be broken down and finally how each subsequent chapter will move from deconstructing game elements towards reconstructing a model of cultural simulation that runs in various ways across multiple games. As previously discussed, these four games, across two franchises, that will be the primary subject of analysis: For the *AC* franchise, *Assassin's Creed Origins* (2017), *Assassin's Creed: Odyssey* (2018), and for the *Magic: The Gathering* series *Amonkhet* (2017) and *Theros Beyond Death* (2020). The study is subdivided into two pairs case studies that provide mirrored analyses between the two cultural discourses and the two types of game: *Assassin's Creed Odyssey* and *Theros Beyond Death* generally represent *Greekness*, while *Assassin's Creed: Origins* and *Amonkhet* represent *Egyptianness*, from the Euro-American perspective (as shown in Table 1).

Table 5.1: Chapter/Theme - Symmetrical model and divisions

Types of Blockbuster Game	Representation of Greekness	Representation of Egyptianness
<i>Open-World Game (Realist Simulation)</i>	Assassin's Creed Odyssey (Ch. 8)	Assassin's Creed: Origins (Ch. 6)
<i>Trading Card Game (Conceptual Simulation)</i>	Theros Beyond Death (Ch. 9)	Amonkhet (Ch. 7)

I am dealing with two open-world games and two sets of a modern card game, which each require different adaptations of game analysis perspectives. These pairs of methodological and cultural discourses require both a general method attuned to studying the representation of culture (as opposed to other aspects, like political economy or player reception), and a refinement of that general method towards two different genres of games. For this reason, I now

move to the general method of the project, followed by the formal elements considered for AAA games, my specific adaptation of the method for card games, and finally to my research protocol.

5.2 General Hermeneutic Approach

The general method is straightforward textual analysis protocols. As a foundation, I draw on textual analysis methods from David Altheide, Christopher Schneider and Alan McKee. The core method is what Altheide and Schneider have discussed as *qualitative document analysis* (2017). As Altheide has previously explained, “qualitative document analysis is similar to all qualitative methodology in that the main emphasis is on discovery and description, including the search for underlying meanings, patterns, and processes” (2000, 290). So, the broadest approach to this project is threefold: (1) Discover, (2) describe, (3) analyze (understood as the search for those underlying patterns). Altheide and Schneider have also detailed how a data collection protocol would be structured which subdivides the discovery portion of the method into collection and flexible coding phases (2017, 3). What I propose here, instead of collecting every data point around and inside each game is to carefully scope what data the following chapters focus on using game studies analytic perspectives. It is important to note that although the majority of the analysis is focused on the games themselves, the paratext and public communications of game makers is taken into consideration and collected as well. This is what McKee refers to as “the rest of the text”, as well as “the wider public context in which a text is circulated” (2001, 13-14). For now, it seems most logical to move to the general steps of my method, taken from games analysis work in the field of communications.

Most recently, Michal Klosinski has provided a detailed ten-step hermeneutic guide to interpreting digital games (2022). This model is compatible with the game elements that will be discussed and provides a general scaffold for doing digital game analysis. Although I am not solely focusing on digital games, his model is exceptionally useful because it combines game studies perspectives from a variety of methods including textual analysis (Fernandez-Vara, 2015), procedural rhetoric (Bogost, 2007) and narratological analysis (Maj, 2019; Ryan, 2015; Ryan & Thon, 2014, Thon, 2016). Klosinski’s article subdivides the interpretative process as follows: (1) playing the game, (2) **distanciation**, (3) **confronting prejudice**, (4) summary, (5) **problematization**, (6) reconstruction, (7) suspicion, (8) **theoretical coupling**, (9) existential inquiry and (10) testing the interpretive hypothesis (2022). Going through each step-in detail would simply reproduce Klosinski’s article, but it is important to explain which steps are most prominent³⁹ in my work and why. So, it is perhaps easiest to cover the steps that have already occurred before moving onto the steps that will take up the most space in this chapter, and in the following game analyses.

³⁹ Signaled in bold for clarity.

According to Klosinski, **distanciation (2)** begins “when passing from the game as an event (in play) into a game as a structured work or a text to be unpacked” (2022). This has been an unavoidable part of the data collection process as I have segmented my playthroughs in hour long chunks that have structured annotations for multiple game elements. Additionally, my playthrough was prefigured by conducting the literature review and finding what is already written or said by other scholars and critics about each game, running parallel to or against my perspectives. So, there’s an unavoidable distance between myself and the game, comparing this data collection process to my first non-research focused playthrough.

In terms of timing and analytic process, **confronting prejudice (3)** is also at the root of this work and so is an ongoing process of questioning my positionality. For Klosinski, confronting prejudice means accepting that “every interpretative process starts with initial prejudices” that derived from one’s social economic and cultural context (2022). In other words, the analyses I’ve conducted are in many ways predetermined by who I am and will always be one person’s reading of these games, with the assistance of the texts that form my body of citations. Fernandez-Vara also discussed the notion of critical distance, and the fact that each researcher is invariably a part of scoping, collecting, and interpreting all of the data (2015, 29). My identity is involved in all of analytic work, and so I think it is important to note that I am a middle class, cisgender male, white immigrant of Romanian origin living in Canada. I don’t experience many of the systematic obstacles, in terms of that other folks might when it comes to accessing these games or conducting research. These obstacles can include but aren’t limited to financial resources to access the games, films or museums that make culture resonate. They can also include technological barriers where the machinery to consume these products might simply not be available for purchase in a specific locale. I also have the privilege to be located at a institution that has been largely funded by social programs from Canadian/Quebec citizens, and to have received governmental funding to conduct this long form research. Lastly, as the literature review made evident, the vast majority of decolonial work is produced in the English language, which creates additional barriers for non-anglophone scholars and players who want to access this kind of work. This is what Amin Alhassan has discussed as the “canonic economy” of communication and cultural studies (2007). So, there are many ways in which I will never be able to access the deepest level of these games as it might be experienced by Egyptian and Greek players, or scholars.

My hope is however that I can engage with these games not as a member of those communities directly, but as a member of the cultural site that is actively involved in making these games. Moreover, my status as a first-generation immigrant, and the mixed cultural heritage and educational experiences is something that runs through this thesis work in relation this notion of prejudice. Transnational and intercultural stereotyping, as well as the flow of cultural objects, are a daily part of my life and the issues that face my family, such as comments concerning what language we speak, our cultural practices and whether or not I actually believe in vampires, all of which stokes my interests on the matter. Further, I have lived in a culture that

stereotypes my own national heritage as a part of wider commodification processes: The reduction of the richness of Romanian heritage to the account of vampirism in the work of one British writer, Bram Stoker. This kind of resonance-focused stereotyping has been part of my MA work on the Witcher series and local attempts to undo the colonialist perspectives on Eastern Europe. So, my research has largely focused on stereotyping and representation regarding my own native locale, and now moves to consider how corporations export that kind of thinking worldwide. Furthermore, the conceit of the project is dealing with practices of simulation, stereotyping, and prejudice that are generally present, but particularly concentrated in the case studies I discuss. The cases discussed in this thesis are much more intense, as they map the colonial logics deployed in Egypt. **Problematization (5)**, has already occurred and is the subject of the introduction and theoretical framework (the two preceding chapters), dealing with the problematic aspects of simulating culture at a broad scale, and the damages caused by reductive accounts of complicated cultural realities, driven by blockbuster resonance. **Theoretical coupling (8)**, has also been a part of developing this project as it requires thinking which methods, theoretical frameworks and research outcomes are most appropriate for the project. It is the central focus of this chapter. From here, the remaining steps constitute the core of my chosen method for studying games.

Steps 1 (gameplay), 4 (summary), 6 (reconstruction), 7 (suspicion) and 10 (verifying the thesis statement) are the primary methodological steps that will organize my approach to every text I discuss⁴⁰. Step 1 requires I play the game reflectively. Step 4 is so large that it comprises the entire data collection process. It entails summarizing what each game is, where it fits in its context and scoping necessary elements. This is the step I will be breaking down following this section because this is the deciding framework for what I record and look at. Steps 6 and 7 are coextensive and inseparable for me. Reconstruction is focused on discussing how game elements work together, what they do and what meanings they convey. Suspicion, as Klosinski describes, is the “reverse side of reconstruction” requiring that we ask what the game hides from us (2022). These two steps will constitute the majority of each game analysis in combination with the collected data from my summaries. Lastly, once all the analyses and interpretive work is done, it will be time to assess to what extent and in what way these games answer my research questions. As mentioned however, summarizing each game and scoping elements that construct those summaries is a major part of analysis. If Klosinski’s hermeneutic methodology is the *how* to study, what follows is the *what* I am studying.

For this, I turn first to Clara Fernandez-Vara’s work (2015) as a more applied model of the general analytic modes discussed above. I had significant prior experience with each of these games, which does matter insofar as I have selected these games believing that they are relevant objects for my research questions and theoretical framework in a general sense (2015, 49). I have not selected them to probe if they simulate culture, but in knowing that they do so, I have selected them to study *how* they do it. With that critical orientation understood, the next step is

⁴⁰ Though the steps often overlap, recur and take place in between case studies as well.

understanding where the analysis begins and where it ends. For the purposes of my case studies, the games begin with their media announcements. This requires gathering paratextual information that prefigures their actual launch (2015, 32). It also means looking at blog posts, E3 announcements, Penny Arcade Expo trailers and game developer interviews (2015, 37). My intention was to find the initial announcement for each game as the initial positioning of the cultural object by the company. For the *AC* series, this means looking at E3 as the predominant mode of introducing the game, along with cinematic and gameplay trailers and the handful of corporate blog posts featured on the official website. For *Magic*, that approach varies somewhat, as there are no conference announcements in the same way. In lieu of those, there are official posts on the Wizards of the Coast website, production in-vivo and post-mortem accounts by Mark Rosewater (and sometimes other team members) throughout a set's initial release, along with developer interviews hosted on Rosewater's personal podcast. In these sometimes corporate and sometimes informal engagements, developers are much more explicit in how and why they make certain design decisions. In short, these games appear on a public stage long before players can purchase them, and that factors into how they modulate resonance and culture more broadly.

With my start point selected, deciding on when the game is complete or finished is equally important. As Fernandez-Vara explains, "as games grow in complication and content, it will become evident that we cannot play the game in all modes" (2015, 27). For *Assassin's Creed*, the end state is when the game no longer has main story missions, or *major* secondary quests to be completed, such that the core narrative of the game is complete. For *Assassin's Creed*, this means that data collection covers its two DLC releases. For the two *Magic* sets, the game cannot be finished, but is already complete, in that I am only analyzing two set releases: *Theros Beyond Death's* 254 cards and *Amonkhet's* 269 cards. This sets a boundary between these iterations of the Theros and Amonkhet in-game worlds as produced on cardboard, and in promotional material. However, their marketing and previous set releases will still be treated as context that impacts how these objects function in a broader pattern. The next step is to determine what aspects are analysed outside of the game.

The *outside* is what Fernandez-Vara describes as the context that allows us to frame the discussion (2015, 59). I will be defining these contextual or outside aspects as *external factors*. So, the first external factor of analysis is determining the genre of the games (69). In grouping these games as two pairs, I am already telegraphing their conformity to genre conventions as AAA open-world games and as trading card games. Genre here is a marker of general similarities in representational modes and game mechanics, but it is also important to note that *Assassin's Creed* and *Magic*, as series, have become virtually synonymous with their genre. As will be discussed in their respective chapters, this is in part due to each franchise's longevity and also its blockbuster level distribution, vast circulation and consumption. This also leads us to discuss what the socio-historic context of each game is, which is the second contextual aspect (75). Where, and when each game was produced is immensely important to understand the deployment of simulation. Third, how the game is marketed, packaged, and sold is yet another

external factor (76). What is included in the main game and what isn't factors into the backend ethics and economics of cultural simulation. The marketing material and developer communications also allow us to understand a general orientation towards the audience (79). Who *is meant* to play is radically different than who does, and although this analysis is not a player study focused analysis, the imagined *players one and two* for each of these games is exceptionally important (Chess, 2017). Fourth, the final contextual aspect is each game's relation to other media (80). Although a broad external factor of these games, it will be covered in depth. This is because each game is involved in adapting pre-existing artistic works, or remediating blockbuster movies, oral culture, and myths. Moreover, the games discussed here are part of megalithic franchises. *Assassin's Creed Odyssey* is part of the *Assassin's Creed* franchise spanning 15 years and 12 installments. *Magic's* history as a game franchise starts in 1993, running for 29 years and spans 113 card sets. Each game is constrained to varying degrees by genre expectations and structural commitments in each game series' design. Thus, all four games have the same four external aspects that figure into the game analyses:

1. Game Genre
2. Socio-Historical Context
3. Marketing, Economic Context & Target Audience
4. Broader Media Context

5.3 Inside the Game: Overview of Formal Elements

Where things get more complicated is in the quantity of in-game, *internal*, elements that account for a major part of each case study. Here, I bring together specific game elements, metrics and objects that will comprise the majority of *what* is recorded inside each game. In Klosinski's terms, this is what will be recorded during the gameplay, summarized, and reconstructed to shape each account of the cultural simulations found in each game format, and in each case study. Fernandez-Vara's work is still fundamental for my selected in-game elements, but I also rely on and modify Consalvo & Dutton's toolkit for game analysis (2006), as well as Flanagan and Nissenbaum's *Values at Play* categories (2012). What follows is a discussion of eight categories of elements I am recording and organizing, which will be populated in subsequent chapters with specific explication for how each applies to open-world adventure games, like *Assassin's Creed Odyssey* or *Origins*, and modern card games like *Magic: The Gathering*.

The **first** element to consider is the general structure of the game. This is what Fernandez-Vara refers to as the structure of the "context inside the game" (60). I will catalog what kind of structural genre the game is part of, how levels or chapters structure the game, and why the discussed sections are part of the discussion (61). In short, this is setting the stage for all the other elements that follow. During the data collection process, this impacts how I separate play sessions, what constitutes a noteworthy break and even how I arrange the priority of

narrative analysis. In the two AAA cases, this means I am dealing with enormous open-world games that need to be subdivided into discrete narrative chapters and play sessions. In the case of *Magic*, this means separating the seemingly simple game objects along complex categories that the developers already prefigure.

The **second and third** in-game elements to consider are the **number of players** and the game's **scale** (88). Simply put, the number of players is important to consider because it is a fundamental condition of who drives the play experience and how much space embedded narrative occupies (89). Further, the player structure is modulated by a larger sense of scale found in each game (91). I focus exclusively on the single-player aspects of the games because my analysis is located at the level of simulation and representation, not players specifically, and consider how much scale can shift from one game to the next.

The **fourth** element is the **rules and goals of the game** (95). What actions can players take? What are they intended to do, in the sense of short-term goals, and the overarching goals of the game? Moreover, figuring out the goals of the game is tied to figuring out when the game is *complete* (95). This is where I catalog the broadest objectives of each game, as well as the structure of the game in the general sense. In the case of the open-world games, this will look like tracing loose trajectories of player activities and goals with cascading degrees of priority, from smaller clusters of activities that combined to form the higher order objectives. In the case of card games, it will take the form of cataloging telegraphed actions that *must* occur in specific ways, sequences, and priorities in terms of game flow. It will also entail cataloging how sets are designed in terms of whether the cultural adaptation or mechanics are the core focus.

The **fifth** element is recording **game mechanics**, a more granular level of detail of the previous element (98). This is what Fernandez-Vara refers to as “the gameplay of a game” (98). Where rules constrain broader patterns of play, game mechanics refer to the granular actions afforded to players. Here, the focus is on the core mechanics of the game. What actions can players take? Can they speak to characters, or can they kill them? Can they traverse territory in specific ways? Can they use a stealth mechanic? What actions are more or less frequent, or crucial? What can be collected? Perhaps most importantly, “what are the verbs that describe basic actions” (99)? In the open-world settings these elements will be actions players can take deliberately or at opportune times with specific buttons, abilities or skills required. In card games, these mechanics will literally be presented as text on the cards, in the form of keywords or descriptive instructions.

The **sixth** element is recording the **space of each game** (100). Since I am primarily dealing with single player instances, social spaces are not discussed. There are two kinds of spaces that are catalogued: *mediated space* and *fictional space* (101). Mediated space refers to the space of the game itself, “defined by the presentation, which is the space of the image plane and the use of this image including the cinematic form of presentation” (101). This generally means what I am physically observing. Is it the 3-dimensional rendering of a real-world

geographic space in a game engine, or is it card plane? The fictional space is the abstract space that “lives inside the imagination” (101). This means the rendering of higher order ideas about the spaces in question from the basis of the game. For AAA open-world games, this is the ideological dimension of the space, found in maps, zone restrictions, and faction spaces that structure *who* the space is inhabited by. In the case of *Magic*, this fictional space is the abstract sum total of the representation found on hundreds of cards which produces one space. It is one space produced by all the objects and rules together, but which is never physically observable.

The **seventh** game element is **the fictional world of each game** (105). This will constitute a major part of each case study because I am evaluating what these worlds are, how they are coded, using what language and rules. This is what Fernandez-Vara describes as the *where* of the game, and whether “the fictional world [is] based on an actual historical setting” (106). Furthermore, there is the question of the player’s position in the game world, especially relative to the power structures found in the story. Is the player a rebel firebrand, an instrument of state power, or a disenfranchised citizen? What the setting is, and who we are meant to play inside of each game world is a core orientation of the simulation.

The **eighth** element is **the game’s story, or narrative** (106). In many ways a continuation of the fictional world, referring to the events that either surround the play experience or are a core part of it (107). The story may not necessarily occur in the act of play but is conveyed through the game in a variety of ways. In the case of the open-world games, the story both takes place during the game and is found on cultural artifacts in the form of text entries. In *Magic*, it is found both in the mechanics and names of cards representing characters and events, as well as in the flavor text that supplements them. These broad strokes about what is inside each game provides a surface level understanding of what the game is, or the “gist” as she describes. However, it is necessary to dive deeper and consider the formal elements that sometimes overlap with these categories, because the slippages between the broader categories and the formal elements are indicative of what each game is meant to structure.

These eight broader categories of game elements are further specified with *formal elements* by Fernandez-Vara. The purpose of recording these formal elements is establishing the ludo-narrative consonance (sometimes simply called resonance in the case of these games specifically) or dissonance between various elements, most notably the narrative elements and the mechanics (120). These formal elements extend far beyond the scope of this thesis, though it is important to focus on the specific set that allows us to answer my research questions. The formal elements I pay particular attention to are (1) the rules of the world, (2) diegetic and nondiegetic rules, (3) the relationship between rules and the fictional world, (4) game dynamics and possible behaviours, (5) mediation, (6) representation (primarily through visual and sound design) and (7) choice design (122). These formal elements, organized along the 8 in-game categories’ model, are the core data points being recorded in play. They also dovetail and are compatible with game elements discussed by Flanagan & Nissenbaum in *Values at Play* as salient objects of game studies (2012).

The *Values at Play* heuristic focuses on a slightly different, though somewhat commensurate set of formal elements to pay attention to. Flanagan & Nissenbaum discuss these game elements as indicators of values (34). Likewise, they explain that although these elements are analytically distinguishable, they are experienced simultaneously and often indistinguishably by players. These elements include the narrative premise, which can be cursory or engrossing (35). There are also the player and non-player characters, which comprise who is represented, and what stories are told about the characters (37). This is where much of the cultural simulation occurs as characters are grouped with other characters. There are the possible actions inside a game as well, coding what players are allowed to do (41). Notably, this is distinct from what players are able to do, which can be enacted through hacking, cheating or dark play, and is not included in this analysis. There are player choices, which are either open-ended or linear and produce pathways for experiencing or exploring each game (44). There are rules for interacting with other characters (48) and with the environment (51), which again reinforce the structure of the game world. Then we each player is given a point of view into the game world and narrative (53). The game world is also construed through the use of a game interface (53), which is exceptionally important for game analysis as has been discussed in the Consalvo & Dutton analytic toolkit as well (2006). These elements constitute a sort of “on the ground” dimension to playing in these simulated worlds, though there is a broader aspect as well.

The VAP heuristic is built to consider some background elements (technical or ideological) that might not be as evident or immediately recognizable but are nevertheless essential for analysis. There are the in-game rewards, which structure individual play sessions and the broader objectives of each game (63). Then, there are the game maps (66), which will be discussed in detail as they are crucial in how *AC* relies on them, as an organizational structure for playing the game, and a simulation tool in themselves. Lastly, at the broadest level, all the elements discussed above produce what Flanagan & Nissenbaum call the “aesthetics” or which we might call aesthetic conventions (69). These conventions are produced by relying on the resonance drawn in from legacy media like painting, film and museum exhibits, and which communicate hegemonic cultural notions through the language and mechanics of games (69). Although difficult to gauge during play sessions, aesthetics will be discussed as an overarching product of what each game produces by combining every other game element. Evaluating these aesthetics will be done through the production of interaction maps, as I discuss now.

5.4 Interaction Mapping

All the formal, in-game and external elements discussed above are catalogued and collected to produce interconnected sets of reference points, which will be the overarching discussions of each chapter. For example, all non-player characters of an in-game group can be mapped as one set of data points. This is extended to the music tracks and specific locations, or even encyclopedic entries and items tied to game cultures. This is an extension of Consalvo &

Dutton’s model of the *interaction map*, which is a “micro-method that involves examining the choices that the player is offered in regards to interaction- not with objects but with other player characters, and/or with non-player characters” (2006). Mapping one set of interactions, say in a specific zone of the game, produces a map of that specific set. Producing multiple such maps, by mapping multiple areas, or multiple forms of interactions, is the same as producing one extensive nesting interaction map. I expand the interaction map to also include all the formal elements discussed earlier are considered as nodes of data to be mapped in order to produce these interaction maps. The interaction map, as a micro-method, also dovetails with the VAP heuristic proposed by Flanagan & Nissenbaum, which is concerned with *discovery* (79). Thus, the purpose of relying on this micro-method is to both push the interaction map tool to its maximal limit, in terms of scope and granularity (trying to study as much as possible, in as much detail as possible), while also showing the complexity or simplicity of each game’s representational structure. The process of discovery necessitates thorough mapping as much as possible to approach as holistic an account as possible, in terms what each simulation *is* or *represents*. I also adapt the interaction map for the specific features of card games hereafter, and then use as a core part of the data collection protocol.



Figure 5.1 Card analysis framework

5.5 Card Game Adaptation

Although the external elements discussed above apply in equal measures to AAA open-world games, and card games, the formal elements have a fundamentally different format. The formal elements that are found in card games are so radically different that they require an adapted set of game analysis items to control for. Therefore, I bring in an adaptation of the

elements discussed in the Consalvo & Dutton, Fernandez-Vara, and Flanagan & Nissenbaum methods. However, I also rely on game analysis methods and platform analysis tools developed more recently which are particularly useful for studying cards (Altice, 2014; Švelch, , 2016; Consalvo & Dutton, 2006; Light et al., 2018). Paying attention to the formal elements found on cards is the starting point for analysis, as shown above in Figure 5.1.

This analytic framework I utilize here is a new combination of the existing game analysis frameworks and is primarily structured for (Zanescu, 2022), adapted to pay attention to cards as units of interaction mapping in themselves, produced by the elements displayed above. Furthermore, each card is a unit in a wider interaction map that is structured along vertical (thematic set) and horizontal (mechanical set) lines to produce a larger scale interaction map. In other words, each card only makes sense if every element on it is understood, and only in the context of every other card in its release set, and even further only in the design language of the card game. To understand how each card set simulates culture, we have to understand the card object, and its release set from top to bottom. This is also why the protocol needs to pay attention to different cues in the context of card design. All of these elements are structured next in my research protocol.

5.6 Combining Frameworks

There are certainly many elements discussed in the methods and objects of study above. The reason for combining these methods together is to produce the most robust methodological toolkit I can, aiming to consider these games in terms of all the many mechanics, aesthetic elements and values that are at play. Likewise, it is my intention to compare these games in keeping with Geertz' idea of *thick description* and Grossberg's notion of the *conjuncture*. By moving from the experience of play, I catalog all and annotate all the individual elements discussed by Fernandez-Vara (with my own adaptations for card games). Then, I consider how all those elements are vehicles for specific values and intentions using Nissenbaum and Flanagan's heuristic. Third, I can form interaction maps or grids that tie together all the recorded elements into wider networks of symbols and intentions to interpret. This is because individual elements are important, but they only reach their full potential when considered in their contexts. Lastly, I structure my entire process self-reflexively using Klosinski's hermeneutic categories. In other words, I'm trying to sacrifice the least amount of detail in studying four games that have hundreds of individual elements that are all at play simultaneously. This combined method leads to the following research protocol following Altheide and Schneider's recommendations.

5.7 Research Protocol

The grid below combines all the perspectives I've discussed to produce a hybrid analog/digital data collection and interpretation protocol in keeping with the Altheide &

Schneider model. This protocol aims at collecting, summarizing and interpreting the gameplay elements and representational elements (audio and video) found in these two genres of games, while maintaining a symmetry in method so that all four game instances are comparable in terms of cultural simulation. Contextual data, such as game genre and socio-historic context specific to each chapter will foreground each game analysis, to set the scene.

Table 5.2: Research Protocol

Hermeneutic Categories (Klosinski)	Analysis Elements Protocol	
	Realist Simulation (<i>Origins</i> and <i>Odyssey</i>)	Conceptual Simulation (<i>Amonkhet</i> and <i>Theros: Beyond Death</i>)
Gameplay	Record all gameplay including: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Complete all primary quests/objectives. • Complete all secondary quests/objectives. • Collect all lore items, encyclopedic entries. • Game Maps. • Soundtrack and ambient sound. 	Catalog all card game objects including: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • All cards that comprise each set. • Alternate art cards released as promotional material. • Game boards (in digital release). • Pets (digital release). • Player avatar (digital release).
Summary	Produce nesting interaction maps linking: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Quests in hierarchical orders. • Zones, aesthetics, sounds. • Items and cultural markers. • Player character and NPCs. • NPCs among each other. • All categories together. 	Produce nesting interaction maps, as card lattices linking: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Quests in hierarchical orders. • Zones, aesthetics, sounds. • Items and cultural markers. • Player character and NPCs. • NPCs among each other. • All categories together.
Reconstruction	Interpretation of overarching simulation produced through interaction maps, and gameplay. Discussion of external elements: game genre, socio-historic context, marketing context, intended audience, and broader media context. Written Analysis in respective chapters.	Interpretation of overarching simulation produced through interaction maps, and gameplay. Discussion of external elements: game genre, socio-historic context, marketing context, intended audience, and broader media context. Written Analysis in respective chapters.
Suspicion	Interpretation of simulation limits: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Historic inaccuracies. • Comparison with other media objects to cross reference for resonance/consonance. 	Interpretation of simulation limits: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Historic inaccuracies. • Comparison with other media objects to cross reference for resonance/consonance.

Lastly, although this protocol was developed prior to the publication of Daneels et al.'s DiGAP (Digital Game Analysis Protocol), it nevertheless follows the general trajectory the authors lay out (2022). Viewed through this lens, my protocol aims to set four specific instances of analysis, to record them as thoroughly as possible from a single-player perspective, to interpret them using qualitative methods, and finally to answer the research questions of this project.

5.8 A Conclusion to the Beginning

The protocol displayed above is simultaneously simple and complex. The data collection process is uncomplicated. I intend to play each game, record it as thoroughly as possible, paying attention to every character, item, quest, event and piece of audio and visual setting that the games afford. The complexity is located in the fact that I'm trying to record everything that is part of these expansive games, with multiplayer elements excluded. Whether we call this textual analysis, game analysis, or hermeneutics is only important insofar as I am situating my analysis in light of previous work. To that extent, the protocol is mostly oriented towards the production of interaction maps, which produce what Bogost called the *count-as-one*, unified systems of elements. Every single element of each game is concerned as a small piece of a broad simulation. Every mechanic a piece of a bigger system. The ultimate system being a simulation of a given culture, Egyptian or Greek, inside of a blockbuster game franchise, open world or card game.

This brings to a close the first part of this dissertation which has been focused on theoretically and methodologically situating the project. I've positioned my work in relation to the vast array of work produced on *Assassin's Creed*, and the somewhat more understudied field of card games. I've shed light on the industrial accounts of resonance which intersect with the many perspectives of academics, and which is so imminently concerned with making culture resonate for imagined audiences. I've equally attempted to situate this project as a contribution to the ongoing development of simulation, from a cultural studies perspective. This project is built to hold together a, sometimes, unmanageably large selection of methodological approaches to produce the richest possible description of these games and how they are structured. Now, it's time to put all of this theory and methodology to work. It's time to look as closely as possible at the production of Egyptianness in the next two chapters, and Greekness in the two that follow after that. *It's time to talk about the games.*

VI. ASSASSIN'S CREED ORIGINS: AN EGYPT FOR AUDIENCES

*“The perfect setting for an epic gaming adventure: Egypt.
Three thousand years of history and mystery
at the tip of your fingers.” – Jean Guesdon, 2017*

6.1 Opening the Tomb in 4K

On July 11th, 2017, Microsoft kicked off its briefing livestream at E3⁴¹. The briefing opened with a standing ovation for Microsoft Gaming CEO, Phil Spencer. Spencer recounted an oral history of “renegade” developers who came together to “empower developers, delight gamers and deliver true hardware and technical innovation” (Spencer et al. 2017). This was the announcement of Microsoft’s eighth generation console, the Xbox One X, “the most powerful console ever made” which “sets a new quality standard for game creators.” Spencer’s presentation was followed by head of Xbox software engineer Kareem Choudhry who explained the company vision of “Power, Compatibility, and Craftsmanship” (2017). The ensuing listicle of how powerful the Xbox One X console would prove to be a new horizon of simulation technologies. From the description of “True 4k”, the number of pixels, the color gamut and the Dolby Atmos partnership, no specification of the console was left to the audience’s imagination. Choudhry didn’t mince words when he outright stated that “our [Microsoft’s] premium design means that every millimetre and every component within the console has been architected for maximum power and efficiency” and that an “industry standard approach just wasn’t good enough” (2017). This was a new generation of videogame technology, meant to power a new era of videogame narratives, at least in theory. In the case of blockbusters, Charles Acland has discussed the deployment of “technological wonders” to buttress “internationalist commercial aesthetic, to their status as resource magnets, and to their function as powerful organizers of meaning and commodities” (2020, 82). The technological deployment wasn’t only material, but discursive. Mia Consalvo and Christopher Paul have referred to this sort of discourse as the “real game”, a form of constitutive rhetoric (Charland, 1987) whose use “invents and constructs the game culture”, and in this case the product itself (2019, 126). As Choudhry put it, it was time to “see what this monster can do” (2017).

A few minutes after Choudhry’s provocation, the screen flashed with two sentences, first “World Premiere” and then “ACTUAL IN GAME FOOTAGE CAPTURED IN 4K” (Spencer et al. 2017). The opening texts pre-emptively answered an unspoken question: “is this what the game actually looks like?” It wasn’t exactly clear which game the trailer was for, but it opened

⁴¹ The Electronic Entertainment Expo is a videogame industry trade show running since 1995. It is organized and hosted by the ESA (Entertainment Software Association) which is a conglomerate of videogame publishers and subsidiaries. Until 2017, E3 was an industry only event. Its premise is the unveiling of new videogame products and technologies not unlike CES (Consumer Electronics Show).

with reverent vocals, a shot of the Great Pyramid of Giza (Fig. 6.1) , and a gruff sounding narrator explaining that “[they] conquered this land, and built an empire” (2017).



Figure 6.1: Opening shot of E3 AC Origins trailer (Guesdon, 2017).



Figure 6.2: AC Origins post-trailer conference (Guesdon , 2017)

Between sweeping vistas of Memphis, shots of naval warfare, and closeups of scarab motifs on gold inlaid jewelry, the assassin protagonist was quickly revealed, and then shown to be surfing down the side of the Pyramid. The trailer hinted at gameplay opportunities players would get to experience in this new 4k visual medium: horseback archery, gladiatorial combat, plundering underwater shipwrecks, fighting giant hippopotami, scaling the ancient wonders of the world, and killing five soldiers with one salvo of arrows. The trailer ended with a surreal shot of the protagonist fighting a fantastically massive cobra, before flashing to the game's logo, oscillating orange lights and golden stage panels (figure 6.2).

As the camera zoomed out from the trailer, a figure that's been a recurring speaker for the franchise took the stage, the so-called godfather of *Assassin's Creed*, Jean Guesdon. Guesdon set the scene by describing "Ancient Egypt as the birthplace of modern civilization" which is "also the birthplace of the Assassins brotherhood" (2017). Shown in the epigraph above, *Origins'* Egypt is conceived of as the perfect setting for an epic adventure, but also as the story of one man: Bayek. As Guesdon explained to the expo hall, "Bayek is the last medjay, the protector of his community. An Egyptian sheriff if you like" (2017). Bayek's struggles against corruption and injustice were meant to tell the beginning of the Assassins story, completely shifting the historic scale set up in the original game nearly a decade prior. Taking a page from Choudhry's book, Guesdon also detailed how "recreating Ancient Egypt, going back so far in time, pushed [them] to rethink and expand [their] gameplay mechanics" leading to the addition of "RPG elements to a huge systemic world, more detailed and alive than ever before" (2017). Following a period of dormancy after the series had become stagnant, *Origins* was a new direction, for a new generation of technology. Guesdon was content to simply let the following section of gameplay footage speak for itself. *Origins'* rollout began in many ways with what Acland has called the "strategy of the *technological tentpole* film, one that intertwined popularity and success with the advancement of a media format" (2020, 157). Though, this was just the beginning of *Origins'* media salvo.

The very next day, Ubisoft's conference presentation unveiled additional details through *Origins* game director, Ashraf Ismail⁴². Ismail opened by explaining his love for the game and likening himself to audiences. Although less focused on the technical aspects, Ismail traced a long story of players falling in love with historic settings across renaissance Italy, the American revolution, and the Republic of Pirates in Nassau (2017). *Origins* wasn't just another game; it was a 10-year celebration of the series "for the fans" (2017). Ismail elided the two most critiqued installments in the series, *Unity* (2014) and *Syndicate* (2015), when he explained that "since Black Flag, over the last three and half years, we have poured our energy, our talent and our passion into bringing the land of pyramids, pharaohs and mummies to life; to bring Ancient Egypt to life" (2017). In front of the projection of an obsidian wall with hieroglyphics and the

⁴² It should be noted that Ismail was fired in mid-August 2020 following allegations of sexual misconduct in the workplace which may have affected development on *Origins*. This is discussed more directly later in the chapter when it comes to the playable characters.

Assassin's Creed logo, Ismail recounted that *Origins* challenged the team to “reinvent what it means to be *Assassin's Creed*” (Ubisoft North America 2017a). The reverent tone about the series was an invitation for attendees to try this new vision for the franchise, “this beast we have been building” (2017a). Ismail ceded the floor to a different gameplay trailer. This time, the trailer wasn't set to reverent vocals, but to the Atlanta post-punk band Algiers' *Blood* (2015). The inexplicable pairing of Ancient Egypt with a song recounting the pain of slavery in America, “four hundred years of torture, four hundred years a slave,” produced a gospel-laden mystique and aesthetic for the game that was altogether different from what the franchise evinced in previous installments. Though, the doubling of *Origins*' Egypt with modern music wasn't over with.



Figure 6.3: Game Director Ashraf Ismail explaining the vision behind *Origins* (2017).

Two months after E3, at Gamescom, another trade show in Cologne Germany, Ubisoft dropped the final trailer for the game (Ubisoft North America, 2017b). This time, the trailer was a 3-minute cinematic that had no gameplay. Instead, this video was set to no less than Leonard Cohen's final song, the posthumously released *You Want It Darker* (2016)⁴³. Combining the reverent, almost gospel-like, tone of the song, ancient Egyptian instruments like the ney and oud, with the bombastic percussions and synthesizer tones of the *Assassin's Creed* sound palette,

⁴³ It's difficult to explain the valence of Cohen in Montreal as I write this chapter a few blocks away from the 10 000 square foot mural of Cohen located next to the Museum of Fine Arts, where the Ubisoft sponsored mummy exhibit was held two years later.



Figure 6.4: AC Origins cinematic panorama (Ubisoft North America, 2017b).

Ubisoft laid out the game's aesthetic on a three-minute canvas. The game would feature pharaohs, mummification, the pyramids, Cleopatra, Julius Caesar, and the protagonist Bayek, all for the enjoyment of players (fig. 6.4). This was an Egypt overdetermined by popular culture and the *Assassin's Creed* formula. This was Egypt at our fingertips.

6.2 Origins at the Conjunction of Egyptianness

Throughout this chapter, *Assassin's Creed Origins* is explored in the context of this initial marketing salvo. Using the methods discussed in the previous chapter, as well as concepts of resonance and simulation, the game is broken down into three sections that comprise this chapter: *Origins* (2017) itself as the core product, the *Hidden Ones* (2018a) and *Curse of the Pharaohs* (2018c) expansions, and the museological *Discovery Tour: Ancient Egypt* (2018b). Each of these sections discusses the composition of the game in terms of spatial structure, narrative, characters, artefacts, landmarks, and the resulting game structure that comprises the game in full. Lastly, the game and museum tour are contextualized with respect to contemporary critiques of colonialism and museums, the failures of extractivist archaeology and the logics of Orientalism that are bound up with Western conceptions of Egyptian culture. The full playthrough of the game is coded in tables that follow the game's structure and display the time allotment, themes, and concentration of activities throughout 73 hour-long recordings, with the support of figures and thick description of the play experience. Thinking back on Spencer, Choudhry, Guesdon and Ismail's words, it's now time to *see what this monster does*.

6.2.1 Origins: An Egypt of Maps

As players are plunged into the simulated Egypt of *Origins*, they become embroiled in Bayek's quest for justice and revenge. This prologue is crucial to the narrative, but it is perhaps best to begin at a different point of analysis: the map. When Jean Baudrillard wrote that "the map precedes the territory," it was surely difficult to imagine how true his words would prove to be (1994, 1). *Origins* is exemplary of this logic, as its maps orient gameplay quite forcefully. As shown in figure 6.5, as soon as players open the game menu, they can access the game map which segments zones in level increments, shown as a diagram comprised of the minimum level on left hand side of a shield, and the maximum value on the right-hand side. For instance, the initial zone of Siwa, Bayek's home village has a level range of 1-4, meaning that enemies will have their levels set to 1 and scale up to 4 in certain cases. Every zone has such a level zone (aside from two exceptions), and they range from levels 1 to 40 for the main game. Any enemy, including the smallest animals or infantry, with a 3-level value higher than that of the player

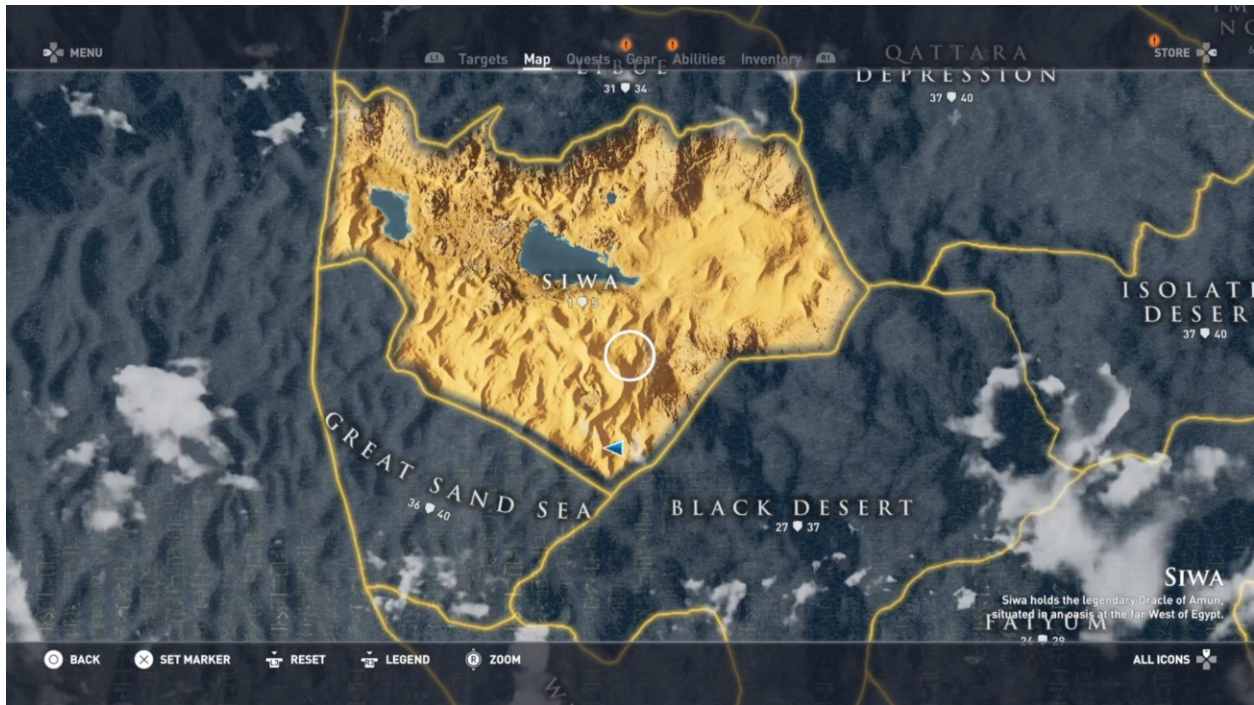


Figure 6.5: AC Origins map

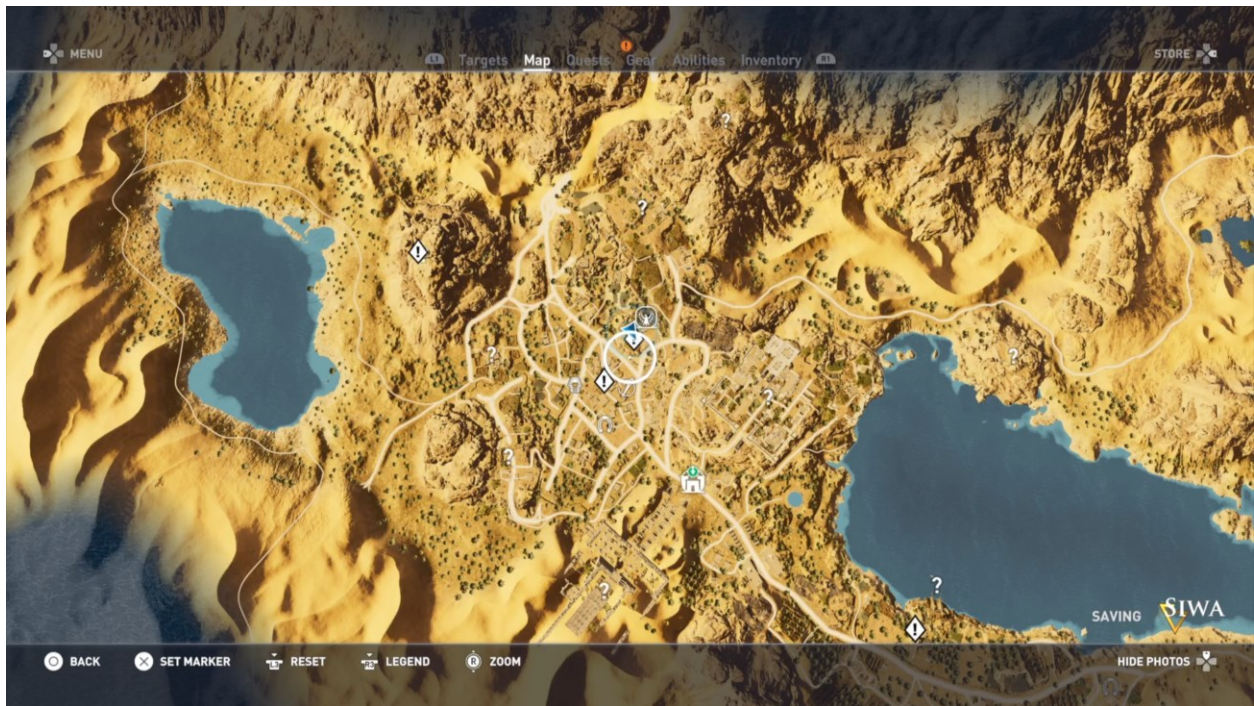


Figure 6.6: Zoomed map of Siwa

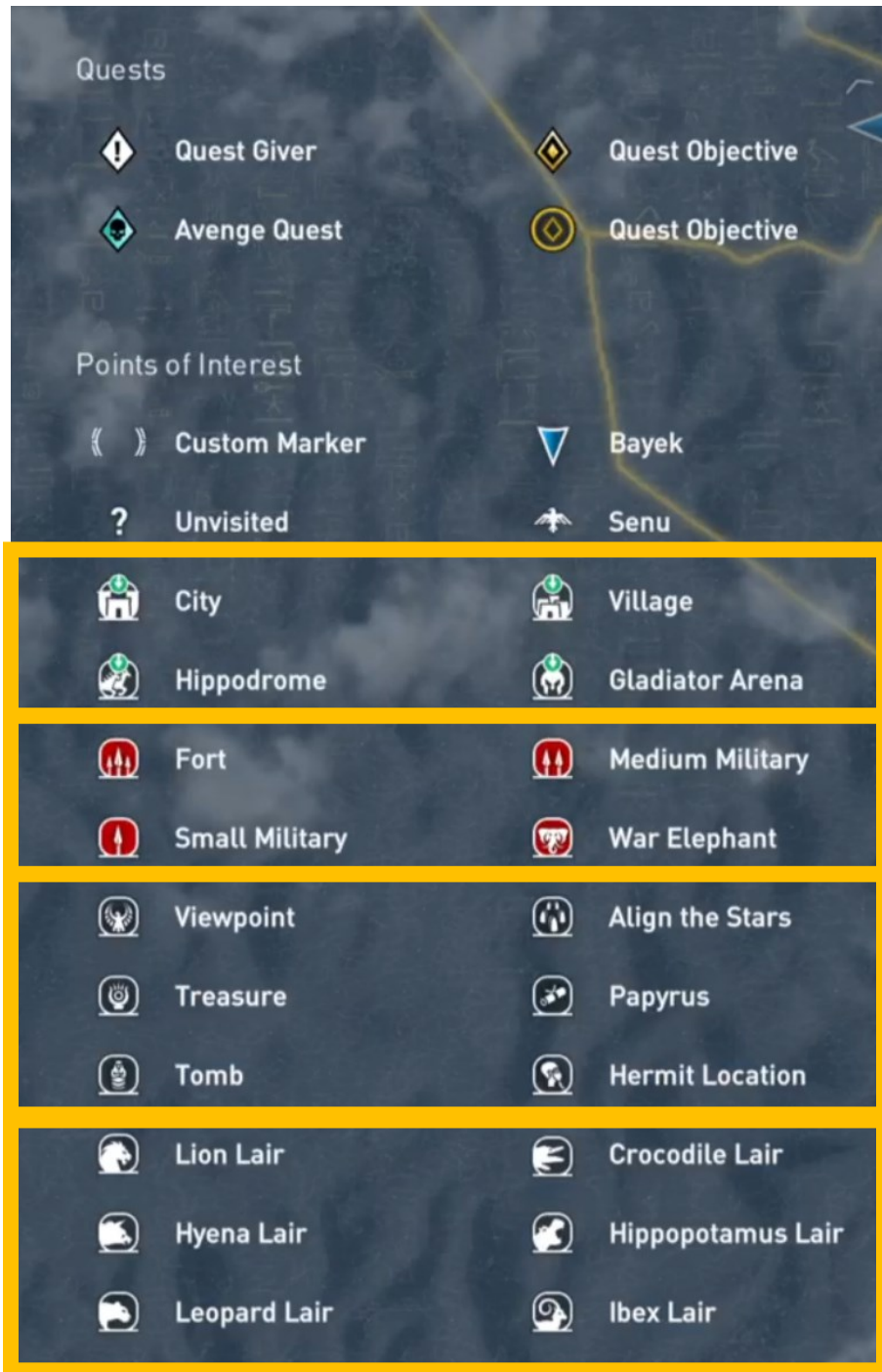


Figure 6.7: Activities legend with annotations

will kill them almost instantly. At the level of procedural rhetoric (Bogost, 2007), the map indicates to players where to go and more importantly how the zones are laid out in a daisy chain. At a macro-level, the map organizes the entire game according to parcels of land with a specific order to follow so that player traversal is inherently oriented and limited. If someone leaves south to the Great Sand Sea for example, they will die and be transported back to Siwa

either due to a sandstorm or a hyena pack. Following Bogost's idea of the unit-system structure (2006), the whole map is the system that structures this experience of Egypt, but it is composed of units: specific zones. At this more micro-level, each zone has a description on the lower right hand of the map screen. For example, the Giza zone is described as "The vast necropolis of the Old Kingdom pharaohs totally embodies this desert plateau." As players zoom into the map to get a closer look, the map expands and shows players the seeming wealth of locales, animals, and activities to engage in (as shown in figure 6.6). So, each zone is composed of these locations and activities as a smaller system of play options.

In reality, the sorts of activities are more limited than might first be apparent. As shown in Figure 6.7, the legend that players can access in game shows them all the activities possible. These activities are color coded for ease of reading as well. These are separated into quests, which I discuss in the subsequent section, and points of interest. The points of interest can be further subdivided into four categories. First, fast-travel points indicated by a green arrow over the icon which comprise all the villages and cities in the game, along with two gladiator arenas and one chariot racing minigame (which is the first non-violent⁴⁴ activity). Second, "eradication zones" where players are meant to kill commanders, loot chests, and slay legendary elephants. These range from small to medium to fort sized locations that are increasingly complex. Because of the spatial organization and requirements of these locations, it is possible to consider them as murder-parkour spaces where the people that need to be killed at the nodes orienting traversal. Crucially, there is no distinction between Egyptian locals, Greek garrisons, Roman forts, or bandit camps. If it's a military or guard post, it's there for the taking. Third, there are exploration or investigation zones that include:

- **Waypoints:** monuments, mountaintops, temples, and other high perches where players can "synchronize" with the landscape and increase the range at which the player's pet falcon, Senu, can spot treasures and enemies.
- **Stone circles:** where the player can align a constellation onto the night sky, and which crucially represent one of three activities that don't require killing or looting tombs.
- **Treasures:** Objects, chests, boxes, or sarcophagi to be looted for monetary rewards and items.
- **Papyri:** written scavenger puzzles that lead to buried or hidden treasure.
- **Tombs:** Pyramids and mastaba that have to be broken into and traversed to find the burial chamber of pharaohs for skill points.
- **Hermit locations:** places to meditate which account for the third non-violent activity.

Fourth, there are animal lairs. These all the require butchering the alpha animal of the listed type (lion, crocodile, etc.) and optionally all the wildlife present and collecting their pelts to upgrade the character's equipment. Not shown in the legend above, there are also statues of Ptolemy to deface for experience points. Of all of these activities, it is possible to note three primary

⁴⁴ I use "non-violent" to mean activities that do not require the killing of other humans or animals for any reason.

orientations towards the Egypt of *Origins*: surveying, looting, and destroying (which includes the destruction of monuments or the killing of people). If the travel points are removed from the equation as nodes for travelling towards activities, then the proportion of these three orientations towards the space almost entirely crowds out nonviolent or nonexploitative activities. Simply put, there isn't much else to do other than kill everyone in these camps, take their riches and then find the next place to rinse and repeat.

Table 6.1: Points of interest and activity proportions

Point of Interest	Quantity (x/438)	Proportion (%)
Fort	9	2
Medium Military	17	4
Small Military	78	18
War Elephant	4	1
Viewpoint	58	13
Stone Circle	12	3
Treasure	157	36
Papyrus	25	6
Tomb	14	3
Hermit Location	5	1
Animal Lairs	40	9
Ptolemy Statues	19	4

As shown in Table I above, it's possible to account for everything there is to do at a general level in the game, aside from quests which are discussed in the following section. These roughly equate to the killing of bandits, soldiers, cultists, animals, and the destruction of property at 38%. Then, there is the looting of houses, temples, and tombs at 45%. Least destructive of the three colonial modes of viewing is the surveying of the landscape at 13%. This leaves a whopping 3% for the constellation puzzles where the protagonist remembers his deceased son, and 1% for resting at hermit locations. This means that the colonial mode is active in more or less 96% of the game activities that players can engage in. Notably, most of the military locations also require the looting of chests. Further, as locations grow increasingly complex, such as forts, tombs and treasure chests located in villas, those activities grow proportionately time intensive, though it is exceptionally difficult to quantify this development without measuring play time down to the minute.

The map structure is inherently rhetorical in its construction of the entire game's progression, and the activity proportions also hint at a disproportionately violent engagement with the cultural locale. When I mention colonial ways of viewing, I refer to Said's discussion of the Napoleonic expedition to Egypt (1993). As he explains, "the French expedition was accompanied by a whole team of scientists whose job was to survey Egypt as it had never been surveyed before—the result was the gigantic *Description* itself" (34). The description, otherwise called *Description de l'Égypte* was an encyclopedic work whose purpose was the codification of

all things Egypt, and which formed the basis of colonial Egyptology, through the “drawings, diagrams, paintings of dusty, decrepit, and neglected pharaonic sites looking ideal and splendid as if there were no modern Egyptians but only European spectators” (118). The process of measuring, describing and codifying Egypt was the basis of colonial occupation from 1798 to the 1950s and is indelibly meshed with Egyptology and archaeology. The enactment of violence on locals is only the more tasteless version of the subtler shades of colonial pleasure the map structures.

As a way of moving on from the map to the quests, it is necessary to discuss its full construction in the base game. The construction of individual zones and their daisy-chaining has been described, but what remains to be examined is which zones are even there. Guesdon’s promise was that the entirety of Egypt would be playable, but much like Westin and Hedlund’s account of Rome in the literature review, *Origins’* Egypt is not a one-to-one model (2016). This Egypt isn’t strictly speaking polychronic because it doesn’t necessarily mix in different time periods. What it does do is outright omit entire pieces of the country, while strategically shifting focus to the western territories of Libya. As shown in Figure 6.8 below, the complete map of *Origins* is certainly massive by games standards, but it is by no means a full map of Ptolemaic Egypt. In fact, it fully omits the entire East side of the Nile territories, and territories south of the Faiyum Oasis. Unsurprisingly, south of the Faiyum is where most Old Kingdom cities are located and where the Nubian pharaonic dynasties reside. In short, the map disproportionately positions Greek Egypt as all of Egypt, and notably only allows for a colonial experience of the locale. Those territories that are shown are subdivided into the administrative regions, Nomes in Greek, which were present in Ptolemaic Egypt. So, what is present isn’t inherently inaccurate, though there are some liberties taken with further subdividing those areas. The main problem is how much there is to do in each area and which stories are even told in the first place. This is where the map not only precedes the territory, but it precedes the narrative and Egyptian culture.

It is equally important to situate the timeframe that the game takes place in, and which the map corresponds to. The main game begins in 48 BCE and ends in 43 BCE, a year after Caesar’s assassination, while at times flashes back the protagonist’s life in 49 BCE. The two pieces of downloadable content state that they take place roughly four or five years after the end of the main game, 38 BCE, for a total frame *for all of Egypt* spanning 10 years. To understand how infinitely small this frame is in the scope of Ancient Egyptian history, Egyptologist Kathryn A. Bard places the general emergence of a unified Egyptian state around 3000 BCE, replete with established social hierarchies, complex burial practices, hieroglyphic writing, and a royal dynasty (2000, 57). The early dynasty period that follows lasted until 2686, followed by the Old Kingdom (2686-2160 BCE), the Middle Kingdom (2055-1650 BCE), the New Kingdom (1352-1069 BCE), the Late Period (664-332 BCE) (Shaw, ix). The Ptolemaic Period lasted from 332-

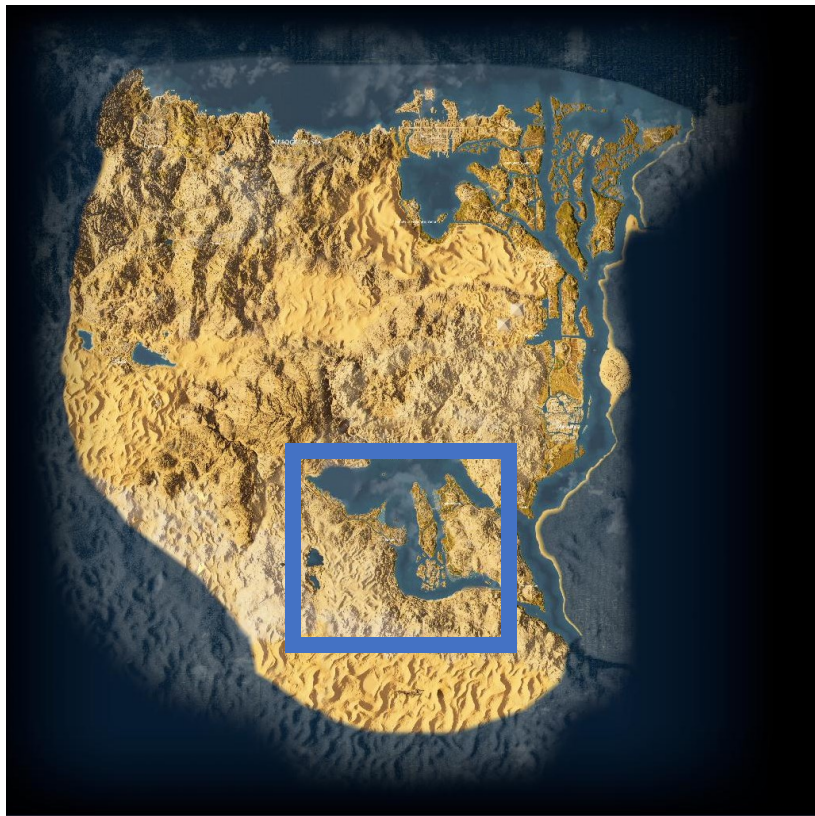


Figure 6.8: Ptolemaic Egypt and Origins Egypt maps, with Faiyum Oasis comparison (Historical Atlas of the Mediteranean, n.d.)

30 BCE, and the Roman Period from 30BCE to 395 CE (Shaw, ix). *Origins* is conveniently located in the single most Hellenic period in Ancient Egyptian history, to say nothing of that timeframe when the Islamic history of Egypt is considered (from the end of the Roman period, up until Ottoman conquest in 1517, and the subsequent French and British colonial administrations). The maps above are a very specific Egypt, one under Greek occupation.

6.2.2 Maps & Questions: Distributing Culture

As discussed above, the map orients people in terms of area order, but there are parts of the game where multiple areas have the same level. These moments dovetail with the game's narrative, which is segmented into quests with varying degrees of importance. Displayed in figure 7, there are two types of quests: one indicated by a white rhomboid icon, and one indicated by a turquoise icon (avenge quests). The avenger quests serve no purpose other than marking a specific non-player character to assassinate for experience. Where things get interesting is in the quests marked with the white rhomboid. In fact, these icons refer to the game's side quests, as the main quest line begins already included in the quest tab and continuously adds new quests as the story progresses. The play structure that this system produces tends to form clusters of side quests in one area, surrounding one main quest. The main quest advances the story and often requires moving to a new area, while the side quests grant experience points to level up players and allow survival in those areas. The main game contains a total of 23 main quests, and 105 side quests that are spread out across Egypt, but they aren't spread out equally (See Table 2).

Table 2, shown in the pages below maps the distribution of main and side quests across all 32 areas of the game, along with descriptions of those areas provided on the map and the number of play segments completing each area took during data collection. It is important to note that this is nevertheless a subjective measurement based on my own play patterns, speed, and instrumental approach to the game. There is also a small detail to note in that the Great Green Sea and Rome quests aren't played with Bayek, but his wife and deuteragonist Aya, and that there are no quest givers there. Players are simply transported into her perspective at key moments around the end of the first, second and third acts of the game. What I want to discuss now is the distribution of main quests, side quests, their thematic connotations, and the relative disparity in the mapped zones.

Each main quest deals with the planning, execution, and aftermath of assassinating a member of the Order of the Ancients, the cult antagonist group orchestrating the game's events and responsible for Khemu⁴⁵'s death. Though, not every zone contains an order member to kill. Further, every member of the order's related quest centers a theme of that is commensurate with the zone they're in, and often organizes the thematic core of the side quests as well.

⁴⁵ Bayek and Aya's son.

Table 6.2: AC Origins play map

<i>Zone Name</i>	<i>Level Range</i>	<i>Description</i>	<i>Main Quests</i>	<i>Main Quest Theme</i>	<i>Side Quests</i>	<i>Side Quest Theme</i>	<i>Play Segments</i>
Siwa	1-5	Siwa holds the legendary Oracle of Amun, situated in an oasis at the far West of Egypt	4	Introduction, Order of the Ancients (Ibis), pedicide, Isu artefacts, tomb of Alexander the Great	8	Family, daily life, hunting, medicine, crime	1, 2 ,3, 33, 34, 46
Iment Nome	6-8	Iment is the Western Nome, because of its situation regarding Yamu and the Lake.	N/A		N/A		4, 5, 10
Lake Mareotis	6-8	The Mareotis Lake is the largest in the Egyptian kingdom and is essential for naval transport.	N/A		7	Religious life, cult of Bastet, embalming, orphans, ritualistic murder	4, 5, 9
Alexandria	9-12	Alexandria is the capital region of the Ptolemaios rulers and is named after Alexander the Great, its founder.	6	Order of the Ancients (Hippo, Heron, Vulture, Ram, Scorpion), Roman conquest, Egyptian rulers, assassins, Phylakitai, mourning, parenthood, marriage, founding of the Hidden Ones.	11	Religious life, philosophers, education, symposia, medicine, parental affection, poetry.	5, 6, 7, 10, 14, 18, 19, 33, 38, 40
Kanopos Nome	11-13	Kanopos is named after the town that borders the Canopic branch of the Nile.	1	Cleopatra, medjay profession, Greek wealth	5	Chariot racing, Egyptian identity, farm life.	7, 8
Sap-Meh Nome	12-15	Sap-Meh is the fifth Nome of Lower Egypt and the ancient region of the Psamtik pharaohs.	N/A		3	Military corruption, hunting, smithing.	8, 9, 11, 12, 13, 14, 16
Khensu Nome	13-15	Khensu is the Cow's Thigh, just south of Letopolis, the ancient Khem.	N/A*	Dropped here as an unmarked gravesite for criminals.	N/A		12
Sapi-Res Nome	15-18	Sapi-Res is the southern shield of Lower Egypt. It encompasses Sais, the former Saite capital.	2	Order of the Ancients (Scarab), organized crime, corruption, construction.	10	Military corruption, homicide, curses, banditry, tax abuse, construction.	10
Ka-Khem Nome	17-20	Ka-Khem is the Black Bull Nome of Lower Egypt	N/A		N/A		13
Giza	17-20	The vast necropolis of the Old Kingdom pharaohs totally embodies this desert plateau.	1	Order of the Ancients, mourning, parenthood, Isu civilization, ritualistic murder, pyramids.	3	Mysticism, Egyptian banditry, Greek geography.	15, 16, 46, 47

<i>Zone Name</i>	<i>Level Range</i>	<i>Description</i>	<i>Main Quests</i>	<i>Main Quest Theme</i>	<i>Side Quests</i>	<i>Side Quest Theme</i>	<i>Play Segments</i>
Ineb-Hedjet Nome	19-22	Ineb-Hedjet is the White Walls Nome, referring to the splendor of its neighbour, Memphis.	N/A		N/A		16, 17, 22
Memphis	20-23	Memphis is the site of the Old Egyptian Capital, from where pharaohs were crowned.	2	Order of the Ancients (Lizard), cult worship, embalming, Cleopatra, infanticide, marriage.	7	Dreams, orphans, crime, Roman slavery, military corruption, crocodiles, mortuary corruption.	17, 18, 19, 20, 30, 39
Saqqara Nome	22-25	The Saqqara Nome holds the very most ancient pyramids and is the necropolis of Memphis.			5	Natron mining, vengeance, corruption, Egyptian rebel resistance.	20, 21
Faiyum	24-29	Egyptians call it Faiyum, meaning the lake. The Greeks call it Moiris.	1	Order of the Ancients (Crocodile), gladiatorial combat, Nubian representation, sympathy for Greeks, infanticide, mourning.	10	Cult of Sobek (crocodile worship), religious corruption, hallucinations, Egyptian rebel resistance, famine, suicide.	22, 23, 24, 25
Black Desert	27-37	Dolerite volcanic hills give the name to the dramatic Black Desert	N/A		N/A		34, 44
Faiyum Oasis	28-31	The Faiyum Oasis boasts life around Krokodilopolis by the grace of its canals.	1	Order of the Ancients (crocodile), corruption, pedicide, mourning, parenthood.	9	Gladiatorial combat, serial murders, religious corruption, cult of Sobek.	25, 26, 27, 46
Uab Nome	29-33	Uab is the Nome of the Two Sceptres, leading south to Upper Egypt.	N/A		1	Banditry.	28, 29
Haueris Nome	30-33	Haueris holds the tomb and labyrinth of pharaoh Amenemhat III, next to the canal.	N/A		N/A		27, 28, 30
Herakleion Nome	30-33	This Delta Nome holds Thonis-Herakleion, the town named in honor of Herakles.	1	Cleopatra, mercenaries, sex work, political assassination.	4	Crocodile poaching, serial murders, military corruption	31, 32, 33
Atef-Pehu Nome	30-33	Atef-Pehu is the Northern Sycamore Nome, bordering the Old Capital and the Faiyum	N/A		1	Military corruption, opium trade, kidnapping of children.	30
Im-Khent Nome	30-33	Im-Khent is the Prince of the South Nome of Lower Egypt.	N/A		N/A		34
Libue	31-34	This region is called Libue after the tribes that used to live around it. It borders Libya.	N/A		N/A		36

<i>Zone Name</i>	<i>Level Range</i>	<i>Description</i>	<i>Main Quests</i>	<i>Main Quest Theme</i>	<i>Side Quests</i>	<i>Side Quest Theme</i>	<i>Play Segments</i>
Green Mountains	32-35	This mountain plateau is the most fertile of Lybia, colonized by the Greeks and taken over by the Romans.	N/A		9	Vitruvius, the generative effects of Roman slavery, military corruption, religious worship of Greek gods.	35, 36, 37, 40, 47
Kyrenaika	34-38	The mostly dense region of Lybia around Cyrene and Apollonia, filled with Silphion plants and owned by Rome	1	Order of the Ancients (Lion), vengeance, justice, liberation, civilization.	10	Gladiatorial combat, the lives of children, smuggling, military corruption	37, 38, 40, 41, 42, 47
Desheret Desert	34-40	Egyptians recognize the desert by its name of Desheret, for it is as remote as can be.	N/A		N/A*		43
White Desert	36-40	Spectacular boulders of chalk rocks define the white desert and hint at its past as a sea.	N/A		N/A		42
White Desert Oasis	36-40	This white desert oasis and its waterfall are an underground overflow of the nearby Faiyum	N/A		N/A		43, 44
Great Sand Sea	36-40	Stretching south of Siwa, the Great Sand Sea undulates endlessly	N/A		N/A		44
Isolated Desert	37-40	Remote and rocky, the Isolated Desert is the extension of the desert mountains.	N/A		1	Egyptian rebel resistance.	39, 44, 45
Qattara Depression	37-40	Qattara is the lowest point in Egypt. Dried out lakes, ledges and a few oases characterize it.	N/A		N/A		45, 46
Marmarica	37-40	The Marmarica Region is the easternmost of Lybia and its Roman rule.	N/A		1	Egyptian rebel resistance.	40, 42
Paraitonion	37-40	The Paraitonion delimits Lybia with the Egyptian Kingdom and is named after a slack bowstring shot.	N/A		N/A		46
Mesogeios Sea	N/A	The Lybian Greeks names this sea the Mesogeios Thalassa, now under Roman influence.	N/A		N/A		41
Great Green Sea	N/A	Wadj-wer the Great Green is a god of fertility, associated with lakes and seas.	2*	Naval battle with pirates to save Magnus Pompey, meeting Caesar, smuggling Cleopatra. Siege of Alexandria	N/A		34
Rome	N/A	N/A	1*	Order of the Ancients (Jackal, Julius Caesar), Ides of March, mourning, justice, civilization, tyranny.	N/A		39

As an example, the game's opening chapter is set in Siwa, Bayek's hometown. As the map describes, "Siwa holds the legendary Oracle of Amun, situated in an oasis at the far West of Egypt."

Consequently, the order member located in Siwa is a false oracle named Medunamun (the Ibis) who is a corrupt religious official. Siwa's side quests don't particularly center prophecy or religious life, but they focus on Bayek's friends and their daily lives, as well as flashbacks to educating his son. This sort of association between the zone, the main quest and the side quests is listed in the table above for each zone. Once the entire procession of quests and their themes is laid out, it becomes apparent that each zone is organized around one cultural theme. Siwa has prophecy, as Alexandria has high culture and philosophy. Kanopos Nome⁴⁶ is all about chariot racing and lavish villas. Interestingly, the Greek-named Krokodilopolis features religious worship of the crocodile god Sobek and gladiator arena but doesn't use the Egyptian name for the city: Faiyum (though Faiyum remains the name of the zone). Alexandria is a recurring hub for the game and even though most of its side quests are resolved early, the main story events drive players back to uncover the tomb of Alexander the Great and beat back a Roman siege. This was the first tip off to the distribution skew: Cities are privileged. In fact, the base game features five cities: Siwa, Alexandria, Memphis, Krokodilopolis and Cyrene (in Kyrenaika), as opposed to each nome having its own capital. These zones account for a significant allotment of the game's quests and time spent playing through them. Of the 47 hours needed to cover this part of the game, Alexandria accounts for 10, Krokodilopolis and the Faiyum for 8, Cyrene (and the approach to the city) for 11, Siwa for 6, and Memphis 5. That means that these five cities (and the 7 zones across which they are split) cover more than 80% of the time spent in the game. The three biggest contenders also happen to be Greek cities in Egypt.

This predominant concentration of quests and time spent around the Greek dominated zones of the game produces a *main-vs-rest* division in the game. That division is mirrored in the side quest distribution and themes as well. Alexandria features most of the political intrigue in its main quests, and the side quests require helping priests, acting as a bodyguard to a rich young woman, symposia, and theater. Alexandria is a city of culture and arts. Cyrene's side quests portray it as a port city, full of smuggling, cult worship of Greek gods, and gladiatorial combat, while its main quest deals with the more science-fiction elements of the plot. Memphis, the old capital of Egypt, features cult worship and mummification, with a hint of corruption. Its main quest deals with a priest who has been desecrating burial rites. Krokodilopolis features land owning Greeks who are at odds with the local Egyptian populace in a bothsidesism style subplot, where the main Greek landowner's child is horribly murdered thereby eliciting empathy. Siwa forms the core of Bayek's home life but is visited once in the beginning and for a climactic race across the village towards the temple later. So, what does that leave for the other zones?

⁴⁶ Margaret Bunson defines the *nome* as "province or administrative region of ancient Egypt, called *sepat* or *the qah* in Egyptian and *nomos* by the Greeks. Some nomes date to predynastic (Before 3200 B.C.E.) times, and all were governed by a *heri-tep a'a*, or NOMARCH, a 'Great Overlord,' a hereditary title roughly equivalent to a prince or count. [...] Each nome had a capital city and a cult center dedicated to the god of the region" (2002, 280). The total number of nomes varied of Egypt's history and was only entirely standardized by the Greco-Roman period (2002, 280).

There is a recurring motif of military, civic and religious corruption across all other zones. Of the 125 side quests present in the core game, 124 require the killing of other human beings or animals, as do most of the main quests. The predominant mode of engaging with everything in the game is through indiscriminate murder. If the proverb holds that to a hammer everything is a nail, then to the assassin's blade everything is a target for assassination. The only completely nonviolent quest is in the Greco-Roman town of Cyrene, where the player is asked to perform the series-staple *leap of faith* jump for the amusement of orphaned children. All other regional locales verge either on slums that are dominated by a military or bandit encampments, or deserts and swampy wastelands with wild animals on the prowl. This is predominantly the case for zones that feature Egyptian nomes, like Sapi-Res Nome, Sap-Meh Nome. In other cases, like Herakleion Nome, they feature ritualistic serial killers, crocodile poachers and bandit camps. In contrast, the Roman-held Green Mountains zone features a sympathetic account of Greek landowners who are being occupied by Roman legions and introduces the famous engineer Vitruvius as a *good slave owner*. Critiques of Roman colonialism are tempered with sympathetic discussions about the power of putting men to work for their grand architectural visions: Roman aqueducts. There are of course zones that would logically feature no quests like the Black Desert or the Great Sand Sea because people didn't settle in the deep desert (Casey, 2021). Yet, these areas still include a plurality of bandit camps, animal lairs and assorted points of interest, which brings me to my next question: what about the areas that feature little or no quests?

There are a few zones that quite literally have no story content other than traversing the points of interest. One example is Ineb-Hedjet Nome, which is described as "the White Walls Nome, referring to the splendor of its neighbour, Memphis." As players traverse the nome it's possible to see the villages of Kerkaseros, Per Ousir and Pr-Hapi-n-Iwnw surrounded by lush farmland and apiaries for the production of honey. Despite featuring three villages and later appearing in the Discovery Tour mode, Ineb-Hedjet has nothing for players to do other than to systematically kill every soldier and animal, loot temples and fight a roaming bounty hunter. This zone is exemplary of a problem that can be observed in other agricultural nomes, which typically don't center Greek perspectives and quests: they are functionally bereft of interlocutors or narrative and the only way to engage is in the colonial style. On the table above, that's the case of Im-Khent Nome, another marshland, Khensu Nome, which is a barren swath of banditry and Libue, which should feature the Libyan peoples under the Egyptian crown. This disproportionate zoning of points of interest and activities produces a landscape that treats most of Egypt as a series of traversal nodes towards Greek and Roman dominated locales. Though, there's also the particular articulation of two specific nomes to consider: Giza and Haueris Nome.

The Giza plateau holds within the name an entire history of archaeological, historical, and filmic resonances. The map description states that "The vast necropolis of the Old Kingdom pharaohs totally embodies this desert plateau." Giza does have one main quest in it, where players are asked to hunt down a cult member called The Hyena, revealed to be a grieving mother who is using human sacrifices to try and resurrect her daughter (which I'll discuss in the next section). Of course, these rituals are held underneath the Great Pyramid of Giza which houses a science-fiction technological complex made of megalithic obsidian. The side quests in the area also concern tomb raiders, or a different science-fiction star map underneath the Sphinx. Giza is one of a handful of places that brings in the broader sci-fi plotline of the franchise, but in a comparatively restrained fashion for the franchise.

In other words, Bayek doesn't care so much about the sci-fi plotline, and consequently players spend most of their time in these locales traversing the interior of the pyramids. Likewise, Haueris Nome doesn't have much to do other than eradicating everyone at a large fort and limestone quarry, with the exception of the tombs of pharaohs Amenemhat III and Smenkhare. Giza and Haueris feature the largest and most ornate tombs in the game, and they harken back to the voyeuristic pleasures of Egyptological documentaries⁴⁷: to be able to delve deep into these rarified spaces. There are also the tombs of Djoser and Sneferu near Memphis, but that city at least features a variety of quests to balance out the composition. Tombs in the game are constructed as complex parkour puzzles with individual flourishes. For example, Amenemhat III's tomb is water based with swimming segments requiring players to manage their oxygen. Whereas, the tomb of Khufu (the Great Pyramid) features an Aladdin-esque cave of wonders (Musker and Clements 1994) theme, replete with a sea of riches lining the floor and walls, and booby traps throughout the tomb filling it up with sand. Underneath the Tomb of Khufu is the sci-fi Isu⁴⁸ temple that seems taken straight out of Roland Emmerich's *Stargate* (Emmerich 1994), complete with its focus on gold and black aesthetic highlights, megalithic obsidian, and holographic projections from the future (Figures 6.9-6.11).



Figure 6.9: Khufu's burial chamber

⁴⁷ Such as *Building the Great Pyramid* (Stamp 2002), *Into the Great Pyramid* (Page 2006), *The Revelation of the Pyramids* (Pooyard 2010), and *Secrets of the Saqqara Tomb* (Tovell 2020).

⁴⁸ Name of the precursor civilization in the *Assassin's Creed* franchise.



Figure 6.10: Isu temple underneath the Tomb of Khufu.



Figure 6.11: Isu projections.

Broadly, the tombs betray another aspect of the colonial gaze that Said discusses: a fascination with seeing, exploring, cataloguing the cultural space of Egypt, and opening up the riches of every religious space for extraction (1993). Bayek is allowed to steal everything that's not nailed down in

these spaces, though they are the only part of the game that doesn't actively encourage or require such looting. Instead, the pleasures are archaeological and filmic in nature. On the one hand, the reading of hieroglyphic tablets (which grant skill points) and on the other, an uncovering of the past similar to what audiences might recall from *Raiders of the Lost Ark* (Spielberg 1981) or *The Mummy* (Sommers 1999). Each of the 14 tombs features a hieroglyphic tablet that is the exact same in every tomb, which Bayek reacts to by saying "Ancient writing. From the Old Kingdom" (Figure 6.12). The tombs are old, and their distinguishing features aren't so much the stories of pharaohs inside or the time period they were built in, but their game features as puzzles. This is comically evident in how the game encourages climbing to the top of pyramids to survey Giza, followed by a command to surf down the side of the pyramid for expedited traversal (Figure 6.13).

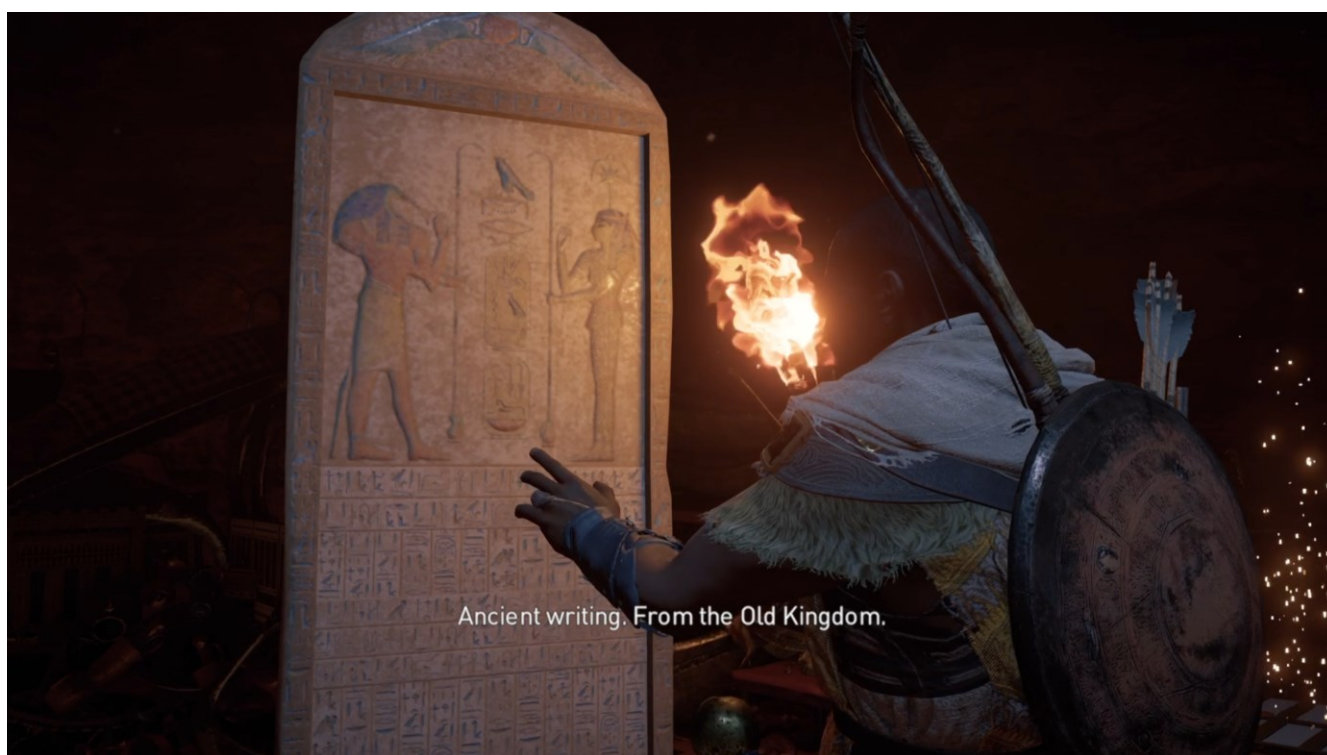


Figure 6.12: Tomb Hieroglyphic Tablets.

Ultimately, the zoning of spaces and activities in *Origins* comes to produce an overarching separation between the Greco-Roman and Egyptian locales and peoples. Egyptian cities and villages are portrayed as zones of lawlessness, misery, and corruption, and kept separate from the pristine tombs and temples that are most often the subject of Egyptological inquiry. In this sense, Arbuckle Macleod's use of *Origins* to teach undergraduate archaeology is commensurate with how the game is built (2021, 101). Her critique that archaeologists dismiss these games as mere play stands and there is indeed significant value in the game's construction of Ancient Egypt. The topography is accurate enough, as is the placement of cities, villages and nomes. The problem which we should take quite seriously however is that this Egypt is experientially skewed. Players spend much less time in Egyptian villages than they do in pillaging temples or fighting the Order of the Ancients. So, it is quite logical that the modelling

technology present in *Origins* is useful to archaeologists but necessitates university-level supervision and commentary to highlight liberties taken by the developers.



Figure 6.13: Surfing in Giza

From a cultural studies perspective, the maps, quest distribution and points of interest highlight what Williams would describe as a selective record. To his mind, the “work of conscious reconstruction, and of the selective tradition, tend to specialization of different classes and activities,” which he intended in terms of the real world (1965, 76). However, this framework is applicable to what happens in *Origins*’ construction of the locales. Each zone is specialized in terms of aesthetics, quests, characters, and activities, according to the developers’ “contemporary system of interests and values” (68). This contemporary view at once retraces the French Napoleonic project of spatial cataloguing, as well as the reproduction of the space into a similar configuration to Helena Esser’s heterotopic London (2021). This isn’t just Egypt, but an Egypt where every element has been carefully selected to convey maximum Egyptianness, on the basis of colonial modes of viewing the space. Further, the theming of zones into a mummification zone (Memphis), a pyramid zone (Giza) or a Roman aqueduct zone (Green Mountains) dovetails with Nguyen’s description of the Disneyfication and theme park construction of the Kingdom Hearts series (which merges classical Disney films, Japanese roleplaying games with its own fantasy world) and segments locales as worlds (2022). *Origins* isn’t Egypt, it’s an Egyptian theme park. Troublingly, this theme park is composed at a procedural level of small activities that require continuous murder and looting to level up the character. So, this theme park holds in it the logics of 19th century domination of the country.

A final note on spatial construction concerns the aural elements of resonance. The timeframe and the spatial construction are important aspects, but they aren't complete without considering the soundtrack and audio design of the game. When audiences think of Ancient Egypt, there is a sound palette baked into the cultural resonance at play. That certainly has to do with the music, but it also concerns spoken language, particularly the use of specific ancient Egyptian words in Demotic⁴⁹. As far as the Latin language used by Roman invaders is concerned, Casey has described the voicework as “informative and (mostly valid)” (28). However, he also explains that “Egyptians everywhere speak reconstituted Egyptian, but the execution is very poor on the whole” (28). Most of the voicework being background repetitions of stock phrases to give the impression of “authentic snippets of ancient language”, such as Bayek referring to many people as “neket iadet (lit. piece of misery)” (28). Casey further notes that in contrast with the degree of accuracy elsewhere, “the disregard for language in the game is totally inexplicable”, especially when fictional languages “such as Elvish and Klingon” garner greater attention to detail in pop culture (29). Spoken language is just one half of the aural aspects, however.

Analyzing the sound design of the game's music would require a great deal more technical knowhow than I have, approaching something like Stephanie Lind's analysis of metre in *Assassin's Creed* and how it matches story moments to increase tension (2019). However, there are some general aspects that can be discussed in terms of the general atmosphere of the music, featured in the official soundtrack (Schachner, 2017). As I mentioned earlier, the game's soundtrack heavily employs ancient Egyptian woodwinds, but those sounds are matched by the sci-fi drones that series composer Jesper Kyd has enshrined as the franchise sound (Blain 2022). Kyd has described being given a series of keywords (war, tragic and mysticism) to produce the series sound and also the sound of Jerusalem in 1191 (Blain 2022). In an interview with *Billboard* magazine, game composer Sarah Schachner described producing the music of *Origins* as a speculative exercise where “we don't actually know what the music really sounded like” (Parisi 2017). Schachner's choice was to combine traditional instruments with a “*Blade Runner*-esque” synthesizer palette that would “always bring you back to the sand” (2017). As she describes, the point of the soundtrack was first and foremost to “focus [...] on more custom sounds and the feelings they evoke”, opting to heavily process the sounds of traditional instruments to make them less obvious. Both soundtrack and spoken language are then aimed at producing *the atmosphere* of Egypt, without compromising the overall franchise identity. With a sense of how the space is built to make Egypt resonant, from multiple perspectives, and what there is to do in it, it's important to also consider who inhabits that space.

6.2.3 Protagonists: Bayek, Bicycles and Desert Police

Like the other *AC* games before it, *Origins* features two levels of simulation. The players play as Layla Hassan, an Egyptian coder and software developer. Layla begins the game as an unknowing member of Abstergo Industries, the front-facing corporate entity for the Templars, the overarching antagonists of the franchise. Layla in turn uses the animus machine, a VR bed akin to the technology used in James Cameron's *Avatar* (2007), to witness and live through a deceased person's genetic

⁴⁹ The spoken language of Ptolemaic Egypt, taking its nomenclature from the work of the Greek historian Herodotus.

memories: Bayek of Siwa. The positioning of Bayek was central to the AC reveals discussed at the start of this chapter, as a sort of sheriff or elite special forces soldier. Casey has also poked fun at Bayek's name being altered for modern audiences, pronounced Ba-Yek, as opposed to the phonetically proper pronunciation which would sound like "bike" (2020, 6). Likewise, his partner animal, Senu (Coptic for companion) is a Benelli's eagle and not a lanner falcon since the game relies on the staple mechanic, Eagle Vision (2020, 6). Small concessions like these are made to smooth over aspects that might be marginally dissonant.

In multiple instances throughout the game Bayek is referred to as the last medjay, the nomenclature used by this Old Kingdom policing order. He often shows interlocutors his medjay badge, emblazoned with the Eye of Horus (a symbol of the Egyptian people) to reassure them. Bayek is there to protect and serve. His tenuous relationship to the pharaohs is more than once the subject of the narrative as well, when Cleopatra wishes him to be her medjay, in contrast to Ptolemy's Greco-Roman phylakes⁵⁰. At the level of how the protagonist interacts with other Egyptian characters, Bayek is like a policeman walking his beat, resolving the issues of the common people. Moreover, he's not just an Egyptian police officer, he's a good cop opposed to the corruption of the current policing infrastructure of Egypt (figure 6.14). This metaphor was useful to make the character's social identity resonate with Western audiences, but it is not where the characterisation stops.



Figure 6.14: Whose Medjay?

Bayek's motivation as a character from the opening sequence of the game all the way to the final quest of the last expansion is acquiring vengeance and peace for his son, Khemu. Khemu is shown to have been killed by Bayek in an accident as he was trying to free the boy being held as a hostage by

⁵⁰ A fictional coterie of enforcers.

the Order of Ancients. The murder is imputed to the Order and so the motivations for Bayek's journey have less to do with protecting Egypt, than they do with the traditional man on a mission trope. Bayek's nature as a grieving father is central to the plotline and is a recurring point of comparison with other characters in the game. Mentioned earlier, Khaliset the Hyena is another grieving parent who is shown as a mirror to Bayek's own pain (Figure, 6.15). This is in line with the general trend of dadification of games discussed by Gerald Voorhees, where "this figuration of fatherhood is reproduced in the way that each game organizes the relationship between the player and playable characters" (2016). Bayek is a father whose rage is justified and righteous because it acts in the

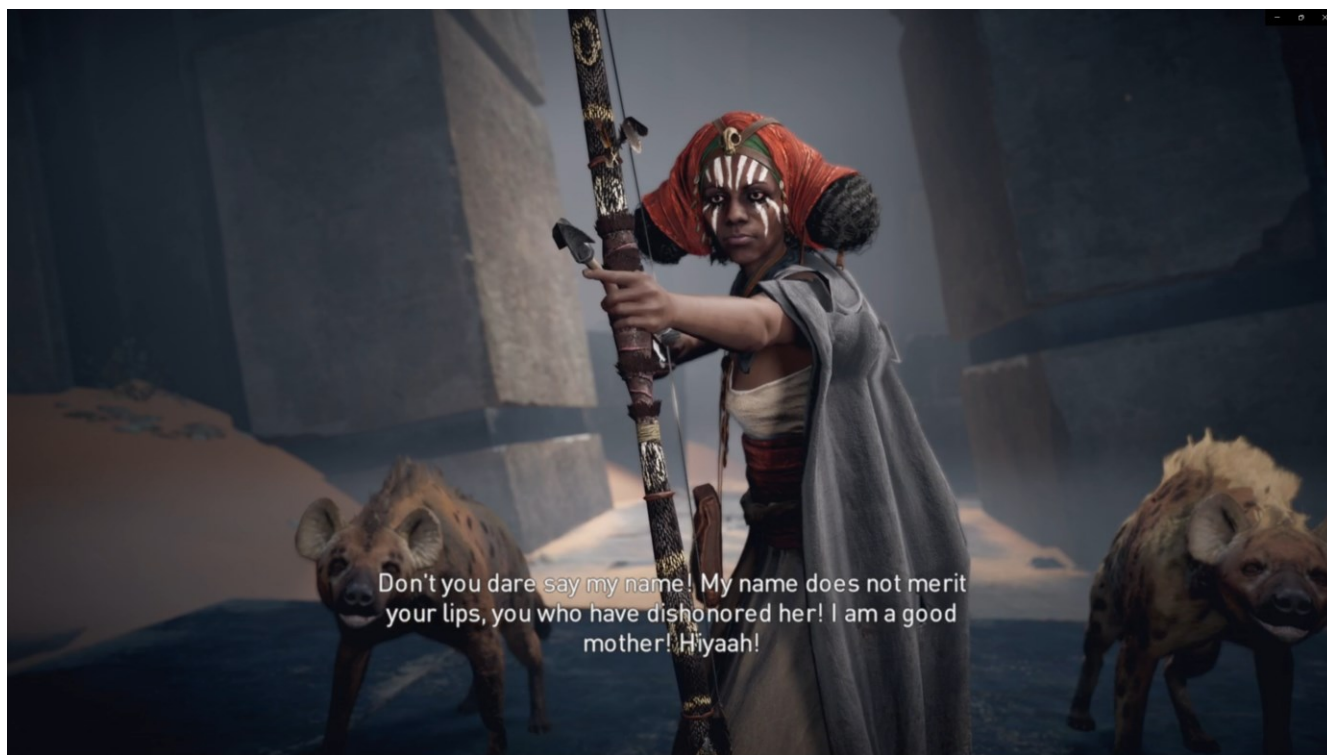


Figure 6.15: Khaliset the Hyena and monstrous motherhood.

Interests of the Egyptian people. Khaliset is portrayed as unhinged, corrupt, and murderous, with the added hyenas that portray her as more animalistic. Further along the story, there is also the Greek landowner Hotephres and his wife Khenut, whose daughter is brutally drowned with a weight attached to her foot. Here, fatherhood is tender and mournful, yet still righteous as Hotephres uses his pain to rebel against other Greeks, while his devastated wife mourns their daughter. There are also many other side quests like "The Flea of Cyrene," the one nonviolent quest where Bayek bonds with the Greek Esiocles⁵¹, or "Hideaway" where Bayek helps his son's best friend, Fenuku to flee from hyenas, or

⁵¹ A word play on the protagonist of *AC II, Brotherhood*, and *Revelations*: Ezio. Here Hellenised as Esio-cles.



Figure 6.16: Bayek taking Khemu and Fenaku hunting.



Figure 6.17: Khemu's tragic death.

“The False Oracle” where he takes both boys hunting (Figure 6.16). As discussed above, there are also the stone circle puzzles where Bayek remembers imparting life lessons to his son about masculinity, love, and duty which are inflected by the constellations the player aligns in the night sky. The

consistent overarching portrayal of Bayek is not as an Egyptian, medjay or hidden one, but as a father, a much more universally relatable condition.

This portrayal of fatherhood is distorted by Khemu’s tragic murder. (Figure 6.17) Bayek becomes a spectre of vengeance for those responsible for Khemu’s death, but also for other children who are unjustly killed. This leads to a fundamental divergence within the franchise structure of assassination. As Bosman has described, killing rituals are part of the franchise, where assassination scenes collapse into a dreamlike shadow corridor (2018). Usually, assassins speak the Latin “*requiescat in pace*” (rest in peace), but Bayek has much more individualized lines which are inflected by Egyptian religious themes. Moreover, Bayek doesn’t silently and delicately assassinate his targets, he brutally assails and decimates them. For instance, the first assassination of Medunamun ends with Bayek caving in his face with artefact before saying that “the lord [Osiris] of the Duat [the underworld] awaits” (Figure 6.18). Likewise, when hunting for Shadya’s murderer, Bayek exhibits almost unbridled rage and when confronting Berenike, the elderly Greek landowner responsible for her murder, Bayek exclaims “I will destroy everything you stand for [...] and I will destroy all others like you” (Figure 6.20) At all points of the story, Bayek is driven by a self-destructive and unbridled rage towards the killers of children (Figure 6.19). So, Bayek’s motivations and characterization are highly *relatable* to modern audiences, in Acland’s sense of the word as being able to filter in the foreign world of the narrative into our contemporary sensibilities (2020, 291). The taboo nature of harming or killing children has been discussed in game studies as a superlative hateful act (Sjoblom 2015). Therefore, Bayek’s rage is not only justified but cathartic because he’s out killing evil cultists, who happen to be colonizers or corrupt, and who have more than once killed children and jest about the act. This is reminiscent of Kishonna Gray’s description of *power in the visual*, which was focused on *Freedom*



Figure 6.18: Assassination of Medunamun.



Figure 6.19: Bayek hunting for Shadya's killer.



Figure 6.20: Assassination of Berenike.



Figure 6.21: *Aya Assassinates Caesar.*

Cry's Adéwalé and his rage at Caribbean slavery (2018). Like Adéwalé, Bayek transforms “powerlessness to participatory competence” by turning his own trauma into a quest for agency and vindication (64). However, this may once again dovetail with underlying and unthinking racisms where men of color are shown to be disproportionately more angry and violent than their counterparts. Bayek is by far the angriest protagonist in the franchise, which is justified by the taboo nature of pedicide, but that doesn't undo the stereotypes that are injected into the story. Though Bayek is only one of two playable characters to consider.

The other protagonist character is Bayek's wife and co-conspirator, the Greek-Egyptian Aya. As Bondioli et al. have noted, where the male characters in the game are more concerned with personal matters, the women are portrayed as more political, with particular respect to Aya and Cleopatra (2019). Though their work is on the historicity of Cleopatra and Caesar's characterization, they do note that Bayek is not a political figure and that Aya is positioned in line with “current discourses on [...] the necessity of discussing women's rights, participation and agency in today's politics” (2019, 10). They further argue that the game agrees in large part with scholarship on Cleopatra, but that Aya (the deuteragonist)'s “agency seems to be more connected with present issues concerning female protagonism in society rather than a historical account of female lives in Egypt” (8-9). Aya appears in key scenes with Bayek, discussing their plans to assassinate members of the order, but where Bayek is portrayed as a family man on a mission, Aya is more interested in turning Khemu's death into a rallying cry against oppressors. This goes as far as to position Aya as the ideological core of the game, when as the final narrative quest the player assassinates Julius Caesar at the historic Ides of March (Figure 6.21), when she calmly tells him that “the same fate will come to all despots.” However, Aya accounts for an exceedingly small swath of play. Two quests on the open sea, helming a Greek trireme and the

final quest “Fall an Empire, Rise of Another.” Bondioli et al. discuss the broader positioning of the main characters as two sets of paired narratives: Cleopatra/Aya’s feminist empowerment in the world of politics, and Bayek/Caesar as martially skilled, with Bayek as “man on a mission” trope drawn from film (10). Further, Aya and Bayek in particular appear to be “serving, first and foremost, as the connection between the players and the game’s narrative” (10). Crucially, former Ubisoft writer Marie Jasmin, who worked on *Origins* has gone on record stating that Aya was originally intended to be the protagonist of the game, which would have meshed the parent and revolutionary sides of the story (2020). In another news article discussing the sexual misconduct scandals that rocked Ubisoft in 2020, Jason Schreier reported that Bayek was originally meant to die early in the narrative and for Aya to take the central role, which was largely axed due to interference from Serge Hascoet, creative director for all Ubisoft videogames, and game director Ashraf Ismail, both of whom have since been terminated (2020). This fundamentally reconfigures the multiple throughlines of fatherhood to be about motherhood and would reformulate the particular rage that is evinced by Bayek. Ultimately, Aya is a key actor in the narrative and the canonical co-founder of the Assassins (Hidden Ones here), taking the name Amunet, to Bayek’s Amun (the Old Kingdom god of the air and sun). A final aspect to discuss about the protagonist’s position is situated more at the level of the game mechanics than it is at the narrative level, so it is useful to dovetail that discussion with the discussion of items and equipment.

6.2.3 PROTAGONISTS & THEIR TOYS: ITEMS, EQUIPMENT AND POSITIONALITY

If Bayek is only examined in terms of historic accuracy or narrative valence, then the representation is fairly straightforward. He is a righteous man with justified anger issues and an unequivocal hero. However, that’s Bayek in the cutscenes. There is also a Bayek that is shaped by the game systems discussed earlier, such as the map and points of interest. This is the Bayek of procedural rhetoric. That procedural rhetoric exists at two intersecting levels: first, the items and currencies in the game, and second, the skill points and customization options (Figures 6.22-6.23). Part of the requirement for advancing through the game is upgrading the character’s items. This occurs along two axes. On the one hand, there are two ranged weapons, two melee weapons and a shield which are acquired from the looting of tombs, bosses, puzzles, and hidden chests. This is par for the course with most RPG games. The second aspect is crafting upgrades for Bayek’s collar, his quiver, his hidden blade, bracers, and tool pouch. This is done by accumulating crafting materials in three distinct categories: wood, ore, and pelts. These materials are found in the wild by interacting with veins of ore, felled trees and animal hunts, but they can also be procured by dismantling gear and buying these materials from shopkeepers for coin. The materials found at shops are limited but stock refills over time.

By virtue of having to decimate and loot over a hundred forts, players are swimming in lower quality gear they will not use, especially once they procure legendary items with special powers. Therefore, there tends to be an abundance of ore and wood from dismantling those weapons. Excess coin is then spent at shopkeepers buying pelts, and that coin either comes from the outright looting of temples or the sale of materials. So, the core gathering, and hunting loop is immediately made irrelevant by the necessitated murder of people which proves to be extremely lucrative. The game’s

narrative elements quickly buckle under the looting aspects of the game systems for all resources, as Bayek often states “I am not a grave robber” while the player is always allowed to rob that exact tomb, down to Pharaonic burial chambers. It is even more ironic when Bayek arrives in Herakleion Nome and is asked to hunt down crocodile poachers, by virtue of crocodiles being sacred “children of Sobek” (in the “Reunion” quest), after the player has been routinely decimating crocodile lairs for cash (accounting for 10/40 animal lairs in the game). So, Bayek’s interaction with people, animals and places is already fraught from a game economy standpoint.



Figure 6.22: Gear screen.

Then, there is the skill points aspect. Trotted out by Guesdon as this game’s technical advancement on previous installments, the player’s accumulation of new skills or upgrades is a core component of the experience. These skill points come from leveling up, which in turn requires killing, looting, and surveying. The opportunity to customize Bayek’s playstyle is certainly a vector of player agency, but how it changes the game is what interests me most. There are a few traversal skills that allow the player to breathe underwater for longer periods, or different weapon attacks, but it is the assassination skills that are particularly indicative of the procedural positioning of the player. Skills like *chain assassination* allow players to instantly kill multiple adjacent enemies without resistance, thereby expediting the traversal of forts. *Buy Materials* allows players to skip the hunting loop and access the less intrusive kill-sell-buy economic loop. The *assassination Loot* skill removes the need to actually rob dead bodies by immediately funneling their items and currency into players’

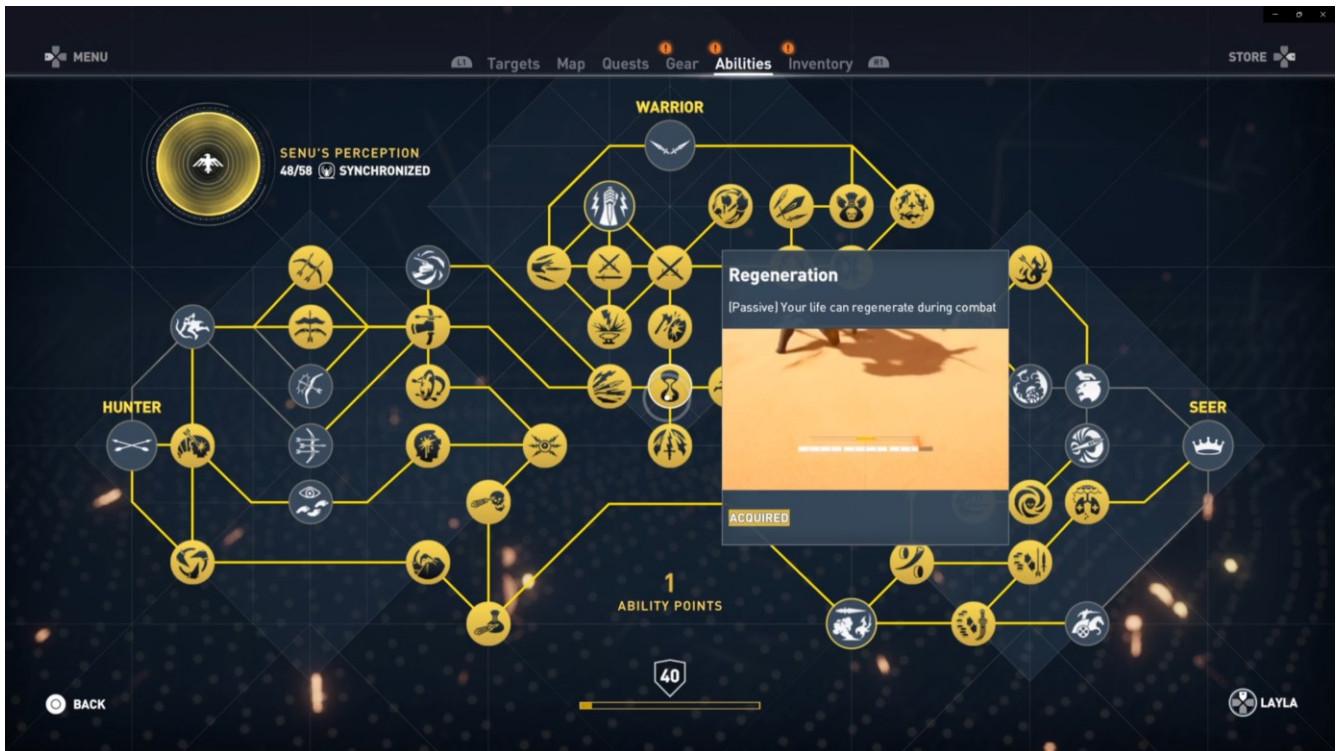


Figure 6.23: Abilities screen.

inventory. The *Regeneration* skill makes resting unnecessary by constantly refilling the player's health. Even in combat, the *Overpower* skill allows players to instantly kill commanders and large animals without difficulty.

There are two aspects to the skill system to consider. First, there is an inherent power fantasy that is part of the colonial style of domination. Bayek can wade through hordes of enemies much more easily than previous AC protagonists who needed to skulk and fear danger. Second, many of the skills expedite killing and traversal to such a degree that it is proper to classify human enemies as merely another kind of surface in the parkour-murder puzzles that constitute each bandit camp and fort. From Consalvo & Dutton's standpoint (2006), if all interactions between items in the inventory, skills, activities, quests, and zones are considered, then it is possible to say that *Origins'* Egypt is not a space that exists on its own, but one that is imminently intended for the traversal and exploitation by the player avatar. This once again ties back to discussions about Adéwalé in *Freedom Cry*, where Magra stated that the player avatar seemed unaffected by the historic inequalities facing the populace. Ethnic Egyptians are downtrodden, poor, and persecuted. Bayek is powerful, rich, and respected. Everything is built for the maximal enjoyment of players in a way that isn't commensurate with era-appropriate depictions of the locale, and in ways where the procedural rhetoric is pitted squarely against the presumed realistic simulation, in Chapman's sense. It isn't Egypt as people at the time experienced, it's Egypt as people think of it in pop culture today. Though, before making any definitive claims, it's also necessary to consider the expansions for the game.

6.3 Expansions: Modulating Egyptianness

There are two expansions to discuss. First *The Hidden Ones* (2018a) a small chapter that includes three additional zones, set a few years after the events of the main game, and focused on the consolidation of Hidden Ones order. Second, there is the *Curse of the Pharaohs* (2018c) expansion which is wildly divergent in tone and historical adherence. The economic systems and skill points don't change for these two expansions, so I'll bracket that discussion off. Bayek's economic/skill relationship doesn't change relative to the game's Egypt. What does change however is the addition of new zones with a radically distinct cultural profile and themes, as well as a change in the overall focus of the game.



Figure 6.24: Lake Anubis.

6.3.1 The Hidden Ones: Egypt of the Downtrodden

Much like the base game, this expansion foregrounds the caustic effect of the Order of Ancients on Egyptians. However, because of the passage of time and the geographic shift to the geographic region of Sinai (on the other side of the modern Suez Gulf). Shown in Table 6.3 below, the Hidden Ones' more modest offering still follows the core structure of the game, however this time around the exploitation of Egyptians runs through all side and main quests. From the initial arrival at Klyisma, Bayek is confronted with Roman occupiers putting Egyptians to work in quarries. Of course, the operations are run by new members of the Order of Ancients, who are not animal-themed like their core counterparts, but instead have roles (The executioner, the administrator, the mason, and the leader). Even by the grim standards of the base game, Hidden Ones is unflinching when showing the unrelenting misery of the Egyptian peoples rooted in colonialist resource extraction at Klyisma, as well as the outright excavation of monuments and tombs at Arsinoe.

Table 6.3: Hidden Ones play map

<i>Zone Name</i>	<i>Level Range</i>	<i>Description</i>	<i>Main Quests</i>	<i>Main Quest Theme</i>	<i>Side Quests</i>	<i>Side Quest Theme</i>	<i>Play Segments</i>
Klysma Nome	38-41	Klysma is a village in the Sinai who's primary resource is Turquoise. This precious mineral is mined through the Sinai	2	Egyptian enslavement in quarries, military corruption, Order of the Ancients (The Executioner)	6	Crime, Egyptian ballads, slavery, poverty, colonialism, vengeance.	47, 48, 49, 50, 52
Madiama Nome	41-42	Oases are few and far between in the vast, desolate lands of the Sinai, providing respite for nomadic Nabateans.	N/A		1	Crime, burial rites.	48, 49, 50, 51, 52
Arsinoe Nome	42-44	Named after Arsinoe Philadelphos, sister and second wife of Ptolemaios II, Arsinoe is set up along the pharaoh's canal and the Way of Horus, connecting Egypt to Judea.	5	Order of the Ancients (The Administrator, The Mason, The Leader), military corruption, colonialism, slavery, colonialism, imperialism.	1	Tomb raiding.	49, 50, 51, 52
Red Sea	40-45	A strategic body of water between Africa and Asia, the Red Sea was known also as the Sea of Reeds in Ancient Times.	N/A		N/A		52



Figure 6.25: Order and Hidden Ones mirror structure.

The overarching narrative is indelibly tied to problematizing the Romans in a way that was the never the case for Greek occupiers. This is even implicit in environmental design, with Madiama Nome functioning as a mass grave with drowned Egyptians at Lake Anubis (Figure 6.24). The expansion's

climax leads Bayek to the city of Arsinoe, another Greek metropolis, though this time with the express purpose of killing an Egyptian traitor, Ptahmose (revealed as the Mason, another cult member), in charge of dismantling Egyptian temples for export to Rome. The parallels with the Temple of Dendur at the Metropolitan Museum in New York abound. The zoning of the areas is much like the core game, with Arsinoe being the monument zone, to Klyasma's impoverished quarry zone, and Madiama's encroaching desert.

What distinguishes this game from the fatherhood-centric themes of the core game is the superlative focus on the ideals of the Hidden Ones. Bayek is once again joined by Aya, now Amunet in their battle against the Leader, which has a twofold conclusion. First, the leader himself is killed while espousing his belief that the ideals of order and control are eternal. Second, Bayek learns that one of his collaborators, the Nabatean⁵², Gamilat, has been purposely leading Egyptians and Nabateans to their deaths to stoke the flames of revolution at the expense of the common people. The game positions the Nabatean and Egyptian resistance to colonialism as too extreme and imposes a moralistic view of violence, portraying Gamilat as almost religiously fervent, and requiring that Bayek kills him for inciting rebellion at the cost of civilian lives. So, the final antagonist is not the Roman Order member, but actually Gamilat himself as the hidden antagonist who seems righteous. This final assassination is much more pensive and less violent, with Bayek wishing Gamilat "peace in the Duat" and proclaiming that the Hidden Ones shall never again harm an innocent. This softening of Bayek is also followed through in one of the few side quests, where the son of an Order member for the core game seeks him out for vengeance. Bayek reflects on his actions, concluding that both he and the son are justified, but that there is another path towards peace: collaboration. Through and through, Hidden Ones focuses on the more abstract notions of order, freedom, vengeance, and revolution in a way that is divorced from the man-on-a-mission trope of the main game. These ideas are punctuated by these last two assassination scenes where spectres of both orders appear behind the main characters (Figure 6.25). In the end, it is possible to qualify the tone of this section of the game as a *Lawrence of Arabia* (Lean 1962) stylized segment, though with the added caveat that this kind of identity tourism isn't relating to Peter O'Toole on the big screen, but embodying Bayek in the game. However, the budding ideological focus that is found in Hidden Ones is so harshly contrasted by the followed expansion that players might get whiplash.

6.3.2 Curse of the Pharaohs: Mummymania & Filmic Tradition

Set another few years after the events of the Hidden Ones, this time Bayek is called to go to the Egyptian capital of Thebes, which is under attack from a mummy's curse. Finally, players are taken to an intimately Egyptian locale known for its proximity to the Valley of Kings, the resting place of most Egyptian pharaohs. The kicker is that the expansion is absolutely submerged in mummy and curse tropes, along with a distinctly fantastical set of locations to explore (shown in Table 4, below). Thebes and its surroundings are much more numerous than those of Sinai, though the same kinds of zone divisions are found here as well. What's crucial however is how exoticized this locale is. The city of

⁵² Nabateans were an ancient Arab people settled around modern-day Jordan.

Table 6.4: Curse of the Pharaohs play map

<i>Zone Name</i>	<i>Level Range</i>	<i>Description</i>	<i>Main Quests</i>	<i>Main Quest Theme</i>	<i>Side Quests</i>	<i>Side Quest Theme</i>	<i>Play Segments</i>
Thebes	44-48	On the east Bank of the Nile sits the sprawling grandeur of the city of Thebes. Once Egypt's capital, the city's importance arose from a cult dedicated to Amun.	2	Curse of the Pharaohs, illegal markets, swindling, tomb raiding, religious worship of Amun.	3	Temple thievery, dreams, penance, mourning, and forgiveness.	53, 55, 56, 58, 60, 62, 63, 64
Theban Necropolis	45-52	On the west bank of the Nile River, this area is home to the tombs of the Pharaohs and nobles of Egypt.	N/A		4	Tomb raiding, Greek military corruption, theft, imperialism.	53, 54, 57, 60, 61
Valley of Kings	45-47	Within the heart of the Theban Necropolis is the Valley of Kings. Home of the rock carved tombs of the Pharaohs.	N/A*	Hub for all afterlives, through tombs.	N/A*	Theban necropolis extends to Valley of Kings	54, 55, 60
Aaru	45-47	Nefertiti's afterlife is a rural idyll with a temple in honor of the Lady of Grace rising up out of a sea of wheat fields.	4	Egyptian paradise, rituals of cleansing, Nefertiti	1	Love and the afterlife	55, 62
Thebes Nome	46-48	Comprising the Ancient capital of Egypt to the east of the Nile and the Necropolis to the west. Thebes Nome is the fourth province of Upper Egypt.	1	Heretic religious cult, human sacrifice	1	Music and poetry.	56, 60, 62
Aten	47-49	Akhenaten's afterlife is a shining monument to himself as the sole god, the living Aten.	1	Akhenaten, heretic religious cult, Egyptian afterlife	4	Heretic and proper religious worship	57, 58
Yebu Nome	48-52	Part of the city of Swenett the island of Yebu arises from the silt waters of the Nile. The Greeks protect the border with Nubia and it is the seat of the Strategos of Yebu.	1	Corruption, banditry, smuggling, artefacts	6	Religious bigotry, magic, worship of Sobek	56, 57, 59, 60, 61
Heb Sed	49-51	The Great Ramesses restored Egypt to greatness and fathered over a hundred children. His afterlife is a testament to his long and fruitful reign.	5	Ramesses the Great, Egyptian afterlife	1	Egyptian prince education, masculinity	61
Duat	53-55	Despite dying at a young age, Tutankhamun restored the religion of the old gods to Egypt. The Boy King's afterlife honours the funeral rites of the black land.	N/A*	Only required to enter and kill Tutankhamun, Egyptian underworld	4	Dark magic, Egyptian underworld, spirituality	62, 63
Waset Desert	53-55	The golden sands to the west of Thebes offer a desolate but beautiful panorama. Few brave the arid wastes except bandits who have made camps in the forgotten temple swallowed by the desert.	N/A*		N/A		62

Thebes is rightly portrayed as a locus of religious worship but the thematic connotations of both the main and side quests is exceptionally focused on the Egyptian afterlife, dark magic, tomb raiding and the Book of the Dead. This section of the game is almost entirely a ludic homage to *The Mummy* (Sommers 1999) and its two sequels, including players fighting giant anthropomorphic scorpions and giant humanoid black jackals.



Figure 6.26: Nefertiti as the Mummy Avatar.

What is most unique about this expansion is the inclusion of four pharaohs, risen from the dead, who are constantly assaulting the city, and which Bayek must exorcise. That exorcism entails finding and entering each pharaoh's tomb in the Valley of Kings, which transports the players to specific afterlives. Aaru, loosely the paradise of Egyptian Mythology, is home to Queen Nefertiti (figure 6.26). The underworld, called the Duat, is home is to Tutankhamun. There are also two inexplicably fictional game afterlives. One is for Ramses the Great, called Heb Sed (which is a traditional festival commemorating years of rule akin to a jubilee). The other is for Akhenaten, called Aten, a reference to his heretical monotheistic religious beliefs. The overarching plot of the game has nothing to do with the Hidden Ones or the previous content and is simply a fantastic tomb raiding expedition across the land. Where the core game is interwoven with French colonial ideas of Egyptology, this expansion is much closer to 19th century ideas about mummies that were present under British occupation and archaeological development (Jarsaillon 2018). This is what Caroline Jarsaillon locates in the development of Egyptomania: "the term that designates ancient Egypt as it appears in the popular cultural imagination" (359). The expansion exudes a filmic fascination with mummies, jackal headed monsters, giant scorpions and human-headed birds that is altogether alien to the rest of the game. Of course, no account of Egyptomania is complete with the risen mummies themselves, which the player is asked to kill.

There are a few side quests that cover the topic of cult religious worship, tomb raiding, banditry and interestingly enough masculinity as Ramses' son tries to become worthy of his father's legacy. However, these quests are proportionately overshadowed by the general tone of the expansion, which is much more exoticizing and orientalising in Said's sense. This Egyptomaniacal tone is fused with a film noir whodunit frame, where Bayek is attempting to uncover the person responsible for triggering the curse and summoning the dead. This is predictably revealed to be the comely priestess of Amun, Isadora, who exudes femme fatale energy (in the film noir sense) throughout the entire installment. All of the fantastical action is set to a different soundtrack by Bulgarian composer Elitsa Alexandrova that does away with the synthesizer palettes and doubles down on a filmic aesthetic closer in tone to mummy films. There are no surprises or ideological twists to the expansion which is squarely located in the popular cultural imaginary of the perceived audience. Though, the narrative sections of the game are modulated by a final piece of the game: The Discovery Tour.

6.4 Discovery Tour: Museum Discourses & the Egyptology of it All

Much of the discourse around *Origins* has been mixed with celebrations of the Discovery Tour mode, a purportedly violence-free game mode where players can select between in-game characters and explore Egypt. The game mode is also sold as a standalone product for those who were uniquely interested in this version of the game. Ubisoft brand historian Maxime Durand explained that the game mode allowed for an "enhanced historical experience" made at the behest of educators (Reparaz 2018). Crucially, Durand recounts that as opposed to the core game where "the world revolved (mostly) around you," in the tour people have their own agendas and "the world revolves around itself" (2018). Theoretically, this would be a boon given the limited construction of Egyptian culture described above. How is the Discovery Tour built to highlight that kind of non-voyeuristic approach?

Show below in Table 5, the Discovery Tour is built in a unit-system structure that bolts players onto a rail. It is possible to deviate from that path, but no tour stations will activate unless players stand on top of the spot, and these spots are daisy-chained together. There are seventy-five tours, split into five categories. Each tour is subdivided into a series of stations that are connected by a golden path (Figure 6.27). When players arrive at a station, they interact with the node to start a description of the subject matter, which concludes with imagery about that subject. However, a lack of combat does not necessarily entail that no violence has been done, especially when it concerns the museological gaze, organization of space, curation of artefacts and the instantiation of resonance through what MacCannell has called "staged authenticity" (1973). Much like every other section of the game, the Discovery Tour segments space and focuses the experience on subjects and stations that are in line with the subject matter of the game. Though, there are some telling divergences.

The overall tour subjects are divided into five categories that should be indicative of Egyptian culture: Egypt, Pyramids, Alexandria, Daily Life and Romans. This initially bodes well, as there are significant contributions to the daily experiences of the Egyptian people, in a way that Williams would consider indicative of the local culture. However, at the level of subject choices and subdivisions, there's already an incipient problem. For example, the Egypt category has ten tours concerning Egypt's landscape, rivers, and resources. It then veers into reverent discussions of the discovery of hieroglyphics and Jean-

Francois Champollion’s pioneering of Egyptological inquiry. Champollion is directly critiqued by Said as one of the key actors of French hegemony dominating Egypt, with his 1822 *Precis du systeme hieroglyphique* (1993, 118). For Said, reconstructing Egypt for the colonial gaze meant saving Egyptians from their perceived backwardness, linked to the historic era of Islamic Egypt, by reproducing and centering hieroglyphics as the truest language of the entombed pharaohs (stewards of Egyptianness), or as he puts it “they had to be made to speak” (118). Crucially, hieroglyphics allowed the dislodgement of texts and artefacts and their transport to European institutions, all according to the logics of “the imperial eye” (118). This initial intrusion of the colonial gaze in the tour is just the start.

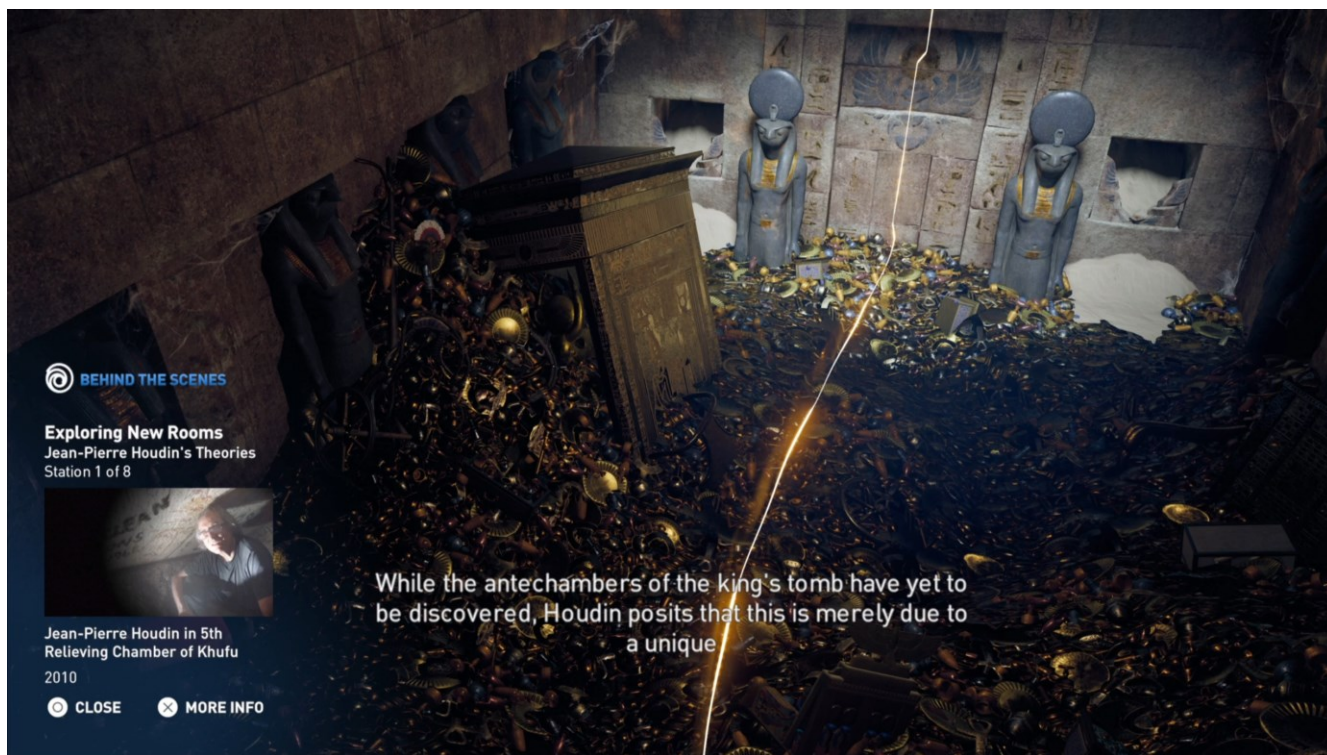


Figure 6.27: Example of the Discovery Tour’s segmentation of space

The back half of the “Egypt” tours is dedicated to the history of Cyrene, its institutions, and its monuments. Although interesting, and topographically correct for the period, Cyrene is still one of the more geographically and culturally distinct locales in the game. Located in modern Libya, the city is also entirely discussed in terms of Greek developments, such as its acropolis, its agora, and its exports. Notably, the tour explains that certain choices have been made to reshape buildings, as is the case of the arena’s circular design which is referred to as a “justified anachronism,” a term to keep in mind for later. This predominant focus recurs in the third category of tours which is exclusively focused on Alexandria. It is described in exceptional detail, with attention to its founding, the siege, and its educational system. Much like the game’s superlative focus on the city, the Discovery gives disproportional representation to the city, accounting for fourteen of the 75 tours. It is also discussed as a commercial hub and an innovative actor in the classical development of Egypt. There is a pernicious equation of Hellenization with development, which is indicative about the game’s broader attitude

Table 6.5: Discovery Tour: Ancient Egypt play map

<i>Passport Categories</i>	<i>Tours, stations, & time total</i>	<i>Tour Names</i>	<i>Number of stations</i>	<i>Estimated Time per tour (minutes)</i>	<i>Play Segment</i>
Egypt	20 Tours	The Major Regions of Egypt	4	2	65, 66, 67
	122 Stations	Bringer of Life, The Nile River	9	9	
	92 Minutes	Deserts of Egypt	3	3	
	0.82	The Qattara Depression	2	2	
	min/station	Siwa	9	7	
		The Faiyum	8	9	
		The City of Memphis	4	3	
		Rediscovering Egypt	7	7	
		Natron	4	2	
		Fauna of Ancient Egypt	5	3	
		Flora of Ancient Egypt	4	2	
		Ancient Egyptian Hieroglyphics	14	7	
		Jean-Francois Champollion	8	5	
		The Founding of Cyrene	7	5	
		The Agora & Thermal Baths	9	6	
		The Temple of Zeus in Cyrene	5	2	
		Important Monuments of Cyrene	9	6	
		The Acropolis of Cyrene	3	5	
		The Gladiator Arena	5	3	
		Major Exports of Cyrene	4	3	
Pyramids	16 Tours	The Origins of the Pyramid	7	5	67, 68, 69
	152 Stations	The Pyramid Complex of Djoser	20	13	
	102 minutes	Inside Djoser's Step Pyramid	10	6	
	0.67	Sneferu's First Pyramid	4	3	
	min/station	The Bent Pyramid of Dahshur	4	3	
		The Red Pyramid of Dahshur	4	3	
		Pyramids of the Middle Kingdom	4	4	
		An Overview of the Giza Necropolis	3	2	
		The Riddles of the Sphinx	22	15	
		Khufu's Funerary Complex	11	7	
		The Secrets of the Great Pyramid	15	9	
		The Great Pyramid: Subterranean Chamber	7	4	
		The Great Pyramid of Giza: Upper Chambers	18	10	
		Jean-Pierre Houdin's Theories	8	7	
		Khafre's Funerary Complex	9	6	
		Menkaure's Funerary Complex	6	5	

Alexandria	14 Tours	The Greek Pharaohs	7	5	70, 71
	103 Stations	Cleopatra, Queen of Egypt	11	9	
	81 Minutes	The Siege of Alexandria	22	20	
	0.78	Introduction to Alexandria	8	5	
	min/station	Alexandria: Planning of the City	8	6	
		Alexandria: A Commercial Hub	6	5	
		Alexandria: City of Celebration	4	3	
		Education in Alexandria	3	2	
		The Great Library of Alexandria	11	7	
		The Mouseion of Alexandria	4	4	
		The Serapeion of Alexandria	4	4	
		The Island of Pharos	9	7	
		The Paneion	3	2	
		The Hippodrome of Alexandria	3	2	
Daily Life	20 Tours	Osiris, The First Mummy	6	4	72, 73
	183 Stations	Mummies of Ancient Egypt	18	9	
	104 Minutes	The Importance of Mummies	9	6	
	0.56	Amulets & Rituals	6	4	
	min/station	Temples & Rituals of Ancient Egypt	12	8	
		Temples and Priests	25	8	
		Building Ancient Egypt	8	5	
		Workers & Transport	9	5	
		Agriculture & Seasons	7	6	
		Ancient Egyptian Cultivation	9	6	
		Domesticated Animals of Ancient Egypt	4	3	
		Ancient Egyptian Medicine	3	2	
		Leather & Linen in Ancient Egypt	4	4	
		Ancient Egyptian Fashions	19	6	
		Artisans of Ancient Egypt	14	9	
		Evolution of Pottery in Ancient Egypt	6	3	
		The Egyptian Household	7	4	
		Beer & Bread	10	6	
		Wine in Ancient Egypt	4	3	
Oil in Ancient Egypt		3	3		
Romans		5 Tours	Roman Military Equipment	4	3
	21 Stations	Roman Forts	4	3	
	15 Minutes	The Forts of Cyrenaica	4	3	
	0.71	Roman Aqueducts	5	3	
	min/station	Crucifixion	4	3	

towards Greek occupation. Roman occupation is portrayed as brutal, Greek occupation is enlightening, mirroring Western attitudes about the vaunted place of Greek culture: Philhellenism.⁵³

One aspect of the tour to consider in terms of philhellenic preference is the time distribution across tours based on developer estimates. Displayed in table 5 (left side) is a time-to-station distribution estimate for each tour. So, even when one tour has more stations than another, it might translate to an altogether different quantity of time spent on the subject matter. Even though the inclusion of a daily life category is commendable for having twenty different tours, it is nevertheless notable that on this time metric, it is the least expansive with a 0.56 minute/station ratio. The Pyramids are second last with a 0.67 ratio, followed by the Romans tour at 0.71, Alexandria at 0.78 and Egypt at 0.82. As a small preface, the Egypt tour is half composed of celebrating Egyptologists like Auguste Mariette, and Greek Cyrenaica, it seems that even in the Discovery Tour, like in the game proper, Egypt and the daily lives of the Egyptian people are given the least time and space.

With these twenty-four tours, it is possible to lump in the 5 roman tours for a total of 29/75 tours dedicated to Greco-Roman classical history. That still leaves forty-six tours for Egypt, which should be sufficient. As mentioned above, ten of those are dedicated to topography, which is well enough. Then, we enter into the heart of the matter. Sixteen tours are earmarked for the Pyramids, in a predictable fashion. And some of these tours are massive, such as the “Pyramid of Djoser Complex” tour which has a grandiose twenty stations. There are many descriptions of how massive the complex is, with reference to its “16 hectares” and how it is a “technological marvel of its time”. There are discussions of Memphis and other tombs as well, which are actually quite informative. However, once audiences reach the “Inside Djoser’s Step Pyramid” tour a weird shift occurs. The tour begins elegizing the contributions to its mapping by J. S. Perring from 1839-1842. Similar contributions by French Egyptologist Jean-Philippe Lauer in 1939 are also celebrated. Drawings of the complex from Flinders Petrie and G. A. Wainwright are included at the end of stations. The tour presents these drawings uncritically, but as archaeologist Meira Gold has discussed, Petrie was equally complicit in damaging and extracting artifacts in his endeavors. As she explains, there was much work done to codify Petrie as “the ‘good’ preservationist and record-keeper, over [his contemporary] Naville, the ‘bad’ excavator and plunderer [while] In actually, Naville and Petrie’s competition meant they both excavated quickly and were equally destructive” (2019, 11). Gold has described archaeology at this time as a “colonial field science” and the tour certainly does little to dissuade viewers from this fact.

The pyramid tour is replete with this canonical roster of European archaeologists and Egyptologists. Figures like Richard Lepsius who mapped the pyramid of Dahshur, and those discussed above like Champollion and his *discovery* of hieroglyphics, or Petrie and Wainwright’s

⁵³ Love of Greek culture expressed by Europeans, which runs the gamut from literary celebration, the development of archaeology and anthropology favoring Greek culture, and even support from Greek independence from the Ottoman Empire.

less destructive extraction of tomb contents, are positioned as the body of work that produces the imperial eye that Said mentioned. The game even uncritically uses orientalist artwork by Jean-Léon Gerome, depicting Napoleon surveying the Sphinx, which is so on the nose as to be ridiculous (Figure 6.28). This is doubly funny because Gerome's art is quite literally the cover of Said's *Orientalism* (1978). The tour does have some cracks where local views on the landmarks are discussed. In that same "Riddles of the Sphinx" tour, there is a single mention that states: "Documents from an Arab Egyptologist of the 12th century, Abd al-Latif al-Baghdadi, indicate that traces of red were still visible in his time" displacing the tour's general timeline by a full seven centuries. There are also indications that the team made specific alterations to the Sphinx, "where the polish present in the game includes aspects of modern restoration attempts" which were made "to present a more iconic version of the Sphinx of Giza to the player." So, we have actually been in a polychronic Egypt in Westin and Hedlund's sense the entire time. Mercifully, the discovery tour does include at least one contribution made by Egyptian archaeologists, in the "Khufu's Funerary Complex" tour. Here, the famous boat pits of Khufu, where actual sized ships were buried as a funerary offering, are discussed as the discovery of "Kamal al-Mallakh, an Egyptian Egyptologist" and was restored by Ahmed Youssef over 28 years, but this is the only mention of local professionals *in the entire tour*.



Figure 6.28: Jean-Léon Gerome's *Bonaparte Before the Sphinx* in-game.

There are also a number of suspect statements, such as the reconstitution of the top of the Great Pyramid, called a pyramidion. As the tour explains, "the reconstitution you see in the game

is fictive, incorporating a golden pyramidion bearing inscriptions relevant to Khufu” without any explanation of what those markings are. The aesthetic of the pyramidion is present, but without any context or specificity. Numerous declarative statements of this kind dot the tour, such as “we can guess that the intent behind the construction of these monuments was Khufu’s way of declaring himself one of the most powerful pharaohs,” which are not particularly rooted in a source. But things really go off the rails once we enter the Great Pyramid.



Figure 6.29: Simulated pyramidion of Khufu.

In an almost incomprehensible choice, there is a full tour dedicated to French architect Jean-Pierre Houdin’s debunked theories that the pyramid was built from the inside out (Figure 6.29). The tour uses some legitimate-looking three-dimensional (called CAITA) models to explain how internal mechanics could have been used to construct the pyramid (Figure 6.30). These theories have never been proven and as of 2022, were still under investigation (Smith, 2018; Houdin, 2022). The theories have been attacked on the basis of credibility by engineers like Craig B. Smith who explains that “there is no evidence that internal ramps were used in any pyramid built before the Great Pyramid, or after,” which is highly irregular (Parsell, 2007). Nevertheless, there is a full tour devoted to legitimizing Houdin’s model, without any other model discussed. Though the tour is fairly clear about why the team chose this, which is quite simply because it was the only way “the team can justify access to this wonder,” access here meaning allowing players to access sealed or unseen burial chambers. So, the choices of how or what to model and include in the tour are really on the basis of what the game needed. This is a first admission of

some hefty alterations made for the purposes of opening the pyramid up for exploration. In fact, the tour explains that “preserving the unique claustrophobic environment of the Great Pyramid while allowing for a smooth game navigation” was the principal goal. This goal was accomplished by adding the “fictive underground complex,” creating “individual accesses” to certain rooms, and the removal of the portcullis to Khufu’s burial chamber “in order to grant the player access.” Strikingly, the tour outright states that these choices and many others were made

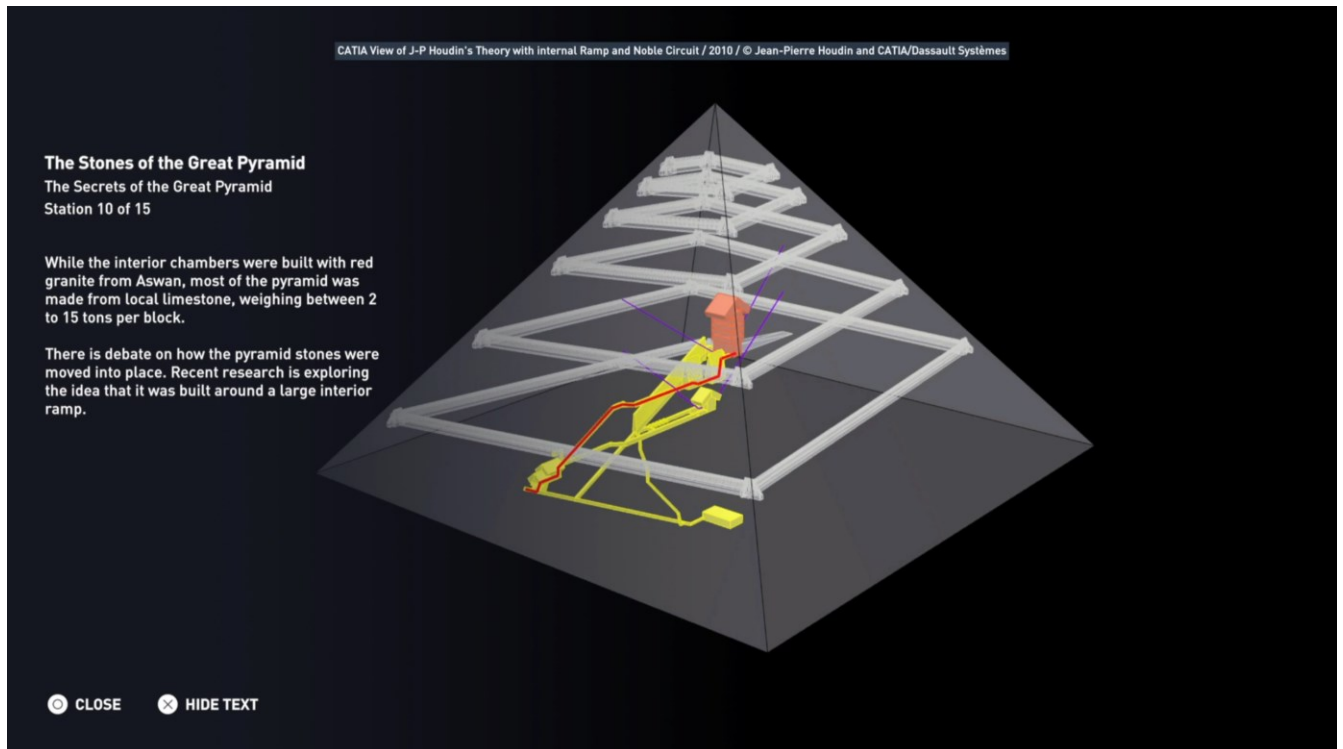


Figure 6.30: CATIA model of Houdin's theories.

“to support the feelings of discovery and awe” and that the art team “created a unique and fantastical treasure in the second antechamber” which required “bringing Houdin’s hypotheses to life”. The rendition of the Pyramid was never about representing it *for real*, it was about catering to player’s desires to enter this forbidden site. They might not be as extreme as Perring’s collaborator R.W.H Vyse who quite literally used boring rods and dynamite to blast open walls and access burial chambers and entombed riches in Menkaure’s pyramid (1840), but Ubisoft’s work is in many ways motivated by the same core idea: opening up the mysterious pyramid interior for viewers.

This is evident since Vyse and Perring’s drawings are used in a tour station unassumingly called “Looking for Other Entrances” (Figure 6.31). In fact, the use of Vyse and Perring’s work speaks to an implicit bias that runs through the tour altogether. Each station has images at the end. Many are from contemporary satellite imagery and some from theoretical models. However, there is a widespread inclusion of materials drawn from French and British occupations over the course of 150 years. Likewise, many of the fragments or sculptures shown are housed at

European museums or the British Museum in Cairo. Not one is from the Egyptian National Museum. French reconstructive artist Jean Claude Golvin is listed as a collaborator who produced schemas for the team to use where they needed to. This extends beyond topographical or architectural choices, such as the use of “Sir Allan Gardiner’s Egyptian Grammar” to produce the Egyptian-sounding language “spoken in the background by crowds” where “the team opted for English as the spoken language, with the characters using ancient Egyptian and Greek words and accents.” However, this use of colonial Egyptology reaches a fever pitch in the Daily Life tour.

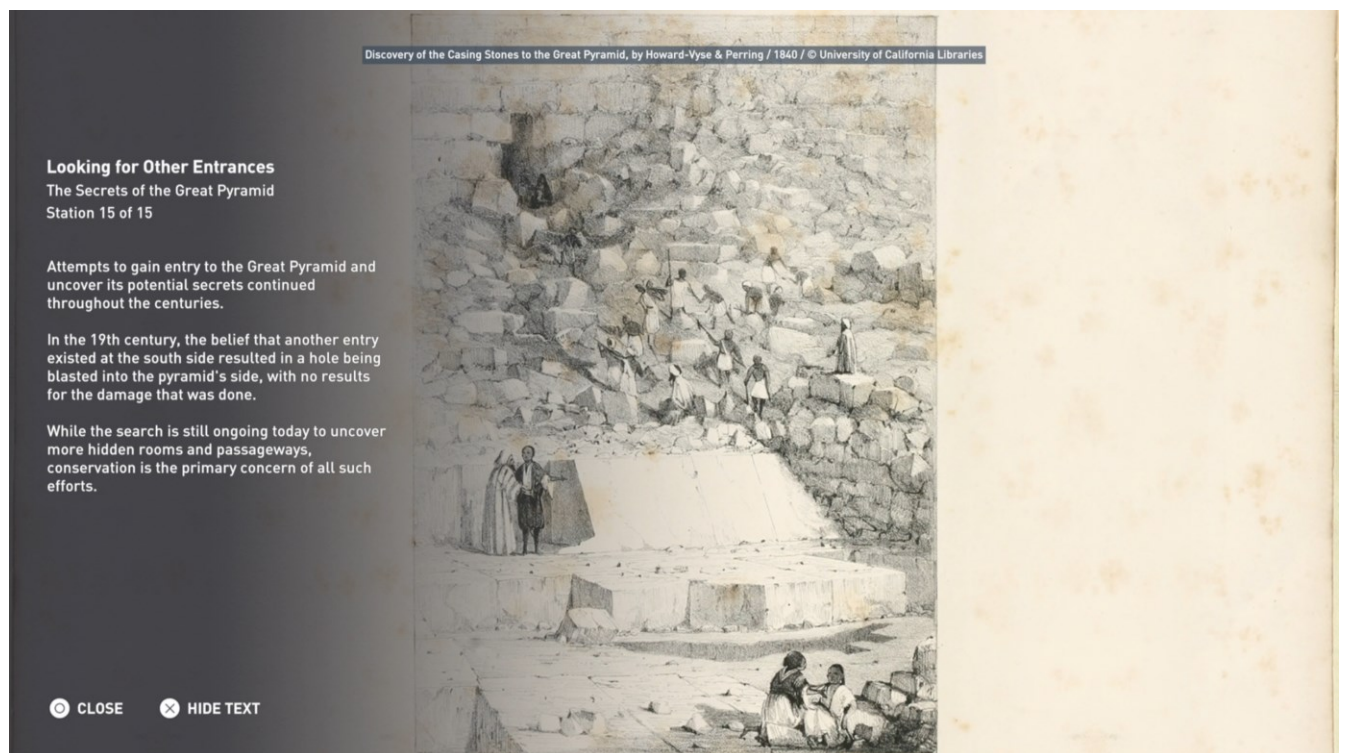


Figure 6.31: Vyse and Perring Art.

Although the expectation would be a focus on food, clothing, and daily mores (which are indeed included), this tour includes a substantial quantity of work on mummification and Egyptomania. The tour innocently states that “Egyptian civilization has always appealed to Westerners, even before the Greek and Roman invasions” and that explains that the Egyptomania phenomenon “exposed Egypt to the general populace.” One specific station, called “The Desecration of Mummies” explains that wealthy British elites would export mummies to England and would unravel the wrappings as “the shining cultural events of the season” and critiques that “Egyptian collections of many museums were founded as a consequence of pillaging.” This discussion nevertheless elides that these wealthy elites actually consumed the mummies as part of these soirees or performed autopsies on them (Gold, 63). Likewise, this statement ironically shades the export of mummies as negative, while the entire rest of the tour

sings the praises of Egyptology more broadly. One such example is the claim that “Cyrenaica benefitted greatly from Roman administration, with the construction of aqueducts and canals,” a statement which even the game has trouble sanitizing as Egyptian slaves are abused. So, there is an underlying problem with sourcing Egyptological expertise and items, which indicates a much deeper problem with the logics of this virtual museum, and museums more generally.

To begin understanding this problem, it’s useful to remind ourselves that Egypt is in many ways the “focal point of Orientalism” (Said, 84). Therefore, there was always a vested interest by both the Napoleonic and British occupations to produce a vision of Egypt as in need of European tutelage, with the museum as its primary arm. That justification is a part of the tour, which explains that “in the 19th century, the increased intensity of tourism and excavation, as well as the outflow of antiquities to other countries, threatened Egypt’s archaeological heritage” and that crucially “Egyptians took part in this destruction” (Figure 6.32). The project of the Egyptologist was to save Egypt from the Egyptians all along!

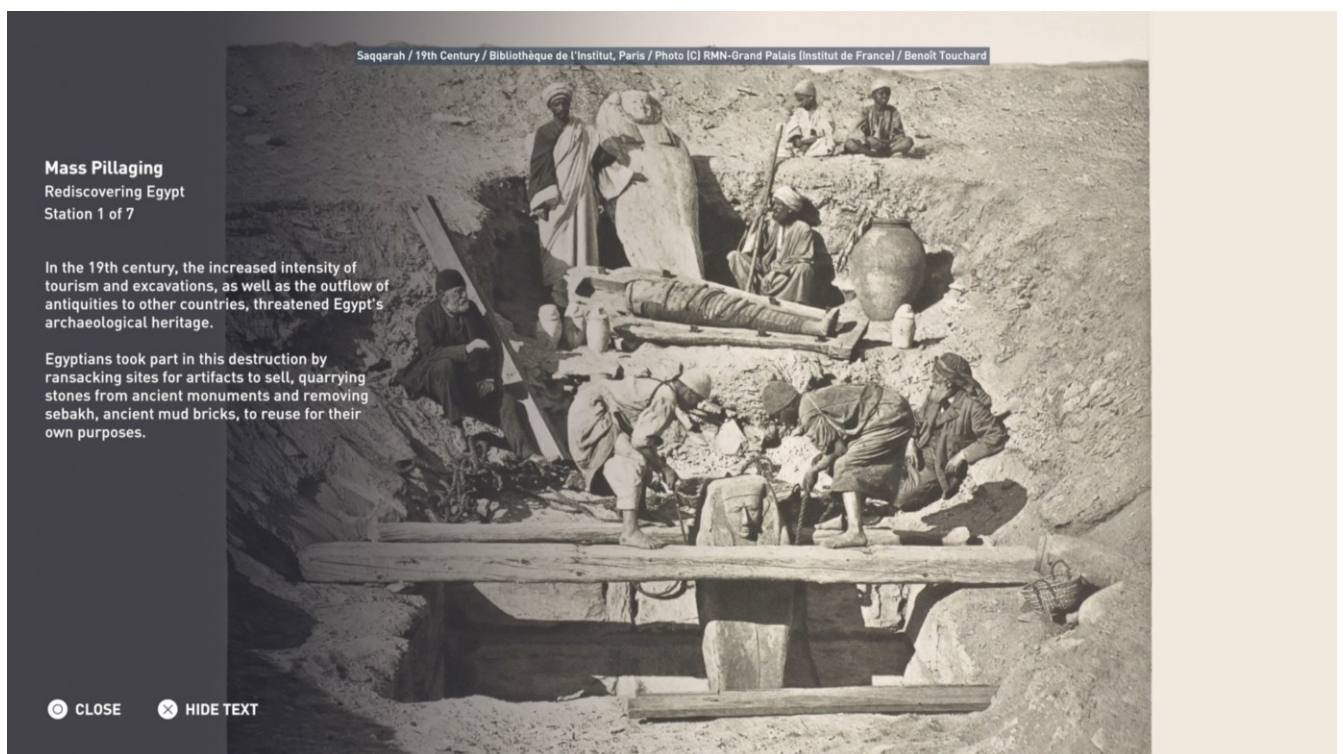


Figure 6.32: Egyptians Looting.

Saving Egypt meant instituting a regimented antiquities service to regulate the flow of objects and their conservation, which was instituted in “1858, when the Viceroy of Egypt created the Antiquities Service” run by Auguste Mariette with “an iron grip” (Figure 6.33). Mariette’s endeavors are positioned as the ancestor of the Egyptian Museum, justifying the colonial management of Egypt. Mariette’s successor Gaston Maspero is equally celebrated as the steward

of the antiquities service until 1950, when “it passed into Egyptian hands”. In reality, the service didn’t so much pass, as it was taken over after Egypt declared its independence. As Elshakry has explained, “the history of Egyptology in Egypt was deeply bound up with the politics of knowledge, affecting all aspects of the discipline in practice, whether in terms of links to imperial diplomacy or to colonial labor policies” (185). What Elshakry is referring to, in part, is the outright exclusion of Egyptian locals from Egyptological training and praxis. As Reid has discussed, “by the time Howard Carter dug up Tutankhamun’s tomb in 1922 [...] Egypt had produced only one Egyptologist of note. Ahmed Kamal.” (233). This isn’t anything surprising given Gold’s account of the first 150 of Egyptology as an organized “system of plunder” (Gold, 10). That system of plunder did however fill museums to the brim, and so it useful to consider the museum itself as a final note in this chapter.

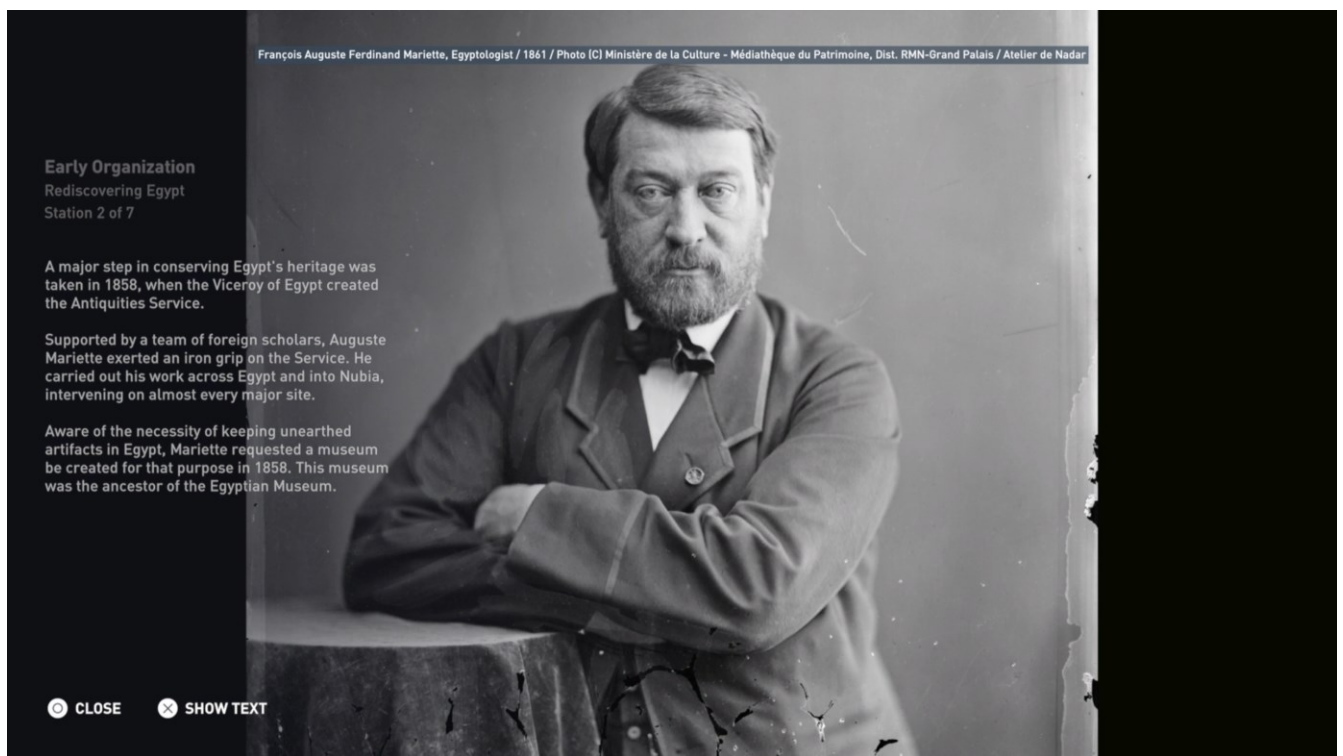


Figure 6.33: Mariette as the steward of Egyptian heritage.

Origins attempts to buttress its limitations by claiming legitimacy. Not through was Parker has defined as the art game or by winning the games as art debate started by Roger Ebert more than a decade ago (Parker, 2015, 2017). *Origins* positions its contribution as one of greater importance, inside the museum and institutional sphere. Poirron, who wrote about the discovery as a contributor, went on to curate the mummy exhibit at Montreal’s Museum of the Fine Arts. As she explains, “at a time when history in general and ancient history in particular are less and less valued, when society as a whole is wondering about its use and relevance, the popularity of Discovery Tour has shown that there is still interest and that the world of video games can be one of the most effective ways of maintaining this public interest” (2021, 84). The tour’s expertise is

also justified through the consultation of “an army of Egyptologists to perfect every detail” (84). So, the expertise of Egyptologists is the selling point of this museum tour, and the museum tour is married to the game as a rejuvenation of public interest in ancient history.

The museum is however anything but neutral. As historian Tony Bennett has described, adapting Foucault’s description of prisons, museums are “institutions, then, not of confinement but of exhibition, forming a complex of disciplinary and power relations whose development might be more fruitfully juxtaposed to, rather than aligned with, the formation of Foucault’s ‘carceral archipelago’” or what he refers to as the exhibitionary complex (23). Bennett contrasts the tendencies of prisons, which tend to hide individuals, from the museum’s inclination to “show and tell” (39). What was the subject of such displays was the “authenticated past,” which Williams called the selective record and which Grossberg might locate as part of the conjecture (40). Museums were always located between the cultures that lined their walls, and the institutions which exerted hegemonic power, which has particularly vile connotations when it comes to colonial museums. The ultimate aim of museums in general was to confer a “degree of unity on the exhibitionary complex” which is really what Napoleon’s *Description* was after all along (44). The development of Egyptian exhibits was altogether unique.

As Egyptologist Timothy Mitchell recounts of early Egyptian exhibits in Paris, “the exhibitions came to resemble more and more the commercial machinery of the rest of the city” (10). These exhibits were set up as a “sequence of exhibitions” which were predicated on accuracy and technical extensivity (10). The point was to simulate as closely as possible what Egypt was, to the European observer. What struck Egyptian guests however was the “commercialism” of rides, artefact displays and exotic dances, which catered to a “consumer economy that required such entertainment” (10). Further, these extensive and engrossing exhibits leveraged “the remarkable realism” which rendered “a strange civilization into an object the visitor could almost touch” and where “a museum inside a pharaonic temple represented Antiquity” (9). Crucially the entire exhibit was oriented inward, for the viewer who was encircled by the displays (9). What Mitchell is describing is a composite process of resonance and simulation, which Origins and its museum are fully engaged with. The only thing that’s changed is that the game offers new horizons of blockbuster technological development to stimulate interest. This entire structure is oriented toward the imperial eye, toward the “position of the visitor as the occupant” (7). But has this endeavor moved towards new horizons that are more emancipatory?

Egyptologist Donald Reid wrote on the topic of indigenous Egyptology over three decades ago, explaining that “Western imperial domination set back the growth of indigenous Egyptology, which might otherwise have taken root fifty years before it did” (233). Crucially, Reid has discussed how Ahmad Kamal, the Egyptologist who discovered Khufu’s funerary boat, was one select exception that could not happen until Britain’s withdrawal from its position of domination (234). The attitude he notes towards Egyptians was twofold. First, the superlative focus on “ancient Egypt implies Western denigration of Coptic and Islamic Egypt” and second it

positions ancient Egyptians as “‘honorary Westerners’ on the onward and upward track that was presumed to culminate in the contemporary West” (234). Reid further problematizes the very foundation of the Antiquities service that the Discovery Tour elegizes. As he notes, “Mariette guarded his treasures jealously” and was perpetually afraid “that Egyptians with hieroglyphic skills would threaten his own monopoly on Egyptology within Egypt” and “did his best to derail the careers” of others (235). Crucially, Reid notes that Egypt’s pasha⁵⁴ at the time, Isma’il “cared little for the pharaohs himself, but adopted the trappings of pharaonism to cater to European tastes” including “the museum, the Paris exhibit, the pyramid-and-sphinx design for Egyptian postage, and the theme for Verdi’s opera *Aida* [which] were all European rather than Egyptian initiatives” (234). The ruler of Egypt was as much in the business of resonance as Ubisoft is, his clients were merely a different market. In Reid’s account, Ahmad Kamal, who was barely given one line in the discovery tour, was a unique hero for Egyptian Egyptologists. He was Maspero’s (the second head of the institute) student where he and four others learned “archaeology and hieroglyphics” when Mariette actively dismissed all Egyptian archaeologist and replaced them with “ex-army officers” (235). He refers to Kamal’s strides as his “lonely struggle,” and to the domination of Egyptology by Westerners as “the long night” (237). So, when Discovery Tour holds up Mariette, Champollion, Gerome, Perring, Vyse, Warwick, Houdin, Golvin and other interlopers as the *crème de la crop* and relegates Kamal, or al-Latif in the 12th century, to a footnote, it’s not a transgressive engagement with Egyptian culture. It’s just more of the same.

6.5 New Formations, Old Ideas

Grossberg’s provocation about considering the conjecture is essential when thinking about *Origins* since, as he explains, “epochal thinking points us to the ‘tectonic shifts’ in the fundamental conditions of possibility, the fundamental modes of existence and ways of being, the fundamental nature of relations, structures and organizations, materialities and agencies” (44). This game’s push for legitimacy through a non-violent museum experience appended to the core game was promoted and celebrated as a new direction, and something worthwhile for the collective. However, Egyptian wings at museums have existed for centuries, and they have been one of the most destructive institutions for Egyptian culture as discussed above. Further, *Origins* doesn’t anesthetize its own colonial and filmic DNA because the tour exists. *Curse of the Pharaohs*’ mummymania-inflected fantasies, or *Hidden Ones*’ interloper epic connotations are what they are, not in spite of the Discovery Tour, but in tandem with it. *Origins* isn’t four segments working disparately. It’s a harmonious whole of problematic tendencies and motifs.

So, although folks like Bondioli et al., Casey, Arbuckle Macleod and Poirron have discussed whether the game is accurate or not, that aspect is less concerning to my mind, than the fact that the game purports to simulate all of Ptolemaic Egypt while only doing so in very limited

⁵⁴ Title of “any definite rank and importance” under the Ottoman empire, and its period of dominance over local Egyptians. In this instance, Isma’il Pasha was the appointed administrative authority (Garnett, 1904).

and skewed ways. It focuses on arguably one of the least Egyptian-centric periods of over five millennia of rich history. It's not that what's there isn't accurate, but that the inclusion and exclusion of this or that immediately paints a picture. Our attention should be fixed on the fact that the game constructs a cohesive system of culture, from the most minute activities of play to the loftiest overarching narratives, which is dominated by ways to murder, exploit and surveil people and animals. That system is supplemented and shielded through claims to legitimacy in the museum world, which has its own share of problems. I'm concerned with the way that Egyptian culture is cauterized, cutting away anything that hadn't been sanctioned by European Egyptologists and the museums that house their stolen relics today. *Origins*' Egypt is tailor made to resonate with audiences on the basis of everything that has formed the basis of Egyptianness for the past 224 years since Napoleon first set off to produce his description.

There are no mentions of Ancient Egyptian literature and it opts to focus on Cleopatra, Cyrene and Alexandria above all, as opposed to setting the game during the time of exceptionally iconic Egyptian rulers, such as Tutakhamun during his religious reformation and restoration of Egyptian polytheism, or even Ramses' nearly seven decades of rule and expansion of the Egyptian Empire. It's not the Egyptian context, which is lacking in material, but rather the imagination of Ubisoft's brand management which is limiting in its pursuit of resonance. Audiences won't have the energy or the granular attention to detail required to find the subtle distortions in the locale. Ultimately, *Origins* may be an excellent game in terms of technique and quality, and a pioneer of virtual museum curation. It is a quintessential technological tentpole in Acland's sense and is positioned as a cultural core by companies like Ubisoft and Microsoft. It remains however a Foucauldian complex of discipline and power. It's not because there is a non-violent game mode that the game doesn't perpetuate existing forms of violence. In Choudhry's words, what does this beast do? It does violence to the fullness of Egyptian culture, which is not located in the museum, but in the street and the everyday.

VII. AMONKHET: BETWEEN THE LIVING AND THE DEAD

“No dusty Egypt! It’s got to be bright, sunny Egypt!”

– Ethan Fleischer, lead designer,
paraphrasing art director Jeremy Jarvis, 2021

7.1 Egypt on Cardboard

Magic’s rollout is often less bombastic than other blockbuster games. It has no E3, Gamescom or Pax, or Tokyo Gameshow keynote to drum up audience excitement. Yet the franchise has been releasing new sets like clockwork since 1993, while consistently increasing revenue and profits since 2014 (Hasbro, 2022). As of 2022, Hasbro, the current owner of Wizards of the Coast, has listed *Magic* among its top earners, and most valuable properties, breaking \$1 billion USD in yearly revenue alongside *Dungeons & Dragons* (2022).⁵⁵⁵⁶ Part of invoking its yearly revenue is reconceptualizing how *Magic* appears to critics. It’s easy to dismiss as part of the analog games, an “idle pastime” (which have remained relatively understudied, even though “the paratextual board game sits at the production nexus of multiple production spaces”, including books, film, and TV (Booth, 2016; 2021; 1). Paul Booth’s work on board games as a scion of new media configurations that “*have important things to communicate about our culture*” (Booth, 1, 2021). So, if board games (including card games) are important cultural products in Booth’s view, how important is *Magic*?

Estimates are always nebulous when board games are concerned given how sales and circulation can be tracked, but industry estimates place *Magic* at around 40 million players in 2022 (METRO, 2021; Galov, 2022), a sharp increase from its 2015 estimates at 20 million players (Duffy, 2015).⁵⁷ Simply put, *Magic* is colossal in terms of player count and revenue by industry standards, while operating with relatively little critical analysis of its magnitude. In Acland’s terms, *Magic* is one of the “dark suns of media culture, with a density of financial investment and a textual richness that pull innumerable other works and practices into their orbit”, in part indicated by “a high level of commodity integration” (45, 2020). It may in fact be the predominant dark star of card games, and a close second for all tabletop gaming more broadly. Given its centrality, the next question would be to ask how *Magic* pulls in texts and practices from the cultural sphere it inhabits, and how does it shape them as a card game on the

⁵⁵ The Hasbro 2017 annual report lists *Magic* in a series of intersecting ways. *Magic* is listed in Hasbro Gaming portfolio, as the primary earner, in a 1,497.8 million revenue number, up 8% from the previous year. Hasbro also lists it as one its seven “franchise brands”, which account for 49% of Hasbro’s aggregate revenue (Hasbro, 2017).

⁵⁶ Industry figures place the 2017 year, that *Amonkhet* was released in, at 108.4B USD total revenue (59.2B for mobile, 33B for PC, and 8.3B for Console). This would imply Hasbro’s Gaming portfolio accounts for roughly 1.38% of all games industry revenue (Batchelor, 2017). However, Batchelor estimates that North American revenue accounts for a sixth of the mobile revenue, and half of console revenue, implying the NA games industry sits somewhere between 20 and 25% of the global games industry revenue. Other sources estimate NA games industry revenue at 27B USD. *Magic* would then account for 5.5% of the NA games industry in its entirety.

⁵⁷ According to industry rankings, this would rank *Magic* as the 10th game in terms of average monthly player count in the world, the second ranked board game behind *Dungeons & Dragons*’s 50 million active players, and the highest ranked trading or collectible card game (Twinfinite, 2022).

one hand, and as a consumer product on the other? Answering that query means looking specific products, and in terms of designed Egyptianness, *Amonkhet* as the unavoidable case study.

Despite its lack of participation in the mainstream trade shows that segment much of blockbuster game distribution, Magic has developed its own pipeline of marketing and previews, which is run through the game's official website and blog. There, in April of 2017, head designer Mark Rosewater began chronicling the production of their newest product: *Amonkhet*, their Egyptian-themed card set⁵⁸ (Rosewater, 2017). In a three-part article series, *Amonkhet Down to Business*, Rosewater situated the game's newest installment as the result of a decades-long process of deciding which cultures to adapt, "from Norse to Native American to Aboriginal Australian" (2017a). Their main conflict, when this process had come to a head more than a decade prior when they were trying to decide whether they would adapt Japan or Egypt. As Rosewater recalls (2017a):

Both cultures were relevant in pop culture, meaning awareness was pretty high. Both had strong iconography and a distinctive visual look. Both had a rich mythology to draw from that we knew would allow us to make cool Magic creatures. Each side had its fans, not to mention the player base, which had been asking for both for years.

In the end, Japan won in 2004, but the logic for adapting Egypt remained stable: a unique visual look, rich folklore, avid fans, and the idea that the locale would be easy to adapt within the game's existing architecture. It is essential, before diving into game analysis discussion, to examine how the setting was scoped.

Amonkhet, like many *Magic* products, had multiple competing commitments, to the setting, to the gameplay and to the overarching franchise narrative that was connecting with the larger shared universe that the game had built. Rosewater further explains that he had two commitments, "top-down⁵⁹ Egypt, and top-down Bolas⁶⁰", and that the issue was figuring out the exact proportion of both themes (2017a). The team's decision was to split the story into two sets, *Amonkhet* (2017) and *Hour of Devastation* (2017), with the idea that the Egyptian themes would dominate the first set, and the franchise elements would be the focus of the second set. In this chapter, I only discuss the first set of the block, because of spatial considerations and because it provides stronger engagement with the simulation and commodification of Egyptianness. This initial article was capped with a cinematic trailer (see figure 1), set to heavy percussions and the rhythmic chanting of *Amonkhet*'s inhabitants: "One from many, by force of will, forged by might, driven by fire, born by death, to rise eternal", foregrounding the kind of religious worship and mysticism that would run through the set (Wizards, 2017).

⁵⁸ Magic releases many different kinds of products, but their principal offering is *card sets*, released on a quarterly model, with a few hundreds cards in each product. Card sets are sold in booster packs of 15 cards, with randomized rewards in each pack.

⁵⁹ Top-down is a design term referring when design "begins with flavor" and where "we build the card around flavor molding mechanics to fit the concept" (Rosewater, 2003).

⁶⁰ Bolas is one of the recurring franchise villains, and a dimension-hopping immortal dragon.



Figure 7.1: Amonkhet cinematic trailer

This chapter, and the analysis of *Amonkhet* as a counterpoint to *AC: Origins* in the previous chapter, is split into four sections. First, a small retrospective of a podcast episode where Rosewater, and set co-lead Ethan Fleischer, discuss which top-down elements were most important and how *Amonkhet* design was structured at the exploratory stages. Second, I provide a condensed model of how analysis was conducted, which vectors of design were considered and a discussion of how to conceptualize a card set, without the need for granular modelling of all the intricacies of card design. Third, I discuss how card design, from the top-down perspective, filtered Ancient Egypt down into a handful of tropes, characters and locales that tends strongly towards the mythological, rather than archaeological-historic views of Egypt in the previous chapter. Further, I tie these examples of the overall design more directly with the history of exhibitor and filmic adaptations of ancient Egypt, along with Egyptological discussions and notions of resonance, though this is a recurring engagement throughout the chapter. Fourth, I discuss the *Bolas* half of the set as the other focus of the set, built to support a wider story arc and franchise that *Magic* is part of. Lastly, I conclude by bring these twin aspects, Egyptianness and the Blockbuster nature of *Magic* products to construct a different perspective on the product overall, as a mirror to *AC: Origins* vision of Egypt.

7.2 Brainstorming Egypt: Broad Resonance and Design

Unlike the more public interviews provided by the *AC* developers discussed previously, Rosewater and Fleischer’s retrospective on *Amonkhet* resembles more closely what Khaled et al. have described as documenting trajectories through hot and cold analysis (2018). The term *hot* refers to a “reading of the work by the creator themselves”, while *cold* refers to the work I am conducting here, a more removed form of analysis (8). By looking at the game from both perspectives, it is possible to approach it from the perspective of design intentionality, as well as a product-focused analysis. Returning to the hot analysis view for the moment, Rosewater has been producing a *Magic: The Gathering* official podcast, called *Drive to Work with Mark Rosewater* (2012), where he either reflects on specific card sets, details technical language, or even invites guest designers to speak. In November of 2021, Rosewater brought on *Amonkhet* co-lead Ethan Fleischer for the 885th episode of the series, to look back on the setting, its design, and particularly the construction of Egyptian themes (2021).

Both developers cited art director Jeremy Jarvis’ intervention early in exploratory design, determining that designers should not model a dusty Egypt, but rather a vibrant, living locale with a rich culture (cited in the chapter’s opening) (2021). As Fleischer explains, the team was critically aware that “there are two Egypts”, where “there’s Egypt as it was in ancient times, and then there is the Egypt of the 1920s British archaeologists discovering Egyptian artifacts”, noting that they didn’t want to simply adapt “a collection of dusty artifacts” (2021). The team’s starting point is altogether different than how Ubisoft sought out academic experts and generally seeks to focus on the historicity of the locale. What this team wanted to create was a theocratic “dystopia where everybody is sort of artificially happy with the status quo that was creepy”, leaning into Egypt’s religious cult elements and zeroing in on a theological totalitarian state (2021). Fleischer’s account is supported by Rosewater some five years after the set’s initial reveal. The division between the game’s franchise fantastical elements and the Egyptian elements led the team to produce a Venn diagram with objects, practices and verbs that would fall into either category⁶¹, or both, with the aim of “capturing Egypt” (2021). This process was described in depth in the *Down to Business* articles mentioned earlier.

Particularly in the second article, Rosewater described conducting word association games with team members on the basis of nationalities, producing call and response results (2017b). For instance, Rosewater would say “French” and the team member would reply “Eiffel tower”, or in other cases, the associations would be *Mexican-Sombrero*, *Italian-Pizza*, *Japanese-Sushi* (Rosewater, 2017b). As he explains, the “number one answer for ‘Egyptian’” was “Pyramid. And by pretty wide margin”, further reflecting that “when many people think of Egyptian things, they think of the pyramids and the Sphinx and monuments in general” (2017b). At a very mundane level, Rosewater’s game was gauging team members’ personal resonance with specific nationalities and their associated stereotypes, problematic as they are. In 2021, the

⁶¹ The two categories being: Egypt and the Bolas elements of the *Magic* franchise.

retrospective answer is a bit different, but not contrary to those early team meetings. As Fleischer explains, it wasn't pyramids that won out, but another trope altogether (2021):

Mummies is a great place to start. That's a monster that is uniquely Egyptian-themed. Now the idea of mummies that can roam around and fight people obviously belongs much more to that 1920s British explorer trope space. Universal monster movies and such, but we went that far. We're gonna have mummies walking around. [...] So, we made a whole keyword mechanic around that, which was *embalm*.

Here, there are two game terms that strongly frontload *Magic*'s themes: card types and keywords. *Card types* means what cards are, the kinds of creatures and professions that populate a setting. *Keywords* is one aspect of what cards can do, how things behave and the activities that comprise the cultural life of the setting. Both of these terms dovetail, at a design level, with Williams' notion of everyday culture, as well as the selective record (1965). These are characteristics and activities that are the bread and butter of the cultural setting. The notion of the selective record is important, because in the same breath as the account above, Fleischer fields a justification for mechanics and art choices given a "budgetary constraint" and a matter of "bandwidth" from technical writers and artists, explaining that "there's not an infinite supply of anything in the world" (2021). Mechanics, types, and keywords, which run through the technological language of *Magic* research and development are the main axis that developers use to shape the game's technical advances.

In terms of one design axis, *Amonkhet* mummies represented a new technical addition to the game. As Rosewater explains mummies were a new take on zombies, a tried and tested trope for the game, that allowed them to break color restrictions from previous settings because "zombies in cities are servants" which "made sense for white⁶²" (2021). Fleischer refers to them as the "sanctified dead", while Rosewater explains that "wild, more vicious zombies" prowl outside the game's city" and that was a "new thing" (2021). Mummies weren't just a cultural theme, they were a technical innovation that allowed designers to break conventional design for the game, and to produce novel, interesting mechanics. Although this takes place on cardboard, it is proper to consider these innovations along the lines of what Acland signals as the technological tentpole of blockbuster media (2020). These are new ways of using cards, and of using archetypes, which led to the production of more creature tokens than ever before in *Magic* history (2021, also see figure 7.2). But the inclusion of mummies is only a starting point of constructing Egyptianness.

⁶² This is in reference to *Magic*'s five colors of cards: white, blue, black, red, and green. With the idea that each color corresponds to larger themes and concepts, such as justice, knowledge, power, rage, and nature.



Figure 7.2: Zombie tokens, now in white.

Zombies were one core trope, and cats⁶³ were the other. Rosewater singles out the inclusion of a cat theme as “another Egyptian thing”, while Fleischer explains that “ancient Egyptians worshipped cats” (2021). Retrospectively though, Fleischer doesn’t consider the cat theme as the prominent Egyptian motif, noting that “cats have taken off in a big way and I’m glad that we were able to embrace people’s love of cats”, and further that “Lots of people love cats, not just ancient Egyptians, but people alive today who buy *Magic* cards” (2021). The resonance aspect of this discussion is present at every thematic level, considering how these tropes tie into wider pop culture formations, or the daily lives and sensibilities of players. What both developers are reflecting on, is how they decided to make Egypt resonant. On that resonance axis, Fleischer explains that “a lot of things people associate with Egypt are artifacts, you know costumes, and tools, and canopic jars, the Pyramids, the Sphinx statue,” which ended up running through a four-part thematic structure “the god, the trial, the cartouche, and the monument” (2021). It’s at this point that it is important to understand how cards are designed and can be read in order to understand that quaternary structure.

7.3 Card Analysis & Metaphorical Model: Egypt as Edifice

Although the subject of how to study cards is essential to analyzing the card set, it is exceptionally complex to render in full descriptive detail in this chapter. For that reason, that

⁶³ Even though cats don’t account for a large portion of the set’s cards

granular analysis has become the subject of distinct full paper (Zanescu, 2022). This method’s foundations are rooted in previous game analysis methods which are particularly compatible with platform studies (Altice, 2014; Švelch, 2016; Consalvo & Dutton, 2006; Fernandez-Vara, 2019). The method is comprised of three broad steps. First, select one or several specific subsets of cards to scope analysis. In this case, these are the gods, trials, cartouches, and monuments mentioned by Rosewater and Fleischer. Second, subdivide and assess the component elements of each card to understand the design language, called “Magic-ese” by Rosewater and the development team (2003), which harkens back to the discussion of Bakhtin’s speech genres and utterance in chapter 3 (1987). Third, trace repetition and divergence (called cycles by developers) to catalog broader design patterns in the chosen set that in a single color (vertical cycle) and across thematic groupings (horizontal cycles). This method moves from the particular instances of card design to the broader themes they are meant to structure and eventually to the whole card set.



Card Analysis Legend (From top, left to right)

- Frame
- Name
- Cost
- Art
- Type (Supertype and Subtype)
- Set Icon
- Text Box (mechanics and flavor text)
- Power/Toughness

Figure 7.3: Card analysis framework redux.

Conducting formal analysis on cards in this manner resembles platform walkthrough methodologies where the media object is visible, configurable, and manipulable to critics. In other words, card games like *Magic* don’t require critics to access or understand digital code and internal structures, since that code is external and visible on cards as text or visual cues. Cards, as Altice has explained, are planar, uniform, textural and spatial (2014). They have a configuration that structures their functions, and which allows researchers to compare them. The resulting uniformity allows for easier reading, insofar as we’re not comparing different kinds of mechanics

(2014). However, the problem with reading cards in this way is that it becomes analogous to reading computer code, or conducting complex linguistic analysis. There are some aspects, like flavor text and art assets that are easier to describe and discuss, but much of the mechanics, and groupings of cards become so complex that understanding this is the same as reverse engineering the entire product's design (Fig 7.3). For that reason, those groupings of cards, discussed in my other piece, are included at the end of this chapter as appendices with reading indications for those interested (Appendices 1-2). For that reason, I propose a metaphorical model to explain how a *Magic* product is built from the broad, to the specific.

In the chapter concerning simulation earlier, I described the process simulation as the construction of a house, or in Umberto Eco's words as a museum housing exhibits. That metaphor is useful if the architectural blocks are replaced with *Magic* concepts or terms, without needing to become absolute experts. A set of *Magic* cards, like *Amonkhet*, is equivalent to the overall building. It is a thematic construct that encompasses the whole edifice, from top to bottom. The orientation towards how that building is constructed is what Rosewater and Fleischer described as top-down or bottom-up. If the building begins with a function it is meant to serve, it's top-down, whereas if it begins with the materials on hand, it's bottom-up. Then, like in any museum, there are wings, split into sub-themes, groups, periods, etc. In *Magic*, this is the colors described in the literature review; different colors, different card groups (cycles), different themes. The cards and the text that is everywhere on them are the internal structures of the building. They are the beams, floors, ceilings and windows that keep the structure from collapsing. Then, the thematic groups that pop-up across the set broadly, like mummies, pyramids, sphinxes and more, are the home décor. They provide the flavor and produce the atmosphere in general. Lastly, story characters seen on legendary cards, like the gods, are the main exhibits, and the protagonists characters, are the people circulating in the space. The game mechanics added to a set are the event: how players can traverse the space, interact with it, and each other. Analyzing *Amonkhet* isn't the exercise of logging and tallying the construction materials only, it's understanding what the entire edifice's function is and who inhabits it.

7.4 Top-Down and Bottom-Up: Thematic Construction

One aspect that is crucial to examining *Amonkhet* is the notion of "top-down" design. Mentioned briefly above, when beginning set design, *Magic* developers face a determining question: Is this set design predicated on mechanics (bottom-up) or on themes first (top-down) (Rosewater, 2003b)? In bottom-up design, "you start with the mechanic [...] then the designer adds some basic flavor to explain what the card is doing [...] later a creative text person comes up with an actual card concept (Rosewater, 2003b). This form of design structures resonance with audience preconceptions by moving from card mechanics to color identity, to broader socio-cultural concept. In other words, developers start with what cards do and then determine what they can represent. In top-down design however, "the designer begins with flavor [...] not a

mechanic, mind you, but a neat concept. When this happens, we build the card around the flavor molding mechanics to fit the concept” (Rosewater, 2003b). Here, design filters broad socio-cultural themes, through the *Magic* design language, into card mechanics. Top-down starts with what the card will represent and then iterates on what it can do. Both models are functional ways of building the game, and specific sets privilege one form of design. Part of why each set fits a kind of design paradigm is the source material (cultural or franchise) which inform production, but they are equally designed to appeal to different kinds of psychographic player profiles and preferences (Rosewater, 2006; 2015). Some players want cards to play a specific way, and set designs usually include cards for various play patterns (Rosewater, 2006). On the other hand, there are aesthetic profiles the company has perfected over thirty years, which appeal to players that love mechanics, for whom bottom-up sets are made, and “flavor players”, for whom top-down sets are made (Rosewater, 2015). The player is already imagined at the inception of a set, and serves as a target for the resonant cultural product.

Cultural representation is fraught from the onset where entire sets operate under the top-down model, leading to the kind of articulated resonance discussed in previous chapters. This has led to sets like *Amonkhet* broadly being designed to represent the flavor of ancient Egypt as flavor players will recognize it (Wizards of the Coast, 2017a). Top-down design regulates wide-scale cultural resonance and the way it does so on the card is also regimented. As the quantity of vectors for card design above might indicate, *Magic* conforms to Chapman’s description of *conceptual simulation* (2016). *Magic* cards already boast exceptional complexity on each individual card, but the construction of a cultural edifice only grows more complicated as cards interact with each other and are built in complex sets. The game systems don’t model the experience of living at a specific time, as they do in realist simulation, but they do model abstract and complex systems and institutions, including religious faith, embalming practices, writing, etc. These aspects are modelled through the second aspect of card analysis: cycles.

7.5 Egypt through Tropes: Monarchs, Myths and Mummies

Understanding what Williams described as an imposed model of culture means understanding the edifice of *Amonkhet* as described above. Evidently, mummies are an unavoidable core of this analysis, as are the religious mythological overtones of the world. So, this section discusses the construction of Egyptianness along five themes of increasing importance, from the least represented to the most represented aspect. This means covering elements that are important in some fashion in the set’s overall structure. First, I discuss the introduction of two particular story characters in the set. Second, I discuss the theme of monument building and construction. Third, I examine the overall religious theme (displayed on card groups in Appendices I-II). Fourth, and most importantly, the lion’s share of simulation work is discussed through the trope of mummies (both in terms of kinds of cards and what players can do in this set), as well as the phenomenon of Mummymania. Lastly, although not a

principal design axis discussed by the developers, the terrain of the setting is also covered, as it comprises a passive but persistent part of all gameplay.

7.5.1 Egyptianness & Monarchs



Figure 7.4: Two and a half monarchs (Wizards of the Coast, 2017).

It may seem strange to begin discussing the construction of Egyptianness in cards with a type of card, legendary creatures, that has only two examples to discuss (Figure 4). Part of my reasoning is that these characters are standout examples of a problem that can be traced in both *AC: Origins* and here: a perceived lack of familiarity from the players towards the subject matter. In a different series of articles, *Amonkhet Talking*, Rosewater took time after the set's release to discuss individual cards, their sources and how they came to be (Rosewater, 2017c, 2017d, 2017e). In the third installment, he explains that “top-down design requires hitting resonant concepts that the audience is aware of” (2017e). *Amonkhet*, in particular, produced a problem the team had never encountered before: “Egyptian mythology and history provided a lot of broad influences (mummies, pyramids, deserts, hieroglyphics, etc.) that let us make categories of cards, but proved much more difficult when we were trying to make individual top-down cards” (2017e). In other words, it was easy to create motifs, “easily recognized iconography”, but when the team tried to find specificity, they found that “the stories and characters are less known by the majority of our players” (2017e). This seemed to strongly be the case when it came to characters.

Amonkhet has a few characters that the story revolves around, but as I'll discuss more in the blockbuster section of the chapter, those characters are cultural interlopers, avatars for player identification that come from other worlds. The characters found inside the world of *Amonkhet* are quite limited, with only four people. Two are locals competing in a series of trials that the religious aspect of the world focuses on, but two are historical adaptations: *Hapatra, Vizier of*

"The biggest thing that has happened in the realm of movies in many a year!"
—Bosley Crowther, N. Y. Times



20th
Century-Fox
presents

ELIZABETH TAYLOR
RICHARD BURTON · REX HARRISON

as MARK ANTONY

JOSEPH L. MANKIEWICZ

as JULIUS CAESAR

CLEOPATRA

ALSO STARRING PAMELA BROWN / GEORGE COLE / HUME CRONYN
CESARE DANOVA / KENNETH HAIGH / RODDY McDOWALL
PRODUCED BY WALTER WANGER · DIRECTED BY JOSEPH L. MANKIEWICZ · JOSEPH L. MANKIEWICZ · RANALD MacDOUGALL AND SUNEY GUCHMAN · MUSIC BY ALEX NORTH · COLOR BY DE LOUXE
1963

Figure 7.5: Cleopatra (Mankiewicz, 1963).

Poisons (Cleopatra) and *Temmet, Visier of Naktamun* (Tutankhamun). A particular problem with these cards was finding a way for them to *do things* in the game's systems. As Rosewater explains, Cleopatra was known for being a leader, but that aspect had to be omitted so that the franchise villain could be the antagonist (2017e). Likewise, she is often depicted in the orbit of Julius Caesar and Marc Anthony, but the team "didn't want to define the one female top-down character by her relationship to men" (2017e). Finally, the only remaining aspect of Cleopatra that remained to be mined was her fascination with snakes and her famous death from an asp bite (2017e). So, *Hepatra* mechanically adapts that notion by poisoning creatures (adding -1/-1 counters which weaken other cards), and by creating small snakes as well.

The card's illustration features a green-skinned woman, extending an arm with a coiled asp, adorned with a cap crown, and flanked by two serpent masked guards. Even this imagery has a lot to unpack, as the guards themselves resemble imagery from Emmerich's *Stargate* (1994), and the cap (adorned with a cobra) is actually attributed to Queen Nefertiti⁶⁴ some 1300 hundred years before Cleopatra VII's time (Schulz, 1997, 661). The game's skewed representation of Cleopatra is notable, not least because there are numerous representations in film, television, and games to draw on, none of which foreground snakes. In particular Mankiewicz's *Cleopatra* (1963), starring Elizabeth Taylor, portrays the pharaoh as an astute politician resisting the imperialism of Europe, and yet that version of the famous queen is not the direction taken by the designers. The HBO series *Rome* (2005) is notable for featuring the character as a shrewd politician, romantic partner, and schemer. Both of which also feature the snake motif strongly. So, *Magic*, in a self-appointed necessity of portraying Cleopatra without being able to fully rely on film tropes viewed as regressive by the designers, is forced to ascribe to different stereotypes. Curiously, both movie and television show have shown Cleopatra wearing era-appropriate headdresses where *Magic* does not, implying that there's a conflation of multiple pharaohs and Egyptian queens in one card. Setting aside the evaluation of a Cleopatra cards for a moment, there's *Temmet* to consider.

Like Cleopatra, this card is surrounded by tropes and preconceived notions about Tutankhamun. His artwork portrays him as a young boy, adorned with symbols of Egyptian kingship (the crook and flail replaced by an Egyptian khopesh and flail), in front of a hieroglyphic-covered wall. Then, there is the backside of the card, where *Temmet* appears as a mummy, in a mirroring position. As Rosewater explains, "His real claim to fame [...] was the discovery of his tomb", meaning that the developers "only really had 'boy king' and mummy to work, so [they] ended up making him a commander for embalm" (2017e). The first part of Rosewater's statement is telling. Notably, Tutankhamun's claim to fame is much larger than his tomb's discovery. Tutankhamun is proportionately more famous for having restored ancient Egyptian religion to power after a period called respectively the *Amarna Period*, known for the "Amarna Heresy" (Price, 2016, 3). Bill Price describes the Amarna Heresy as a lengthy transition away from ancient Egyptian polytheism towards a sun religion centering the pharaoh as a

⁶⁴ Nefertiti's Bust is a famous limestone bust of the queen housed at the Egyptian Museum of Berlin's collection.

monotheistic power above the gods, with Tutankhamun's father, Akhenaten, "declaring himself divine in his own lifetime [...] giving himself the title 'the Dazzling Aten' and calling his palace in Thebes 'the Dazzling House of Aten'" (Price, 2016, 3). Tutankhamun resolving the heresy by restoring ancient Egyptian religious cults happened swiftly through a condemnation of his father's heresy (Assmann, 1995). Further, the restoration has been called the "Amarna Sunset" and the "Egyptian counter-reformation) by Egyptologist Aidan Dodson (2009). Tutankhamun's restoration is so famous that his name literally means *Living image of Amun*, a reference to the principal god of the Egyptian pantheon, Amun-Ra. The second part of Rosewater's claim is however true in a way. Tutankhamun's rediscovery "propelled the previously obscure and largely forgotten pharaoh in the glare of the modern media, giving him celebrity status among the general public" (Price, 2016, 7). Price has referred to Tutankhamun, now, as the "most famous pharaoh" (2016). So, Rosewater is right, but not in the way he may think. Tutankhamun's claim to fame is infinitely more important, and generative, than his remains being uncovered, but that is how the figure resonates with modern audiences. How does that shake out on the card? *Temmet* has two abilities, making mummies stronger, and becoming a mummy himself. So, when players manipulate the card, it is the premier example of *turning cards in the graveyard zone into mummies*, which could also be read as excavating tombs or mummies shambling outside of them.

So, the two characters that are *actually* Egyptians who lived appear in weirdly truncated forms. Cleopatra only as she was in the moment of her death, and how blockbuster movies and prestige TV dramatize her death. Tutankhamun even more reductively appears primarily as the core card justifying and perpetuating the process of mummification, through the *embalm* mechanic. There was supposed to be a third historical Egyptian top-down card, who didn't make the cut: Ramesses II. Arguably, Ramesses might be even more famous as he is the Pharaoh in the Old Testament, "aka the Passover story seen in movies like *The Prince of Egypt* and *The Ten Commandments*" (Rosewater, 2017e). The reason he wasn't included is because the creative theme found the character "problematic", as "he's usually portrayed as completely bald and extra mean," and because "the pop culture portrayal of Ramesses revolved around him treating his people (a subset of them) badly and them suffering" (2017e). One would assume he was omitted because of fears of antisemitism accusations, but the deciding factor was the population of this fantastical Egypt was so docile, and their normal leaders so brutal, that developers couldn't properly design a despot mean enough (2017e). So, the Egyptian characters either ended up getting cut entirely, as Ramesses did, or molded to fit the pop culture perceptions of their lives, insofar as it didn't interfere with the franchise requirements of the game. Where the team did get a bit more space to structure the world was in their portrayal of monuments.

7.5.2 Egyptianness & Monumentality



Figure 7.6: Brick counters and monumentality (Wizards of the Coast, 2017).

At this point it's useful to briefly describe *what happens* during a game of *Magic*, as the cards I mention will deal more with gameplay, as opposed to solely their representational aspects. In the most succinct explanation, players draw cards and during alternating turns play them and attack each other until one player's life total reaches zero. A bit more in-depth, *Magic's* general way to win games is to attack enemy players with creatures or to cast spells that directly harm them. Playing cards requires resources that players slowly accumulate to pay for their creatures and spells. However, there are tens of thousands of non-standard ways to use resources in the game, and that's where monuments, as an idea, comes in. Rosewater and Fleischer's mentions of sphinxes and pyramids is a nod to one of *Amonkhet's* core ways of representing Egyptianness. As Rosewater in particular explains, cards like those in figure 7.6 represent "the constant monument-building that went on in ancient Egypt" (2017b). The monuments are all colorless, which is associated with buildings or artifacts in *Magic* design.

Further, they have two abilities that interact with the concept of bricklaying. Fleischer has explained the thinking behind this cycle as "inspired by the Civilization videogames, where you would build great monuments and they would give you some special power if you managed to complete them before other players" (2021). Years earlier, Rosewater had explained the cycle's origins as: "the idea for this cycle is that each monument had two actions: one that has an effect and puts a brick counter on the artifact, and a second with a stronger version of the effect but only usable if you had three or more brick counters" (2017b). The resulting mechanics indicate that each monument is undergoing construction, and that at a certain point it has been completed.

At a conceptual level, Egyptianness itself is associated with bricklaying, and monumentality, which shapes the gameplay to allow players to *build monuments* for various effects. When thinking back on the process, Rosewater notes that when “many people think of Egyptian thing, they think of the pyramids and the Sphinx, and monuments” (2017b). Once again, the unspoken implication is that designers were themselves a pop culture audience with resonant attachments concerning Egypt as a category. Certainly, ideas about mythological associations and religion are part of those resonances.

7.5.3 Egyptianness & Religion

In a recurring pattern, religion, mythology, and the gods of Egypt ran into many of the same problems as the historical Egyptian characters. Rosewater notes that the team “looked through the most popular of the Egyptian mythology and did a little research, which reinforced that the only characters people knew at all (and even then far less than the source material for [...] *Theros*) were the gods” (2017e). The research the team did was perusing Wikipedia (Rosewater, 2017d). So, the set did include references to Egyptian mythology to the tune of five adaptations of the Egyptian gods the cat-headed Bastet, the ibis-headed Toth, the crocodile-headed Sobek, the jackal-headed Anubis and the snake-headed Wadjet. Part of why I refer to the gods here in terms of their animal heads, and not their stories, or domains of influence, or connotation is because this is how the developers speak about them. Rosewater describes them collectively, stating that “all the Gods are animal-headed” and that they had to “match the source material” (2017a). In this respect, Magic follows the same kind of media logic as Hollywood blockbusters like *Stargate* (Emmerich, 1994), which also displayed Egyptianness through animal-headed helmets and masks. The inclusion of gods was viewed as necessary by the development team, with Rosewater further asserting that “the set inspired by Egyptian mythology had to have Gods” (2017a). The problem isn’t that the gods exist, it’s that they don’t particularly correlate to anything in Egyptian mythology or culture. They’re simply there for the sake of being there.

This type of top-down design is seen in a series of cards that derive from the gods as well; much more than I can include here. In short, there are gods, and each god has monuments in the world. Both the god and the monument are important to the portrayal of mythology and religion in *Amonkhet*, as each god has a home base (2017b). To interact with these elements of religion, players have access to a series of other cards that are part of the story. There are trials the protagonists must undergo to prove themselves to the gods. Then, when players complete those trials (by fulfilling a specific condition listed on the card), they are rewarded with a seal, that the game calls a cartouche. This creates a thematic pattern where players are rewarded for combining these cards for increased synergy (Figure 7.7). There are bundles of cards like these for each Egyptian-coded deity, producing what I called above the wings of the museum.



Figure 7.7: Red god and card synergy highlighted (Wizards of the Coast, 2017a).

Different colors, different themes, different gods, different trials, different cartouches but the same structure of play activities and synergy across the cards in *Amonkhet*.

So, the god and their monuments are fairly vacuous in terms of cultural specificity, aside from a sense these cards build into each other in a smooth manner. What is notable however is the cards called cartouches, like the one shown at the bottom right of the previous figure. It's not important to understand the effects, because their thematic charge is in their name and artwork. These cartouches are items characters can play, and they are jewel incusted gold necklaces. Cartouches have historically been used to display royal names in an oval form with a tangent line at the bottom or right hand side. As Egyptologist James Allen explains, cartouches are "name rings", "surrounding names of kings, queens, and some gods" which were heavily used in early Egyptological discoveries such as those of Champollion (2010, 9). In other words, they are naming units for important people and divinities. Their form is also standardized, and not composed of various evocative shapes like those above. However, in *Amonkhet*, cartouches serve a different purpose. Here, they indicate success in their color's respective trial, and are presented as "an ornamental decoration, and an invitation to the next Trial", with the final cartouche reward resulting in ritual sacrifice [2021]. Fleischer has described the cartouches as a "special medal" (2021). They're spiritual rewards at best, or Olympic medals, and filmic MacGuffins at worst. "a design challenge for [the designers] to solve" [2021]. These bundles of cards were designed to be "synergistic with one another," which further reinforces the mechanical, aesthetic, and thematic resonance that produces a unique Egyptianness found in *Magic*. So, what players *do* in *Amonkhet* is build monuments, perform religion, play one of two pharaohs, and more broadly interact with, play mummies and perform mummification (through *embalm*), which is the core mechanic of this setting.

7.5.4 Egyptianness, Monsters & Mummies

Though the previous categories of Egyptianness are concentrated in smaller bundles of cards, this isn't to say that *Amonkhet* doesn't have an overarching atmosphere or theme. Arguably, it's at the level of theme that the setting finds its strongest and most expansive connotations. *Magic* research and development actively use measurement indexes for figuring out if thematic density is sufficient across card packs⁶⁵ Understanding if a set reaches a specific threshold of thematic density means looking at all of the cards in the set and counting every single term that ties a card to that theme.⁶⁶ So, broadly speaking, *Amonkhet* features, creates or rewards the production of one kind of creature more than any other: mummies. This should come as no surprise given Rosewater and Fleischer's insistence of mummies as a key component of designing *Magic's* Egypt. Thinking back to levels of culture in Williams' sense, many of the examples above sit at the level of institutional or artistic culture inside the game world. The level

⁶⁵ The measurement is called "as-fan", referring to a card pack held in a fan shape by players.

⁶⁶ Although I won't be discussing the full measurement here, but the full tally of every kind of card, and every kind of creature is listed in Appendix 7-8

of the everyday is found in these broader sets of cards, and in particular in the key activity that *Amonkhet* centers: *embalming*.



Figure 7.8: The process of mummification in card form.

As *Magic* editor Matt Tabak described the mechanic as “[breathing] unlife into some creatures after they die”, and comically stating that “the dead are so useful here! They Cook. They Clean” (2017). The mechanic of mummification is straightforward in magic parlance. Players can play a creature, and when it dies, they may pay the *embalm* cost to play it again in its mummy form (figure 7.8). The card retains its abilities and its other attributes but becomes a *zombie* in addition to whatever it was before.⁶⁷ So, *Amonkhet* is a set where gods and pharaohs reside, but it is a set where players play and interact with mummies predominantly. Given that each *Magic* set ships with a handful of mechanics, this is the core technological tentpole aspect of each set. If the Cleopatra movies were marketed on the basis of scale, and contributions to cinematography, *Amonkhet*’s main appeal lies on the in the proposition of playing with mummies. As Tabak notes, “after you’re made into a mummy, you look pretty badass [...] like a movie villain or something!” (2017). Mummies are the core of this vision of Egypt, but they work because there are other aspects of Egyptianness, such as the gods, the monuments, and the pharaohs.

⁶⁷ There are numerous mechanical distinctions when we get to a more granular level of card analysis, but by and large this is how the card appears to casual players.



Figure 7.9: It's a jackal! (Wizards of the Coast, 2017).

In playing into the resonant tropes about Egypt, *Magic's* Amonkhet reaffirms a more general conformity with pop culture stereotypes concerning Egyptian culture, often quite intentionally. For instance, there are also *Jackal* creatures called *Khenra*, at a lower density than mummies. This is almost certainly a nod to the Egyptian god Anubis, but there are other jackal or Egyptian wolf deities (Sed, Wepwawet, Neb aq-t, Upi-sekhmeti, Ur-Khent). Shown below in figure 7.9, the fantastical *khenra* foster in the Egyptian jackal monster trope found in Hollywood films, like the aforementioned Roland Emmerich's *Stargate* (Emmerich 1994), or Stephen Sommers' blockbuster smash, *The Mummy Returns* (Sommers 2001) (Figure 7.10). Further, they bring back the idea that Egyptian deities and monsters are animal headed but have human bodies and distribute it across a much larger selection of cards. Though, generally, the jackals thematically function more as window dressing, increasing the cohesion of the atmosphere than being the cards that players are expected to interact with the most. There is no jackal mechanic to speak of. That is reserved for mummies.



Figure 7.10: Jackals, Jackal Everywhere (From top to bottom: The Mummy Returns, 2001; Stargate, 1994).

On the topic of mummies, it's difficult to begin speaking only about the mummy trope. Rather, it is crucial to fix the mummy trope in Egyptologist Caroline Jarsaillon's discussion of modern Egyptomania. In other words, mummies and the popularization of mummies as a media motif had a different basis originally than what it morphed into over the last two centuries. As she explains, Auguste Mariette, the head of the Supreme Council of Antiquities during French occupation of Egypt discussed in previous chapter, saw the future of public education about

Egyptian culture in “Egyptomania-inspired entertainment”, accompanied with “higher levels of scientific accuracy” (369). Jarsaillon locates early attempts of popularizing Egyptian content at the Paris World Fair of 1867, in the construction of Mariette’s Temple, with the help of the future head of the antiquities council, Gaston Maspero (369). Both figures were mentioned in the preceding chapter as key figures in the colonial exploitation of Egypt in terms of the development of Egyptology and colonialist archaeology. What they have to offer the current discussion about *Magic* can be understood by recontextualizing them, not as scientific archaeologists, but as media producers of the 19th century. So, it’s possible to think of early exhibitions of temples and palaces as antecedents to media renditions of mummies.

They were hardly the first, and as Jarsaillon explains, the Egyptian Court, produced as an “immersive and theatrical [display] at the Crystal Palace after its relocation from Hyde Park to Sydenham in 1854”, was not even produced by scholars but by two contractors who “were somewhat familiar with ancient Egypt” (368). The first, Owen Jones who had “worked on the Great Exhibition”, also called the *Great Exhibition of the Works of Industry of All Nations*, in 1851, and published his architectural observations. The second, Joseph Bonomi, had been a member of two expeditions to Egypt “in 1824 and 1842” and worked with the British Museum’s Department of Egyptology (369). Jarsaillon locates these early exhibits in a trend of defining Egypt through “the inclusion of Egyptianizing architecture” which “became rather common in the history of World Fairs” (369). These kinds of exhibitions gave rise to what Jarsaillon calls “mutual emulation”, whether Egyptology inspired Egyptomania (an outsized fascination with ancient Egypt) and vice-versa (370).

These early exhibits then had a thematic legacy in literary works, such as Dominique-Vivant Denon’s *Le Pied de Momie (The Mummy’s Foot)*; 1840) and *Le Roman de la Momie (The Mummy’s Novel)*, 1858), which began integrating the mummy as a core motif of Egyptian culture in the popular imagination, more than it had already been (371). This didn’t stop with Bram Stoker-esque novellas, and extended in the halls of Egyptological inquiry, where, for instance, Champollion (the renowned pioneer of hieroglyphic transliteration), used to sign his letters “with his name written in hieroglyphics, often adding Egyptian epithet such as *Mayamun*, ‘loved by Amun’ (371).⁶⁸ This soon extended to operas, such as Giuseppe Verdi’s *Aida* (1870), composed to commemorate the inauguration of the Suez Canal, at the request of Ismail-Pacha, then-ruler of Egypt. Ismail-Pacha had been intent on modernizing Egypt by playing into the colonial tropes and cultural industries, and even later proclaimed that “my country is no longer only in Africa; we are now part of Europe, too” (1879).

Regardless, the production of *Aida* (Verdi 1871) was viewed by Mariette as “a new way of using the interest whipped by Egyptomania to convey an accurate representation of ancient Egypt” (371). Mariette’s imbrication with artistic and commercial production was viewed as anathema to erudite Egyptological inquiry and despite Mariette’s best efforts “remained close to

⁶⁸ The chief Egyptian deity, often equated with Amun-Ra.

nineteenth-century theatrical fantasy characterised by an abundance of adornments (372). In the museum context, as Jarsaillon notes, institutions replete with “ancient Egyptian collections do not have to work hard to make their collection popularity”, and that the challenge of academically or ethically minded institutions are faced with is exploiting “the subject’s popularity while questioning some of the assumptions on which that popularity is based” (McDonald in Jarsaillon, 373). If the French and British Egyptological endeavors had of a focus on scientific inquiry and presenting an accurate vision of ancient Egypt, game products like *Amonkhet* care little for dusty artefacts of the museum.

However, the mummy trope remains extremely evocative and lucrative, which Rosewater and Fleischer confirm (2021). This means that cards in *Amonkhet* stand at the contemporary end of a long techno-cultural movement from Egyptomania to a much more reductive, if resonant, “Mummymania” (Day, 2006). Egyptologist and cultural theorist Jasmine Day has defined mummymania as “the popular fascination with Egyptian mummies – through the underbelly of culture, from Victorian pulp fiction through horror films and into late twentieth-century children’s toys and cartoons” (1). Using Antonio Gramsci’s formulation of fantasy worlds, Day refers to the mummy as an instance of “fabulous concreteness in popular intellectual life”, explaining that the mummy has “accumulated significances in contemporary cultures” (Gramsci, 1985, 350; Day, 1). Day also warns that mummymania has largely been ignored by academics and the public at large, since its location is in popular and often vulgar or genre art, which has led to the proliferation of “insidious cultural stereotypes that seem harmless” (Day, 1-2). In other words, mummies are the locus of contemporary articulated resonance with Egypt, and that resonance is predominantly build on stereotypical images and connotations. Before examining the media constellation of mummymania, it is crucial to take a moment to examine just how prevalent the mummy motif is in *Amonkhet*.

Slightly less than one third (41/131) of the creatures in *Amonkhet* are mummies, can be embalmed to make mummies or reward players for having mummies. This is substantially higher than any other kind of card that players can utilize, aside from humans. Mummies also cross conventional thematic boundaries that magic uses in general, like colors. A different way of putting it is that if *Amonkhet* is a museum, almost every wing is a mummy exhibit. It’s just different kinds of mummies. There are dutiful mummies, soldier mummies, horticulturalist mummies, cursed mummies, ravenous mummies, mummies riding camels, mummies fanning the rich and even mummies making other mummies (often horrifically on the living) (Figure 7.11). Mummies don’t touch every aspect of the set, but they are by far its predominant vector for constructing Egyptianness. The final aspect of the mummy discussion is to ask, considering that the set predominantly rests on this reductive motif, how this is a negative connotation in itself, and to consider the reach of mummymania in the broader media context.



Figure 7.11: Mummies, mummies, mummies! (Wizards of the Coast, 2017).

7.6 Mummymania: Mummies without Context

Perhaps a different way to ask the question is asking how denatured the mummy of mummymania is, compared to the mummy's native socio-historic and religious context. As Day explains, "Egyptianizing products and media images are often based on originals that are themselves at least once removed from their ancient sources of inspiration," mirroring a Baudrillardian simulacra argument (2). More directly, Day understands the modern mummy as a symptom of "Ancient Egypt [...] being manipulated in order to create new meanings for its old images, so that these venerable motifs can be put to work in culture today" (2). Much like Homi Bhabha's discussion of the stereotype as a negotiation between what something is in itself, and how people apprehend it, the mummy appears as the most widely circulated and modified "appropriated Egyptian motif" (Bhabha 1994, 66; Day, 3). In other words, Mariette and Maspero's mediatization of Egyptianness had occurred through the Pyramid, the Sphinx and the temple. Egyptology's Egyptianness is shaped by an Egypt that displays artifacts, pieces of art and places of worship.

This is, for the most part, the Egyptianness found in *Origins* discussed in the previous chapter. *Amonkhet's* Egyptianness bears some of those visual markers as well, but they are largely bereft of context and specificity. Further, *Magic* it exists in a modern media landscape where Egyptianness is located *foremost* in the mummy icon. Similarly, Roland Barthes located Romanness in the oiled bodies and coiffed fringes of mid-century actors in Mankiewicz's *Julius Caesar*; the director of *Cleopatra* mentioned above (1972, 26; 1953, 1963). What Day calls mummymania is arguably the core of Egyptianness for the 20th and 21st centuries. Not the oiled bodies of Roman soldiers, but the wrapped and desiccated lumbering dead that rise from a sarcophagus to consume the living erudite Europeans.

Mummymania, in comparison with the lofty academic aspirations of Egyptomania more generally, in Day's words, has been regarded as "'low' popular culture" located in particular in horror films and "mass-produced mummy kitsch" (3). It is yet another instance of the high-low culture debate that has haunted media studies since Adorno and Horkheimer's work since 1944. Day asserts that mummymania has only been discussed superficially, while it is in fact "a cohesive system of ideas and images rooted in the history of colonialism" (3). That cohesive system of ideas ties the bodies of the Egyptian dead with "a myth called 'the mummy's curse', 'the curse of the pharaohs' or simply 'the curse'" (4). At a connotative level, the mummy appears both an icon of colonial fascination, but also of bad luck, injury, warfare, disaster, and death (4). The mummy's curse is often tied specifically to the pharaoh Tutankhamun and led to the production of "six mummy-themed films between 1932 and 1955" in Hollywood and another four British Hammer Studios films "between 1959 and 1971" (4).

Film studios actively produced a subgenre of horror films focused on the mummy's curse trope. As Day further notes, using Egyptologist Frank Holt's notion of "ambulatory mummies," that the mummy is "the means by which the curse is enacted" (Day 2006, 4; Holt 1986, 60). This

certainly includes the famed *The Mummy* (Freund 1932) starring Boris Karloff (billed simply as KARLOFF). That movie spawned multiple sequels including, *The Mummy's Hand* (Cubanne 1940), *The Mummy's Tomb* (Young 1942), *The Mummy's Ghost* (Borg 1944) and the *Mummy's Curse* (Goodwins 1944). The Universal franchise of the 1930s and 1940s became the antecedent to the Hammer films of the 1950s-1970s starring Christopher Lee, as well as the Sommers films spanning the 90s-2000s starring Brendan Fraser, and the dead-on-arrival Tom Cruise-led Dark Universe franchise of 2017 (figure 7.12). This trope is found in *Amonkhet* as well, though its motif extends to the general inhospitality of the tombs themselves, as well as the deserts and the creatures that surround the mummy.



Figure 7.12: 85 years of mummymania (From left to right: *The Mummy*, 1932; *The Mummy*, 1959; *The Mummy*, 1999; Not shown: *The Mummy*, 2017).

As Rosewater and Fleischer note in their retrospective, they wanted *Amonkhet* to feel “mean” and to capture the sense of a “harsh world”, a “dangerous place” and a “hostile environment” for players (Rosewater and Fleischer 2021). In other words, players are positioned as makeshift Egyptologists opening the cursed tomb, replete with all the tropes of the horror films. This is certainly the case in cards like *Nest of Scarabs*, which mirrors the horrors of scarabs visited on criminals and greedy trespassers in Stephen Sommers’ *The Mummy* (1999, Figure 7.13). *Trespasser’s Curse* is an allusion to the cursed tomb raider who is doomed and may release a magical mummy, mirrored in Alex Kurtzman’s maligned *The Mummy* (2017; Figure 7.14) starring blockbuster action star Tom Cruise, which features a female mummy inspired by Sommers’ Imhotep who becomes a vengeful harbinger of plagues (in the form of city-wide sandstorms), complete with several elements of body horror, though unsurprisingly with sultry and seductive orientalist elements. Finally, the ambulatory *Festering Mummy* is largely

equivalent to the Imhotep character also found in Sommers' film who steals trespassers' body parts to become a harbinger for the *Plagues of Egypt* from the Biblical Exodus (Figure, 7.15).



Figure 7.13: Flesh-eating scarabs tied to the Mummy (*The Mummy*, Sommers 1999)



Figure 7.14: Mummies, but Make It Contemporary (*The Mummy*, Kurtzman 2017)



Figure 7.15: Imhotep enacting the mummy's curse (*The Mummy*, Sommers 1999)

Mummymania is certainly reductive in its voyeuristic pleasures, as far as Western audiences are concerned, and as Day notes, “indigenous peoples have recently protested against the excavation, display and museum storage of their ancestral human remains” (5-6). Day invokes Said’s Orientalism as well, explaining that Egypt has been its arena since at least the era of Roman propaganda against Cleopatra VII (6). On the one hand, the orientalist impulse is to condemn “mummies as the component of [Western] Egyptian fantasies that embodies its demons”, while on the other pursuing the “glorification of ancient Egypt” through Egyptological endeavors (6). What Day is noting, along with Jarsaillon’s description of Egyptological media endeavors earlier, is a two-pronged deployment of articulated resonance. On the one hand, there is positive Egyptianness, found in monumentality, religious worship, and hieroglyphs. On the other, there is the fetid mummy lumbering out of those same temples, connoting a negative Egyptianness. Both forms of Egyptian resonance co-exist and are often co-extensive, as is the case in *Amonkhet*. As Day explains, “the mummy romance “coexists with “the Western imperial domination of Egypt, including archaeological exploitation” (8). Certainly, the black cards in *Amonkhet* conform to this stereotype of the ambulatory flesh-eating monstrosity, but what about the white mummies who are uncanny protectors and servants?

This is a case of some aspects of the mummy’s curse trope abating, while also mixing in with the blockbuster superhero inclinations of contemporary popular culture. For instance, the 1997 cartoon *Mummies Alive!*⁶⁹ produced by DIC Productions and Northern Lights Entertainment was an instance of *good mummies* (Figure 6.16). DIC Productions had been behind hit children’s shows like *Inspector Gadget* (Adams et al. 1983) and *M.A.S.K.* (Stone et al.

⁶⁹ *Mummies Alive!* Is an important inflection point for *Amonkhet* because it also featured a toy line produced by Kenner in 1997 and 1998, on the franchising access. Notably, Kenner was also a Hasbro subsidiary, like Wizards of the Coast would be after 1999. This sparks associations with Derek Johnson’s description of media franchising, by way of extending Egyptianness through different forms of toy production, and game distribution.

1985), *G.I. Joe: A Real American Hero* (Brown et al. 1989) and *Captain Planet and the Planetegers* (Colburn et al. 1990), as well as videogame adaptations such as *The Adventures of Super Mario Bros 3* (Boone et al. 1990). On the other end, Northern Lights Entertainment was founded and run by the Czechoslovakian-Canadian blockbuster filmmaker Ivan Reitman, famed for directing *Ghostbusters* (1984), *Ghostbusters II* (1989) and producing *Space Jam* (Pytko 1996), among many other hit films. *Mummies Alive!* Wasn't a fringe production, it was Hollywood deploying some of its best and brightest to tackle the mummy genre. The show itself featured four mummy warriors waking in present day San Francisco to protect a pharaoh reincarnated in the body of a teenage boy. As Day notes, these mummies were part superhero, but they were fashion icons wearing “bandage crop tops, arm warmers and knee-high boots”, and they weren't emaciated corpses, but rather athletic and slender (103, 105, 116). They had humorous puns for names, like the self-serious Ja-Kal, purple-adorned Armon who would *gain an arm* when transforming into his armored shape, or the sassy femme of the group, Nefertina, whose name was a play on the famous queen Nefertiti and the American name Tina. Crucially, mummies were, for this flash in the pan, possessed of “fully developed personalities” and consisted of “non-object mummy women” (123)⁷⁰. Day contrasts these more positive representations of female mummies with the “sex objects with unravelling bandages” featured in earlier comics, which I would extend to Kurtzman's 2017 film, and even Sommers' *The Mummy Returns* (2001). The mummies were at times stern and dutiful, and at others humorous and glib.



Figure 7.16: *Mummies Alive!* intro (DIC Productions, Northern Lights Entertainment, 1997).

This is mirrored in one of the more recent entries in the mummymania array, Marvel's *Moon Knight* (Isaac et al. 2022) (Figure 7.17). The main protagonist, Mark Spektor, a mercenary

⁷⁰ And it possible to read Armon as an early representational icon for folks with disabilities as well, imputing a sort of prosthetic nature to mummification.

with multiple personality disorder, is enlisted to serve the Egyptian lunar deity Khonsu as an avenging warrior. He can also transform into his mummified form, wield various superpowers, and access hidden chambers in lost temples that are unseen to most. Like the mummies of *Mummies Alive!*, Moon Knight is in many ways alive, vibrant, and crucially, conventionally attractive and physically fit like most Marvel Studios leads. Moon Knight has many commendable aspects in terms of production, from the inclusive directorial credits of Mohamed Diab to the musical score by Egyptian composer Hesham Nazih, and the use of modern Egyptian music such as DJ Kaboo's *Enta* (2020) or Ahmed Saad's *El Melouk* (2021), which are instances of Egyptian underground hip-hop banned in Egypt because of its ties to the Arab Spring (Guyer, 2022). The main protagonist, like those of *Mummies Alive!*, is also a wisecracking adventurer who is part soldier, part archaeologist, part superhero. Acland has traced this particular iteration of the leading man as an "ideological [strain] of American popular film", the archetype of the "smart aleck" (2020, 77).



Figure 7.17: *Marvel's Moon Knight* (2022).

Acland further describes the smart aleck as "the blasé face of perpetual dissatisfaction", who presents "themselves as cool, distancing themselves from the million-dollar sound-and-light shows" that they inhabit and who often act in service of others, even if begrudgingly (290-291). Han Solo, Indiana Jones, and the newer brand of "diverse smart alecks" found in the Marvel Cinematic Universe certainly fall in this archetype, as do the *Mummies Alive!* Stars. The *Magic* protagonists, interlopers that traverse Amonkhet are more traditional chivalrous and self-serious protagonists, though they borrow much from media strategies used today.

7.7 Blockbuster Blockage & Designing Arcs

On the topic of protagonists and blockbuster pressures, I began this analysis discussing how Cleopatra was unable to be connoted with elements of leadership because of the franchise

villains who would take on those qualities. One of the core aspects of *Amonkhet* which has made producing and structuring Egyptianness particularly challenging is the commitment to the broader franchise aspects of Magic. Notably, *Amonkhet* isn't a standalone product, and in fact very few *Magic* products are standalone projects. This is what Rosewater and Fleischer referred to as the *Bolas* half of the Venn diagram for producing this entire set. Half of the set had to connote Egypt, and the other half had to set up events and tie into a larger narrative, setting up the main villain, Nicol Bolas (figure 7.18). This character began as a ridiculous farce, but has since evolved into an immortal, evil mastermind dragon that has been in the franchise since 1994. He also had a mechanic in the set called *aftermath*, where cataclysms would have fallout on the world, connoting his magnitude.

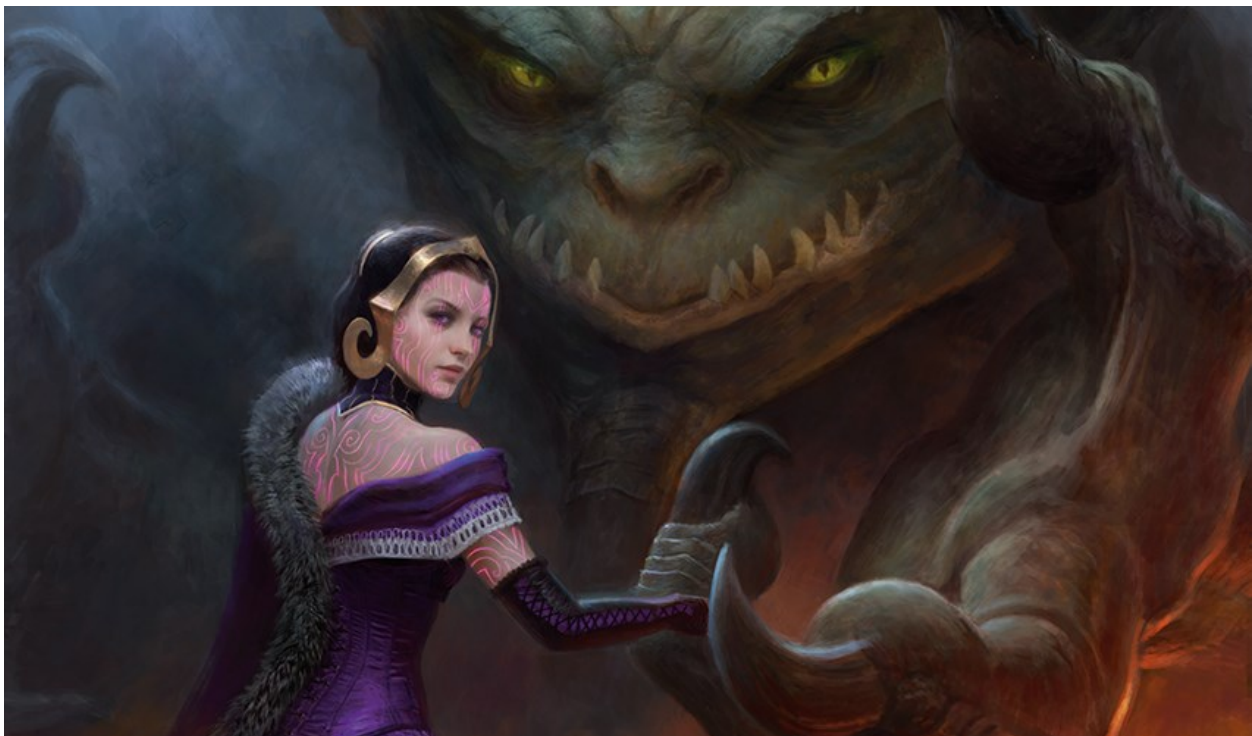


Figure 7.18: Protagonist Liliana Vess and Series big bad, Nicol Bolas (Wizards of the Coast, 2019).

Generally speaking, the events of *Amonkhet* reveal Bolas as the franchise bad guy for every set spanning 2016-2019, ten card sets in total, ending with a climactic set called *War of the Spark* (2019). This was *Magic's Avengers Endgame* (2019) or its *Return of the King* (2003). Every villain and hero from the past 26 years of *Magic* would show up, duke it out, and have an epic showdown with the immortal dragon god. This, however, meant that every set from 2016 to 2019 had to set up and feed into this narrative. This means that every set lost half of its real estate to the franchise narrative.

In some ways, Magic built a blockbuster finale from the franchising aspect bottom-up. Derek Johnson's definition of a franchise's operation are useful to note here, explaining that "control of intellectual property resources became increasingly central to corporate strategy, both

in their potential to be protected as proprietary and their potential to be widely shared and flexibly multiplied on a production level” (2013, 5). In other words, Bolas, as an intellectual property got to appear in multiple sets, and the sets were built towards his big finale. Another way Johnson explains franchising is as a “conceptual model for organizing media production” and playing an “imaginative role in the media industries, framing their responses to other economic [...] shifts” (6). When Rosewater speaks of the success of *Amonkhet*, it’s along these terms. Notably, Rosewater has shown a ranking scale the team uses when deciding which world to visit, for what reasons and how to structure the entire series around each specific releases, which he’s called “a larger canvas”. The team decided how “all sets interact with one another” and mapped everything “all in one sitting” (Rosewater, 2019). The franchise design aspect didn’t only happen in that meeting room, and other resources like publications that supported the story throughout (Elliot, 2018a, 2018b, 2018c, 2018d, 2018e, 2018f, 2018g). Another way of conceptualizing this model is the deployment, “ownership of stories and characters and control of multiple products that come out of franchises” (Acland, 2020, 260). Though any franchise with a good villain, also needs interesting protagonists.



Figure 7.19: Planeswalkers, Magic Protagonists (Wizards of the Coast, 2017).

7.8 Relatability & Interloper Protagonists

Magic’s multiverse is vast, as vast as the game’s tens of thousands of cards. Originally, players were understood as the protagonists, but in 2007, *Magic* released a type of card,

planeswalkers (Figure 7.19). Planeswalkers are exceptionally powerful, central cards to each set they appear in. They are the protagonists that can travel between the different worlds of *Magic*, and quite literally they are cultural interlopers. Often, like in *Amonkhet* they ruffle feathers, question local practices and intervene according to their whims. At a root level, they fulfill two functions. First, they allow players to find the closest thing to a player character to identify that *Magic* has. This allows players and writers to approach each world from a justified outsider perspective. Shown below, the heroic *Gideon of the Trials* is dashing, durable and debonair. *Liliana, Death's Majesty* is sultry, conniving and opportunistic. There are across different sets dozens of planeswalkers to choose from, and together they form *Magic's Avengers* (2012): The Gatewatch.

Most of them conform to the smart aleck archetype discussed above, and where Charles Acland locates the “the most elevated form of evaluation for contemporary culture: relatability,” which he contrasts with Roland Barthes’ “nature” (291). As explained earlier in the chapter on resonance, relatability is one of the prime motors of making a product resonate. Either the broader locale of *Amonkhet* resonates, or what appears weird and discordant (such as the religious zealotry themes) is questioned by the interloper characters. As Acland describes further relating means that the player “applies a familiar set of normative experiences, drawing the representational figure into one’s own life” and by this token is able to “naturalize depictions as obvious and true, timeless and sensible” (292). Acland’s example considers “myth-deflating New Hollywood films” where the point of view of the common people is used as a foil against “a larger oppressive system” (292). Though, notably, these smart alecks are less powerful than the villains, but still exceptional, and positioned as “personifications of an American idea of liberalism, ethical fortitude, and civic responsibility” (293). Naturally, the Gatewatch has to fight the mummies and the ones who make them, after all mummies are the result of occult sorcery, religious backwardness, and schemes of an evil mastermind. In this manner, when Acland refers to the ideological power of relatable concepts of characters as “hidden norms”, it becomes immediately apparent how *Amonkhet* either willingly or unwittingly perpetuates the trope of the horrific mummy, even by its unnatural stillness in the open or its unleashed fury against trespassers.

7.11 Egyptianness as Land: Desert Meets Bolas

A final note on the seeming natural quality of *Amonkhet*, or in other words in its conformity to Egyptian stereotypes comes from the terrains and aesthetic of the setting. I’ve primarily discussed *Amonkhet* as a conceptual simulation, overdetermined by multiple axes of Egyptian and *Magic* franchise systems that are stacked on top of each other. In some ways, the set products what Noah Wardrip-Fruin calls a Sim-City Effect, where looking at the set tells you less about Egyptian culture than it does about how *Magic* structures Egyptianess. One of the more passive elements of playing *Magic* works on a different axis entirely: lands. In short, lands

are the basic building blocks of the game, but they are also the place where action happens. They are, quite literally the land. Lands offer one of two iconic elements in how *Amonkhet* appears to most players. This is because lands account for roughly one third of all cards players are required to play. Without them, the game simply doesn't work. Therefore, their aesthetic charge is important, even though the cards aren't the big showstoppers.



Figure 7.20: Two Amonkhet lands: half-Egypt, half Bolas (Wizards of the Coast, 2017).

In film terms, they are the location, the lighting, the ambient sound and the score against which the backdrop of the action occurs. Lands in *Amonkhet* are mechanically the same as they are in every set, but they are illustrated to be part of the world, and like the world Rosewater and Fleischer sought to create, they have a half-Egypt locale, topped with the twin horns of the franchise villain in every piece (Figure 7.20). Even at the most basic level, the blockbuster pressures and Egyptianness connotations shine through in a way that meshes both perfectly for resonance.

One aspect to consider is the impact of lands on the construction of narrative and space *in play*. One way to conceptualize this aspect of lands in *Magic* comes from the work of media scholars Mary Fuller and Henry Jenkins on New World travel writing (1995). Published as a conversation piece, this discussion between the authors deals with the very idea of packaging land for audiences, along with the connotations attached to them (1995). As Fuller explains, “one wants to first find a way of characterising their [travelogues] structure and its shaping imperatives on its own terms and second, to account for their reception, their uses and pleasures

for audiences then and now” (1995). Land cards used to feature smaller art frames back at the game’s inception, but have since evolved into many forms, including the framing above. One manner to conceptualize this proliferation of full art lands, as they are colloquially called, is to attend to the fact that each top-down set since 2012 has featured an array of these case. The presumable resonant motivation is constructing a narrative space for players to enjoy. To paraphrase Jenkins’ point, the transformative act that *Magic* achieves is the “transformation of place into space,” in the above images from a generic plain or forest, to an Egyptian plain or forest, as a way of simulating the atmosphere of the locale.

7.9 Sealing the Tomb

Finally, *Amonkhet* appears as a triple threat of blockbuster. First, it is a smashing success for Hasbro, and in fact the start of an upward economic trajectory that continues in 2022. Second, it produces an Egypt that is serves to highlight both *Magic*’s technical advancements and its broader franchise aspirations. Lastly, it renders all the content of its Egyptianness resonant to players, either by overdetermining what pharaohs, gods, creatures, and landscape fits into its model, or by adding in interloper heroes that poke fun at all the dissonant aspects of the locale. At a thematic level, it matches a more complete definition that Acland provides, where the game fully supports the rendition as American, in its cultural and economic connotations: “individualism as the primary narrative force, immodesty as self-empowerment, white as the predominant skin color, violence as necessary to community survival, consumerism as the natural social and economic system, liberalism as progressive and noncontroversial, skepticism of state and corporate institutions as a civic duty” (2020, 76-77).

As might be evident by now, *Amonkhet* is complicated. In many ways, it is the reverse side of the coin to *AC: Origins* (2017). It is a conceptual simulation that merges the simulation logic of *Magic* more broadly with abstract Egyptian themes. It doesn’t purport or seek to represent life as it was lived by the Egyptian folks, equated with realist simulation. As Rosewater remembers, while the developers “were influenced by Egypt, no doubt, the world of *Amonkhet* had a very distinctive [...] feel” and that they “made [their] own world” (2021). What he signals here is that *Magic* successfully absorbed the thematic content of resonant Egyptianness. *Amonkhet* certainly is its own unique setting, inside of that resonant constellation, but it is nevertheless determined by its cyclical design and its superlative inclusion of mummies at *every level* of the card roster. If *Origins* sought to reproduce Egypt as seen in museums, *Magic* did it by blending down everything in pop culture and reproducing it on cardboard.

What’s produced here also accesses an extremely fine tuned paradigm of inclusion and exclusion described by Mieke Bal in her discussion of visual essentialism, which operates through recognition of peoples, icons, signs and motifs in visual culture. As she has explained, “to be ‘off the map’ is to be of no significance, obsolete or unknown; to be ‘on the map’ is to be acknowledged, given a position, accorded an existence” (2003, 21). Although Bal uses the map, I

would substitute it with Siegart's grid as an analogue for *Magic*. Everything that is in the grid, is most essential, everything that is not, is simply excluded. In this way, *Amonkhet* primarily shows an Egypt of gods and mummies. It does include analogues to the Nile, and Luxor for instance, but those don't feature in the game narrative. Likewise, this Egypt is not an Egypt of common people, it is an Egypt of religious cultists, and the supernatural creatures that encircle them. These inclusions and exclusions don't undo or challenge Hollywood tropes, they rely on them.



Figure 7.21: Doubling down on Egyptianness.

As Rosewater puts it, this is a facile piggyback ride on centuries of cultural domination, which is at no point more evident than in the luxury *Amonkhet Invocations*, extremely rare and randomly inserted gold-plated, limestone aesthetic-laden cards, that players can find in *Amonkhet* packs. Egyptian printing of cards like the one above (Figure 20), show that rather than thinking critically on the shortcomings of how *Amonkhet* need to structure Egyptian culture, it doubles down. Fleischer, now five years after the fact, considers that they “nailed a lot of the Egyptian themes”, while Rosewater feels that “the world had a very living element to it that the gameplay did a good job of demonstrating” (2021). Perhaps the most problematic aspect is that *Amonkhet* features very few characters, and those that it does appear in truncated forms by the necessity of the overall series. In other words, it is a world of stereotypes and interdimensional tourism.

Amonkhet is built to produce a world, an aesthetic, and an atmosphere, but not representation. Crucially, it accesses some concepts that *Origins* neglects, such as the fundamental importance of religious practice, which is generally understated from a presentist secular perspective, but it does so by merging it with cursed mummies, live vivisections, and scarab burials. On the other hand, it features scant representation of Egyptian figures. Now, if this were the case in all of *Magic*'s products, it would be simple to say that the game is generally not built to convey these kinds of stories. Putting aside the implications of that kind of sweeping statement, this is precisely not the case in the Greek-inspired *Theros*, which I discuss later in the project. In the end, *Amonkhet* is not built for identification, it is built for relatability, compressing the fullness of Egyptian culture into only those resonant stereotypes that Western audiences are expected to understand (Acland, 292). It is built for players to insert their perspective into the ornate systems provided by the designers. In the end, *Amonkhet*'s autonomous mummies are analogous to what the set actually does: uncritically replicate what was already there by mangling the vibrant and living culture of Egypt.

VIII. GREEKNESS IN ASSASSIN'S CREED ODYSSEY: HISTORY, MYTH AND MOVIES

“Before you, I see a path, built by friendship, and family, love and loss, war and bloodshed [...] As you write your odyssey across the mountains and the seas, remember... Greece journeys with you” – King Leonidas I – *World Premiere Trailer* (2018)

8.1 Your Odyssey

On June 11th, 2018, exactly 11 months since its last E3 appearance on the main stage, the spiral Ubisoft logo flashed on screen at the company's conference. The trailer opened with a shot of white marble spears and a Spartan helmet to the booming cheers of the packed Los Angeles Convention Center, flowing into a nighttime establishing shot of Sparta, and in simple white script “A Ubisoft Quebec Production” (Ubisoft, 2018a). The sorrowful pleas of the protagonist's mother, set to somber piano tones, intimated a dark tone to start off, though it immediately cut to sweeping vistas of Greece. Narrated by a gruff voice, later revealed to be that of the legendary King Leonidas, the player is told “where we begin, does not define who we will become” (2018a). Shown in the epigraph above, the premise of the game is neatly laid out for the audience, with additional prompts by the hero's mother explaining that “you were sent by the gods to protect this world”, and the *Father of History*, Herodotos⁷¹, telling players that “you carry the blade of Leonidas, act like it” (2018a). Set to a booming techno-militaristic track with sweeping epic overtones, the trailer bombarded audiences with landscapes, characters, combat, and customization. It was building on what *Origins* had set up, but the level of intended hype was evidently meant to get adrenaline flowing. Where *Origins* was mysterious and exotic, *Odyssey* was badass and epic.

The audience cheers indicated that *Assassin's Creed Odyssey*⁷² was being revealed to a completely different industrial context than *Origins* had been the previous year. Ubisoft had rehabilitated the franchise from its lowest point (in terms of sales and critical reception) to a second period of a cutting-edge technical quality, thematic excess and historical maximalism matched by few rivals in the blockbuster games industry. This wasn't a trailer shown in Microsoft's broader tech conference, it was the capstone to Ubisoft's individual conference, capitalizing on the success of *Origins*, while rehabilitating the discourse around *Unity* and *Syndicate* (2015, 2016). This game wasn't here to show off new hardware, it was the star of the show, which creative director Jonathan Dumont's beaming smile made clear. The first striking

⁷¹ Alternatively called Herodotus, but the game uses the above spelling and pronunciation.

⁷² Hereafter *Odyssey*.



Figure 8.1: Odyssey trailer panorama 1; Establishing Shot of Sparta, General Nikolaos and Hero, 300 Spartans (2018a).

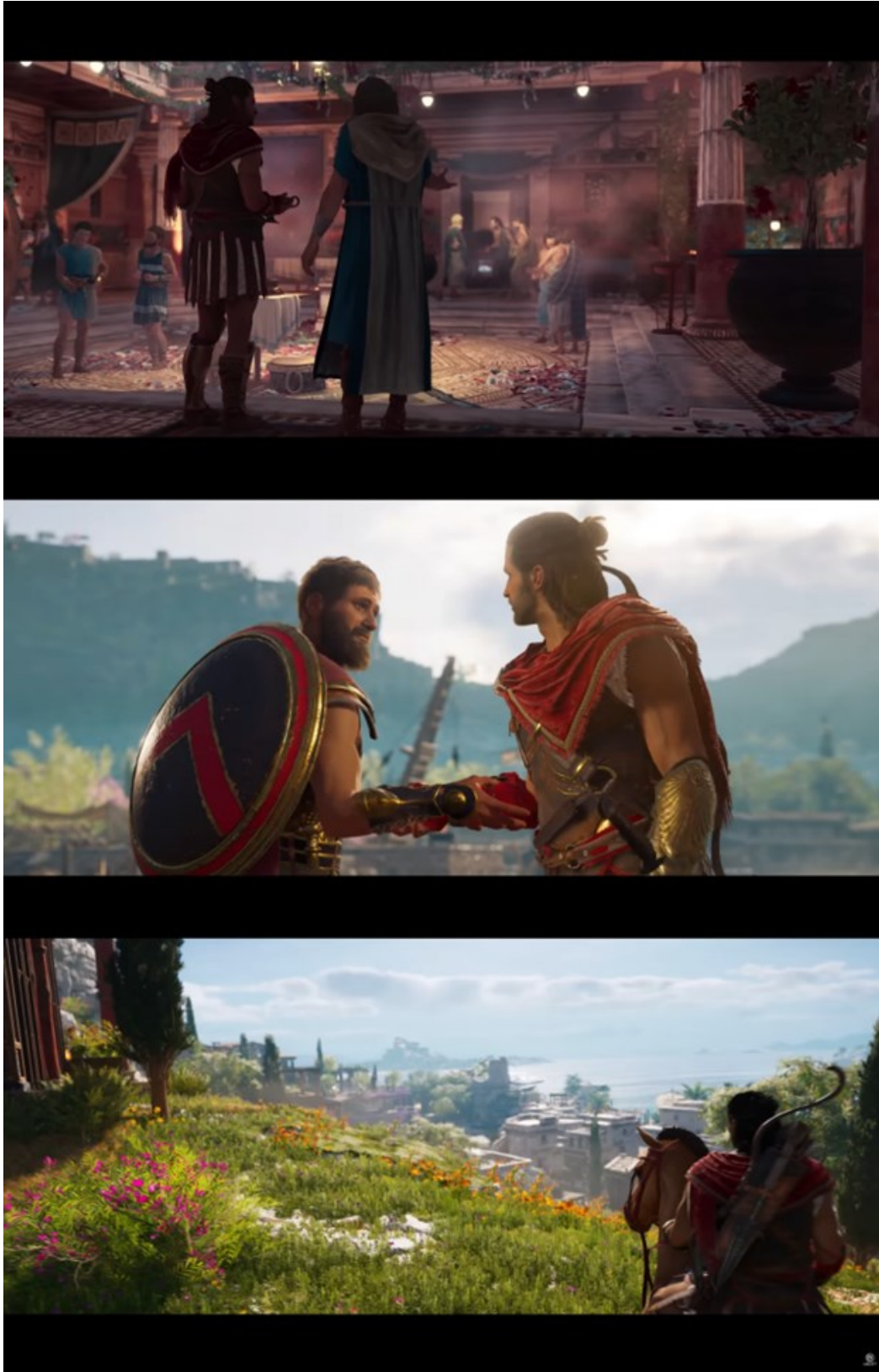


Figure 8.2: *Odyssey Panorama 2*; Hero at Perikles' symposium, Hero and Brasidas, Hero overlooking Greek city (2018a)



Figure 8.3: Odyssey panorama 3; Shot of Greek megalithic statues, Hero jump attack, and running assassination maneuver with shifting armor (2018a).



Figure 8.4: Dumont's lauded arrival on the E3 Stage (2018a).

difference between *Origins* and *Odyssey* wasn't just the jump in cultural setting, but that the entirety of the promotional material featured no cutscenes or cinematics external to the game's engine. Even the shots of the prologue and the famous 300 Spartans showed a higher framerate usage of the game's assets, which spoke to Ubisoft Quebec's confidence in the product itself. However, Dumont's speech didn't touch on these aspects, it positioned the game in other ways.

What he was proudest of was the reinvention of the franchise that had started with *Origins* now becoming fully realized in *Odyssey*, remarking that the game is "more than just an adventure, it truly is a role-playing journey" (2018b). The game's core premise was communicated quite differently as well. As Dumont explained (2018b):

You will explore on land and on sea, one of the most iconic and influential settings in human history: Ancient Greece. The golden age of Athens saw the rise of democracy, modern medicine, revolutionary art, and western philosophy. But it was also a time of war, a devastating conflict between Sparta and Athens. The Peloponnesian War divided the Greek world and changed the course of history. In this world of contrast and opportunity, this land shaped by the gods, rages a battle between order and chaos. This is where your adventure begins.

From the aspects covered, to the positioning of the stakes, actors, and themes, it was clear that Greece didn't need as much work to explain its workings to the audience. However, much like Bayek's sheriff connotations in the previous installment, the hero of this game was initially



Figure 8.5: Marble panorama of the game (2018b)



Figure 8.6: Gender Choice (2018b)

described as “a simple mercenary, an outcast” asked to “take on an incredible quest to save your loved ones and become the legendary hero Greece desperately needs” (2018b). Dumont

continued detailing with verve the team’s “energy, passion and dedication” and how they had spent the last three years toiling to produce an “epic RPG experience”.

More precisely, the studio foregrounded that the game would not have players embark on “an Odyssey, but your Odyssey, shaped by your actions and choices” (2018b). In many ways, the following reveal felt like a balm to the criticisms facing *Assassin’s Creed Unity*’s horrendous reception in 2014. The audience’s cheers when Dumont explained that “the first choice you’ll make, at the start of the game is to choose your character, Alexios or Cassandra,” were resounding. The game would have, for the first time in its decade-long runtime, fully voice-acted, motion-captured gender options for the entirety of the game. It is difficult to explain for now just how much content that entails, without getting into the granular aspects of the game, but at the production level, this verged on producing two separate games, with each voice actor recording multiple thousands of hours of spoken dialogue (Ubisoft, 2018c). Dumont also enthusiastically recounted how this focus on choice ran through the entire game, not limited to the protagonist choice, mentioning that “for the first time, we have deeply changed the way we tell stories in *Assassin’s Creed*” and that “you can now truly interact with history like never before” (2018b)⁷³.

Ubisoft developers were integrating branching dialogue options into the game’s open world, in effect merging techniques like those used by Bioware in the *Mass Effect* and *Dragon Age* franchises. That choice was present in the dialogue options, the choice of protagonist and a more refined skill system that the previous game had begun experimenting with. Three main ways that enshrined *choice* as the core design vector in the reveal were gender options, debating the famed philosopher Sokrates and the iconic *Sparta Kick* skill, modelled after the maneuver shown in Frank Miller’s *300* comic and the Zack Snyder film adaptation. *Odyssey*’s development (running from 2015 to 2018) placed it in a broader development trajectory, stretching from the franchise’s contractions to the triumphant *Origins*, extending into yet unseen installments. The game was positioned as the natural next step in *Assassin’s Creed* technical development, as well as its adaptation of real-world cultures, not to mention its filmic DNA. Though, it was only in the following weeks that the game’s scope would become apparent.

Over the next few months, Ubisoft would roll out an array of content detailing just how massive *Odyssey* was compared to its predecessor. There was a four-episode docuseries called *Behind the Odyssey* (2018d, 2018e, 2018f, 2018h) that covered topics like gameplay mechanics, combat, naval warfare, and the representation of Greece itself. This series opened the way for various leads inside the game’s production to detail their work. Melissa MacCoubrey, the narrative creative director, spoke about the importance of *choice*, and how “it’s the philosophy that’s flowing through all of the creation of the game” (2018d). Choice included a romance system, which doesn’t “necessarily intertwine with the bigger picture” and entailed more

⁷³ A statement that I’ll discuss broadly throughout this chapter, in relation to Adrienne Shaw’s *Tyranny of History* piece covered in previous chapters.



Figure 8.7: The kick heard around the Greek world (Ubisoft, 2018b; Miller, 1999; Snyder, 2006).



Figure 8.8: The aristeia in cinematic form (2018i).

“regional content stories, or you know, a little bit more for fun”, in the words of Dumont (2018d). The game director described how choice would allow for players to craft their own unique experience, create a variation of tones in Greece, and most crucially how “player choice is a motivator [that] connects you with what you’re doing” and the degree to which “the game is talking to me [the player], and I need to respond to that” (2018d). Choice was the key vector for structuring resonance. After all, what’s more resonant than what the player chooses? This would be felt in the dialogue, the playstyle, the abilities, the romances, and which city state to side with, Sparta or Athens (2018d).⁷⁴

Interwoven with this docuseries, the studio dropped two more trailers and a separate mini-documentary. One trailer was for Gamescom on Aug 21, 2018, which focused on Cassandra as the protagonist (for the first time in all promotional material, which had to date named the protagonist as a son of Sparta) (2018h). Although Cassandra had been shown before, this video was fully about her. Then, shortly before the game’s Oct 5th release, Ubisoft put out a *Launch Trailer* that featured accolades from games journalism outlets, with IGN describing the game as “DAMN BEAUTIFUL” (2018i). That trailer showed more of the action combat in longer sequences, still set to booming music, and with the hero’s mother narrating how this was “your Odyssey” (2018i). The most distinguishing feature of this trailer was an exceptionally long combat scene where the protagonist’s combination attacks are shown in closeup, as a brand-new take on the classical Greek tradition of the *aristeia*⁷⁵ (Figure 8.8). The smaller documentary they put up was to showcase how taxing motion capture and voice acting work was, and to foreground the actors for both characters: Greek/Canadian actress Melissanthi Mahut, as Cassandra, and Greek actor Michael Antonakos for Alexios (2018j). Notably, Mahut spoke about the complexities of portraying a female warrior who could access “a spectrum of emotion, without being schizophrenic”, while Antonakos spoke about what the role meant to him, as he was originally born in Malia, and has Spartan cultural roots (2018j). For the first time in the franchise’s history, the company had chosen to hire, and made a great deal about showing, actors whose ethnic backgrounds matched the characters. The game was surrounded by paratexts celebrating cultural specificity, technical advancement and ethical hiring practices. If Odyssey’s barrage of promotional material made one thing clear, it was that this project was going to be the biggest and most grandiose game the studio had ever produced.

8.2 Odyssey: A World of Heroes, for Heroes

It's in this context, a predominant focus on choice, the deployment of filmic techniques like establishing shots and closeups, the literary conventions of Homeric texts, the inclusion of numerous historic characters, the maximalist focus on portraying all of ancient Greece, and the

⁷⁴ I leave the other docuseries episodes for the specific parts of this chapter they discuss in regard to the game’s specific systems, spatial construction, protagonist and general aesthetic, which are discussed hereafter.

⁷⁵ Classicist Gabriel Rossman explains that *aristeia* “literally means moment of excellent but basically refers to a battleground killing spree” which is measured by “raw size of number of defeated foes” (2017).

broader atmosphere of adventure, matched with the protagonist's heroic persona, that I discuss the structure of *Odyssey*. The rest of the chapter broadly subdivides the game into three sections, mostly matching the previous analysis of *Origins*: the core game (and small DLC additions) which constitutes the vast majority of this chapter due to its exceptional size, the *Legacy of the First Blade* and the *Fate of Atlantis* expansions, and *Discovery Tour: Ancient Greece*. In these the first section on *Odyssey*, the division of the landscape into zones is once again discussed, but this time with added emphasis on the astronomical quantity of content included in the game, and the issues this version of Greece produces. Likewise, elements of sound design, protagonist positionality, combat and customization, game economy, and the distinctly more naturalistic version of the tour are covered throughout⁷⁶. The full playthrough is coded in tables detailing the 126 hour-long recordings, once again matched with figures and thick description (Geertz, 1973) of the gameplay experience. As world director Benjamin Hall puts it, *Odyssey* “reinforces a sense of you being on your Odyssey,” so it's time to see what your Odyssey actually means (2018f).

8.2.1 Mapping the Journey

The Greece of *Odyssey* once more parachutes Layla Hassan and players into an action-packed prologue, however this one is set some fifty years before the main narrative, as opposed to *Origins*' economical story setup. Players are treated to a small cutscene and then taught the combat mechanics of the game through a retelling of the Battle of Thermopylai. Like the Spartan Kick referring to *300*, *Odyssey* also positions Leonidas as the quintessential Greek hero, fighting against the Persian invasion, and prospective enslavement of the Spartan people, setting the game in the earlier part of the Classical Greek period (Fig. 8.9). The cinematic ends with a transition to the heat of battle. Then, the game cuts to the present day explaining the stakes of the story to the broader *Assassin's Creed* franchise story, ending with a cheery “431 BCE here we come!” that allows players to select their protagonist: Alexios or Kassandra.⁷⁷ Then, the game loads into Kephallonia Island, with pastoral music⁷⁸ and has the game's bird companion Ikaros do a fly-by establishing shot of the area, settling the gaze on Kassandra cleaning Leonidas' spear, who is immediately insulted by thugs. This fast-cutting initial segment is a perfect indicator of the game's tripartite thematic construction: historic epic, science-fiction romp, and sword-and-sandal comedy adventure matched with Greek pastoral tones. There is a lot packed into these few minutes, giving players a taste of what the next hundred hours of play will include, but once again, the game map is crucial to navigating the world.

⁷⁶ Specific Discovery Tour stations that have Behind the Scenes tags are discussed at relevant points to the core game, as opposed to the tour exclusively.

⁷⁷ An initial exploratory playthrough timing out at 77 hours with Alexios was completed in 2018, while this playthrough focused on Kassandra.

⁷⁸ *Odyssey* – Greek version by The Flight, Mike Georginades and Fanny Perrier-Rochas



Figure 8.9: Leonidas' speech to the 300 (Ubisoft, 2018a).



Figure 8.10: First accessing game Map – *Odyssey* (Ubisoft, 2018a).

Arguably, the map (figure 8.10) is even more important in *Odyssey* than it was in *Origins*. As soon as players open the map, they are given a quick explanation on using the tool to locate objectives, place markers and navigating the world more generally. As opposed to *Origins*' sand-

swept aesthetic, *Odyssey* opts for a Greek painted aesthetic on the ocean areas, and obscured mountains on land, differentiating where players can sail and where they have to walk. The zones are once again segmented by level ranges (shown as a number-shield-number icon), with Kephallonia ranging from levels 1 to 5. However, one key distinction from previous installments is that zones scale up to the levels of players, so that as players adventure and surpass zone levels, the game never becomes too easy. This, combined with the fact that enemies three levels higher than the player are exceptionally difficult, means that the game incentivizes players to follow a zone order, while also keeping the playing field scaled.

Thinking back on the Bogostian procedural rhetoric (2007) argument made in the *Origins* chapter, this map functions less as a daisy-chain structure and much more as a web-like open structure. At the macro-level, players are freer to explore increasingly high numbers of locations as they level up, with only the first three areas being more linear. And following the unit-system structure, the micro-construction of each zone is a more extensive version of the game's previous installment. I should note before discussing how zones are constituted individually just how large the game world is. According to fan sites that measured the game world using American scales (Gamerant, 2020; Aberdeen, 2020), *Odyssey*'s Greek map clocks in at an unfathomable 90.7 square miles⁷⁹, in comparison to *Origins* 31 square miles, nearly tripling the game world in size (though much of that space is devoted to the Aegean Sea).⁸⁰ I would also add that the game is packed with tall mountain peaks, and sunken ruins, meaning even in that 90 square mile range, the game's three dimensional space is even larger than the map lets on. In that space, there are 29 zones each with a small tagline or zone nickname discussed later.⁸¹ The connotative aspect is more streamlined than it was in *Origins*, though as players zoom into each zone, it becomes clear that there are zone subdivisions, cities, villages, and ports that orient traversal.

For instance, the map in figure 8.11 shows the northern third of Attika, the zone where Athens is located. Without all the markers and subdivisions traversal would be virtually incomprehensible. Quests also often indicate the subzone where the player needs to go, but will not outright mark it on the map, as they did in *Origins*, requiring further exploration. Players can no longer fast travel to cities and villages, needing instead to find the viewpoints where they can "synchronize" with the landscape. Generally speaking, the map is exceptionally complex by series standards, because the world is even more complicated, and it still retains a Baudrillardian map-preceding-territory relationship where players have to be able to make sense of traversal and narrative progression somehow.

⁷⁹ 234.9 square kilometers for *Odyssey*.

⁸⁰ For further comparison, Bethesda's *Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim* had an open world at 14.5 square miles (Gamerant, 2020) and World of Warcraft's original map was around 60 square miles (WoWpedia, 2022; WoWHead, 2020).

⁸¹ In subsequent tables I also list the Aegean Sea and Panhellenic for quests that span the entire Greek world, though these are not "zones" in the game's sense.



Figure 8.11: Zoomed map of northern Attika (Ubisoft, 2018a).



Figure 8.12: Map Legend – Odyssey (Ubisoft, 2018a).

The map legend also matches the increased degree of complexity that the game world and map exhibit, showing numerous different kinds of locations, activities, and quest markers. Shown above in figure 8.12, the legend itself is not annotated as in the previous chapter, largely

because the game color-codes it for players to be able to read. The color white often means places to discover, while red locations like forts, ruins and ports are clearly militarized and hostile. The quest markers vary by color as well, with gold being part of the main game, white being supplemental non-descript contracts and bounties⁸², teal indicating the *Lost Tales of Greece* downloadable content, and orange being for the much larger expansion episodes added later in the game’s life cycle. With all these points of interest calculated, a pattern begins to emerge.

Table 8.1: Points of interest and activity proportions (core game only)

Point of Interest	(Quantity x/1322)	Proportion (%)
Viewpoint	117	8.9
City	36	2.7
Village	49	3.7
Sanctuary	16	1.2
Ship Dock	75	5.7
Historical Location	360	27.3
Dwelling	88	6.7
Temple	41	3.1
Cave	66	5.0
Underwater Location	42	3.2
Tomb	22	1.7
Animal Den	48	3.6
Legendary Animal Den	8	0.6
Camp	65	4.9
Quarry Camp	8	0.6
Military Camp	99	7.5
Leader House	21	1.6
Arena	1	0.1
Fort	30	2.3
Fortress	5	0.4
Port	14	1.1
Ruin	45	3.4
Mysterious Site	6	0.5
Ostraka	60	4.5

These points of interest can be separated into the same four broad categories, as in the previous installment, with an added fifth hybrid form of space (Table 8.1). First, there are locations that players travel to by foot, but which mostly serve an organization purpose. They tell players “You are here”, to allow for more organized navigation, and they are the most common of points of interest in the game. This includes, cities, villages, religious sanctuaries, and a

⁸² I don’t discuss these quests because they either don’t have any named characters or story significance at all, or they are stock repeatable quests to acquire drachmae (money), resources and experience.

staggering number of historical locations that are visible on the game map. Second, there are “investigation zones” that include many places to loot throughout the game:

- **Waypoints:** Mountaintops, landmarks, shipwrecks, and elevated spots where players synchronize their hawk, Ikaros, to the landscape, expanding their capacity for exploration.
- **Ship Docks:** These allow fast travel like waypoints, and calling the player’s trireme, the Adrestia, for easier travel by sea and naval engagements.
- **Dwellings:** Greek houses that often have a treasure chest, an ostraka⁸³ fragment, or a crime to investigate.
- **Tombs:** Tombs of kings or heroes, holding a stone tablet called a stele, with ancient civilization motif on it, granting a skill point.
- **Underwater locations:** Shipwrecks, sunken palaces, or ruins with treasure chests to loot, or investigations.

Third, there are all the “eradication zones” once again, though unlike in *Origins*, there are distinctions between who the player fights. Military camps, quarry camps, ports, forts, and fortresses mean that the player is fighting either the Spartan or Athenian army, and when they are seen killing upstanding Greek citizens, their infamy rating increases, prompting mercenaries to hunt them down. Ruins and regular camps however feature crazed cannibals, war cultists, helpers of the Cult of the Kosmos⁸⁴, the Daughters of Artemis (women living outside of the polis⁸⁵) and bandits. Fourth, there are once again animal dens, though here they aren’t separated by animal type (wolf, lion, bear, etc.), but by whether you’re fighting a regular kind of animal, or a legendary animal like the Kretan Bull from mythology, and even some mysterious sites where players fight mythological monsters outright (the cyclops, medusa, sphinx and minotaur). Fifth, and the new addition, there are hybrid locales that are both filled with treasure, but require specific killing of city leaders, military commanders, or cult commanders. These zones often also require the theft or burning of polis resources, and they include temples under military control, the city leader’s house, and caves. These are often coded as political, rather than merely military or mercantile.

This distribution of activities and points of interest functionally shifts what kind of valence *Odyssey’s* Greek world had, as well as the context of looting and killing. Color coded in table 1 below, the kinds of colonial viewing Said discussed (1993) are still present. In blue, surveying locations, in yellow, looting, and in red, killing. Notably, looting in cities is not tolerated and civilians will alert authorities, unlike in Egypt. The hero has to watch out to avoid

⁸³ *Ostrakon*, or plural *Ostraka*, are pottery fragments found in archaeological digsites, though they were also used in ancient Greece as a surface for writing short inscriptions. These replace the Egyptian-inflected papyri puzzles.

⁸⁴ The main antagonists of this game.

⁸⁵ Ancient Greek equivalent to a city’s greater metropolitan area.

criminal activity in an implied civilized world. The green color code indicates hybrid looting/killing/political destabilization. The signification is still that players are killing someone in 39% of the activities, roughly equating to the previous installment. They are also looting something in 32.7% of the places they go, and the looting and killing overlap in hybridized ways. However, the killing and looting in the hybridized contexts have political intent. Each zone has an influence meter, and as players kill and loot, they chip away at that meter, destabilizing the government, while playing both sides. The third colonial mode of viewing, surveying, once again clocks in at 14.6%, usually positioning certain locations as useful for the player in their adventuring, powers, and achievements. Where *Odyssey* begins to diverge wildly from *Origins* is in the remaining non-colonial points of interest. Arguably, the very act of viewing and visiting these is touristic, and colonial at a more diffuse level, but unlike everything else in the game, they simply exist. Players have no need to interact with historical locations, and the non-player characters there are simply going about their daily business. These locations account for 34.9% of all points of interest, and they offer nothing to players other than the pleasure of seeing them.

If all points of interest are considered together, Said's traditional colonial modes are active in 65.1% of the game, down from 96% in *Origins*, while coding that new space in line with tourism and sight-seeing, in line with tourist studies scholar Ning Wang's discussions of authenticity in tourism (1999). As she explains, one way of thinking through authenticity is as the historical verisimilitude of the representation found in a tourist experience, which was more so the case in *Origins* (1999, 354). Another is the perception of "immaculate simulation" (354). This view lines up with how the game structures a Greek world by packing it with so much that it feels lived in. Drawing from anthropologist Edward M Bruner's work, Wang locates the feeling of authentic simulations of culture where "we all enter society in the middle, and culture is always in process" (Bruner, 1994, 407 in Wang, 355). The sheer volume of nodes in this Greek world entails the kind of realist simulation that Adam Chapman has described (2017), as it means that the world appears substantially closer to how locals may have experienced it. Further, Wang explains that this kind of engagement with authentic cultures is actually a search for "symbolic authenticity," which is "more often than not a projection of certain stereotyped images held and circulated within tourist-sending societies, particularly within the mass media and tourism marketing documents of Western societies" (1999, 356). In other words, the historical locations in *Odyssey* shift the needle away from *Origins*' archaeologically inflected colonial views of the 18th and 19th century, to the capitalistic tourist model of today. So, where do the players, as tourists, go?

As discussed briefly earlier, *Odyssey*'s map is certainly colossal even by the series' standards of maximalist simulation. Shown below in figure 8.13, the full map of the Greek world gives a sense of scale, with the smaller yellow square to denote the zoomed in map displayed in figure 8.11 earlier. It is possible to zoom in to that extent at all points on the map below, which



Figure 8.13: Full Map of AC Odyssey's Greece.

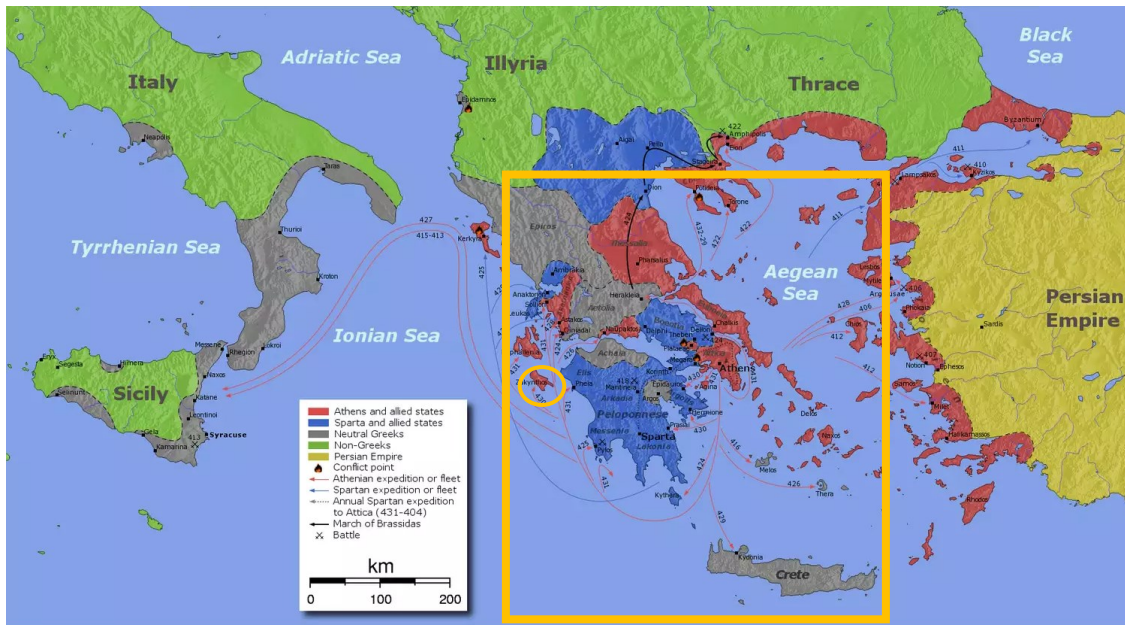


Figure 8.14: Kenmeyer map of Greek world during Peloponnesian War (431 BCE)

shifts the user interface to show the points of interest that otherwise collapsed. To clarify, in the overall map of Greece, if the location icons for visible, the actual terrain of the map would be invisible under the sheer quantity of points of interest (which is nearly triple that of *Origins*). However, the Kenmayer map of the Peloponnesian War in 431 BCE (shown in figure 8.14) paints a different picture in a number of ways.

First, the vast majority of Greek city states on the coast of Anatolia (modern day Turkey), are entirely cut out. This includes important towns of the period, such as Miletus (home city of the philosopher Aspasia), Rhodes and Halicarnassus (home of Herodotus)⁸⁶ (Crielaard, 2009, 40). This area is so geographically massive, and politically important in its proximity with the Achaemenid Persian Empire, that the twelve biggest cities of Ionia became known as the Dodekapolis (literally Twelve Cities), which classicist Jan Paul Crielaard describes (based on Herodotos' texts) as possessing a kind of "collective identity which was expressed in religion and cult, and enhanced solidarity in military matters" (37). Crielaard further describes these cities as "reckoned among the leading centres of the Hellenic world" (40). One of the main distinguishing features of Ionian Greek city-states was their extensive mingling with other cultural and ethnic groups, which set them apart from their European continental counterparts, the Dorian and Aeolian Greeks (40). Additionally, Ionian states were more traditionally tyrannies in Hellenic sense. Likewise, it omits much of the Greek city states that extended along the southern borders of Thrace and up towards the Black Sea. The square framing that scopes where *Odyssey* would fit on the cartographic map of Greece, indicates the erasure of numerous islands in the Aegean Sea and the Ionian Sea, like the entire island of Zakynthos (circled in yellow). Likewise, the mountainous range on the game map makes it appear as though there are no cities above the island of Kephallonia. So, much like *Origins* cut out Egypt's southern regions, thereby reconfiguring an image of Egyptianness concentrated around Alexandria, *Odyssey* refocuses Greek culture to a continental binary core around Athens and Sparta, that includes some of the Cycladic isles. So, why the erasure?

One simple answer is that the game architecture simply couldn't handle the enormity of the Hellenic Greek world. Criticizing a game of this magnitude for not attending to every single isle and polis can appear unreasonable, especially since even in the Hellenic cities themselves, there is a lot of compression and distortion. However, I'd argue that this exclusion of Eastern Ionia is one symptom of a much larger maneuver: reframing Greece in a way that transforms it conceptually, to be resonant with modern audiences, in both the gameplay sense, but also in the sense of cultural sensibilities. A small tip off to this point is that the game splits the entire Greek world in red and blue outlines, connoting Spartan or Athenian domination of a zone. As Hellenist Catherine Morgan explains, ancient Greece was a much more ethnically and culturally diverse locale than is commonly imagined today. According to her work, "'tribal' identities of the Greek world (Dorian, Ionian, Achaian, [Aeolian])" played a crucial role in conceptualizing notions of

⁸⁶ Both of whom are key characters in the game's narrative, and whose depictions suffers greatly as a result (discussed later in this chapter).

“social proximity” as well as strong consciousness about the “process of identity construction” (2009, 11). Morgan understands ethnicity as a “continuing process of choice, manipulation and politicization, highlighting traits accorded active importance (either by the group themselves or in response to outsider perceptions) in the structuring and expression of socio-political relations” (12). In other words, Athenians thought of themselves as Athenians by virtue of where they were located, but also because of their arts, philosophy, and political practices. Likewise, other Greek cities viewed democracy as an Athenian institution. By truncating multiple city states from the picture, the starting point for players is a Greece far removed from its historic socio-cultural context. Likewise, of the tribes discussed above, Athens was part of the Ionians (although it was its most extreme occidental member), whereas Dorians included the famous Spartans (13). Tribal identity is virtually undiscussed in the game and becomes a way of papering over “the existence of different registers of activity” of different tribes and the “potential for dissonance between them” (29). Conversely, game director Scott Phillips describes that in their Greece “every little city-state has its own army and they’re allied either with Sparta or Athens, those are the superpowers of the time” (2018g). This superimposes a cold-war dynamic onto a complicated historic configuration. So, if the world is enormous, yet denatured from its real-world tribal distinctions and presented to players along the Sparta/Athens binary, then for each polis that appears, its defining traits have been altered to produce a different locale.

8.2.2 Maps & Questions: Greece as Spatio-Narrative Construct

Odyssey preserves the previous game’s zone structure, where each area has a mix of main quests, side quests, the points of interest discussed above, and a small description of the area. Here, the structure is more complicated however due to three main factors. First, there are four interwoven main quest lines, instead of one. There is the *Odyssey* quest line, which deals with the hero’s journey through the Greek world, their quest to reunite their family, and their place in the Peloponnesian War. This is the most Greek-centric aspect of the story. Second, there is another main quest dealing with the Cult of Kosmos, the antagonist faction revealed to have been the traitors during the Greco-Persian wars, war profiteers, ancient civilization worshippers and the ones responsible for brainwashing the hero’s sibling into the game’s main villain, Deimos⁸⁷. This main quest that requires players to assassinate every cult

member, aside from your sibling who you choose how to interact with. The purpose of this quest is to uncover the mastermind behind the cult’s operations, revealed to be Perikles’ affable wife and confidant, Aspasia of Miletus⁸⁸. Third, each member of the cult that is assassinated drops a fragment of ancient technology that players are asked to collect and return to a first civilization

⁸⁷ Whichever protagonist is chosen sets up the other sibling is the antagonist, so if players choose to play as Cassandra, then Alexios is called Deimos, or vice-versa. Deimos replaces the character’s smart aleck demeanor with a vengeful, sadistic and psychologically unstable persona.

⁸⁸ Aspasia’s portrayal is the subject of additional discussion in the character section of this chapter, as her portrayal lines up with broader issues with characterising Ionian Greeks, women, and sex workers in the game.

forge on the isle of Andros, where they upgrade the spear of Leonidas and gain access to increasingly mythical skills and powers. Lastly, about midway through the Peloponnesian War storyline, the hero is told to visit their biological father, revealed to be the Ionian Greek mystic Pythagoras, who is now immortal and the guardian of the gateway to Atlantis. This questline then sends players on adventures that lead to the mysterious sites and encounters with Greek mythological monsters like the Minotaur of Knossos. Where *Origins* was more down to earth with the science-fiction aspects, *Odyssey* steers straight into its genre elements.⁸⁹ Although the primary war *Odyssey* quest does not require players to visit every zone in the game, between all four main quests, players will go to almost every single zone for one reason or another. Then, the side quests come into play, and fill in the rest of the zone allotment.



Figure 8.15: *Cult of Kosmos* board.

Shown in the next few pages, the full play map of *Odyssey* is enormous. 29 zones, 140 main quests, 202 side quests, and another 75 additional downloadable content quests saturate the landscape of *Odyssey*'s Greek world with varying stories and themes (table 8.2). The following table presents each zone with its name and its intended level range to begin with. Then, there is the slogan or sobriquet of each region, indicating to players what kind of atmosphere or story they will encounter. For instance, Attika (seat of Athens) is “The Land of Democracy”, while the Spartan Lakonia is the “Valley of Warriors.” Consequently, players can expect that Attika quests

⁸⁹ Of triangle measurement fame.

Table 8.3: AC Odyssey Continental Greece Play Map (Odyssey quests, Lost Tales of Greece and DLC included)

Zone Name (Island Included)	Level Range	Sobriquet or Slogan	Odyssey Quests - Episode (x/140)	Odyssey Quest Themes and Main Characters	Side Quests - Region + Character (x/202)	Side Quest Themes	Lost Tales of Greece and DLC (x/75)	Lost Tales of Greece Quest and DLC Themes	Play Segments
Kephalonia Islands	1-5	Land of Lost Dreams	7 (Ep. 1)	Kassandra's home, Life with Phoebe and Markos, The Cyclops gang, Elpenor arrival, Peloponnesian War as adventure/job.	8 (World) +1 (Phoibe)	Daily life, petty crime, misthios, blood fever, persecution, banditry, poverty, helping elderly			1, 2, 3, 4
Megaris	5-9	Frontlines of the War	11 (Ep. 2)	Peloponnesian War, Spartan strategies, life of a misthios, Stentor, Nikolaos	3 (World) + 2 (Odessa)	Misthios, predatory marriage, independent women	1	Blind beggar, prince of Persia	5, 6, 7, 12, 82
Phokis	9-13	The Land of the Gods	6 (Ep. 3)	Prophecy, Religious corruption, Cult of the Kosmos, Elpenor, Pythia, Delphi, Deimos	4 (World) + 2 (Daughters of Artemis) + 3 (Lykaon)	Pirate woman, retirement, aphrodisiacs for the elderly, mythical beasts, medical ethics, religious corruption, bandits	12	Village run by women, governance, trial of Sokrates, philosophy, Plato	7, 8, 9, 10, 11, 62, 82, 83
Malis	12-14	Wild Lands of the North	2 (PRLG., Ep.4)	Battle of the 300, Leonidas, Panhellenism, Herodotus, history					10, 12, 83
Lokris	12-14	Salt of the Earth			2 (World)	Joke quests about failson	7	Comedy, defending civilian village trope	17, 18, 61
Andros	13-15	Land of Plunder	8 (Ep. 4, The Spear of Leonidas)	Deimos, Power of the Spear, Isu Civilization, Forge of Hephaistos, Herodotos			1	Cyclops	13, 14, 66
Abantis Islands (Euboea, Skyros)	12-16	Islands of the Fall			2 (World) + 8 (Agapios) + 1 (DoA) +1 (Xenia)	Slavery, crime syndicate, revolution, brothers, Hind of Kyreneia, treasure.	1	Barnabas' Family	14, 15, 16, 17, 18
Attika	15-19	The Land of Democracy	18 (Eps. 4, 6, 8)	Athens, Perikles, Cleon, Democracy, Debate, Symposia, Alkiabes, Aristophanes, Sokrates, Phidias, Aspasia, Ostracism, Plague, Death of Phoebe, Athenian resistance, saving democracy, tyranny, memorial.	4 (Alkibiades) + 6 (Demosthenes) + 2 (Heitor) + 3 (Kleon) + 5 (Sokrates) + 2 (Xenia)	Alkibiades helping politicians, retrieving a sex toy, smuggling a refugee, political marriage, Athenian war effort, jilted lovers, shady business, Sokratic dialogues, ethics, philosophy, treasure, delivery	3	Barnabas' Family, Atlantis Setup	18, 19, 20, 21, 22, 23, 24, 36, 37, 38, 76, 77, 82

<i>Zone Name (Island Included)</i>	<i>Level Range</i>	<i>Sobriquet or Slogan</i>	<i>Odyssey Quests - Episode (x/140)</i>	<i>Odyssey Quest Themes and Main Characters</i>	<i>Side Quests - Region + Character (x/202)</i>	<i>Side Quest Themes</i>	<i>Lost Tales of Greece and DLC (x/75)</i>	<i>Lost Tales of Greece Quest and DLC Themes</i>	<i>Play Segments</i>
Pirate Islands (Keos, Seriphos) Obsidian Islands (Hydrea, Melos) Argolis	17-20	Lands of Plunder	7 (Ep.5)	Xenia the Pirate Lord, Myrrine's pirate past, freedom, naval battles	2 (World) + 5 (Xenia)	Little girl and dolls, love triangle, pranks, piracy, politics	1	Atlantis Setup	18, 21, 25, 26, 92
	18-20	Playgrounds of Ares			3 (Drakios) + 3 (Roxana)	Physical training, romance, women in sports, fighting tournament, Cult of Kosmos			42, 43, 72
Korinthia	18-22	Birthplace of Medicine	9 (Ep.5)	Hippokrates, medicine, medical praxis, superstition, religious persecution, baby be mine trope, Chrysis, Myrrine as a mother	3 (World) + 1 (DoA)	Trap quest – Chrysis ambush, banditry, destroy Chrysis legacy, Nemean Lion	1	Atlantis Setup	30, 31, 32, 33, 82
	19-23	Land of Beautiful Corruption	5 (Ep.5)	Heteraeae, the Monger, sex crimes, abuse, priestesses of Aphrodite, Brasidas, Myrrine as independent	4 (World) + 1 (Alkibiades)	sex work Alkibiades genitalia molds, infatuation, jilted lover	12	Divine intervention, destiny, Father and sons, PTSD, love triangle.	26, 27, 28, 29, 82
Paros Island	23-24	N/A	2 (Ep.7)	Myrrine, siege of Paros, Polis warfare			1	Barnabas' Family.	39, 40
Naxos Island	24-26	Vineyards of Dionysus	4 (Ep.7)	Myrrine as ruler, mothers and daughters, family, women in power, polis warfare	1 (World)	Graffiti, political dissidence			38, 39, 40
Volcanic Islands (Nisyros, Anaphi, Thera) Silver Islands (Delos, Mykonos)	27-27	Forge of the World	4 (Between Two Worlds)	Discovering and sealing Atlantis, Pythagoras, Immortality, Atlantis in Present Day			2	Barnabas' Family, Fire Cyclops (Arges)	41, 42, 81
	25-29	From Riches to Rebellion			6 (World) + 3 (Kyra) + 1 (Sokrates) + 3 (Thaletas)	Rebellion, Kyra, Podarkes, secret father, party, jealousy, ethics of justified killing			33, 34, 35, 36

<i>Zone Name (Island Included)</i>	<i>Level Range</i>	<i>Sobriquet or Slogan</i>	<i>Odyssey Quests - Episode (x/140)</i>	<i>Odyssey Quest Themes and Main Characters</i>	<i>Side Quests - Region + Character (x/202)</i>	<i>Side Quest Themes</i>	<i>Lost Tales of Greece and DLC (x/75)</i>	<i>Lost Tales of Greece Quest and DLC Themes</i>	<i>Play Segments</i>
Pephka	26-30	Home of Heroes			2 (World) + 7 (Leiandros) + 2 (Skoura)	Minotaur scam, comical suicide, tourist industry, theft, gladiators, depression, honor			67, 68
Messara	26-30	Triumph of Theseus	7 (Between Two Worlds)	Isu Civilization, Atlantis Key, Minotaur, Labyrinth of Knossos	10 (World) + 1 (DoA)	Fishing, Poseidon, mourning politics, secret love, smuggling, banditry, civil unrest, smithing, Kretan Bull			69, 70, 71
Southern Sporades (Kos, Samos)	26-31	School of Medicine			2 (World) + 3 (Markos) + 1 (Phidias)	Markos conning people, wine industry, loan sharks, crime, comedy, Phidias' puzzle	7	Barnabas' Family, Herodotos' Family, Persian incursion	41, 64, 81,
Lakonia	32-36	Valley of Warriors	7 (Eps. 7, 9)	Return to Sparta, Myrrine as Spartan, Agoge, Helotage, Spartan kings, gerousia, ephors, Brasidas, Archidamos II, Pausanias, treachery, saving/killing Deimos, family life,	7 (World) + 1 (DoA) + 5 (Lysander)	Agoge, Spartan boys, masculinity, spartan women, helots, citizens, periokoi, stories, education, Lykaon Wolf, Spartan war effort			43, 44, 45, 46, 47, 61, 62
Arkadia	33-37	Breadbasket of the Peloponnese	6		1 (DoA)	Kallisto the Bear	4	Old Friend (Anais), romance, social life, dating, raising children	57, 58, 59, 60
Elis	34-38	Origin of the Olympics	5	Incompetent athlete (Testikles), comedy, Olympics, Pankration, Win the Olympics	1 (DoA) + 4 (Olympics) + 3 (Phidias)	Erymanthian Boar, child thieves, sports cheating, blood feud, woman executed for attending Olympics, Phidias' work, statues	13	Producing a play, Thespis, political function of theater, pastoral life, religious fraud, hero worship	48, 49, 50, 51, 52, 53
Boeotia	34-38	Land of Perpetual War	10 (Ep.7, Between to Worlds)	Peloponnesian War, Champions, Stentor, Nikolaos, Sphinx, Riddles, Isu Civilization, Atlantis Key	5 (Eppie) + 4 (Hippokrates)	Archaeology, Linguistics, Mycenae, Stele, palliative care, end of life, medical ethics	5	Praxilla of Sicyon, Greek Poetry, Atlantis Setup	53, 54, 55, 56, 57

<i>Zone Name (Island Included)</i>	<i>Level Range</i>	<i>Sobriquet or Slogan</i>	<i>Odyssey Quests - Episode (x/140)</i>	<i>Odyssey Quest Themes and Main Characters</i>	<i>Side Quests - Region + Character (x/202)</i>	<i>Side Quest Themes</i>	<i>Lost Tales of Greece and DLC (x/75)</i>	<i>Lost Tales of Greece Quest and DLC Themes</i>	<i>Play Segments</i>
Messenia	35-39	The War Factory	1	Battle of Pylos, Brasidas, Deimos					47, 48, 76
Kythera Island	35-39	Home of Tyrian Purple	3 (Between Two Worlds)	Cyclops, cave of the Cyclops, mythic cult religion, Isu Civilization, Atlantis Key	3 (World) + 1 (DoA) + 6 (Eritha) + 1 (Phidias)	Village troubles, fake treasure, Krokotas Hyena, twin sisters, Cult of Kosmos, femme fatale, Phidias' puzzle			62, 63, 64
Makedonia	14-42	Rise of an Empire	1	Battle of Amphipolis, Death of Brasidas, Death of Kleon, Deimos	1 (World) + 1 (Xenia)	Burry Brasidas, treasure			79, 80
Achaia	42-46	Shipyards of Greece					2	Demokritos, natural philosophy	77, 78
Hephaistos Islands (Thasos, Lemnos)	42-48	The Wealth of the Gods			6 (Mikkos) + 2 (Phidias)	Human trafficking, Barnabas' family, boxing, pankration, human experiments, Cult of Kosmos, Phidias' puzzle			64, 65, 66
Petrified Islands (Chios, Lesbos)	46-50	Land of Sapphic Love	7 (Between Two Worlds)	Lesbian relationship, bigotry, Medusa, daughters of Artemis, Isu Civilization, Atlantis Key	10 (World) + 1 (DoA)	Lumber business, banditry, wolf pets, daughters of Artemis, crazy woman, alchemy, hunting, star crossed lovers, Ares cultists, medicine	1	Atlantis Setup	72, 73, 74, 75, 76
Aegean Sea*	N/A	N/A	2 (Eps. 4, 6)	Naval Warfare, Recruiting Crew, Helping Myrrine	1 (World)	Barnabas recruiting pirate			Various
Panhellenic *	N/A	N/A	8 (Cult of Kosmos)	Hunting Cult of Kosmos branches, Aspasia Cult Leader, Pythagoras	15 (World)	Complete bandit camps, caves, forts, leader houses, riches, follower of areas kills, random treasure, misthios			Various

will deal with democracy, while Lakonia quests will cover warrior culture. Then, the main quests are listed in the episodic structure that the game presents them in, along with the themes, historic characters, and fictional characters the game introduces. Then, most zones also include side quests. Odyssey departs from the traditional structure by subdividing these quests in the log as “world quests” and “character quests”, and every main quest or side quest can have support quests as well. World quests usually involve unimportant or outright unnamed Greek locales and produce a more diffuse connotation for each zone. For instance, the Petrified Islands have many smaller quests dealing with forestry, hunting, cultists, various women who want to join the Daughters of Artemis, and lesbian romance which supports its connotation as the “Land of Sapphic Love”. There are also world quests that take players everywhere in the Greek world to loot caves, kill bandits, assassinate city leaders and rob military forts.

Characters’ quests on the other hand are tied to speaking characters, presented as important NPCs and their quests form longer narrative chains. Examples include the famous Sokrates whose quests, mostly in Attika, are framed as Socratic dialogues between the hero and the philosopher on a range of topics including theft, murder, slavery, justice, and religion. Another example is the shifty statesman Akibiades⁹⁰, whose quests have to do with sexual libertinism that is revealed to be shady political maneuvering. Alkibiades shows up throughout main quests and his character quests in numerous zones like Attika, Korinthia and Elis (where he shows up to the Olympic games). Without dwelling on the constellation of historic figures, what the side quests indicate is much stronger stitching of zones as cohesive systems, and complex units in a homogenized portrait of the Greek world.

There are also the *Lost Tales of Greece* and two unique DLC quests to consider. The *Lost Tales* were rolled out as additional downloadable content shortly after the game’s initial release over the course of a year (from Nov 1st, 2018, to September 5th, 2019), these twelve packs of missions further fill in the game’s zone distribution with a variety of fictional and historic characters (Ubisoft 2018f, 2018g, 2018i, 2019a, 2019c, 2019d, 2019f, 2019g, 2019i, 2019k, 2019m, 2019n). These additions are notable because unlike *Origins*, they don’t bring players to new locales, they add stories and depth to already existing places that audiences explore. Additionally, they tend towards many quests that are non-violent or focus on pastoral aspects. The *Old Flames Burn Brighter* DLC adds quests where the hero enters a relationship with a single mother, goes on dates at the market, and teaches her son to avoid violence (2019m). The *Poet’s Legacy* introduces players to the lyric poet Praxilla of Sycion, who produced Greek drinking songs (2019c). The quest line has the player tune her lute, fend off her paramours, and help her deal with her estranged son. This is also a prime example of how far the developers delved to seek out cultural specificity, as Praxilla’s work only survives on a handful of pottery fragments. Another example of how the *Lost Tales* function is the *Sokrates’ Trial* questline takes players back to the oracle of Delphi in the Phokis zone and deals with charges of impiety leveled

⁹⁰ Generally referred to as Alcibiades in English, although Alkibiades is the name used in ancient sources and in the game. For ease of reading to audiences, the game pronunciation will be used.

at the philosopher, asking players to navigate the complexities of Greek secularism and religion at the time (2019n). This questline also brings in a young Plato, adding even more historical persons to the game. There is even a small DLC addition that requires players to find documents about Zeno's paradox, the Pythagorean theorem, and the Golden Ratio, and then explain them back to the NPC character, requiring a passing understanding of mathematics. That NPC is the famed Greek philosopher Demokritos, the originator of atomism.⁹¹

Thematically, although the game is mainly about the Peloponnesian War and the hero's Odyssey, there are numerous other themes (violent and peaceful) that can be engaged with. Consulting historian Stephanie-Anne Ruatta describes this version of the Greek world as shaped by the Peloponnesian war as a "crucial moment in history for our civilization because as Thucydides says, it was the most important conflict in Antiquity between the rise of a democracy and ancestral systems of tyranny and oligarchy, but plainly other oppositions: between tradition and modernity, religion and science" (Ubisoft North America, 2018h)⁹². Likewise, creative director Jonathan Dumont intimates that "that time period is still relevant for us today, because **we still embrace a lot of those philosophies, we still have the same questions that they were thinking about back then**" (2018h). Fundamentally, there is a positioning of Greek civilization as relevant to *our* civilization, presumably meaning the West in some form, and the necessary inclusion of themes that are understood as inherently resonant. Dumont refers to this situation as "a match made in heaven for an Assassin's Creed Game" (2018h). So, there is an altogether different engagement with the Greek cultural legacy than in any other *Assassin's Creed* game, though the construction of zones is not only at the level of the map and quests.

8.2.3 Biomes: Resonance through Technical Mastery

Another aspect to zone construction that is harder to grasp without being alerted to its use is zone topography. By topography, I mean both the natural landscape of the Greek world presented, as well as the construction and spacing of cities. In the fourth *Behind the Odyssey* documentary produced by Ubisoft, various developers and experts discuss how they built Greece at micro/macro scales. World director Benjamin Hall elegizes "the landscape of Greece [as] magnificent" and explains that "[they] went to visit and the epic vistas it allows [them] to create were something that [they] really wanted to concentrate on recreating in the world" (2018h). More practically, art director Thierry Dansereau describes Greece as "made out of 85% of mountains [...] a very mountainous landscape," which he views as useful in "creating a ton of layering, so [they] could play with fogs, and mists, to create very unique ambiances" (2018h). This practical use of verticality is different from *Origins* where the only tall spaces were the pyramids, temples, and the Lighthouse of Alexandria. Hall further describes this use of mountains as something that "plays with the sensation of the Odyssey" and how they imagined

⁹¹ The theory that all matter is composed of atoms.

⁹² This is the one time when a consulted historian has officially spoken about the game world of an *AC* game.

players would wonder “what am I gonna get when I go there,” once again reinforcing “a sense of you being on your own Odyssey” (2018h). So, the game is a series of mountains and valleys that are distinct from one another, producing a natural zoning in terms of biomes⁹³ and intended to produce wonder.



Figure 8.16: Biome BHTS site (Ubisoft, 2017).

Pre-empting the Discovery Tour discussion, there are several Behind the Scenes (BHTS) sites⁹⁴ that discuss the use of biomes (figure 8.16) and natural landscape construction in a way that goes far beyond predecessors. This is where remembering Charles Acland’s notion of the technological tentpoles is essential, as “instrumental to the development of our integrated media economy and the valorization of technological wonder” (2020, 36). The *Biome* site explains how “the player will encounter seven distinct biomes—six on land, one underwater—as they journey through Ancient Greece” (Ubisoft, 2019o). These are “spring, summer, arid, paradise islands, volcanic, and deciduous forest” with the final biome being underwater (2019o). Additionally, biome construction is described as “a joint effort of several artists, technical artists, and technical directors who work together to create those landscapes that are driven by procedural rules” (2017). Assistant art director and biome artist Vincent Lamontagne describes the process as the drive to “create **believable** procedural biomes” which requires for technicians to “fully understand interaction between elements that drive nature and apply it in the game” (2019o). So, the biomes, provided a “challenge for the art team” because they had to ensure that “the biomes

⁹³ Biogeographical units that include landscape, fauna, flora, lighting, and cities.

⁹⁴ The discovery includes guides tours and hundreds of discovery sites, mostly historical, with a few behind the scenes technical discussions.

each had their own individual atmosphere, vegetations, color palette, even down to the types of rocks in each location” (2019o). There is discussion about a “dedicated river tool [that] has been developed to render believable river layouts in a Greek mountains landscape,” in the words of Lamontagne (2019o). Even weather is discussed as “systemic”, “dynamic,” and “complementing the different topographies” (Dansereau, 2019o). All these techniques support the overall intent: to produce “very different atmospheres for the player to navigate, giving the game a more **immersive and realistic feel**” (2019o). At every level imaginable, the game world is presented in terms of technical advancement and maximalist design.



Figure 8.17: *BHTS Underwater site, the seventh biome (2017).*

However, Biome design has more functions that merely displaying virtuosic talent, which is nonetheless important. In the documentary, Dansereau further explains that for the development team “Greece needed to be colorful and very lush because **that’s what most people have in mind when they think of that amazing land,**” which required them to produce these multiple biomes and to “[push] saturations and colors quite a lot” (emphasis mine, 2018h). What Dansereau locates perhaps unintentionally is that resonance happens at a visual level, where their Greece has to look like the Greece people have in their mind. Resonance also happens in the underwater biomes where “by exploring the depths of the ocean the player can choose to take a dive amongst long forgotten ruins” (figure 8.17). However, that resonance isn’t just located at the aesthetic level. Hall remembers that the development team “knew that this world was going to be huge, so it was super important to make sure that we kept it interesting for the player [...] so as they go from region to region, it’s not always just the typical picture of

Greece” (2018i). The implication is the biomes interact with the quests, sites of interest and map zones to produce 29 differentiated zones, whose primary purpose is to avoid boredom.

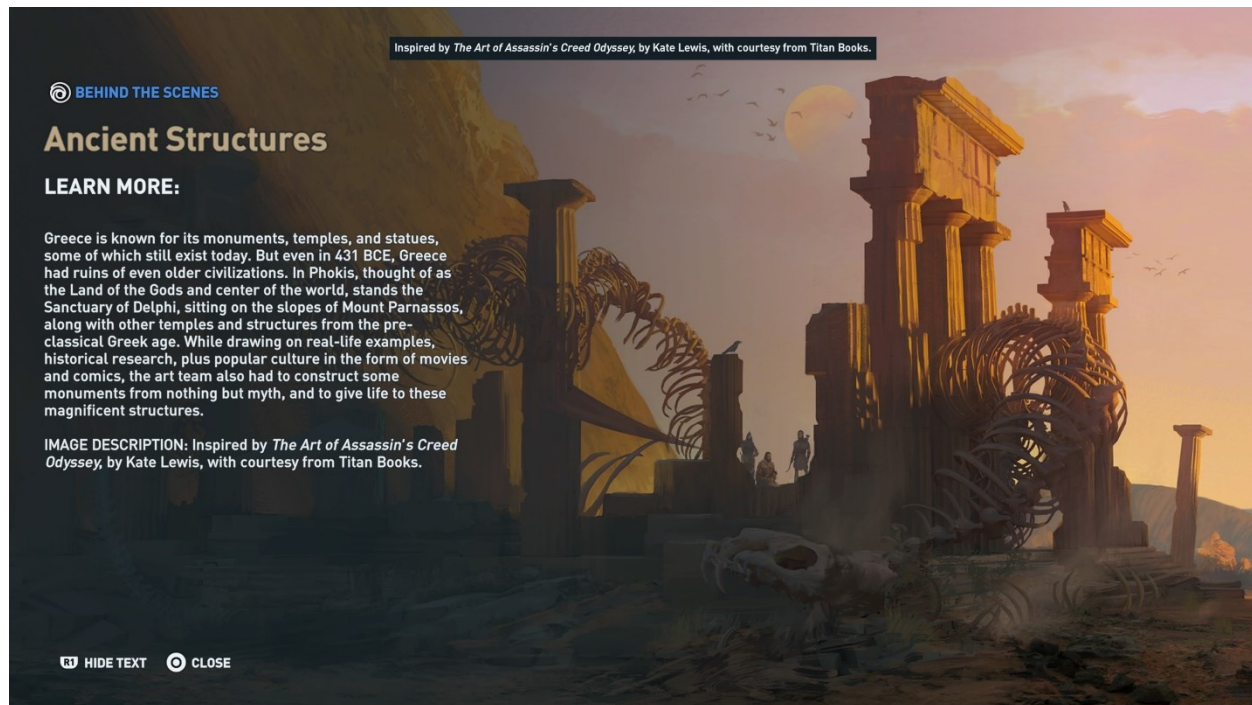


Figure 8.18: BHTS Ancient Structures Site (2017).

One notable aspect is that every piece of media surrounding the game, as well as the game itself, doesn't focus on tombs or archaeological sites in the way its Egyptian counterpart often did. The focus on natural biomes should be indicative of how the game creators view Greece, or at the very least, how they imagine audience expectations about Greece. The Ancient Structures BHTS site (Figure 8.18) explains that “Greece is known for its monuments, temples, and statues,” yet these are often treated no differently than military camps, dwellings, and ports (2019o). This is where the game's treatment of temples fully steps away from how landmarks in *Origins* were described previously. The BHTS site on *Architecture* (figure 8.19) describes how “the architecture of each city, town, and village reflects both location's biome and the building materials readily available,” indicating that the designers went as far as considering how local sourcing would function inside the game. This site explains that the city of Argos is “known as the white city, is constructed from marble,” implying that the team produced virtual renderings of marble and its texture and applied it to that zone.

Historical fidelity is highly prized by the team and overtly discussed by Ruatta. As she explains, “reconstructing ancient Greece was quite a challenge” as “for some cities, it was harder to find specific data,” with Mykonos as an example where almost nothing remains (2018i). Hall describes how, on top of even constituting the basic building blocks of nature and architecture,

“there was no urban planning as we know it today, so we needed to try and embrace that chaos,” implying that the construction of cities is somewhat more freeform those of hyper-designed *AC* capitals like Victorian London or Renaissance Rome. This Greece is presented as *natural*. The zone design doesn’t stop with buildings either. Hall describes a proprietary AI system where “people still live their own lives, they have their own schedule”, reminiscent of Noah-Wardrip Fruin’s description of mapping NPC routes (2003). Every detail, from the lighting, color saturation, flora, fauna, topography, buildings, materials, and even the number of extras in the background is part of exceptionally complicated system of realist simulation (Chapman, 2016).



Figure 8.19: Architecture BHTS site (2017).

Each zone’s particular combination of all these elements produces hypercomplex representations of a polis. One useful example is the city of Argos, in the Argolis zone. As the tour describes it, “like most Greek cities, there is a clear distinction between rich and poor, with muddy streets, and low, ramshackle houses, leading into stone structure, clean roadways and plenty of vegetation” (2010o). The zone map describes Argolis as “Birthplace of medicine”, which is relevant given that its main quests focus on Hippokrates, and rivalry between secular medicine opposed to the crazed priestess of Hera (revealed to be a cult member). The zone is lush and located in perpetual summer, bathed in warm yellow light, flat topography, and farmlands everywhere. There are some side quests about hunting animals, but mostly this is how the zone is built. Another interesting example is the city of Olympia in Elis, where the Olympic games are held. It is the only zone to have total prohibition on violence in the city, intimating that it is a holy site, with main quests focusing on the Olympic game of pankration (an ancient Greek

combat sport), and side quests focused on family, people attending the Olympics and street thieves. The topography is mountainous, orange-red in color, and set in almost perpetual sunset, that rolls over multiple temples. Later on, the *Lost Tales of Greece* require players to come back and help the Ancient Greek actor Thespis⁹⁵ put on a play, and learning about the political importance of theater, in addition to sports. Although the visual and ludic elements of the game are consistently thrust to the forefront, both in the game’s user interface and promotional material, the audio components deserve attention as well

Audio functions, like in *Origins*, in four distinct ways: non-diegetic music, diegetic music, speech that happens around the hero, and speech the hero participates in. Where non-diegetic music is concerned, despite its enormous size and two expansions that have divergent themes and science-fiction spaces, *Odyssey* has one soundtrack to consider. Composed by The Flight, a British duo consisting of Joe Henson and Alexis Smith, the *Assassin’s Creed Odyssey Original Soundtrack* (The Flight 2018) continues the trend mixing instrumentation inspired by the historic locale with sci-fi overtones. The Flight had previously composed music for *Black Flag*. The duo described the broad process as “finding ancient-sounding solo instruments, and then using them in a modern way, like the way the franchise blends history and sci-fi” and “linking up” with other team members to suit the game’s needs (Access Animus, 2022). The duo list specific tracks as their favorites to write, such *The Hills of Attika*, *A Happy Family*, and *Legend of the Eagle Bearer* (2022). What differs generally, and more so in those tracks, from the way *Origins* sounds is that action sequences lean very heavily on the science-fiction warbling sounds of the franchise, but most of the soundtrack doesn’t. The themes The Flight mentions were co-composed by them and British-Greek musician Mike Georgiades. In fact, half of the soundtrack is composed in tandem with Georgiades and features heavy use of the bouzouki, kithara, lyre, and aulos, all traditional Greek instruments that heavily favor strings and woodwind (*World Music & Sea Shanties Edition* 2018). Whatever the reason, Georgiades’ touch runs through the soundtrack, with *Odyssey -Greek Version* as the most notable example, as it features full Greek vocals by Fanny Perrier-Rochas. The soundtrack doesn’t sound like Ancient Greek music would, but it is distinctly unlike other *AC* music, at least since *Black Flag*.

In the third *Behind the Odyssey* documentary, game designer Charles Benoit discusses how players unlock sea shanties, returning from *Black Flag*. Sea shanties are pieces of diegetic music that your trireme crew sings. As he explains, “the more you progress in the game, you will unlock sea shanties that are about your odyssey” (2018f). Players don’t need to do anything other than play the game, and as the story advances, players will unlock songs like *The Cult of Kosmos*, *The Tale of Leonidas*, *Myrrine* and *The Fall of Athens*, which recount game events, alongside myths and historic events, in modern Greek. Most composition was done by Greek composer Giannis Georgantelis, with many tracks by Kalia Lyraki, Emma Rohan and Panagiotis Stefanos. The shanties themselves are performed by the Messolonghi Cultural Centre Choir (based in Messolonghi in Greece), Kalia Lyraki and the Zakynthines Fones of Montreal (a group of

⁹⁵ From whom the word *thespian* originates.

Zakynthian descendants located in the city). So, at every level, the diegetic music is itself composed and performed by Greek musicians and locals. Further, that diegetic music is not inflected by the science-fiction elements, and there are numerous NPCs playing instruments throughout the world, as players approach them.

In terms of speech, the composition used in *Origins* continues to be prevalent. In the background, NPCs use modern Greek stock phrases to fill the air. One of the more subtle tricks in constituting a homogenized Greekness is presenting Greek as one unified language (then and today). Ancient Greeks actually spoke many different dialects altogether. For instance, as Crieelard explains, “language and dialect are a first, potentially distinctive feature that could have helped to shape Ionian identity” (44). Crieelard further explains that these dialects spanned the Aegean, and had distinctions even among the Kyklades, Attika and Euboea (44). Even Greeks at the time “felt the major Greek dialects overlapped with the traditional ethnic divisions” that ran through their world (44). If Greece presents as a unitary panhellenic world, then it can’t model dialect variations. It can’t model them due to the technical requirements of recording as many versions of the stock phrases as there are islands in the game. Further, it can’t model them because it would detract from the kind of Greekness the game pursues. Dialogue with characters holds on to some of those stock phrases and words, like *chaire* (a greeting), *misthios* (a professional, in this case mercenary) and the often memed *malaka*⁹⁶ (a range of swears). However, by and large, the spoken language of the game is English with a Greek accent. This is accomplished by casting, as mentioned above, Melissanthi Mahut as Cassandra and Michael Antonakos as Alexsion. However, the casting of Greek actors runs through most of the supporting cast. It is fairly rare to find non-Greek actors with a lot of speaking time in the game. The result is a layered soundscape of music and dialogue that is commensurate with modern Greek contexts, rather than ancient ones, but is at the very least composed by, and performed by Greek musicians and actors. The resulting combination of topography, music, dialogue, architecture, biomes, and quests produces a theme park of Greek culture, and individual zones as micro-parks, as opposed to *Origins*’ archaeological digs.

8.2.4 Greece as Theme Park

Odyssey is certainly the most complex game in the series to date, where almost each zone is filled to the brim with activities. A useful way to reconsider *Odyssey* is as a theme park, built with topographically accurate thematic wings. In this perspective, games scholar Celia Pearce’s work on theme park aspects in Disneyland and *World of Warcraft* is crucial (2007). Pearce views theme parks as “celebrations of novelty, technology, entertainment and culture,” which are also the fusion of “architecture and story” (200). She further calls this kind of park “narrative architecture”. Narrative architecture is understood to be an exceptionally ancient medium, dating back to ancient Mesopotamia, but it is the scale and intensity that modernity provides that Pearce

⁹⁶ Which, according to Google trends, tripled in searches worldwide the month the game released (2022).

is attentive to (200). She considers this format of design, whether in the physical world or games, as “different stylistic motifs [...] layered on top of each other” (200). She understands the potential of theme parks, located in their construction of three-dimensional space, as something that morphs in the online spaces have much greater agency and higher dynamism (201). However, what Pearce described back in 2007 was the formation of multiplayer online worlds with multiple players, asking whether these spaces were “new theme parks or [...] new cities,” while *Odyssey* is a single player game (204). Pearce locates the original genesis of Disneyland in its desire to “be part of a ‘small town’” (204). *Odyssey*, as a construct is distinct because it has a theme park structure, but the player is alone. The entire park is built for them alone, in a way that other parks are not.

Another way to consider the theme park is through Michel Foucault’s notion of heterotopia, which I’ve mentioned previously. Here, heterotopia presents as a “cluster of relations” that produces “sites of temporary relaxation—cafes, cinemas, beaches” (1984, 3). As a point of comparison, Egyptian tombs and pyramids were closer to heterotopic constructions of “privileged or sacred or forbidden places” (4) *Odyssey* does exhibit the museum tendency of “accumulating everything [...] establishing an archive,” however it is matched with what Foucault calls “fairgrounds, these’ marvelous empty sites on the outskirts of cities that teem once or twice a year with stands, displays, heteroclitic objects, wrestlers, snake-women, fortune tellers, and so on” (7). Further tying together these game spaces as theme parks, fairs, and movie theaters, is the work of film scholar Geoff King, who views parks, movies and theaters as spaces and formats that are constantly cross-pollinating each other, forming films as theme parks, and “theme-park movies” that are “overdesigned, hermetically sealed, totalizing environments masquerading as movies” (2000).

For King, these hybrid formats are marked by “the pursuit of ever grander spectacles” which have transcended the classical narrative structures of film and text, and which take “the visitor through a series of mock temple chambers and passageways that set the mood for the ride itself” (2000). Crucially, in the theme park cinematic model, there is a constant ebb and flow between lower intensity preparatory moments and “the spectacle that follows” (2000). In this sense, *Odyssey*’s game world’s main quests are the spectacle, huge historic battles with bombastic set pieces, which are interspersed with lower intensity activities, and even lower intensity diffuse biome construction priming players constantly. King compares the “overall experience of the ride-film” to “the ‘classical’ narrative pattern: a lengthy and gradual build-up leading to a relative brief and spectacular climax” (200). *Odyssey* lines up with this idea of fairs, except that it is perpetually active at all times, in every city, or almost. Moreover, it dovetails with King’s description of the ride-film in the spatio-narrative construction of the game. This leads to an exceptional over-saturation of *Odyssey*’s Greece, which in turn produces one exceptionally problematic gap.

8.2.5 The Messenian Omission & Implications: Getting Off the Ride

Given the game's maximalist inclusion of stories, characters, places and activities, *Odyssey* largely inverts the main issue that *Origins* faced. In *Origins*, the construction of Egypt and its story was relatively economical and daisy-chained throughout select Greco-Roman zones, at the expense of most Egyptian locales. This isn't the case in *Odyssey*, and its thirty-six cities, in comparison to *Origins*' five. In fact, between main quests, side quests and everything else, there are only two zones that have almost nothing to do in them. One is the *Achaia* zone, called "Greece's Shipyard," although the math oriented DLC with Demokritos sends players there for a small jaunt. This is in some ways a functional erasure of Achaean Greeks from the tapestry of the game. However, the zone still has two quests in it. Where things really take a turn is in the region of Messenia. Shown in figure 8.20 below, Messenia is the region adjacent to Lakonia, the seat of Sparta. Messenia has one quest that sends players to the absolute edge, located in on the peninsula Pylos, and otherwise keeps players away from the landmass. It has points of interest, but unless players are attempting to complete every single area in the game, this is only place where the core game doesn't send audiences. This also happens to be the only Greek city-state that was historically entirely reduced to helotage⁹⁷ by Sparta. Messenia is tagged as "The War Factory" and is entire choked by smoke when players go to the area. The only other place that even resembles it in the rest of the game is the Underworld zone in the expansion. Messenia is, quite literally, hell on earth.

Messenia is such a glaring standout from the rest of the game that it drags forward the primary issue that *Odyssey*'s Greek world tries to bury as much as possible: slavery. This is an exceptionally complicated phenomenon to discuss, as slavery has varied extensively in its configuration across the ages and cultures that have practiced it. However, as classicist Peter Hunt explains, "slavery is a cruel institution, but it was central to ancient Greek and Roman civilization for around a thousand years" and further asserts that Greco-Roman cultures were "during some periods [...] true 'slave societies'," inasmuch as modern Euro-American societies (2017). Hunt cautions that classicists have often tried to elide that fact, and further mentions that many of the accounts that remain available on Greek slavery come from slave-owners themselves (2017). Hunt is clear, slavery was in Ancient Greece "one of its central institutions," which is commonly found in literary texts like Homer's *Illiad* and philosophy like Aristotle's *Politics* and acknowledges that even Athenians at the time understood slavery as a "concrete, everyday, and violent institution" (2017). This is echoed in classical historian Thomas Wiedemann's discussion of ancient Greek slavery across a range of writers from Aristotle to Strabo, to Pausanias (2005). Wiedemann explains that the Athenian constitution codified by Solon removed the "class of bondsmen" for locals and paved the way for democracy, which however did not extend to slaves of non-Greek origin (2005). So, there's ample texts on the

⁹⁷ Helotage is the specific form of slavery practiced by Sparta, whereby individuals were owned by the state.

Sparta Social Classes tour (figure 8.21), and in one site called *Helots* (figure 8.22). In the tour, they are described simply as “people who had lost their freedom to the Spartans, and they served the city as slaves” (2017). It does also explain that “helots were considered property instead of people” and that “as a result they had no political or civil rights”.

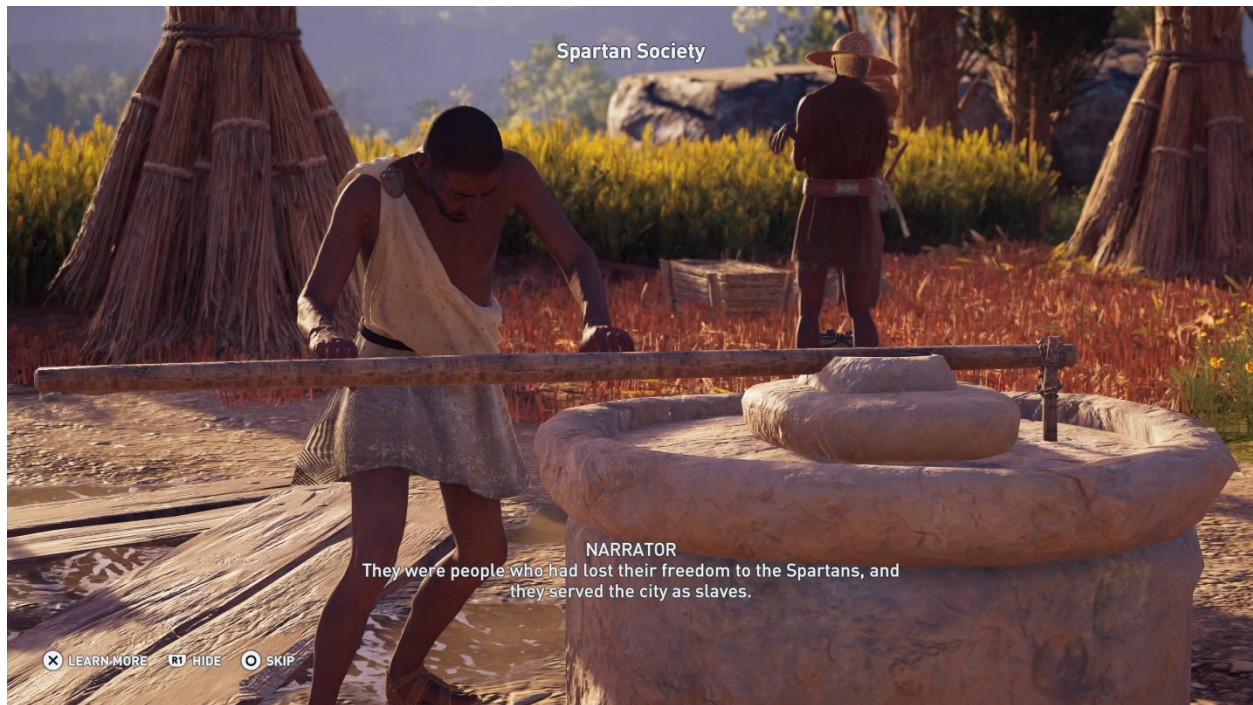


Figure 8.21: *Spartan Society* tour.

One of the more hidden sites however paints a much harsher image (figure 8.22), though one that is excluded from the main tour. Here Messenian Helots are discussed in terms of mathematical proportions. The site explains that in the 5th century BCE, Sparta “consisted of Around 12 000 – 15 000 Spartans, 40 000-60 000 Periokoi⁹⁸, and 140 000-200 000 Helots” (2019o). It also explains that helots were treated with “great cruelty”, including the wholesale killing of two-thousand Helots by Spartans at the Battle of Sphakteria. Critically, the player is knocked unconscious during that battle and never witnesses the aftermath in-game. Likewise, Lakonia and Messenia never have the player speak with Helots aside from one farming quest, where they’re shown to be antagonistic to Spartans. This is staggering given that they account for roughly seven times as much of Sparta’s population as citizens.

In other words, the reality of helotage is anathema to the game’s construction as a theme park. Worse even, if players were fully aware of how Spartans treated helots, not to mention the prevalence of slavery in the Greek world in general, they would be forced to realize that most of their interlocutors owned slaves or were involved in their exploitation. The backgrounding of

⁹⁸ Landed Greeks who lived around Sparta, often from allied tribes, but free, nonetheless. Also served in the military.

helots as non-speaking NPCs is the only way to salvage any resonance with Spartans as pop culture hero-warriors. In other words, the Sparta of *Odyssey* cannot line up with real-world Sparta, and so the procedural rhetoric is constructed to drive the audience gaze away. One of the most jarring aspects of how Messenia is constructed as non-existent is the inclusion of a subzone called *Helot Hills* in Lakonia, implying that helots only lived there. I say one of, because the main questline has players go to Lakonia and engage with a special detachment of Spartans called the Krypteia⁹⁹, whose inclusion and portrayal is even more shocking.

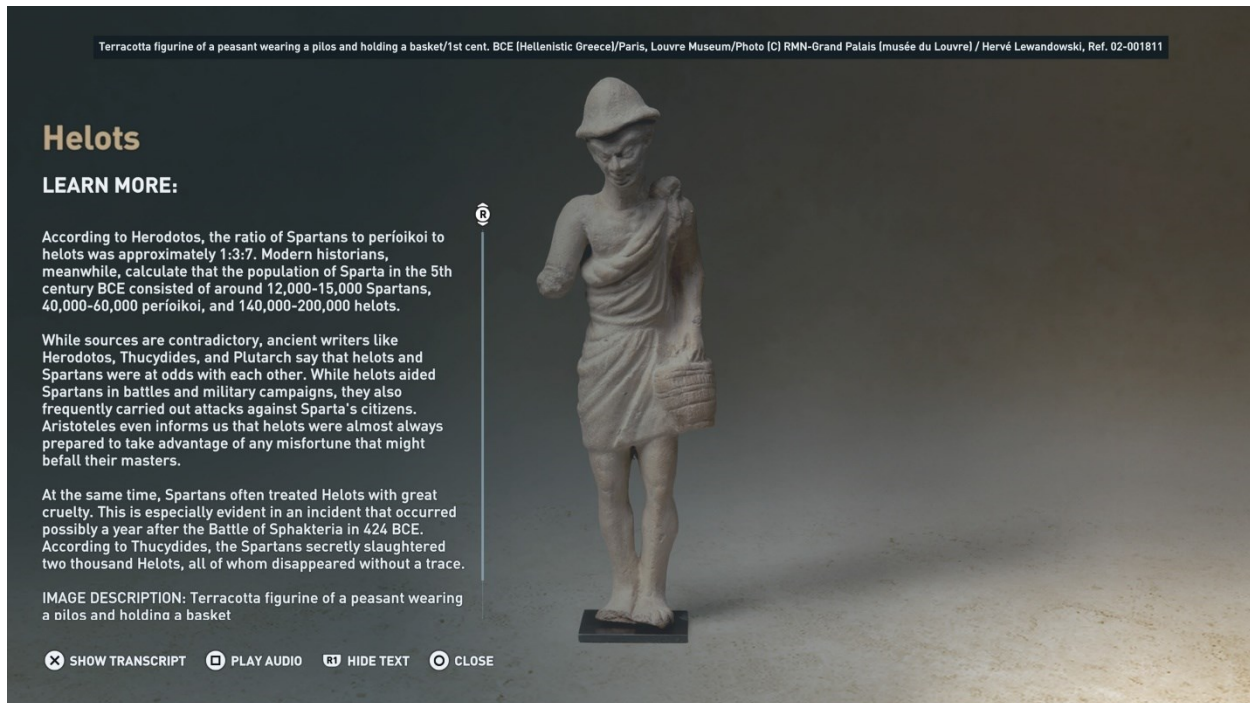


Figure 8.22: Helots tour station.

Cartledge goes into great detail about the constitution of the “Crypteia, which is variously confirmed” by ancient sources (85). Utilizing Plutarch’s writings, Cartledge highlights that the crypteia who were “youth [18- and 19-year-olds], equipped only with daggers and minimum provisions” would go to Messenia, hide during the day and at night “dispatched any Helot they caught” (Plutarch in Cartledge, 85). Cartledge pointedly refers to the process as “systematic brutality” (85). He also brings in more contemporary sources to characterize Spartans as “the most religiously driven of all Greek societies” and explaining that the crypteia exhibited religious functions of state-affiliation, with youth affirming allegiance to the military state and helots were “publicly designated enemies of state who might therefore and legitimately killed without incurring the taint of religious miasma that normally accompanied all homicide” (85). A.J. Toynbee, an early 20th century Hellenist, compared Spartanism, and its configuration of the

⁹⁹ Written as Krypteia in-game, but alternatively Crypteia

crypteia, as an inspiration for the Nazi Schutzstaffel (also known as the SS), with the only difference between the two being that Germany's "term of life was one of twelve years, in contrast to a Lyncurgen Spartan's run of four centuries" (Toynbee in Hodkinson 2008, 322). The crypteia is so important in this discussion capping off zones and quests because the main quest in Lakonia asks the hero to deal with the crypteia outright.

In the quests *Bully the Bullies* and *One Bad Spartan Apple Spoils the Bunch* (an incredibly tone-deaf nod to the expression one bad apple spoils the bunch, used in critiques of modern police brutality), the hero is asked to comply with the Spartan Kings to regain their home as a citizen. These quests can be missed if the hero is antagonistic to the Spartan kings from the get-go, but there is no indication what will be asked of players beforehand. The quests start with cutscenes linking the hero to Leonidas and intimating what it takes to be a proper Spartan citizen. Cassandra even asks how she can "serve Sparta". Both quests ask the players to assume the role of an overseer of the crypteia, and to go assassinate corrupt members. These crypteia members are corrupt because they are inciting helots to revolt and arming them to do so. At the level of procedural rhetoric, the player is even told to assassinate the targets without being seen, so there would be less unrest, mimicking real-world practices of the crypteia. Another quest in Lakonia, *A Godless Blight* has the hero deal with helots more peacefully, as they are farmhands, though the player can elect to indiscriminately murder them. Not once is the connotation of the crypteia explained to the player, nor is it discussed in the discovery tour. This omission of Messenian helots, and the characterization of Spartans as cops, with a few bad apples, would presumably produce revulsion and break resonance if the truth was explained to the player.

However, as horrid as the Lakonia and Messenia situation is, it is hardly the only place where slavery is lazily presented. In the Abantis Islands region, which is located on the islands of Euboea and Skyros, players meet with a character named Agapios. Agapios is the sidequest giver with the most character missions in the entire game outright, and his narrative has to do with his life as a slave on Euboea. The narrative sets up his brother in parallel as an anti-slavery criminal mastermind who butchers innocents, while it portrays the slave master that Agapios serves as a gentle old man, amenable to setting the lifelong servant free. The hero is given the option of voicing pseudo-anti-slavery sentiments here, with dialogue choices like "that man earned his freedom long ago" (2018d). Thinking back on Adrienne Shaw's *Tyranny of History* piece highlights how the player is given the option of helping in the manumission¹⁰⁰ of the slave, but not being fundamentally anti-slavery. Subsequently, Agapios' criminal brother is killed for trying to usurp the masters (if brutally), and Agapios voices sentiments like "I'm still a slave without a master," to which the player can respond "a slave without a master is free" (2018d). Agapios's choice is to continue doing the same job as he has his entire life. Euboea has one more world quest, where a slave about to be manumitted wants you to implicate him in a crime, so that his master will lengthen his service (figure 8.23). That NPC explains that he has "purpose, food, shelter," and the player may either implicate him and lengthen his slavery or tell the master who

¹⁰⁰ The legal process of freeing slaves undertaken by slave owners.

will continue to hire him in the exact same way, but as a free man. In Attika, the quest *A Life's Value* has Sokrates show up and pose riddles about the value of life to the player, who is forced to choose between freeing a slave and saving an indebted mother from the quartermaster of the Laurion Silver¹⁰¹ mines, portrayed as particularly brutal and a cult member to justify his cruelty (2018d). The game either presents Spartan helotage, as “lingering between slavery and freedom,” with a “mechanism for freedom” and the crypteia as the elite agents, or it presents individualized slavery in Euboea and Attika, exclusively, as a situation of good and bad owners. Resonance would certainly break otherwise, but the other issue that becomes visible in the position of the hero, story NPCs and these masked peoples, is that who you play is fundamentally different from *Origins*.



Figure 8.23: Euboean slavery as desirable

8.2.6 Protagonists & Antagonists: Heroes, Citizens & Schemers

In *Origins*, Bayek was an underdog. Certainly, the game mechanics gave him extreme power and autonomy compared other Egyptians, but he was positioned narratively as a champion of the people, fundamentally divorced from the ruling Ptolemies, occupying Greeks and incoming Romans. The hero in *Odyssey* is diametrically opposed by comparison. Up to this point, I've discussed the hero as either female or male avatar, but the official novelization of the game sets up Kassandra as the canon protagonist, and Alexios as the canon antagonist. This is crucial because it means that canonically, the player is meant to experience the Greek world from

¹⁰¹ Discussed in the Discovery Tour component

the intersectional perspective of a Spartan exile, an outcast, and a woman, at least in theory. For instance, the game exclusively calls *Kassandra misthios*, the male gendered noun for a mercenary, as opposed to the female gendered *misthia*, connoting that much like *Origins*, the internal shakeup may have changed the narrative structure of the game during production.

Unlike *Bayek* who mostly uses his name, remains anonymous and only takes a pseudonym at the very end of the game, *Kassandra* is a hero throughout. She is referred to by villagers throughout the game as *Eagle Bearer* (a title because of her hawk *Ikaros*, but also symbolizing affiliation with the king of the Greek Pantheon) and later *Keeper*, a mystical title. *Kassandra* is implied to be famous in Sparta relatively early in the game (figure 8.24), and once the player arrives in Lakonia, *Kassandra* also begins referring to herself as “of house Agiad,” one of the two royal houses in Spartan society. Compared to the legendary Argonauts and called a demigod, she functionally becomes immortal by the game’s end and can teleport, mind-control individuals, kills mythological beasts and is the most feared pirate in all of Greece. At home, she’s a warrior princess, abroad she’s a feared mercenary, but *Kassandra* is never an underdog. There is also continuous stitching of her character with King Leonidas, portraying her as a firebrand and nonconformist, which matches with the aforementioned vector of *choice* that ran through design.



Figure 8.24: *Kassandra*, famous in Sparta.

This is fundamentally at odds with another vector of ancient Greek life: the place of women in society. The *Discovery Tour* has a full tour dedicated to the topic, which clearly explains that women were prohibited from public life, and detailing the virtues extolled for the perfect women in Greek stories and philosophy (2018d). The tour explains that “making textiles

was the main occupation of women” in Greek society, and that even homes were segregated such that women spent most of their days on the roofs of the traditional oikos¹⁰². This is certainly not the case throughout most of the game. There are numerous characters who are women, and they enjoy similar space to men in the game. The young girl Phoibe is an errand runner, Aspasia is seen interacting with men at the symposium, the pirate lord Xenia runs an entire island, as does your mother, Myrrine. This is exceptionally untrue as far as Cassandra is concerned. She is allowed entry into every non-militarized place and her gender is never questioned in any dialogue choices.



Figure 8.25: Herodotos brings Cassandra to the symposium.

This is not to say that gender is not an issue in the game. For instance, in Olympia, the Olympics pose a particular problem. First, *The Contender* main quest has Cassandra compete in the pankration event and win, which is highly irregular. Second, the *Kallipateira* quest a few feet away has a mother on trial for indecency, as women are not allowed to gaze upon the naked bodies of men competing in the Olympics. She’s about to be executed as Cassandra is asked to find proof that the competitor is a son, and so the mother is allowed to be there. On the one hand, the game admits that women were historically barred from the space, while on the other treating Cassandra like a man. The portrayal of women as equal to men at the time runs through the game but is at its most intensive in the quest *Perikles’s Symposium* (figures 8.25 and 8.26). In this sequence, Cassandra is brought by Herodotos to the famed *Symposium* recounted in Platos’

¹⁰² Greek home unit.

works. The player is allowed to interact with famous characters like Sophocles, Euripides, Aristophanes, Sokrates, Alkiabes and even have a private audience with the city's de-facto ruler, Perikles. Throughout the events, Aspasia and Phoibe are also present and enjoying the festivities. This sequence is a perfect example of how the game's conceit, *making history your playground*, is only possible if the character is allowed on the playground in the first place. Cassandra has to be able to attend, and it wouldn't make sense for her to attend while other women are barred. So, the logical decision is to simply omit the fact that women were segregated from Greek public life. This is equally prevalent when Cassandra is granted audiences with the Kings of Sparta and is treated like an equal, given military tasks and sent as a political emissary. So, the way to make Greek resonant once again is to apply a presentist view of gender relations. To be clear, this is an interesting deviation and in line with Shaw's hope that the games would stray further from history or provide agency for marginalized people. In turn, this makes the treatment of helots seem even more bizarre. As the symposium shows, Cassandra is an exceptional character by the world's standards, but she's certainly not alone in this.



Figure 8.26: Cassandra meets Euripides and Aristophanes.

The game is absolutely packed with famous historical characters. This is par for the course with *AC* games, but usually they feature two or three important characters that act as helpers for the hero. In *Odyssey* there are dozens. As narrative creative director Melissa MacCoubrey explains, developers “were really lucky that [their] historical characters had quite a bit of information about them,” referring in particular to Sokrates (2018h). The team parsed “historical documentation, and the different myths and legends, and the stories that helped [them]

craft the fictional characters” (2018h). MacCoubrey locates the core of the decision-making process in “who [they] knew [they] couldn’t leave out,” or in other words, the most resonant historical characters. This includes the *father of history*, Herodotos. There are famous statesmen like Perikles, Demosthenes Cleon and Alkibiades for Athens, and Archidamos II and Pausanias for Sparta. There are philosophers like Sokrates, Demokritos. Great Greek tragic playwrights Euripides and Sophokles show up, as does the *father of comedy*, Aristophanes. The actor Thespis is present as well the sculptors Phidias, maker of the Statue of Zeus at Olympia (one of the wonders of the ancient world), and Polykleitos are included. There are of course famed generals like Demosthenes, Leonidas, Brasidas. The mystic and philosopher Pythagoras plays a core role in the narrative and is revealed to be godlike and your father. Plato, perhaps the most famed Greek philosopher appears in the DLC, as does Sokrates’ wife Xanthippe. There is also of course the most famous Athenian woman, Aspasia of Miletus who is core to the narrative of the game as well. In fact, where most Assassin’s creed games have these characters show up seldom among the invented protagonists and antagonists, Odyssey makes them the main cast and brings the player into famed dialogues and plays. There is a notable distinction in how the good guys and bad guys are presented however.



Figure 8.27: Brasidas enters the fray.

Throughout the game, there are numerous action-film set pieces where protagonist characters get to show off and be *badass* (for lack of a better word). In Korinthia, Cassandra is embroiled in helping local priestesses of Aphrodite, *hetaerae*, who are being hounded by a cult member for profits. During a warehouse raid, Cassandra is surprised when a thug is speared

through the chest, and a Spartan warrior enters the burning battlefield. Both characters have a tag-team massacre where they dispatch the cadre of goons with stylish maneuvers and grim efficiency. Then, the camera shifts to the exterior, as the warehouse doors explode and the duo walk out in slow motion with an inferno behind them, reminiscent of the action-movie trope found in films like *Con Air* (West 1997), *True Lies* (Cameron 1994) and more recently described in the comedy song *Cool Guys Don't Look at Explosions* (The Lonely Island 2009). The warrior is revealed to be the famous general Brasidas, who is more or less the commander of the Spartan forces during



Figure 8.28: *Deimos Too Cool to look at Battle.*



Figure 8.29: *Achilles' beach aristeia in Troy, as comparison (Petersen, 2004)*

the war and compared to most Spartans fairly honorable (Figure 8.27). Deimos, the game antagonist, also gets his own entrance (Figure 8.28). In fact, Deimos gets two such entrances, one at the Battle of Pylos and one at the Battle of Amphipolis (the two major battles of the first Peloponnesian War). Cassandra, Brasidas and Deimos are often given *aristeia*, the traditional Greek killing spree, in cutscenes and presented as exceptionally badass, much like Brad Pitt's killing sprees in *Troy* (figure 8.29; 2006), where Trojans fall to his surgical strikes by the dozens. The cinematic language of action movies seems predominantly suited to the game's portrayal of Greek heroes. Acland's model of the smart aleck is also prominent throughout the game, as main characters constantly quip with each other and jest about the war, which Acland metaphorizes as the Die Hard "Yippee-ki-yay" line (290), which in *Odyssey* is found in Cassandra consistently yelling *malaka*, Greek profanity with meanings ranging from expressions of anger to a pejorative equivalent of "jerk off" (Tegopoulos, 1997). Long gone are Bayek's solemn reflections on justice. Cassandra and Deimos present lighter and darker shades of the smart aleck, "the blasé face of perpetual dissatisfaction", who appears as the "rugged individualist, beholden to no one [...] a champion of historical value" (290-291). This comes as no surprise, given that Cassandra is in this game a hero, but also a jaded mercenary, often out for herself or money, and at best out for her family. The aspect of player choice also makes the character malleable to audience wishes. Cassandra's adventure is at times emotional, especially when finding her mother midway through the game, but it is overdetermined by an action-film DNA very proximate to current trends.

Conversely, other villains are portrayed as cowardly, rapacious, morally bankrupt, and unhinged, much like in *Origins*, and especially when it concerns women. Aspasia of Miletus (figure 8.30), the hidden main villain is at best presented as a political backstabber and manipulator, and later on in the story closer to an unhinged religious zealot, altering her historical reputation as the most important woman in Athens, and the potential author of Perikles' funeral oration. As historian Medeleine M. Henry portrays her, "Aspasia of Miletus, a key figure in the intellectual history of fifth-century Athens, is without question the most important woman of that era" (1995, 3). Henry further notes that Aspasia was a prominent philosophical figure, reputed to have been Sokrates' teacher, as well as Perikles' political advisor and mistress, and a renowned courtesan (3). Games scholar Roz Tuplin has described Aspasia in the game as "the *hetaera*¹⁰³-queen" (2022, 216). In this light, Aspasia is shown to consider herself, as a *hetaera*, to be much like the protagonist: a mercenary fighting to find their place in the world through the means at their disposal, viewed as "immensely powerful" among Athenian elites (217). Unfortunately, the needs of the game for a villainous antagonist deprives her of connotations as "politician, a philosopher, or a saloniere" and reformats her with a more recognizable "sexualized intellect" found in femme fatale archetypes (1995, 127). Aspasia's fate is sealed when she causes the death of Phoibe, the adopted little sister of Cassandra, and the only part of the game that leads to unbridled rage mirroring what Bayek exhibits in *Origins*. Tuplin explains that the logic surrounding Aspasia, as "the whore behind the throne [of Athens]," entails that

¹⁰³ Tuplin describes that "the term *hetaera* is often understood to refer to 'higher end' prostitution – as distinct from the common *pornae*" (2022, 212).

“because Aspasia’s power rests on whorish deception, it is inevitable that it should be corrupt” (2022, 216, 219). The harming of children remains a facile shorthand for signalling reprehensible villainy. In this vein, another cultist named Chrysis is the one who raises your sibling and is a stereotypical rendition of the *baby be mine* movie trope, where women steal other women’s babies. She is revealed to have tricked your mother and kidnapped your sibling as she worships your blood in an off-putting eugenic and religious way. The femme fatale archetype also comprises the entirety of another cultist, Dione, whose entire motivation is being jealous of her twin sister and using sex to brainwash the men of Kythera Island. Women as temptresses and hags, which games scholar Sarah Stang has discussed as a recurring motif of the monstrous feminine, often through the use of the maiden, mother and crone archetypes (2016) and sometimes through the use of abject monstrosity outright, such as the famed Medusa which appears in *Odyssey* as well (2018, Stang & Trammell, 2020).



Figure 8.30: *Aspasia enters the symposium* (2017).

Where men are concerned, the connotations are different. The Athenian statesman Kleon is also revealed as a cultist and dies in shame at the end of game, running away from the player once his machinations fall apart. Likewise, Pausanias, a king of Sparta is abjectly killed in the street for being a petulant traitor. Villainous men are consistently emasculated, feminine-coded or treated as devout serial killers. This extends into the expansions, but aside from Deimos who is a mirror for the protagonist, and can be saved, the game’s villains are often dishonorable and shamed when they’re men, or manipulative, sexualized and unhinged when they’re women. This trend can be traced in what Acland describes as building “degrees of freedom into their

[blockbusters] ideological armature, though always within a deeply embedded valorization of some individuals over others, and always via the commodity and technological form of the movie” (2020, 78). Regardless of whether they are heroes or villains though, all the speaking characters are polis citizens, not migrants or slaves. Moreover, the exceptionalism and valorization of Cassandra also takes place at the level of items and skills.



Figure 8.31: The skill tree (2017).

8.2.7 Armor of the Gods: Class Through Skills, Items, Ships and Wealth

One of the earliest visions of how the player would exert power in the game came from the reveal trailer at E3. There, the hero was shown diving down with the glowing spear of Leonidas and blowing soldiers away on impact. That teaser holds up in the game and is the core of both skills and items. Game director Scott Phillips described the combat style as “not the true Spartan phalanx with the shield and spear” and that “you’re fighting on your own, you’re fighting for your money, you’re fighting for your life”, with the combat maneuver and skills being “very active, very dynamic” (2018e). Further, there is a science fiction justification for customization, explaining that because of the character’s ancient DNA and the spear of Leonidas “you get really impressive game-changing abilities” (2018e). Shown above in figure 8.31, Cassandra is able to specialize in one of three branches of skills, *hunter*, *warrior*, and *assassin*. Like the previous game, this gives access to numerous combat options, though they are even more pushed here. The base player power is lower on average, and the gains from specializing

much higher. The purpose is to produce a game loop where “you have to build adrenaline, energy, for the spear to use that and then unleash these abilities” (2018e). Because of this loop, the trend that started in *Origins*, where player power pushes efficiency and the reduction of humans to mere units of measurement is much stronger here. For instance, the chain assassination skill from the previous game is renamed *rush assassination* here, and allows players to kill up to 6 enemies, with the spear teleporting between them. Humans are literally parkour nodes and entire forts become an exercise in murder metrics spanning dozens of soldiers. Warrior skills like *Ring of Ares* allow players to disregard stealth, and to engage a dozen enemies at once. Skills like *Rain of Arrows* submerge an entire area in a hail of arrows, killing, setting on fire or poisoning enemies. The result is a less homogenous protagonist, and one that feels marked by the weight of player *choice*.



Figure 8.32: Gearing, customization and set bonuses.

The degree of customizability is virtually infinite, as once the base skills are selected, there is an option to continue increasing their damage with hundreds more point allotments than what the player can ever attain. The result is a composite sense of personal playstyle, and complete dominance over anything human in the game. Item customization factors into this with the player acquiring dozens of legendary armor sets and weapons, themed after Greek heroes, Athenians, Spartans, Amazons or Gods. These sets provide unique bonuses to specific skills, modify them entirely and offer complex mix and match attributes, as well as the opportunity to craft gear. The result is to constantly reinforce the specialness of the player as “the only character in Greece that has a first civilization artifact”, as Dumont explains, while also adhering to “a

strong aesthetic that's true for a Greek hero warrior" in the words of animation director Marc-Andre Clermont (figure 8.32). The sheer quantity of legendary gear means that anything else is fodder for sale or dismantling as early as the first quarter of the game. Like *Origins*, hunting remains a woefully unproductive ability, and it is vastly more profitable to kill enemies. This time around, assassination auto-looting is a core part of the game, expediting the kill-loot-sell game loop vastly. That loop is slightly complicated by the addition of a ship to manage and customize, the *Adrestia*. Players can customize weapons, sails, crew, colors and engage in sea combat, where ships provide commensurate riches. In line with the push towards action, game designer Charles Benoit describes the combat as "more fast paced, more close-ranged, more intense than ever" and technical lead James Carnahan overtly describes speeding up boat maneuvers like drifting and ramming to increase their "spectacular nature" (2018h). In perhaps the most striking example of the synergy between naval combat, land combat, wealth and spectacle, Carnahan explains that players "can even Sparta kick them [mercenaries] off the deck, and this is a way cooler way to take out a mercenary in the game" (2018g).

Speaking of mercenaries, players also engage with another system: the mercenary system. This is a persistent user interface, where players are situated on a leaderboard of hostile NPCs that they must kill, and who at times hunt the hero throughout the in-game world, if *Kassandra* becomes more infamous, commits crimes, or has a bounty put on her by cultists. Some mercenaries are cult members, some are even legendary heroes later on, though most are randomly generated using the nemesis system popularized by *Shadow of Mordor* (Electronic Arts, 2014). The mercenaries are themselves a source of legendary items and rising through their ranks provides shop discounts and crafting bonuses. Overall, the game is built for players to kill their way through the narrative even more than *Bayek's* was¹⁰⁴. The number of items and wealth acquired far outstrips any use in the game's systems, with the final luxury ship upgrades the only remaining aspect to spend money on at the end of the game. For context, *Discovery Tour* lists the historic cost of purchasing the highest civil office in Athens' port district at around 40 000 drachmae, and the monetary value of an Athenian slave at 50 drachmae, horrid as that is. By the end of the game, I had accumulated over one million drachmae. I could bribe mercenaries nonstop to clear the infamy meter, commit any crimes needed to progress the story, pay for every money-based dialogue option, upgrade every piece of gear, all without even checking the cost. The only aspect limiting build customization was if a specific piece of gear was owned by a particular NPC, in which case murder was always the most expedient option. So, at the level of quests, narration, cutscenes, and even skills and wealth, *Kassandra* is presented as the strongest, richest, coolest character. To what end? One answer comes from Carnahan who remarks that the game is "called *Odyssey*, and of course we're modelling ourselves on the voyage of *Odysseus*,"

¹⁰⁴ I originally started logging mercenaries for inclusion in tables, though the exercise seemed impossible to sustain after killing more than 100 unique mercenaries across the game. At that point, they simply receded into the background as slightly stronger enemies.

and giving the “same experience” to the player entails combat, navigating and of course, monsters (2018h).



Figure 8.33: It's Minotaur time.

8.2.8 Clash of the Titans: Your Odyssey

About two thirds of the way through the main narrative, the lost city of Atlantis is introduced, along with the much harder strain of sci-fi and fantasy that the franchise is known for. Where in other games there are aspects of the first civilization, technology and artifacts, *Odyssey* opts for directly depicting these themes through legendary animals for the Twelve Labors of Herakles, and more strongly in monsters from Greek myths, including the Sphinx from Sophokles' *Oedipus Rex*, Homer's Cyclops, and Hesiod's Medusa and the infamous Minotaur (figure 8.33) These are the most epic encounters in the game, with enemies towering over the player and having unique boss designs. This is what every other customization aspect in the game drives towards and the only outlet for player power. The bosses are all included in the game's main quest and are often found at the end of quest lines that mimic the original myths. The tour also offers multiple BHTS, behind the scenes, sites that explain in great detail how the team adapted the myths and what changes they made, on the basis of historic fidelity. Ironically, it seems the minotaur and medusa require more attention than the reality of helots.

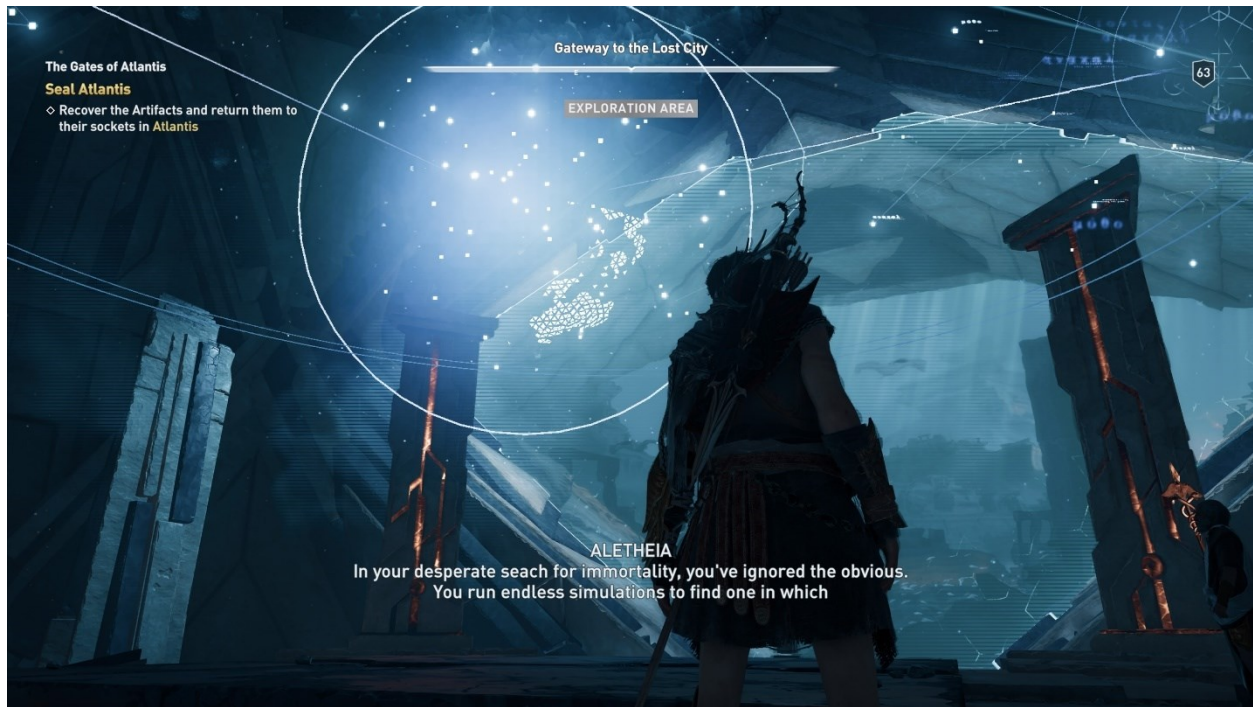


Figure 8.34: Sealing Atlantis.

Consulting historian Stephanie-Anne Ruatta has described the use of mythology as a process where “we tried to capture the importance of mythology for the ancient Greeks. Mythology is an integral part of their society, their social behaviour, their belief, their religious tradition. Mythology also inspired them in their art, in their decoration of their temple. Also, mythology was used during that time period as a political propaganda” (2018h). So, there was clear intent in its use, at the design level. At the play level mythology positions the ultimate point of the narrative towards having the player become the guardian of the gateway to Atlantis (figure 8.34), and tie together multiple narrative strands of the *AC* franchise, but that is left *to be continued* in the expansions.

8.3 The Expansions: Persia, Myth, Vacation & Franchising

Although the downloadable content in the game is intensive time-wise, it actually doesn’t change much of what the core game sets up. There are three expansions of varying size to discuss, and to locate in the game. First, there’s the *Legacy of the First Blade* expansion (2018h, 2019b, 2019e) that sees Cassandra cross paths with the first assassin, a Persian warrior named Darius. Second, there’s the *Fate of Atlantis* expansion (2019h, 2019j, 2019l) that takes players to Elysium, the Underworld and Atlantis itself. Lastly, there’s a small stinger expansion resembling an island vacation on Korfu (2021), which ties to the next series installment. All of these expansions are rolled out as episodes, featuring their own themes, locales, antagonists, and skills to discover. So, the question then, is do they contribute anything to the discussion above or shift

the needle in terms of resonant Greekness? The answers vary depending on the expansion, but generally speaking, they reinforce everything the core game requires to produce a fun experience for the player, from the most bombastic elements, down to the most problematic.

8.3.1 Persia: Legacy of the First Blade

Table 8.4: Legacy of the First Blade play map (continental Greece).

Zone Name	Legacy of the First Blade Quests (x/59)	Legacy of the First Blade Quest Themes	Play Segments
Makedonia	23	Artabanus Natakas (son of Artabanus), Order of Hunters, First Assassin, Persian Politics, Serial Killers, Consequences	89, 90, 91
Achaia	22	Artabanus, Order of Storms, mothers and daughters, romance with Natakas, family life, pastoral life, kidnapping.	86, 87, 88, 89
Messenia	14	Persian invasion, corruption, bloodlines, Order of Dominion, Amorges, Spartan corruption, Elpidios.	84, 85, 86

Despite the core game’s span, the expansive coverage of the Peloponnese, the mythological aspects and the living world developers attempt to create, the broader *AC* narrative is left unanswered by the end of the game. In large part, this is what the *First Blade* expansion resolves. Notoriously one of the most controversial pieces of Ubisoft content (Alexandra, 2019; Wales, 2019; Arif, 2019) the expansion rolled out in three episodes. Each episode is located in one of the three least-explored zones as discussed earlier: Makedonia, Achaia and Messenia (table 8.3). Each episode also has a branch of the Order of the Ancients to kill your way through, and a theme to match. The first episode introduces a father-son duo, Darius and Natakas. Set in Makedonia, Persians have returned hunting the fugitives and are encroaching on Greek land. The Persians are portrayed similarly to their design in Frank Miller’s *300* as masked, faceless, orientalist killers (figure 8.35). In the first episode in particular, the main antagonist is shown to be a serial killer who brainwashes civilians into committing crimes, kidnaps children and murders the elderly (figure 8.36). This is made most evident when Cassandra stumbles on a giant tree full of hanged bodies, overlooking a swamp of impaled heads (which mirrors an establishing shot of Thermopylai from *300* as well). Persians have come to disrupt the epic and lighthearted atmosphere of Greece at this point.

The second episode sees Cassandra reunite with Darius and Natakas in Achaia, and features the invention of Greek fire, naval engineering and a woman called the Tempest, who mirrors the hero’s journey, though with a tragic end. Here, the franchise necessities of the game poke through, as Cassandra is forced into a relationship with Natakas, so that the bloodline of assassins will continue (Totilo, 2019). Developers have since admitted that this “missed the mark” (2019). The other aspect of this episode is seeding the expansion villain in the background as a farmer, before revealing him in the final episode. The third episode is notable for a few reasons. First, it begins with extended pastoral nonviolent quests where Cassandra goes to



Figure 8.35: Immortals in 300 (Snyder, 2007).



Figure 8.36: Immortals in Makedonia (2018h).

market to get food for the baby, meets with townsfolk and has a date by the beach.¹⁰⁵ Despite the game's problematic portrayal of romance and gender, this is one of the few -if only - direct representations of motherhood from the protagonist perspective in all AAA games titles ever

¹⁰⁵ Notably, if players have selected the non-canon Alexios as their player avatar, the love interest Natakas is replaced by his sister Neema, and the quest structure remains the same.

produced. The baby is quickly kidnapped and Natakas killed, setting Cassandra and Darius on a path to vengeance.



Figure 8.37: Amorges explains the Order's function (2019e).

Here, the game's gender and social aspects collide. The villains have fled to Messenia, where they are shown to be corrupting the local government and oppressing the people. Of all the things the developers could have done to patch the Messenia situation, they opted to introduce Persian invaders and position them as the source of improper enslavement and tyranny in the region, while also portraying them as cultists and kidnapers. Notably, one Messenian woman is shown as combative against the regime, while all others seem completely trampled underfoot, which goes against Cartledge's gathered Greek sources which generally depict the Messenians as constantly resisting and revolting. In this context, Cassandra and Darius dismantle the operation, and nothing really changes for players, aside from gaining access to three new skills. The villain is revealed to be a decent man whose principles have become corrupted and granted an honorable death by the heroes, but not before speechifying about the order's eternal nature. This effectively sets up the villainous faction in the series as Persian in nature, and the resistance as Greek (figure 8.37). The expansion closes with an extended segment where Cassandra must give away the baby due to her fame and duties. Here, for the first time, the game has a full cinematic that shows Darius leaving with the son, and as he walks and grows up the background shifts to Egypt, ending on a shot of Aya, not Bayek as the inheritor to the Assassin bloodline (figure 8.38). This both supports the earlier theories that Aya was positioned as the series protagonist, while also decentering the Egyptian core that *Origins* set up with

Bayek, in favor of a Greco-Persian framework. What this expansion preserves is the franchise continuity, while stitching new links between characters, even if at the expense of player *choice* they had set up prior.



Figure 8.38: Aya inherits the Creed, not Bayek (2019e).

8.3.2 Myth: Fate of Atlantis

Much like the mummy expansion in *Origins*, the Atlantis expansion here diverges from the filmic, yet historically oriented aspect of the narrative. Cassandra has at this point inherited the magic staff of Hermes (the actual symbol for medicine used everywhere today), which makes her immortal. However, to unlock its full power she has to venture into simulations (discussed as simulations inside the game) of Elysium, the Greek underworld and Atlantis. In these three episodes the player gets to interact with first civilization individuals, perceived as gods, constantly giving life to Greek mythology. Elysium has Persephone, Hekate, Hermes and Adonis. The underworld features Hades, Cerberus, and Greek legendary heroes like Perseus, Achilles, Herakles and Agamemnon. Atlantis is substantially more sci-fi inflected, though still centers around Poseidon, Atlas and Juno. Throughout these episodes (Table 4), players can discover new abilities that are substantially more godlike in tone, upgrade their items and more than double the skill points they possess. What is most notable however is the broad experience each chapter provides for the player.

Table 8.5: Fate of Atlantis play map (Elysium, Underworld and Atlantis).

Zone Name	Fate of Atlantis Quests (x/62)	Fate of Atlantis Quest Themes	Play Segments
Elysium			
Heart of Elysium	5	Arrival in Elysium, paradise, Persephone, Hermes, Staff of Hermes	93,
Deukalion's Heritage	5	Human revolt, Adonis, Leonidas	93, 94, 96, 97
Pheraia's Retreat	6	Hekate, nature in paradise, intrigue	94, 95, 96, 97, 98
Asphodel Fields	2	Palace of Persephone, merrymaking, order, symposia	94, 95, 99
Minos's Faith	2	Ruins, impossible architecture, Staff of Hermes, Hermes	95, 96, 97, 98, 99
Underworld			
The Scorched Lands	15	Gate to Elysium Cerberus, Hades, Palace of Hades, Elpenor, The Monger, Perseus, Testikles, Phoebe, arms of the dead, redemption, staff of Hermes, undead cultists, undead heroes	100, 101, 102, 103, 104, 105, 106
Mourning Fields	7	Poisoner of Athens, Epiktetos, Swordfish, Achilles, Brasidas, suicide, suffering, Charon, lost souls, penance	100, 102, 103, 104, 105, 106
Chasm of Torment	N/A	Deianeira, Herakles, Agamemnon, River Styx, Tartaros	100, 104, 105
Atlantis			
Royal Mountain of Poseidon	10	Poseidon, Atlantis, Atlas, libraries, legendary weapons, forging, human experimentation, eugenics, staff of Hermes, Juno, Aita, siking of Atlantis, judgement, armor of the dikastes, dikastes' role	106, 107, 109, 110, 111
Oikos of Atlantis	5	Botany, cultivation, animal control, population control, human experimentation, eugenics, humanity, judgement	106, 107, 108, 109, 110, 111
Porimos Ring	5	Rioting, violence, brutality, adamant mining, sympathy, orphans, judgement	107, 108, 109, 110, 111

Elysium as the Greek paradise allows the player to meet with Leonidas and understand his legend through his eyes. The conceit is meeting with the valiant dead, as well as the gods. The Underworld on the other hand allows Cassandra to re-kill cultists, Greek heroes, and Hades. Notably, General Brasidas is condemned to the underworld and realises his army was responsible for the death of women and children, one of the only parts of the game that engages with the human cost of war. Atlantis sets up Cassandra as a *dikastes*, a supreme judge over the city, administering all affairs, while uncovering the dystopian human experiments the gods are conducting. The final boss of the game is the Hecatoncheires, a multi-armed giant from Greek mythology in an epic battle. Atlantis doesn't really advance the story all that much for Cassandra

and certainly doesn't diverge from the touristic pleasures of the core game. If anything, it enhances them, and prepares players for the final part of the game.



Figure 8.39: Cerberus, Persephone and Hekate (2019h).

8.3.3 Vacation: From Korfu to Franchise

Table 8.6: AC Odyssey Those Who Are Treasured (Korfu DLC) play map.

Zone Name	Those Who Are Treasured Quests (x/7)	Those Who Are Treasured Quest Themes	
Korfu			
Shores of Drepani	4	Vacation, treasure hunt, relaxation	111,112
Heart of Korkyra	1	Artifacts, loss of power, friends in danger	112, 113
Peak of the Phaiakes	2	Conclusion, friendship with Barnabas and Herodotos, contribution to history, immortality, AC franchise	113, 114

More than three years after *Odyssey* launched, the *Those Who are Treasured* episode was released as a crossover event between this game and its sequel, *AC Valhalla* (2020), shown in figure 8.39. The conceit of the DLC is fully located in the tourist aspect, as Cassandra takes an

island trip to Korfu and experiences a new concept: “a vacation” (2021). The episode is structured with only a main quest, and a smaller treasure hunt side quest across three areas and sees the hero reunite with Herodotos and the ship captain of their trireme, Barnabas. The DLC is relatively short and small, and errs on the side of comedy, showing the character coming out of retirement (Table 8.5).



Figure 8.40: A final heart-to-heart (2021).

Players run an obstacle course, and there are jokes about putting on weight and getting sluggish from all the wine. However, the episode is a heartfelt sendoff to the game’s heroes. It delves into the conceit of the narrative which is that Cassandra, as an immortal, is doomed to outlive everyone she loves (figure 8.40). The episode sees Cassandra lose much of her assassin powers and change into more of a historical observer. The final cutscenes, interspersed with the game’s credits show her crossing paths with Aya in Alexandria, delivering Herodotos’ *Histories* to the library, as well as disembarking in England during the events of *Valhalla*. The franchise is fully stitched together, even if it means that this game ends in a *to be continued* inflection. Nowhere is that more clear than when the credits load players into the purchasing page for the next installment. Though discussion of *Odyssey* has occupied most of this chapter, the impact of the *Discovery Tour* has popped up from time to time. Now, it’s finally time to take a closer look.



Figure 8.41: *AC Crossover Stories* (2021)

8.4 Discovery Tour: Greece on European Terms

In some ways, *Discovery Tour: Ancient Greece* is the same as it was in Egypt, and in others it is altogether a different experience. It preserves the tour-station structure of the previous game and still has players travel on rails between those stations. The website describes the tour as “a living museum” that allows players to “personalize their experience,” “meet legendary tour guides” and “delve into an immense world” (2019b). Shown below in table 6, this tour is at once leaner and denser than its predecessor. Tours are a fraction in terms of number compared with the previous installment (30 instead of 75), though their time and word count is vastly expanded. On a sheer numerical scale, tours are on average **much longer than they were in the previous installment**. For instance, the daily life tour spends roughly four times as much time on each topic as it did in Egypt. Further, most stations are roughly the same length, meaning that each individual station dedicates as much time to each subject across all tours. This produces a vastly different experience for audiences **than its Egyptian counterpart**.

Shown below in figure 8.42, tours are zoned in specific regions, given thematic tags and players are guided by a tour guide from the main game. Aspasia handles all tours about Athens, finally giving her some importance, while Leonidas handles tours about Sparta. Herodotos shows

Table 8.7: Discovery Tour: Ancient Greece;: Tours, Time Totals, Themes, Stations.

<i>Tour Categories</i>	<i>Tours, stations, time total & time per station</i>	<i>Tour Names</i>	<i>Tour Themes</i>	<i>Number of Stations</i>	<i>Estimated Time per tour (minutes)</i>	<i>Play Segment</i>
Daily Life	9 Tours	Urban Household	Education – Archaeology	8	16	114, 115, 117, 120
	59 Stations	Wine	Trade – Food	5	10	
	126 Minutes	The Life of a Greek Woman*	Trade – Economy	6	13	
	2.14 min/station	Bronze in Argos	Trade- Economy	6	16	
		Perfume	Trade – Economy	6	13	
		The Laurion Silver Mines**	Athens – Economy	6	16	
		Wheat and Agriculture	Economy – Food	8	16	
		Pottery in Athens	Trade – Art	5	13	
		Dyeing and Fashion	Economy – Craft	9	13	
Politics and Philosophy	4 Tours	Sparta Social Classes**	Sparta – Politics	5	12	120, 121
	22 Stations	Spartan Politics	Sparta – Politics	6	13	
	45 minutes	Democracy in Athens	Athens – Politics	5	10	
	2.04 min/station	School of Greece - Philosophy	Education – Politics	6	10	
Art, Religion, and Myths	5 Tours	The Olympic Games	Mythology – Festival	9	22	118, 119, 120
	31 Stations	School of Greece -Music	Athens – Art	4	11	
	75 Minutes	Knossos	Mythology – Archaeology	8	15	
	2.41 min/station	School of Greece -Theater	Festival – Athens	7	17	
		Gods and Love	Mythology – Religion	3	10	
Battles and Wars	5 Tours	Spartan Education	Education – Sparta	6	18	117, 118
	41 Stations	Battle of Marathon	Great Battles – Heroism	9	18	
	88 Minutes	Thermopylai	Sparta – Great Battles	8	20	
	2.14 min/station	Battle of Amphipolis	Sparta – Great Battles	9	18	
		The Battles of Pylos and Sphacteria	Great Battles – Heroism	7	12	
Famous Cities	7 Tours	The Akropolis of Athens	Athens – Archaeology	9	25	115, 116, 117
	63 Stations	Mycenae	Mythology – Architecture	9	25	
	139 Minutes	Gods of Olympia	Mythology – Religion	9	21	
	2.20 min/station	The Agora of Athens	Athens – Trade	11	23	
		The Oracle of Delphi	Mythology – Religion	7	14	
		Piraeus	Athens – Trade	9	13	
		Sanctuary of Asklepios at Epidaurus	Religion – Architecture	7	18	
Discovery Sites	N/A	N/A	All Themes	258***	N/A	114, 115, 116, 117, 118, 119, 120, 121, 122, 123, 124, 125



Figure 8.42: Aspasia as tour guide for *The Life of a Greek Woman* tour (2019o)

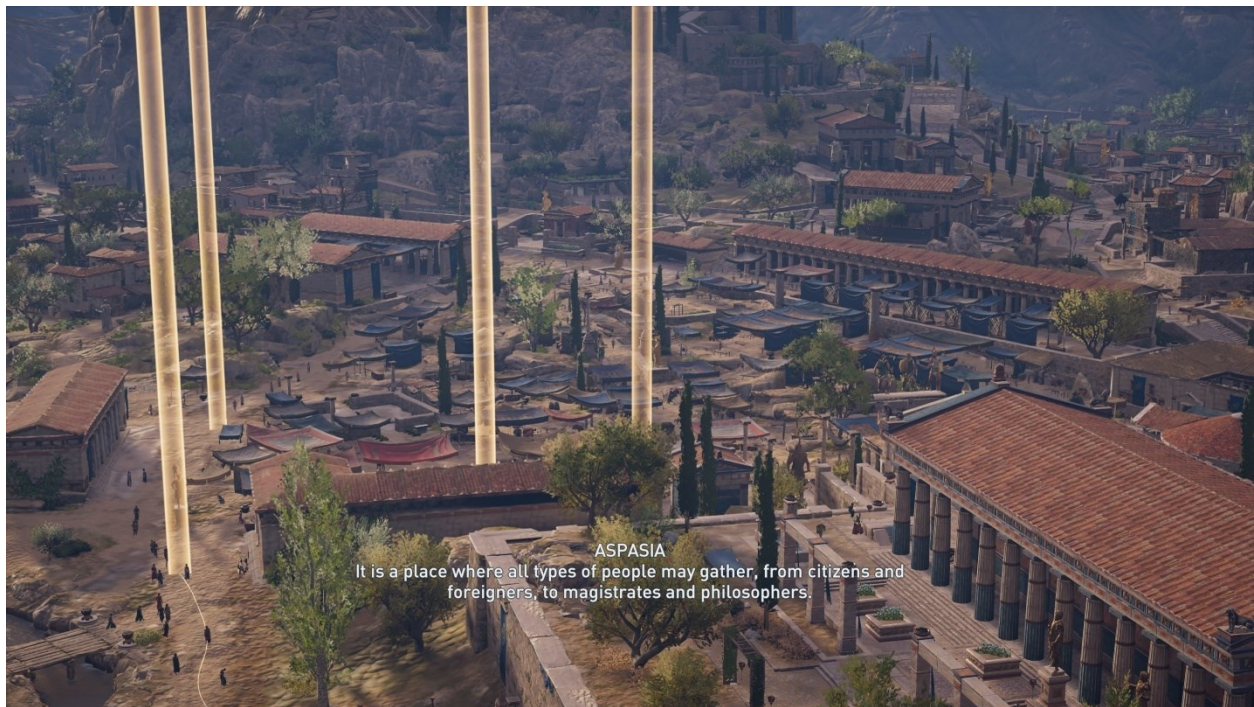


Figure 8.43: Tour overview (2019o).

up for most historical tours outside of those cities. Each tour has the guide frame it according to *their views* about the subject, before handing it off to an omnipresent tour guide voice. As players load in, the historic character will give them an overview of the tour and show the layout of

stations (figure 8.43). Each tour also ends with the tour guide giving them a three-question quiz about various information on the tour, indicating that players should pay attention. The tours are structured by broad thematic category: Daily life; Politics and Philosophy; Art, Religion and Myths; Battles and Wars; and Famous Cities. Players may choose to jump in anywhere, or they can use the suggested tour order which structures them sequentially (Appendix III). At the end of every tour, the guide will ask players if they want to take the quiz first, move to the suggested tour second, to a random tour third, or roam. So, at the level of procedural rhetoric, the tour stitches the experience fairly directly for players. One crucial effect this has is foregrounding the daily life category first, followed by famous cities second.

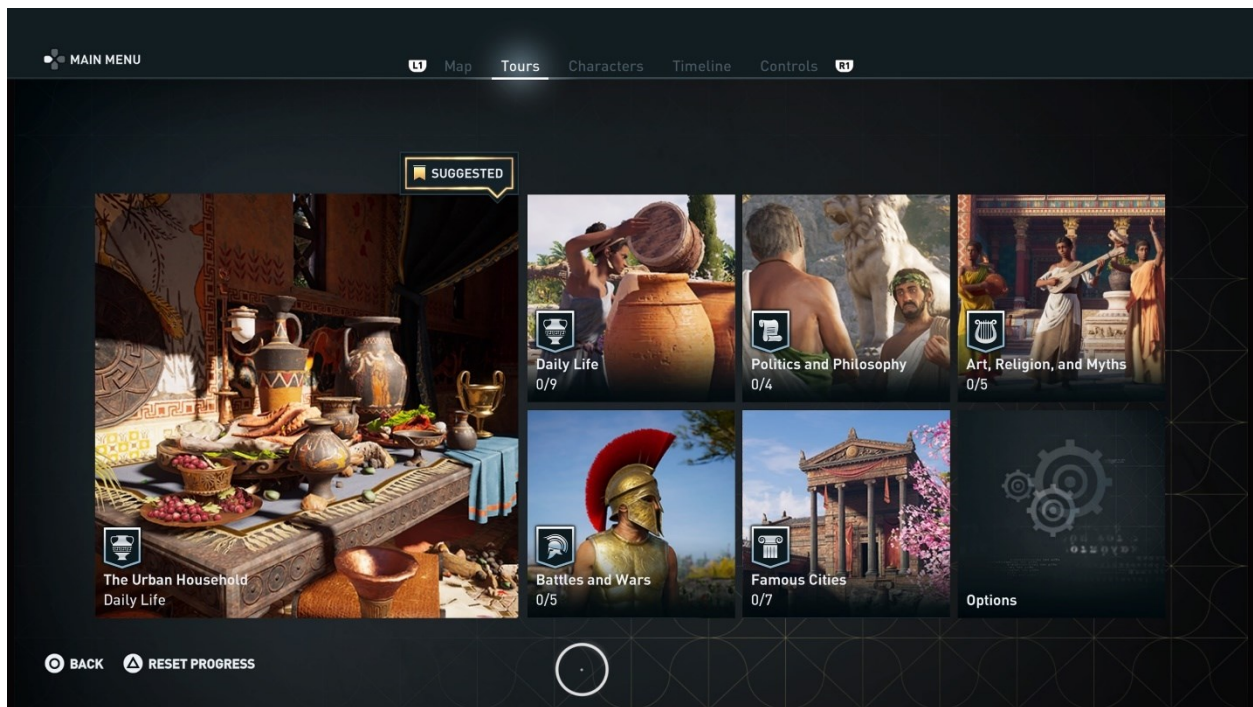


Figure 8.44: *It all begins with the household* (2019o).

Compared to Egypt, this tour drives attention towards the everyday, Williams' third category of culture. For instance, this is the one place that fully describes the conditions of Greek women, finally explaining the role of the hetaerae of Korinth as priestesses and courtesans. These tours go way beyond that level of detail and attention though. They describe in minute detail processes of bronze smelting, wine making, the layout of an urban house (down to how toilets worked) and even the dyeing process used for textiles. In fact, the urban household is the starting point of the entire suggested tour system (figure 8.44). The darker aspect of this layout is that anything detailing Athenian and Spartan slavery is pushed almost to the very end, as the 23rd and 24th tours. *The Laurion Mines Tour* describes the arduous process of mining and the "human cost" of extracting that resource, explaining that slaves suffered greatly, but it also explains that day-labourers suffered similarly, at times downplaying the phenomenon once again.

Further, mining is justified as a necessity to the state's prosperity, and quickly brushed aside. Here again, the focus is driven towards the arts and lives of citizens, not those they exploit. Perhaps the most troubling of these is when the *Sparta Social Classes* tour has King Leonidas justify the citizen-periokoi-helot structure as everyone having "a role to play" in the Spartan efficiency-focused state, a courtesy the tour never extends to the helots or slaves themselves (figure 8.45).



Figure 8.45: *Helotage* from the Spartan king's perspective (2019o).

The tour generally celebrates Greek culture, arts, sports, architecture, historic events, battles and even myths in a generally even-handed way, aside from the slavery issue. They even discuss gender segregation fairly straightforwardly, not shying away from the issue. The tours are certainly not all there is to the discovery tour. One of the notable aspects in discussing Ancient Greece is that European archaeologists are only mentioned a single time. The specific Archaeologist discussed is Heinrich Schliemann for his discovery of the palace complex of Mycenae. Schliemann is notable as he is celebrated at the National Archaeological Museum in Athens for his contributions to Greek classicism. Schliemann's discovery of the complex was turned over to the Greek crown upon discovery in 1876, accompanied with a letter to King George I, reading "Since I work out of sheer love of science, I naturally make no claim on these treasures and enthusiastically make them over, in their entirety, to Greece [...] May these treasures be the foundation of immeasurable national wealth" (National Archaeological Museum, 2022). So, the one time when archaeology appears in the tour, is to briefly mention a person that Greek institutions actively celebrate today. Though, like in its Egyptian incarnation, most of the

supporting photographic additions are drawn from Euro-American institutions like the Metropolitan Museum and the Louvre (with two images drawn from the National Archaeological Museum for theatre masks). The rest of the tours present knowledge bereft of elegizing any non-Greeks at the expense of the locale.



Figure 8.46: Schliemann's mention (2019o).

In keeping with the vector of *choice*, this discovery tour also includes a staggering additional 246 discovery sites. Players can load into zones on the game map and go visit these sites as they choose (figure 8.46). Additionally, as they traverse the landscape, the 300+ historic locations found in the game also pop up. This creates a tripartite virtual museum where at the most diffuse level the world is full of historic locations, hundreds of discovery sites and dozens of tours (Appendix IV). Though not every single island is covered, a good example of how extensive this structure is, each zone's flag is described in detail using coinage from the era (using pieces from the London Numismatic Society). So, the *Discovery Tour* can be experienced in its suggested tour format which organizes the Greek world by themes and subjects, or it can be traversed by zones, finding places and tours that constitute its *polis* city-state identity. This covers all main 26 Greek cities included in the game. At least here, the museum seems to be somewhat less colonial in its approach.

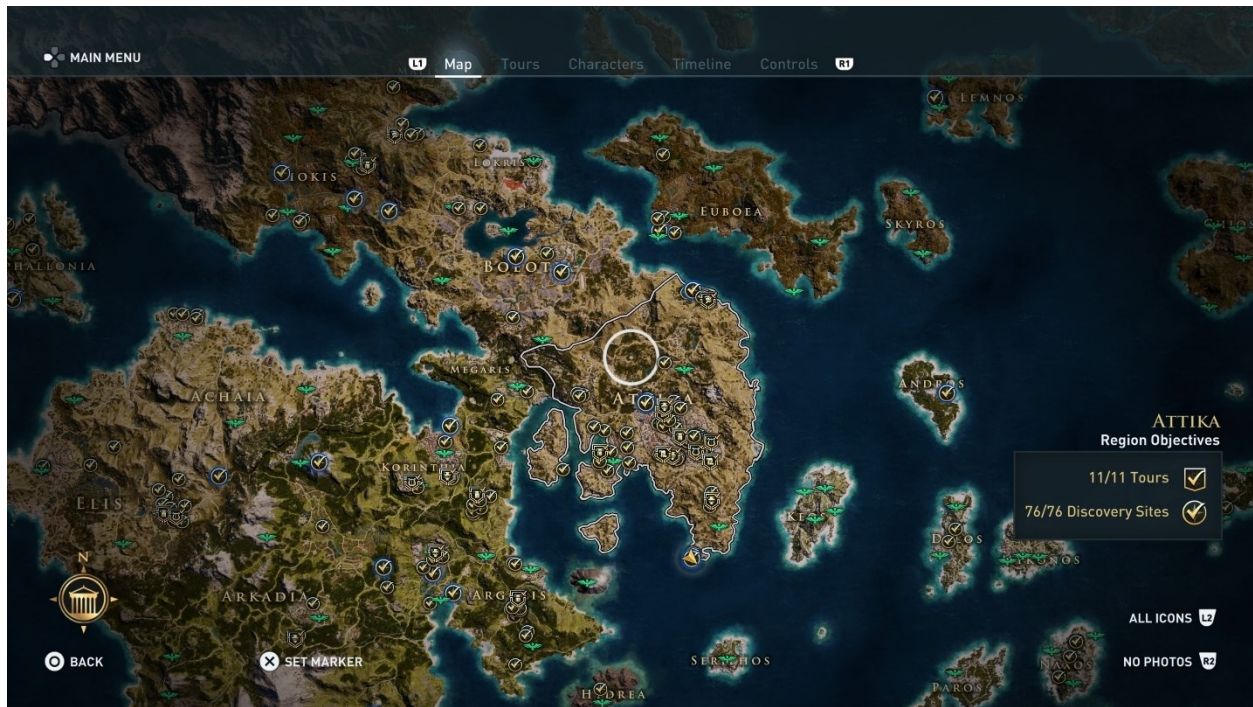


Figure 8.47: Zone map, tours and discovery sites (2019o).

8.5. Philhellenic Formations

As might be evident by how large this chapter is in comparison to the other games discussed in this project, *Odyssey* is absolutely enormous. The entire affair is submerged in technological celebration, technical virtuosity, film tropes and mythology. There are numerous competing frameworks at every level of the game as a construct. It is a theme park, a museum, an epic poem full of *aristeias*, a rendition of daily pastoral life and a sci-fi romp. It is also decidedly more light-hearted than Bayek's trauma-laden desperate battle against oppression. *Odyssey* is at once an adventure, a celebration of Greek culture, and a vacation to a paradisiac land of perpetual summer and underwater ruins. So if Egyptianness was constructed from archaeological expeditions and Egyptological knowledge, how does Greekness shake out in the end?

The answer to that question only becomes apparent when the subtle manipulations of the Greek world are considered. This includes the outright omission of the Ionian Dodekapolis, the Black Sea Greek cities. More critically, it includes the papering over of Greece as a slave society, and the elegiac reverence of Spartan culture which cannot contend with their historic reputation as the most brutal city-state in the panhellenic world. It also includes the omitted gender segregation of public spaces, politics and even the urban household. Resonance Greekness has to be uplifting, heroic and badass, it cannot be totalitarian, brutal and morally questionable. This

implies that crafting resonance means cutting many things out to preserve something central to what the developers consider to be Greekness.

At the National Gallery in Athens, which is filled with Greek art and sculpture, there is a section dedicated to *orientalism* as an art movement, and in Said's sense (1979). In that wing, the museum curators call orientalism the "pathology of Romanticism," which Greek painters inherited from France in the late 1800s. Crucially, they located a particular problem that faced painting at the time: "it is of course difficult to draw a clear line between Greek genre painting and Orientalism, as the scenes of everyday life in Greece had as their natural décor the context of a countryside life, which still bore a strong oriental flavor" (2022). Greek orientalist painting also found its champion in Theodoros Rallis, a pupil of Gerome (whose work is the cover of Said's *Orientalism*). In other words, Greek orientalist art shone a light on a unique difficulty in the depicting Greece: it was too hard to distinguish from the Orient. Keeping this in mind, Odyssey's broad mechanism for constructing Greekness is much easier to understand. It is the process of cauterizing anything that goes against the notion of Greekness as sculptural heroes, myths, white marble, triremes, and democracy. It is transforming Greece from a liminal space between Asia Minor and continental Europe into the very seat of European culture, as Derrida and Habermas understood it (2003).

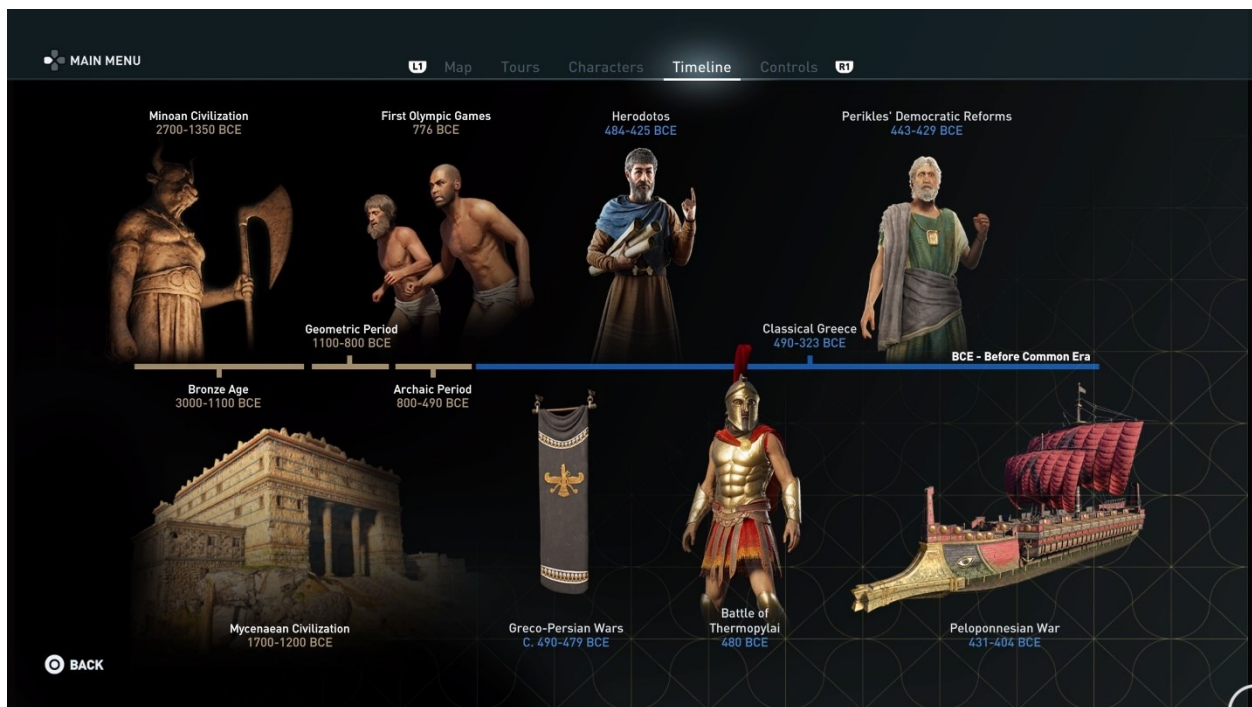


Figure 8.48: Timeline of Ancient Greece in Odyssey (2019).

This is a process that classicist Hans-Joachim Gehrke calls the "construction of "intentional history"" (2009, 85). Through the formation of myths about the ethnic origins and

characteristics a culture is reproduced through “ethnogenesis” (85). This certainly dovetails with Schieding’s application of discourses of the past (2020), but it also includes the naturalization of a “group’s members and of kinship ties between them, intended as real or at least metaphorical” (85). Ionian Greeks living on the coast of Turkey are not positioned as Greeks. Macedonians are not positioned as Greeks. Likewise, Greeks are positioned as hero-warriors and lovers of democracy, not as slave-owners. Greeks are exempt from the realities of the ancient world, and *Kassandra* is the most Greek of them all. This is the production of “ethnic concepts and images of Self and Other,” where Greekness is carved out of its historic context to be amenable to modern audiences (86). After all, it is exceptionally difficult to relate to actual Spartans for contemporary liberal audiences. Even the temporal framing of the game in 431 BCE places the events in the early part of the Peloponnesian War, which ran for another 27 years after game’s end (figure 8.48). The game omits the most relied-on source about the war, Thucydides’ *History of the Peloponnesian War* (2003: 5th Century BCE), which describes how brutal the war would become over the following years. The game succeeds in eliding historic moments like the mock trial and execution of Plataean prisoners by Spartans, in 429 BCE, or the brutality of Greek warfare in general, which historian Helen H. Law describes: “Ordinarily the fighting went on to the bitter end; quarter was seldom asked or given; troops that were overpowered and helpless were simply slaughtered” (191, 135). Reckoning with the atrocities of ancient Greek warfare would break immersion and relatability, it would break resonance because by the sensibilities of modern audiences, what transpired in the Peloponnesian War was horrific, and it was a European civil war.

Odyssey exhibits a particular kind of philhellenism, a general love of Greece, which Gehrke locates in a distinctly Western view of world history marked by “oriental despotism” on the one hand, and “nations much more divided and much smaller in size and means, but nations which were enlivened by the free individual” on the other (2009, 95). The game opening with the Battle of Thermopylai and closing with Persian incursions is a framing device that distinguishes Greek infighting from the existential threat of the Oriental other. This is a vision of Greece formed by “the western intellectual tradition, with its rigorous dialectic,” which has shaped its own collective identity by cauterizing any “oriental history and civilization” Greece was interwoven with (95). As Gehrke explains in the end, Europe subsumed Greece through “myth—understood as real history [...] a symbol for exclusion or integration by means of segregation” (98). *Odyssey*’s Greece is a theme park, a film, a museum, a myth of all Greek successes that justify European pride, and none of its shame. Greekness as everything valorized at the very root of Western European nationhood. Moreover, *Odyssey* is another myth in a long line of myths. A Greece without the elements that shock audiences, and a Greece engineered for wonder and fun. After all, this is your *Odyssey*, and as the trailer told audiences, Greece travels with you. It’s not an authentic Greece, but a coherent one: Your Greece. A Greece of rolling hills, without inequality and consequence. *Greece as subject, rather than object.*

IX. GREEKNESS IN BEYOND DEATH: SUMMERTIME ESCAPE AND ADVENTURE

“By focusing on those things, and not having other things, kind of the absence of the non-Greek things, and a raising the volume of the Greek mythological things, really, itself, would have a feel to it”
– Mark Rosewater on *Theros: Beyond Death*, 2022

9.1 Magic Ascendant

In the short time between 2017 and 2019, *Magic* had undergone rapid evolution in terms of its product rollout announcements. Wizards was still absent at the big tent trade shows that dominate the yearly landscape of blockbuster games¹⁰⁶, but there were other avenues and formats to rely on. No longer limited to blog pages and a single trailer, Wizards of the Coast had begun producing YouTube and Twitch content to discuss upcoming products. This was the medium used for the *Throne of Eldraine* set (2021), a German fairytale and *Shrek* (Anderson and Jenson 2001) mashup, broadcast on YouTube in September of that year (*Magic: The Gathering*, 2019a). Instead of relying on the bombastic showstoppers that hit the stage at E3, this stream opened with an absurd cinematic of two gingerbread cookie people trying to survive humans fighting to death above them, in a medieval kitchen (Fig. 9.1). The stream then cut to actor Jimmy Wong, an avid *Magic* player, as well as a podcast host of *The Commander Zone*¹⁰⁷, and supporting actor in Disney’s *Mulan* (Caro, 2020) setting the stream’s pace. Wong was quickly joined by *Magic* art director Cynthia Sheppard and Mark Rosewater to discuss what this set’s thematic highlights would be. Instead of being grandiose, this announcement was convivial, particularly when Rosewater announced their forthcoming Greek-inspired *Theros: Beyond Death* (2020) through a tray of cookies with card set icons (Fig. 9.2). Despite the unassuming quality of this first broadcast, *Theros: Beyond Death* (hereafter *Beyond Death*) would prove to be a blockbuster *tour de force*, both in its technical aspects and themes. Sheppard’s excitement was palpable when she exclaimed: “we are going back to the legendary world of gods, heroes and monsters, but this time we get to see the underworld” (2019a). Wong then ended the stream asking players to “let them know what they were excited about” (2019a). Though rhetorical, Wong also questioned Rosewater about potential plot details and elements to be excited about in the world of *Theros*. *Beyond Death* would be a reprisal of the original *Theros* block¹⁰⁸, which entailed limitations about how the product could be designed, matched with opportunities to show new takes on older motifs. By December of 2019, that enthusiasm would hit a fever pitch with the cinematic

¹⁰⁶ As well as a continued absence from GenCon, the largest trade show for tabletop and analog games.

¹⁰⁷ A *Magic: The Gathering* podcast that focuses on *Commander*, a specific format of play in *Magic* where players can select a specific avatar for their entire play style.

¹⁰⁸ *Magic* products have undergone numerous design formats called blocks. From 1996 to 2014, settings would appear as three-set blocks (a main set and two smaller expansions). From 2014 to 2018, production switched to a two-block paradigm (a main set and one expansion). From 2018 to 2021, production swapped to the three-and-one model, which would print three individual sets and one beginner core set. In 2021, the model swapped to the four-set model, which would print four individual sets each year. Progressively, *Magic* has compressed settings into smaller products that are woven across years, as opposed to devoting a full year, or even half a year to a single setting (Rosewater, 2017; 2021).

trailer for *Beyond Death*, featuring longtime series protagonist, Elspeth (who had appeared in six unique sets and had been shockingly killed off at the conclusion of first *Theros* block in 2014).



Figure 9.3: *Throne of Eldraine Cinematic Trailer (Magic: the Gathering, 2019a)*.

The cinematic trailer's viewership compared to the initial announcement was orders of magnitude higher. *The Throne of Eldraine Announcement Stream* (which included the first mention of *Beyond Death* was viewed 123,123 times, whereas the *Theros: Beyond Death* trailer was viewed 9,768,725 times (a 7 934% increase as of December 2022). As a comparison point, this view count was roughly ten times higher than the *Amonkhet* trailer (909,546), 381% more than *AC Origins*' trailer (2,561,851) and 52% higher than *AC Odyssey*'s trailer (6,439,407). Moreover, it's viewership numbers dwarfed the 2019 Microsoft E3 conference, that year's version of the trade show discussed a few chapters back, which had 1,219,260 viewers for the entire show (by a factor of 801%). This may be a case of apples and oranges in terms of content, but as a question of scale, *Magic* commanded attention as a massive game IP. Even though *Magic* seemed more casual and fun in tone, Rosewater's cookie tray had sparked more interest than an E3 or Gamescom tradeshow. This wasn't *Magic* missing the boat on large scale announcements, it was Wizards, and Hasbro by extension, superseding conventional announcements and tradeshow entirely. *Theros: Beyond Death*'s announcement was a celebration of nostalgia about the original *Theros*, which raises the question of why *Theros* was such a popular setting, and consequently what *Beyond Death* would offer in comparison, particularly on the thematic side of *Magic* design.



Figure 9.2: Rosewater's Cookies – Theros: Beyond Death Top Left (*Magic: the Gathering*, 2019a)



Figure 9.4: *Theros: Beyond Death* Cinematic (*Magic: the Gathering*, 2019b).

Concretely, this chapter examines the design decisions that shaped *Beyond Death*, as a mirror to both *Amonkhet* (in terms of card design and tropes) and *AC: Odyssey* (as a mirror representation of Greekness). This set was selected over the original *Theros* (2013), which

pioneered many of the concepts used in *Amonkhet* and *Magic* sets since, because it is one of newer instances of resonant simulation in the game, and precisely because it is a sequel product, which has its own particularities to analyze. From here on, *Beyond Death*'s top-down design is discussed with comparatively greater detail than the previous set, by once again parsing Rosewater's reflections and Fleischer's work (who returned as vision design lead), to understand how the set's overall approach was structured (Rosewater, 2020). Further, this section discusses more directly ideas of technological innovation, franchise development and the restrictions of existing intellectual property that developers constantly balance in vision design. Then, I reproduce the same analysis pattern as in the *Amonkhet* chapter, which runs through individual cards that adapt specific folkloric or mythological characters, some broader patterns of cultural signification that ran through card cycles. This addresses in particular a superlative focus on gods, demigods and the role of Greek arts. I also discuss the broader formation of the set as a form of language, which Rosewater has called *magic-ese*, and which is very different from how the game was used to highlight Egyptianness. Lastly, this formation of Greekness as an iconic and systematic motif is discussed with regard to a form of philhellenism which focuses on Greek mythology and storytelling, in contrast to *Assassin's Creed Odyssey*'s more historical variant. In other words, it's time to look at how *Beyond Death* designs the *feel* of Greece, as Rosewater puts it¹⁰⁹.

9.2 Homeric Magic: Top-Down, Take Two

Understanding where *Beyond Death* sits in relation to the other installments in *Magic*, as well as realistic simulations like the *AC* franchise, requires returning to the broader structure and praxis of top-down design. Discussed more swiftly in the *Amonkhet* chapter, top-down design is easier to conceptualize now that its instantiation in a full set has already been examined. As of 2022, Rosewater has returned to the subject, once again defining top-down as a philosophy that requires designers to “start with flavor and then build mechanics” and further noting that “the flavor defines the structure” of each product (2022). *Flavor*, in his words, is what I would compare to *Greekness* in Barthes' sense: a semiotic construct of form and meaning. Then, how is it built in *Beyond Death*? In the broader corporate paradigm, Rosewater separates top-down into two distinct categories or styles, which provides an indication of how making cultures resonant happens in the first place. As he explains (emphasis mine, 2022):

“there are two main sources when we talk about top-down. Number one, is sort of a cultural source. Examples of that would be *Theros*, *Kaldheim*, *Kamigawa*, *Amonkhet*¹¹⁰. [...] It's borrowing from a *real-world place and from a mythology*. [...] The things that it [the card set] is doing come from

¹⁰⁹ Quoted in the chapter epigraph.

¹¹⁰ Respectively, these products adapt Classical Greece, Viking Scandinavia, Sengoku Jidai Japan, and as discussed earlier, Ancient Egypt (very broadly).

sort of historical sources, if you will. The other large category is what I'll call sort of *genre tropic clumping*, I guess. Examples there would be *Innistrad*, *Throne of Eldraine*, *Strixhaven*¹¹¹. We're doing gothic horror. We're doing fairy tales. We're doing magical school. We're taking things that are popular in genre and we're pulling from that. [...] Sometimes, there's a combination of them."

There are already a few aspects to unpack when it comes to this conception of flavor. First, Rosewater separates historic cultural sources, which notably includes mythology, from more modern representational genres, such as gothic horror. Notably, *Amonkhet* and *Theros* are listed on the historical end, though, as mentioned in the previous chapters, they both nevertheless include overt genre elements and tropes, such as the mummy's curse running through all *Amonkhet*. Similarly, *Beyond Death* melds historical and mythological elements throughout its design though it pays much closer attention to the minutiae of the Greek world. The second aspect of interest is Rosewater's point that both styles of top-down design can coexist, which is important because *Beyond Death* uses a twin form of top-down design unique to sequel sets, compared to original or standalone products. For instance, *Amonkhet* was beholden to Mummymania and the broader narrative of the *Magic* story. However, *Beyond Death* is shaped, on one hand, by a myth-centric philhellenism, and on the other, by its adherence to the motifs set up in the first product set in the same world (Wizards of the Coast, 2013). In other words, designers don't have carte blanche to design from scratch, because the franchise had already shaped resonant Greekness for audiences in the original block seven years earlier. So, discussing *Beyond Death* necessarily means looking back at *Theros* (2013) design paradigms, as well as understanding what a *Magic* sequel needs to accomplish in general.

9.2.1 *Theros*: Summertime Greekness

Like many sets before, *Beyond Death*'s design insights are publicly available from Rosewater (on his podcast) and Fleischer, through articles written on the official *Magic* website, though the discussions can be quite arcane and dispersed over the span of years. As Rosewater remembers, the original *Theros*, which simply means "summer" in Greek, came from a longstanding desire to make a Greek mythological themed set. It is noteworthy, that much like Ubisoft designers, Wizards also focused on the paradisiac perpetual summer aesthetic for constructing the world. However, this setting encountered an issue that no other set had, and that *AC* certainly doesn't; separating Greekness out from conventional *Magicness* (as a connotative quality of *Magic*) was particularly difficult. Thinking on Richard Garfield, the original designer of *Magic*, and his early work, Rosewater explains that "the one thing that actually held us back

¹¹¹ These products adapt Universal monster movies, German fairy tales and a twice-removed version of the Harry Potter magical boarding school genre.

for a while, was that so much of Magic, so much of early Magic, what Richard had built, had been built a lot on [...]Greek mythology [which] had been a big inspiration source that so much of the stuff that's already in Greek mythology is naturally in Magic" (2020). In fact, as early as *Magic's Alpha* set (1993), players could play cards replete with Greek mythological creatures like pegasi, basilisks, dryads, cyclopes, minotaurs, hydras, Atlantean merfolk and even cards referencing Greek deities like Gaea (the Greek primordial earth titan). Many of these cards would go on to form entire play archetypes over the game's overarching history. So, the problem was that *Magic* was too Greek to easily make a Greek set. In other words, Greekness and Magicness were nearly indistinguishable. To solve this issue, Rosewater found a simple solution when designing original *Theros*: intensifying the set's Greekness. In other words, turning it up to 11.

As the chapter epigraph indicates, *Theros* required "raising the volume on Greek mythological things", while cutting away everything that had non-Greek connotations. If *Magic* had a baseline Greekness index, then deploying a much stronger form of exclusionary scoping would produce something more Greek than even real-world Greece. *Theros* did have a bottom-up¹¹² design component that helped along with this process: its focus on enchantment¹¹³ cards. Rosewater explains that the use of enchantments and Greek flavor was a uniquely perfect match of "Greek mythology world and enchantment world", where "the enchantments represented the gods, so the gods themselves were enchantments, enchantment creatures" (2020). Much like in *Amonkhet*, gods were crucial to original *Theros*, but they weren't just an important part of the world, they were its core focal point (Fig. 4). Greekness by way of the Olympian pantheon, it seemed, was the easiest shorthand for resonance. Rosewater further explains that "in order to make enchantments work, I needed enchantment creatures" and this was because "to make a theme work, you have to have the As-Fan as high as you can, you know, high enough that it matters, and that means it has to be on creatures" (2020). "As-Fan" is a design concept that was presumably part of *Amonkhet*'s design, but was never discussed in public concerning that set, so this remark makes analyzing *Beyond Death* easier. The term is an abbreviation of "as fanned", drawing its imagery from the physical act of players opening a card pack and looking at the cards in a fan, and measures "how often a particular subset of cards will show up in an average booster"¹¹⁴ (Rosewater, 2016).

It wasn't enough for *Theros* to have Greek-inflected gods and cards representing their influence. The set had to surpass some minimum threshold where any player opening a pack could understand that the set was Greek themed. *Theros*' As-Fan, the proportional density of Greekness per card pack, was how designers measured resonance internally. Knowing the specific ratio designers had to meet would perhaps be useful in conducting further analyses, but

¹¹² The style of design that privileges the mechanical aspect of the product over the thematic connotations.

¹¹³ Enchantments represent *persistent* magic in the game, often played as cards that affect the game state indefinitely or enchant creatures, enhancing their attributes in some way.

¹¹⁴ A booster is a shortened term for booster pack, a regular *Magic* pack of cards.

my focus is on understanding how they went about instantiating it. That process appears throughout the peppering of mythological characters, stories and motifs discussed hereafter, so I'll table that description for now, but it also happens at the level of the set's mechanics which run through the entire product. Thinking back, *Amonkhet's* set mechanic was *embalm*, the mummification mechanic, which was a discrete part of many cards, and lacked any other competing mechanic that connoted Egyptianness. *Theros* has had comparatively many more mechanics over its lifespan, comprising the first block - *Theros* (2013), *Born of the Gods* (2014) and *Journey into Nyx* (2014). There were multiple mechanics that were strongly featured in the first set of the block as a selling point, and then tapered off in subsequent expansions. Each expansion also had its own proprietary mechanic, while still carrying forward core aspects of the main set, forming a tighter loom of connotative keywords and mechanics (Rosewater, 2020). Above all, Rosewater had a thematic superstructure, a "model [he] had built when [he] made original *Theros*", which he called "Gods, Heroes, and Monsters". This is the same model referenced by Sheppard in the *Beyond Death* announcement. This is the tripartite thematic and mechanical core of Greekness on *Theros*.

Each of these themes (gods, heroes, and monsters) had a mechanic associated with the characters, and the cards they appear on. Briefly explaining these mechanics is essential because virtually every card in *Beyond Death* interacts with these themes, even when the mechanics don't appear outright on specific cards. First, the gods "were represented by the enchantments and represented by *devotion*" (2020).¹¹⁵ As Rosewater explains, "the idea was that you could build up your devotion to your god" by playing cards with the same color as your god, and the gods were the focal point of play in this set. This means that specific colors matter more in *Theros* than most sets in *Magic's* history because everything constantly builds towards devotion, which is also a primary marker of flavor in the set. Second, heroes "had a mechanic called heroic, where when you targeted them, they got better" (2020). This was an adaptation of the idea that adventures, *odysseys*, are a core part of resonant portrayals of Ancient Greece. The mechanic encouraged playing cards that interacted with your heroes to make them adventure, and those cards were often enchantments, that indicated heroes interacting with the gods, like they do in myths (2020).¹¹⁶ The notion of adventuring, of worshipping gods and creatures becoming monstrous entailed a "lot of building up", as opposed to *Amonkhet's* harsh environments and shambling undead mummies (2020). Connoting Greece already has a much richer mechanical and thematic language available for players to structure complex metaphors both in the cards themselves, and the resulting play patterns. Greekness, at the broadest level, was largely composed of the idea of adventure, a player's very own Odyssey, not unlike *AC: Odyssey*. But

¹¹⁵ Devotion is a mechanic that counted the mana resource symbols in the costs of cards players had on the board to do something. Having devotion means having a set number of symbols across all your cards in play.

¹¹⁶ The monster mechanic matters less to *Beyond Death* since it didn't make the cut, but in short its function was activating a *Monstrous* effect on the card, growing bigger.

the original *Theros* block ran into some key issues with its distribution model, ones faced by blockbuster media more broadly: franchise fatigue rooted in a (perceived) lack of innovation.

9.2.2 *Theros* and Sequelitis

From *Theros*'s initial release through its two expansions, running from September 2013 to September 2014, players had spent a full year on the fictional world of *Theros* before a new product would shake things up.¹¹⁷ As Rosewater explains, “one of the reasons we don’t do blocks anymore is we had a lot of trouble with third sets”, in that keeping things “fresh” was exceptionally difficult. There was a glut of mechanics including *heroic*, *devotion*, *tribute*, *inspired*, *bestow*, *monstrosity*, with the third set adding *constellation* and *strive*¹¹⁸ (2022). The set was overloaded with mechanics, while also overstaying its welcome in terms of making enchantments feel unique and selling Greekness. Rosewater remembers that “people would grow tired of what you were doing” and would want to go to new worlds (2022). Most of these mechanics simultaneously defined the original *Theros* block, but were also its eventual Achilles’ heel, producing “worse and worse” sales numbers as the year went on (2022). The broader attrition of sales is why the company gradually¹¹⁹ switched from the block model, a model which Rosewater now calls “a mistake”, to individual card sets going to a new world each three months. Enter, *Theros Beyond Death* (2020).

Beyond Death is the fourth product set on *Theros*, and a direct narrative sequel to that original set. As a sequel, the new product had some key limitations, but also an opportunity to cut away everything that had overgrown the original block. Rosewater explains that “because we had taken *Theros*, and *Born of the Gods*, and *Journey into Nyx* and condensed it down into a single set that also had new elements, we could not do everything” (2020). This meant preserving only that which was most essential. In terms of card quantity, which is the raw cardboard real estate for iconic simulation, *Beyond Death* is composed of 254 cards, less than half of the original *Theros* block’s 579 cards (249 for *Theros*, 165 for *Born of the Gods* and 165 for *Journey into Nyx*). Moreover, the set needed to feel like a cohesive rendition of the original *Theros* block, while also offering innovations to whet player’s appetite, and doing so with less than half the design space. This meant doubling down on the original concentration of Greekness to further select only the *most* Greek connotated imagery and characters.

¹¹⁷ The traditional three-set block model ran from 1996 to 2014, right after the original *Theros* block. The two-block paradigm produced sets in pairs from 2014 to 2018 and ran into development challenges regarding beginner products, which is where *Amonkhet* is located. 2018 to 2021 used the Three-and-One model, but beginner products saw lower sales numbers. From 2021 onwards, the company produces four unique sets, in different worlds of intellectual properties (Stoddard, 2016; Rosewater, 2021).

¹¹⁸ Remembering all of these mechanics isn’t important, and what is crucial is the sheer quantity of signifying mechanics and connotations were needed for three interlinked products.

In one sense, *Theros Beyond Death* contains the highest density of *Greekness* in all of *Magic*'s development history¹²⁰. In that respect, what signifiers are considered the most indispensable aspects of this setting for the developers is crucial. As Rosewater remembers, their main approach was to ask “why did people like *Theros*? The reason they liked it is [...] Greek mythology is fun and it’s fun to focus on the Greek mythological things. You get your gorgons, and your minotaurs, and your hydras” (2020). The vision design unit ended up deciding that there were three current core aspects that the set needed to integrate. As he explains, “One was we had to have gods. We didn’t think we could fit all fifteen gods in. In fact, play design [...] was concerned that fifteen gods had been too many” from a mechanical standpoint (2020). Bringing gods back meant the return of devotion, as a core mechanic as well, seeing as it was “a big hit” (2020). Second, enchantments were also returning as a core part of the setting, including the *constellation* mechanic in a revamped form, as “the cleanest thing we could” for a superlative focus on enchantments (2020). The company’s cautious refocus on enchantments is viewed by Rosewater as a reaction to the slow decline in consumer interest back in 2013-2014, attributed to a lack of focus on enchantments from the get-go (2020). Third, the vision design team was aware that they “were going to have the underworld play a larger role than it had originally” (2020). This last aspect is the key innovation of the product and what the trailer was selling to audiences before the fact. Every other mechanic was either condensed into a subgroup of cards or abandoned altogether. *Beyond Death* was a leaner redux, but also fundamentally had to be distinct to garner engagement. It had to accomplish an almost impossible task, reminiscent of Odysseus needing to shoot an arrow through the handles of twelve axes in Homer’s *Odyssey*¹²¹. This time, the set’s winning formula would be *Gods, enchantments, and the underworld*.

Unfortunately, producing the Greek underworld as the sequel’s hallmark proved to be a technically daunting task. The purpose of the underworld was to mechanically design something never seen in *Magic*. This was the set’s technological tentpole aspect, insofar as tabletop games are concerned. Rosewater loftily describes how the team’s goal was to “bring the River Styx¹²² to the battlefield” (2020). It was intended not as something that showed up on specific cards but as a mechanic that would alter the entire play space. This mechanic, called *stygian*, would require players to manually build the river with tokens on the board and then players could move creatures between the land of the living and the dead (2020). Rosewater’s memories about the process recall similar discussions of technological development by other game and film directors, rehashing the boldness of auteurs (2020):

“We tried infinite numbers of stygian variations; we were excited by stygian.
We thought it was bold. The idea of bringing the River Styx to your board.
We thought that would be dynamic in digital play. And we were really

¹²⁰ It takes the original block’s As-Fan and conducts a second pass for inclusion/exclusion of Greek themes.

¹²¹ A reference to a hero modified and featured in *Beyond Death*.

¹²² One of five rivers circling the underworld in Greek Mythology, which separates the world of the living from the underworld.

excited, it seemed to be something that really seemed different and fun, and we thought sort of captured the underworld in a way that was different.”

Unfortunately, *stygian* ran into two problems. First, it proved too complex for Magic’s game infrastructure, particularly for the digital platforms of *Magic Online* and *Magic Arena*, where the mechanic would cost significantly more than expected and occupy development time (2020). Second, the creative team felt like the mechanic produced dissonance on multiple levels. They felt that it was “kind of weird, things going back and forth between the land of the living and the dead” (2020). What worked thematically, didn’t quite work mechanically. Moreover, even at the thematic level, *stygian* broke the top-down Greekness of the set by making escapes from the underworld commonplace, whereas return trips from the underworld were rare in myths: “there’s a few isolated stories, but it’s not something that happens with any regularity” (2020). Crucially, the design team stepped in to make sure the game would adhere to the minute details of Greek myths, rather than just attending to the general motif. In the end, *stygian* “had to go”, but the product’s story was still built around the protagonist, Elspeth (Fig. 9.4): escaping from the underworld, nonetheless. Enter the mechanic that stuck the landing: *escape*.



Figure 9.5: Example of Escape Mechanic Highlighted on Elspeth Card (Wizards of the Coast, 2020).

Magic has a play zone, like many other board games, where dead creatures end up: the graveyard. A more elegant solution for making the underworld playable that developers settled on was to ask, “what if there’s a way to escape the underworld” and “what if your graveyard is the resource” (2020). The resulting mechanic was *escape*, where players pay a cost to bring a creature back to the play area. As a comparison point, the *embalm* mechanic for *Amonkhet* and *escape* here generally¹²³ accomplish the same effect: players pay a cost to return a creature to the active board. At a thematic level, in the Egyptian world creatures returned as mummies, while here they’re just themselves, but it is at the level of mechanical cohesion for the whole set that things differ most. In *Amonkhet* the way *Magic* is played is largely standard and mummies are the core component of most matches. *Beyond Death*’s wealth of mechanics means that there are multiple other variations of Greekness in play. Players can tailor their strategies to focus on gods, escaping the underworld or enchantment magic, at the very least. In other words, as simple arithmetic, *Amonkhet* generally plays along one axis, whereas *Beyond Death* plays around at least three, at the level of core mechanics. However, this is just the broad thematic layer of how *Beyond Death* signifies Greekness across its product.

9.3 Legendary Cards: Granular Greekness in Specific Figures

Looking at the coding of themes in general, of play patterns and of color design is one way to gauge how a set is constructed from a top-down perspective. That’s a way of articulating resonance through broader design. However, *Beyond Death*’s starkest contrast to its Egyptian counterpart is in how many mythological characters it includes for player enjoyment. This is perhaps most evident in its strong focus on 32 legendary¹²⁴ cards¹²⁵, featuring 30 legendary creatures (more than double that of *Amonkhet*). Simply put, legendary cards are the stars of *Magic*, and they generally warp play around them. They have exceptional effects and are often cornerstones of alternative strategies. Some are so strong that the entire game immediately shifts to be about protecting or destroying them, at a mechanical level. At a thematic level, they accomplish what Rosewater lamented was impossible in *Amonkhet*: they provide individual top-downs for players to recognize as icons of the theme, or in other words, they have the highest concentration of Greekness per card. So, not only is Theros, in *Beyond Death*, constructed as a world of magic, but it is also a staging ground that features bombastic protagonists and antagonists with their own motivations, struggles and goals (in the form of their mechanics). Some of those legendary cards will factor in shortly, but first it is important to also consider

¹²³ At a more granular level the additional costs of *escape* require a different kind of graveyard management. In short, players need to fill their graveyard with multiple cards to return one, where *embalm* only needed the card with the mechanic on it.

¹²⁴ Legendary is a card supertype tag, which means that only one copy of that card can be in play across all players in a match, as opposed to generic cards (which can include up to 4 copies per player) or lands (which have no limit across all players).

¹²⁵ Roughly 12.36% of all cards in the product are “legendary” cards.

subtype distribution. Recalling that *Amonkhet* had a predominant focus on mummies, their formation, and their function, how does *Beyond Death* measure up?

9.3.1 Prophecy and Passage: Greekness in Underworld Deities and Oracular Function

Shown below (figure 9.5), there are several characters that begin to stitch together Greek myths, *Beyond Death* mechanics and themes, along with filmic and pop culture motifs that are repeated consistently across legacy media. For instance, the character on the left, “Atris, Oracle of Half Truths” is constructed thematically and mechanically as a double-dealing oracle who may or may not be telling the truth. As discussed in the previous chapter on *AC: Odyssey*, the corruption of the pythia (the oracle of Delphi) and the potential corruption of divine consultations is a recurring theme in both games. Likewise, this is a theme in Zach Snyder’s adaption of the Frank Miller opus, *300* (1999), the Pythia is shown to conduct occult rituals in dark incense filled chambers, as the Spartan ephors¹²⁶ that manage her pocket bribes (Ubisoft, 2017). Although historical sources like the *Histories* (1921) of Herodotus don’t mention civil corruption of religious institutions, the theme of religious corruption and double-dealing Priests runs through contemporary pop-culture examples concerning Greece (figures 9.6-8.6). And so, the “Atris” card offers a play style focused on that aspect.



Figure 9.5: Unique Cards, Unique Inflection Points (Wizards of the Coast, 2022).

Another card, “Kunoros, Hound of Athreos” is mechanically constructed to prevent cards from escaping the graveyard and has three heads with three abilities. It quite simply blocks the

¹²⁶ Traditional Spartan magistrates.

escape mechanic that the product promotes generally. At a thematic level, the character is an adaptation of the three-headed Cerberus from Greek mythology (Hesiod, 1914).



Figure 9.6: The Corrupt Ephors in 300 (2007).



Figure 9.7: The Pythia attempting to seduce Leonidas at the Cult's behest in AC: Odyssey (2018d).



Figure 9.8: Disney's Cerberus (Musker and Clements, 1997)



Figure 9.9: Clash of the Titans' Cerberus (Davis 1981).

In the *Theogony*, Cerberus is described as a monster not to be overcome and that may not be described, [...] who eats raw flesh, the brazen-voiced hound of Hades, fifty-headed, relentless and strong” (1914, 101). Often depicted in relation to the myth of Herakles’ twelve labors, the three-headed hound Cerberus has become an enduring symbol of Greekness across media. For example Disney’s adaptation of *Hercules* (1997; figure 9.8) quite predictably features the hound, but the hound has a long cinematic history including Desmond Davis’ stop-motion box office hit

Clash of the Titans (1981; figure 9.9), the Kevin Sorbo led film *Hercules in the Underworld* (Norton 1994), and Chris Columbus' 2001 franchise starter, *Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone*, where the hound is renamed Fluffy (Columbus 2001). Not to mention the videogame treatments the hound received in both *AC: Odyssey* (2018d) and *Hades* (2019). In virtually all pop culture examples, as in Hesiod's original, the hound is a guardian that blocks a gateway between the underworld and the living world. The fifty headed form has since been replaced with the three-headed form found in the writings of Apollodorus (1921, 233). However, the crucial part of this pop culture adaptation and the card design is that the substance of the myth, the creature's functions *and* its thematic depiction are all respected, as opposed to the denatured stereotypes of Egyptian mythology.

A third example of a unique legendary figure is found in the "Athreos, Shroud Veiled" card, modeled after Hades' ferryman of the dead, Charon. Charon is an omnipresent deity in Greek myth, appearing in the works of ancient writers consistently. In Pausanias' *Description of Greece*, he is described as "the old Ferryman," manning the "boat on which embark the dead" (1918, 529). In Apollodorus of Athens' *Library*, a group of interlopers try to avoid paying Charon for "ferrying them across to hell," confirming the notion that one would pay for passage in some fashion (1921, 35). In Virgil's roman epic poem, the *Aeneid*, Charon is depicted as a "the dreaded ferryman [who] guards the flood, grisly in his squalor" and who "all on his own [...] punts his craft with a pole and hoists sail as he ferries the dead souls" (192, 2006). Consistently the boatman is an emaciated solitary soul, who ferries the dead, and later in classical text is accompanied by a golden bough to steer the raft. The Athreos card thematically fits in with Charon's aesthetic connotations down to the bough. But what about the ferryman's payment? The dead are expected to compensate the ferryman and a persistent image of that process is seen in films like *Troy* (Petersen 2004) in the placement of coins on eyes. Ancient sources like the fragments of Callimachus of Cyrene confirm that in fact coins were placed in the mouths of the deceased (Hollis, 1990, 286; Kurtz and Boardman, 211; Smith, 689). Coins are nevertheless the most important organizing aspect of mythological representations of passage into death. In keeping with those stories, the card requires players to place coins on cards, and if those cards with coins are destroyed, they return from the graveyard. So mechanically, the core aspect of Charon's function across cultures is maintained, as it is in its thematic design aspects. Like Cerberus, Charon has been a recurring media figure in these connotations, which is why *Magic* designers presumably used the deity to bolt down Greek resonance.

Throughout the renaissance and early modern period, Charon has been featured across multiple paintings. He has been depicted by Michelangelo in *The Last Judgment* fresco in the Sistine Chapel (1536-1541), Gustave Dore's *L'Enfer* (1857) where the boatman is shown beating sinners into submission, and Russian painter Alexander Litovchenko in *Charon Carrying Souls Across the River Styx* (1861). Charon is an enduring symbol of the Greek afterlife, which has unsurprisingly broken into modern media as well. He appears in Louis Leterrier's remake of *Clash of the Titans* as a flayed skeleton requiring coin payment (2010; figure 9.10) in Chris Columbus' adaptation of the Riordan novel, *Percy Jackson and the Lightning Thief* (2010; Figure



Figure 9.10: Charon in Clash of the Titans (Leterrier 2010).



Figure 9.11: Charon in Percy Jackson and the Lightning Thief (Columbus 2010).



Figure 9.12: Charon in John Wick (Stahelski and Leitch 2014).

28), and in the *John Wick* films, played by Lance Reddick, as a criminal underworld hotel lobby manager who provides various services for thick gold coins (2014; Figure 29). He also appears in the *Hades* where the main currency of the game is Charon's obols (2019) and *AC: Odyssey* where a lost soul cannot cross as their coin purse has been stolen (2018). The 2010s exhibit an irregular and unprecedented game and filmic resurgence of this minor echelon deity from Greek mythology, with all his textual and folkloric connotations fully intact (save for coins being placed bizarrely). The main point, however, is that Greekness appears less built on an overarching aesthetic palette, as in the mummy case, than it is about hyper specific characters and motifs that Western audiences are expected to resonate with. In fact, familiarity with Charon is sublimated to the point that the image of a coin on the eyes of the deceased is inherently understood as a gesture to ensure passage to the afterlife in colloquial discussions. So, the deity's *function* as well as his *connotations* are preserved once again. These three cards showcase how even some remote mythological characters are treated with great care and the specificity of their function in religious frameworks is transferred to the gameplay mechanics of *Magic*. This presumably has to do with the space that philhellenic attitudes towards Greek mythology occupy in the Western imaginary, but before attending to that, there are a few more examples of unique cards to discuss, and with specific mythological backlog to bring up.

9.3.2 Minotaurs, Titans and Heroes: Greekness in Monstrosity and Heroism

The legendary deities and oracles covered above present touchstone instances of Greekness that far outstrip what Roland Barthes' imputed to one-dimensional Romanness in their attention to detail (1972).¹²⁷ Producers and audiences are past the need to view Greekness as that oiled up and armored spectacle of the silver screen in the 1950s. And yet, *Beyond Death* offers some of those audience pleasures as well, and it does so by having small groupings of cards that work either as duos or small ensembles of cards. When audiences think of Greek monsters, and as the broader distribution of mythological creatures in the product indicates (Appendix VI), minotaurs come up quite frequently. Simply put, what would classical Greece be without a minotaur or two? Rosewater indicated in his written postmortem, that one of the missed opportunities of original *Theros* block was the absence of a maze and minotaur (2020c). This shortcoming was rectified in *Beyond Death* (Fig. 9.13). Minotaurs are a motif of renaissance painting again with another Gustave Dore piece, *l'Enfer* (1857), William Blake's *Inferno XII* (1824-1827), as well as Picasso's *Minotaur Kneeling over Sleeping Girl* (1933).

The minotaur and the maze it inhabits are interlinked in classical accounts. Appolodorus of Athens described the creature as "Asterius, who was called the minotaur," a creature who "had the face of a bull, but the rest of him was human" and who was locked in a labyrinth at the behest of a fearful oracle (1921, 305). Appolodorus recounts how the Minoan King of Knossos would

¹²⁷ Also, certainly beyond the Tutanakhamun equals mummy logic of *Amonkhet* allowed.

ask for human sacrifices, seven boys and seven girls to be delivered to the maze and fed to the minotaur, until such a time as the hero Theseus killed the beast. This is echoed in Strabo's *Geography* (1928, 131), Isocrates (1928, 75), Pausanias (1918, 145) and Plato (1925, 418).



Figure 9.13: The maze and its Warden (Wizards of the Coast, 2020).

Thematically, the card duo above functions by creating entirely different play patterns outside of Magic's normal attacking mechanisms. The Labyrinth allows players to use its thematic winding passages to remove creatures from combat, while the minotaur itself can use the maze to hunt down other creatures. Thematically, the interlinking of the maze and minotaur also holds true to virtually every account of classical writers and continues a trend of thematic respect of primary sources. Although the minotaur myth has been proximate since antiquity, it is also about as close as media representations of Greekness tend towards Orientalism, with notable film examples in this instance as well. Adaptations of the famous man-bull trapped in the King of Crete's labyrinth include the Henry Cavill epic, *Immortals* (2011) directed by Tarsem Singh, where the minotaur is a cowardly and cruel man trapped in a monstrous suit of armor that tortures him to the brink of murderous rage (Figure 9.14). The monster has however been featured in many lower budget monster movies such as the Italian *Teseo contro il Minotauro* (trans. *The Minotaur, the Wild Beast of Crete*, Amadio 1960, Figure 9.15), a Natalie Portman led comedy, *Your Highness* (Green 2008), and the 2006 horror film, *Minotaur* starring Tom Hardy, directed by Jonathan English. The Minotaur appears as a recurring motif of monstrosity at the fringes of the Greek world, in Minoan Crete as the furthest possible point of the Greek world and as close as possible to the

African continent, and as discussed in the previous chapter, in places that are coded as simultaneously Greek and Orientalized in Said's sense.



Figure 9.14: *The Minotaur in Immortals* (Singh 2011).

The minotaur is another example of what Jaroslav Švelch has termed “monsters by the numbers”, a type of representation of monsters “that obey the rules” (2013, 197). Likewise, he locates the power in representing these kinds of monsters as the simultaneous drive to represent the horrific, disgusting, and awe-inspiring, matched by the desires of players to control and defeat the monstrous (202). In contrast to the monstrous pleasures of *Amonkhet*, the minotaur is not an opportunity to denigrate the deceased Egyptian nobles of ages past and to display their riches in private salons, but rather the “promise of achievement and fun” either by defeating it or using it (203). Where the minotaur in *AC: Odyssey* intervenes quite late and breaks the game’s historicity, appearing at odds with the museological and historical notions at the core of the game’s marketing, in *Beyond Death* there’s little dissonance because the pleasure of the set is the manipulating and configuring all things Greek, accurately portrayed as they may be. This sort of sublime manipulation of the dangerous, and the monstrous is also found in the pair of Titan cards.

The titans are another enduring, and often monstrous motif of Greek mythological representation. Though instead of being geographically proximate to the near east, and coded as animalistic (like the minotaur, sphinx and gorgons), they are temporally remote, as they are



Figure 9.15: *Minotaur, the Wild Beast of Crete* (Amadio 1960).



Figure 9.16: Two Titans (with escape interactions highlighted) (Wizards of the Coast, 2020).

located at the dawn of time. In Aeschylus' play *Prometheus Bound*, the titans are described as “children of Heaven and Earth, disdainful counsels of craft, in the pride of their strength thought to gain mastery without a struggle and by force” (1963, 235). Described in Hesiod's *Theogony* as an older generation of gods, titans are often associated with primordial concepts of the natural world. Concepts, or themes, like those shown in the two cards above: natural cataclysms and endless hunger (1914, 95). Unlike the later Olympian gods, the Titans are often related to the natural world and not to Greek crafts or cultural aspects. Titans such as these have also popped up in renaissance painting, such as the infamous *Saturn Devouring his Son* by Francisco Goya (1819-1823). This painting is part of Goya's *Black Paintings*, a series of exceptionally bleak works produced towards the end of his life. Similarly, Rubens' *Saturn* (1636) had dealt with the same subject matter in less brutal detail (Figure 9.17). By comparison, *Magic* evinces a more ludic interpretation of the titan, above named “Kroxa” (figure 9.16). The notion of *eating endlessly* is adapted into card mechanics, and mixed with the set's *escape* mechanic, mashing together artistic representations with the player focused idea of how the titans resonate. This is presumably rooted in Hesiod's account that the final titan's battle with Zeus ends when “in the bitterness of his anger Zeus cast him into wide Tartarus¹²⁸” (1914, 143). So mechanically, the titans are always sent to the graveyard zone and have to escape from it, unlike other cards in the set and once they do, they wreak havoc on the battlefield. Similar representations of titans are found in more modern film adaptations. These include John Liebesman's *Wrath of the Titans*

¹²⁸ The deepest and harshest space in the underworld.

(2012), featuring Cronus (the Greek naming for Saturn) as a giant lava monster who only lives to destroy and consume. Titans like these also appear in the animated horror Netflix series, *Blood of Zeus*, as mindless all-consuming cataclysms, though with disproportionately more gore (Parlapanides and Parlapanides 2020). However, the most important aspect to note is that the function of monsters like the titans and the minotaur, in *Magic*, as in most action epics, is to provide the protagonists with an opportunity to exert their heroic nature,



Figure 9.17: Goya and Rubens' paintings (left to right) of the titan Saturn (Cronus) devouring his children in Greek mythology (Goya 1819, Rubens 1636).

or to play with the monstrous heel, rather than reflecting deep anxieties about the natural world or the human condition. Notably, even though the minotaur and titans are mythological motifs dating back thousands of years, and often codified through oral history, modern games and films are exceptionally detailed in their representation of contemporary problems in their guise. The minotaur never appears without the maze, as opposed to mummies that are utterly denatured from their socio-cultural context constantly. It isn't just monsters that play into the resonant expectations and enduring motifs Greek media representations, however.

The final example of card ensembles to discuss here, though *Beyond Death* contains many other examples still, is the compression of the *heroic* mechanic discussed much earlier in

this chapter. Shown in figure 9.18, the key card of the five-card package of “Hero” cards in the set include the *heroic* mechanic without it being a keyword, like it was in the original set (Rosewater, 2020b, 2020c). As the “Hero of the Nyxborn” flavor reads, “heroic deeds inspire new heroes”, the overall valence of the hero package starts to take shape. Connotative terms and expressions like “forever remembered”, “loyalty”, “brashness”, “bravery” and “ride into legend” dot the other four cards. Thematically, “Hero of the Nyxborn”’s art is highly reminiscent of Spartans at the movies, as in Rudolph Maté’s CinemaScope epic (figure 9.19) and Snyder’s comic book adaptation (figure 9.20). In fact, the construction of Sparta in Red and White, along with its *heroic* mechanic is highly compatible with the representation of Lakonian¹²⁹ Greekness.



Figure 9.18: Sample of the Hero package in Beyond Death (Heroic mechanic highlighted) (Wizards of the Coast, 2020).

¹²⁹ Continental Spartan land and culture, including the city of Sparta, but larger in scope.



Figure 9.19: 300 Spartans (Maté 1962).



Figure 9.20: Spartans in 300 (Snyder 2006).

To be Spartan is to be a war hero. In fact, as discussed regarding *AC: Odyssey* in the previous chapter, and even though Magic is almost entirely concerned with the mythological, rather than the historic, connotations of Greekness, it equally falls into the trap of mythologizing the fascist and militaristic overtones of Spartan society. So heroism is commensurate with being Spartan thematically, and as a mechanic it means making creatures better for combat by interacting with them, and producing a wider army of heroic units. Simply put, heroes are made for war broadly, but there is a specific hero that stands above all other cards as a quintessential symbol of Greekness in *Beyond Death*.

Aside from perhaps Herakles (alternatively Hercules), Achilles is the most famous Greek character in the everyday context. Likewise, Achilles' importance is attributable to Homer's *Illiad*, described by classicist Martin Hammond as "the first work of European literature [which] has fair claim to be the greatest," which he further describes as the "cornerstone of Western civilization" and "central to the European tradition" (1987, vii). Hammond further posits the

Illiad holds a vaunted position in Greek mythology, history, poetry and oral tradition (viii-xi), and that Homer “announces it subject in the first line [...] the anger of Achilles and its consequences – for the Achaians¹³⁰, the Trojans and Achilles himself” (xiv). This theme of rage and consequence features strongly in *Beyond Death*, and in the *Illiad* where “Achilleus’ anger does indeed dominate the story” and “all the major events of the poem [...] spring unbroken from the anger that entered Achilleus” (xvi). The *Illiad* is Achilles’ story. Crucially, in his post-mortem, vision lead Ethan Fleischer describes the process of adapting Achilles as the superlative example of heroes in *Beyond Death* (2020). Fleischer’s reading of Achilles is twofold, as “in the literary canon, he is mostly known from Homer’s epic poems, where he comes across as the angriest man of all time. But the detail of Achilles’s biography¹³¹ that most resonates with modern audiences comes not from Homer but from the later Latin poet Statius, who writes that Thetis held her infant son by the ankle and dipped him into the waters of the river Styx, rendering him invulnerable to harm.” (2020). So, the heroic aspect of the game’s mechanics is modulated here to represent the world’s angriest hero in all his glory (Figure 9.21). Achilles’ rage is so famous that it is the foremost example of the Greek literary tradition of the *aristeia*, literally meaning *excellence*, which is an elegiacal description of a mythological character’s killing sprees and deeds on the battlefield (Rossman, 2017). In the *Illiad*, Achilles’ *aristeia* lasts for a full book, *The Anger of Achilleus*, which begins with “sing, goddess, of the anger of Achilleus, son of Peleus, the accursed anger which brought unaccounted anguish on the Achaians and hurled down to Hades many mighty souls” (1987, 3). That anger is represented in Wolfgang Petersen’s 2004 epic, *Troy*, where Achilles played by Brad Pitt, massacres an entire beach’s worth of Trojan soldiers, desecrates a statue of Apollo, and then spears a cavalryman kilometers away, much to Hector’s horror (played by Eric Bana).

In card form, Achilles is called Haktos, and depicted as a Spartan-esque Red/White hero (in fact his play cost is restrictive it is *impossible* to play him in any other combination) and shown unfazed by a hail of arrows. Mechanically, Achilles’s *aristeia* takes the form of a mechanic which forces to players to attack constantly, and his numeric statistics make him deadly for almost every creature in the set, as well as killing players extremely fast. For that matter, the card’s pseudo-Spartan aesthetic and lore dimensions dovetail well with the *aristeia* that many characters in the film *300* (2006) are also given, and this conflation of heroism, militarism, and Sparta. The other element Fleischer mentioned regarding the famous *Achilles’ Heel*, is present here mechanically as protection from every kind of card except one random cost, is also notable and in the card’s thematic flavor text: “Many have sought my weakness. All have failed” (Wizards of the Coast, 2020). The effect is that when he enters play, the game immediately becomes all about killing him, which can prove extremely difficult. In effect, like the *Illiad* is about Achilles, so does a game of *Magic* become about Haktos once he’s in play. This cultural marker is generally so widespread that some 2800 years after the Homeric myth entered the Greek poetic tradition,

¹³⁰ Notably, Achaia and the Achaeans were one of the two omitted Greek tribes in *Odyssey*. Hammond does describe that “Achaian civilization declined and collapsed within a century of the Trojan War”, heralding along with Mycenae’s collapse, the start of the Greek dark age (x).

¹³¹ Treated almost like a primary source for a real person.

Euro-American cultures have internalized myth to the point of naming body parts after the myth. However, Fleischer is correct that the famous heel is not present in the *Illiad* and Achilles' death is more vaguely prophesied (Homer, 1987, 360), and only later appears in the works of classical authors like Apollodorus (1921b, 69). The degree of granular knowledge, about Achilles' rage and its consequences for both the opponent and the player should luck not be on their side, is telling about the degree of knowledge the designers possessed about classical Greece. Conversely, the merger of Spartan connotations of military prowess, rage, and chiseled physiques, with the mythological Achilles, who loathed Spartans, is a salient example of how *Beyond Death* repurposes the myths more lightly to produce a resonant form of Greekness relevant to modern Western audiences, distinct from tradition, and amenable to the game's structure.



Figure 9.21: Achilles by any other Name (Wizards of the Coast, 2020; Petersen, 2004)

Beyond Death's engagement with Greek mythological and historic individuals is unequivocally denser and more diversified than what *Amonkhet* presented. The divide between how a card like this is treated, as opposed to the Tutankhamun mummy in the previous set is much more complex and attentive to detail. Certainly, this set benefits from the design successes and failures of previous *Magic* products, and so it may be unfair to compare them in a one-to-one fashion. Except that *Beyond Death's* individual characters only account for roughly one sixth of

the set. These are the iconic peaks of Greekness, but behind them is an entire tapestry of Greek motifs and connotations to support them.

9.4. Greekness in Larger Patterns: Select Cycles, Broader Mythology and Greek Arts

Earlier versions of this study featured granular breakdowns of every card cycle structuring the Greekness that surrounds these individual heroes and gods (Appendix VII). For spatial reasons, it's impossible to include that analysis in full, largely because the set uses 11 cycles, account for roughly 55 cards out of 259. The individual connotations of each card are important, and they form an overarching latticework of Greekness, but to speak of them individually would require almost an entire other project's worth of space. For that reason, the following discussion privileges the gods, demigods, and folkloric creatures (very briefly) as a signifier of Greek polytheism, and Greek arts as a signifier of Greek cities and their artistic crafts, competitive sports, and philosophic traditions. Simply put, the secondary level of Greekness constructs a world with intelligible religion and civic institutions that players can see and use, though they are less unitary than the heroes and deities described above.

9.4.1 Greekness as Polytheism: Gods, Demigods and the Presence of the Religious World

As discussed above, the *Theros* deities are a primary axis of thematic design in *Beyond Death*. There are individual deities with unique mixes, but the game product also systematizes religion in a more regimented manner. As Rosewater describes, “the pantheon represents the colors. So, the major gods are the mono colors [...] and then, the enchantments represent the gods' influence or the gods themselves are enchantments and all the things or creatures generated by the gods are enchantments” (2020). The main five featured in this set are adaptations of their Greek counterparts: Zeus, Poseidon, Hades, Hephaestus, and Artemis. Figure 9.22 shown below focuses on Helioid and Erebos (the analogues for Zeus and Hades) as they are more important in this set, as a narrative of war between the living and the dead, though the other gods structure the broader set in tandem with these. What's most important in analyzing cards like these is understanding that all the gods contribute to structuring *devotion* as an omnipresent mechanic, in addition to their qualities as god cards (such as being indestructible). A different way to put this is to say that in *Amonkhet* the gods are around, but they don't interact with every aspect of the game, while here they fundamentally alter how players progress towards a victory.

Aside from the mechanical aspect of the gods and the *devotion* mechanic, all the gods have thematic connotations of Greece as a land of persistent magic. As viewed by vision design,

“The way that gods work is that [...] they were enchantments¹³² that had devotion to their combination of colors and then when they met a certain threshold” (2020). The gods are in a sense living magic in the deistic sense, and they contribute to *devotion* a mechanic that structures an abstract notion of polytheistic worship. At first, “they had an enchantment effect they did every turn, or sometimes they were activated” which is a mechanical nod to their perceived persistent presence (2020). They would materialize once players had enough devotion to their gods, or as Rosewater describes, “in order to get them to be real, you had to have enough followers” (2020). So, the Greek gods are here depicted as ambient magic that manifests once there is enough collective faith. *Beyond Death* had to deal with an issue stemming from the original block, where there are fifteen gods in total, but due to reduced space, most of the two-color gods were cut¹³³, making these five the essential ones (2020). These five cards are commensurate with the Egyptian gods in *Amonkhet*, however they have many more affiliated cards that depict their presence in the world they inhabit.



Figure 9.22: Sample of Major Theros Gods: Helioid (Zeus) and Erebos (Hades) (with mechanical highlighted for reference).

Each color has a god, with its thematic mechanics, and each god has cards that depict its intervention in the world, either directly, or in the form of omens, or demigods they favor (9.23). Once again, although there are named cards, it is their systematicity and the maximalist structure

¹³² This is also visually indicated in the starlit frame around each of these cards.

¹³³ With a particular exception discussed later in the chapter.

of Greekness through this exceptionally complex array of cards and signifiers that is crucial. Each intervention works in roughly the same way, depicting how gods can intervene in the world. Stories of such interventions abound in Greek mythology, such as the interventions of gods like Poseidon during Homer’s *Illiad and Odyssey*. Though, there are more subtle options for deific action. The importance of prophecy in Greek folklore appears once again, not in the form of the oracles, but in the omens they deliver. Omens themselves are a core part of ancient Greek religious cultural life. Sophocles’ *Oedipus Rex* (429 BCE) features disastrous cases of oracles and omens. Homer’s *Illiad* (800 BCE) also features omens from the gods (Books XII-XIII). Likewise, the importance and origin of the oracle of Delphi is indispensable in Greek oracular praxis. As religious studies scholar Dietrich Bernhard has explained, “its unique nature [that of the oracle] corresponded to the archaic and classical view of the god at Delphi as speaking directly through his medium, just as in myth he spoke through Cassandra¹³⁴” (1992, 42). Bernhard also refers to this practice as “divine consultation” dating at least as far back as the 5th century BCE (43-46). So the omens and interventions offer triple the card space to depict gods as intervening themselves or speaking to mortals about their respective themes (life, death, seafaring, bronze work and hunting respectively).



Figure 23: Blue God's Card Ensemble (Intervention, Omen, and Demigod).

Demigods are a unique inflection point to discuss. The Achilles card discussed earlier was a hero, but not depicted as a demigod. This is because the demigod cards share a unifying feature across all the colors they appear in: they have a diminished version of the gods’ *devotion* mechanics. This subtly ties specific demigods to specific city-states, as founding ancestors, and it restructures the importance of demigod myths in Greek texts. As Rosewater describes in a written piece, “*Theros Beyond Death* was looking for unexplored space in Greek mythology, and we realized that [original] *Theros* had Gods but didn't have Demigods”, calling the cards a series

¹³⁴ Priestess of Apollo, Princess of Troy, sister of Hector and Paris, important during the Trojan War.

of “innovations”, alongside the interventions cycle (2020c). They are quite literally half-gods in game mechanics. The demigods grow stronger the more devoted a player is to their respective god, and their mechanical text is in line with what each gods favors. Demigods, like the *Callaphe* card above, which is based on Odysseus, are all modelled on specific traditional Greek heroes¹³⁵, further providing a systemic structure for each color and the broader mythological structure of the set.



Figure 9.24: Color-Specific Nymphs (3 of 5) (Wizards of the Coast, 2020).

Beyond the named characters of the setting, which in this format are much more systemic representations of mythology than they are individual inflection points, there is also a colossal wealth of folkloric creatures. These run the gamut from satyrs, minotaurs, hydras, dryads and centaurs to name a few (Appendix VI). Furthermore, they are exceptionally attentive to translating folkloric specificity into the game’s color system. For example, each color features biome-specific nymphs, which are a mainstay of Greek mythology and have cropped up in virtually every classical text about the gods or heroes. Though they are often not represented as gods, they nevertheless form part of the Greek religious life of antiquity and feature in the classical texts of, Hesiod (730-700 CE), Oppian of Anazarbus (2nd Century CE), Strabo (1st Century CE), Ovid (8 CE), Pausanias (2nd Century CE), Lactantius (3rd-4th Century CE) and Gaius Julius Hyginus (1st Century BCE), among many others. There are hundreds of nymphs described in classical geographic, religious, and lyric texts as most nymphs are personifications of natural wonders. Specific rivers, atolls, mountains, and forests all have their own nymphs are often included in the birth stories of heroes and kings. Moreover, the color specificity of nymphs in terms of what kind of nymphs are found in each geographic locale matches source material (figure 9.24 For instance, *naiads* are water nymphs ranging from personifications of tributaries,

¹³⁵ There are specific cards playing on the myths of Perseus, King Minos of Crete, Atalanta and King Leonidas (who is rather historic, but mythical in his popular culture portrayals) (See Appendix I).

springs and other rivers discussed from as far back as Homer’s *Illiad* (1987, 91) and *Odyssey* (2007, 201), to Apollodorus’ *Epitome* (1921b, 167), to Ovid’s *Metamorphoses* (1958, 161). While dryads show up in Pausanias’ *Description of Greece* (160, 359), and *alseids* (field nymphs) are found in the *Illiad* (1987, 322) and *Odyssey* (2007, 161). The effect of including this level of descriptive detail is a spotlight on Greekness, contrasting Ubisoft’s focus on hyper-specific biome design in the game’s topography to make it *feel* like Greece. Here, Wizards constructs Greekness by loading every aspect of the product with this level of detail. This is a kind of resonance that is produced by exceptionally strong representation. Further, this is a level of detail that reaches its apex in the representation of Greek artistry.

9.4.2 Greek Arts: Oral Tradition, Poetry, Sculpture and Bronzework

One aspect that Rosewater neglected to discuss much is the inclusion of *sagas*, a kind of card that tells a story. Its mechanics are comparatively simple to describe. Players play them, and the effects occur on that turn and two more turns afterward. They are in fact the act of communicating a story to someone, in Bakhtin’s sense of utterance. As a card type, sagas are much newer in the history of *Magic*. They first appeared in 2018 as a new signature mechanic but have since become a series mainstay due to fan appreciation (Tabak, 2018). As Matt Tabak explains, sagas were “a new type of enchantment type that captures [...] stories in episodic form (2018). The addition of sagas allowed developers to link legendary characters like the gods, artifact objects that have endured the wear of time and sagas which are some forms of historical accounts into this category of cards. Moreover, sagas, as a form of card design approximate Raymond Williams’ notion of selective record by representing Greek art forms such as mosaics, pottery, oral tradition, bronze sculptures, etc.



Figure 9.25: Sagas and Specific Greek arts (red stype pottery, black Attic style pottery and Marble Sculpture; 2020).

Displayed in figure 9.25, these three sagas (from a set of ten) relay historic events within the world of the game from the perspective of each color's *poleis*, and in keeping with real-world practices from Greek cities. For example, each color depicts events in the game world, in the way that Greeks from the associated city-state would have depicted those events in the real world, and often focus on events that would be celebrated by those cultures as well. Thematically, there is a staggering attention to the specificity of Greek art on a polis-by-polis basis. White and blue are the primary colors of the in-world Athens, signifying a connection between that polis and the development of mosaic arts, which continue to line historic sites like the Ancient Agora or Kerameikos in Athens to this day. In the red color, sagas either engrave stories on the Spartan-themed shields soldiers use or relying on period and region-specific Greek pottery. Seeing as red is meant to simulate Spartan and more broadly Lakonian art, while green cards use island art (also called Cycladic pottery), the materials, along with the art style used at time the stories would have been told, matches the collection found at the National Archaeological Museum in Athens (figure 9.26). The subject of the saga art is also commensurate with what the in-game cultures are coded as. The red Akros tells stories about the Trojan war, in which Sparta was a main actor, through pottery. The Athenian-coded Meletis has mosaics about the founding of their city by their Athena-analogue and religious deeds by a national hero tied to their Perseus-analogue. The green poleis of Setessa, favoring amazons, physical training and a connection to nature, tells stories about the binding of the titans in Cycladic stone sculptures. Though there are many other examples, the adherence to regional specificity is exceptionally apt in comparison with the comparatively reductive representation seen in *Amonkhet*. There is a



Figure 9.26: Lakonian (Spartan) Black Figure Pottery Circa 6th Century BCE.

sense of place, cultural difference, artistic praxis, and strong engagement with myths and pseudo-historic events at every level so far, and it also seems to collapse the boundary between historical and mythological aspects of Greekness.

In many ways this is accomplished by an overwhelming inclusion of the gods' touch in cards (Appendix V), which runs at the general level through one third of the set, which dwarfs even *Amonkhet's* mummy aspects, but the level of individual variation and specificity is exceptionally high. Greekness doesn't suffer from a lack of resonant content to put into the set. Quite the opposite in fact. The card examples above cover a few cards (out of 254), and hopefully convey the amount of thematic charge that structures all card cycles, the distribution of creatures and magic across the card pool, and the considerable swath of mythological creatures and stories that dot many other cards in the set. What is evident in the level of detail on specific cards, as well as the maximalist conception of Greek mythology, is a much deeper, and systematically rigorous construction of Greekness. Clearly, *Beyond Death* engages with Greekness, very differently from both *Amonkhet's* Egyptianness, through the sheer quantity of material it covers, and even from *AC: Odyssey's* Greekness, which is much more historic. So, how is its Greekness distinct?

9.5 Philhellenism, Mythology & Resonance

Returning to Rosewater's discussion of top-down design is useful here, with *Beyond Death* now more clearly described. As he explains, the most fundamental aspect of doing top-down work is to "understand your source material", the "where it is you're pulling from" (2022). If, in the case of *Amonkhet* as a systematic simulation, the expectation was adapting Ancient Egypt, then the set is only a mitigated success because it understands Egypt as mostly as *a place of mummies*. *Amonkhet* was a set with one place (one city, Naktamun named after the pharaoh Tutankhamun, and one river modelled on the Nile, called the Luxa). It was also, largely a setting featuring five gods, and a few speaking characters. So, it leaned into one trope very heavily. In other words, *Amonkhet* was an exceptionally apt rendering of a problematic cultural trope: Mummymania. On the other hand, as a realistic simulation, *AC: Odyssey's* Greekness appeared in the guise of historic philhellenism: a love and interest for the most minute details of Greek historical people, music, philosophy, science, literature, gender relations, civic life, and the historic events of the Peloponnesian War. That adaptation featured a rich cast of main and supporting characters drawn from a roster of famous persons and like *Beyond Death* it evinced a much stronger familiarity with the cultural setting.

Beyond Death is a somewhere in between, a hybrid of both of these forms of cultural simulation. It has the predominant focus on myth and tropes that runs through so much of *Magic*, but it includes an exceptional cast of no less than fifteen speaking characters (not all of which have been covered here). It features at least four city-states and gestures towards more areas,

creating a much stronger narrative spatial structure¹³⁶. It also features mythological creatures with variety and cultural specificity. Not to mention, that the saga cards incorporate various art forms, with relatively appropriate temporal and geographic specificity. Though, as the lands above show in their omission, *Theros* is more a mystical atmosphere than a place. There are no featured fields, seas, or cities that players play on the board. Players instead play at the broadest level with *Nyx*, a fantasy matter composition that is analogous to the Gods themselves (figure 9.27). What players manipulate is the structure of mythology itself. It is a Greekness without Greece, a mythology with cultural specificity, yet without spatial specificity. So, the kind of Greekness that *Beyond Death* constructs is highly mythologized, but much denser, diverse, and complex than virtually any other *Magic* set, and certainly more so than *Amonkhet*. From a comparative perspective, if both *Amonkhet* and *Beyond Death* have more or less the same quantity of cards to do their work, why does this set do so much more? The answer, arguably, lies in how Greekness is constructed through philhellenic mythological adaptation. In other words, there is a different intensity of resonance at play.

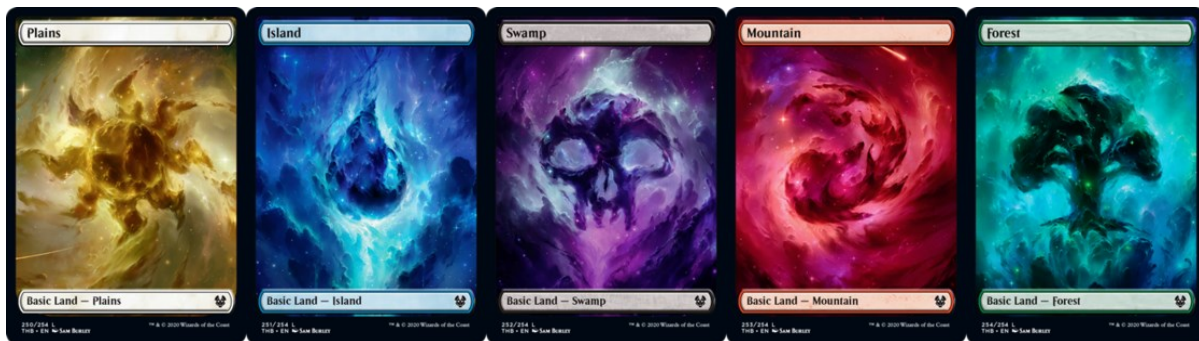


Figure 9.27: Lands as ambient magic, rather than place (Wizards of the Coast, 2020).

9.5.1 Resonance in Place

While comparatively less topographically grounded than *AC: Odyssey*, *Magic* nonetheless creates a sense of place in the world of *Theros*. To invert the Baudrillardian paradigm, it is a territory that precedes the map. As Greek historian and archaeologist Paraskevas Matalas has argued, Greece has been constructed in the European imaginary “at least since the Renaissance” as a site of mystery and prospective exploration (197). As discussed earlier, Hammond’s claim that Greece is the cornerstone of all Western civilization, and that Homeric mythology and Achilles more specifically is at the core of this relationship dovetails quite well with Matalas’ account. Where the previous discussion on *Odyssey* focused more strongly on travel and the construction of space from a visual perspective, *Beyond Death* is better understood as a systematically rendered “visual or poetical landscape [and] a way of imagining antiquity” (197). In fact, this imagined and mythologized Greece is explained by Matalas as “a way in

¹³⁶ Crucially it has no landscapes or cities to play *in*.

which to recreate, literally to resurrect an ‘antiquity’, through painting, poetry, theater, architecture” which would become the “precondition for an acquaintance with its real landscape, that is the essence of the ‘true’ Greece” (197). What Matalas is describing is late 18th century European travelers visiting Greece to access that truer Greekness, located in its “literary and mythical representations” (197). True Greece in his sense is what I would call resonant Greekness for modern audiences.

Sparta, Athens, the land of the Amazons, and the underworld, aren’t real places in this context. They are not any of the poleis of the real world; they are the poleis of mythology. Sparta today is a site of ruins; Sparta in *Odyssey* is a historical place and Sparta here is the home of immortal demigods reaching much further back. *Magic* is certainly not the first visual or linguistic medium to accomplish this. Matalas explains how painting for instance reshaped European relations to the Greek landscape by elegizing it, to the extent that travelers would be shocked on arrival as the “actual landscape doesn’t fit totally to ‘the image you were waiting for’” (202). What *Magic* constructs is opposite to a real landscape, it is an image for audiences to absorb. It produces a resonant Greece as one aspect of Greekness: a land of monsters and magic infused in almost every card. This is where philhellenism reappears, not in the sense of democratic institutions, but as appreciation for an atmosphere of adventure. Matalas further details that in its artistic pursuits, “philhellenism not only imagines, discovers, and represents but it may also be an attempt to construct, literally, a Greek landscape that conforms to the European philhellenic ideal” (206). He also refers to this process as the “nationalization’ of the landscape”, which is forced to “refer constantly to the philhellenic idealization” (208). A different way to put it is that mythological Greece has never existed in the way the West understands it, but real Greece is trapped in a visual regime of mythological imagery. By setting *Beyond Death* in a hyper mythological world, it actively elides all Greek history and produces a Greece of perpetual myth and summer. *Beyond Death* lives in a fully mythological world, in opposition to AC: *Odyssey*’s comparatively more grounded portrayal¹³⁷ This is a movement outside of the historical, which is felt in the characters and narratives as well.

9.5.2 Resonance in Narratives & Characters

One of the throughlines I’ve tried to structure throughout this chapter is the degree of specificity found in many cards, from the mythological creatures to the heroes that battle them. Portrayals of the famous gods like Zeus, Poseidon, Hades, Artemis and Hephaestus through their *Beyond Death* adaptations are at the core of the story and world. However, *Beyond Death* boasts innovation such as the inclusion of demigods, and more mythological protagonists. From Perseus, to Odysseus, Leonidas, Atalanta, King Minos, Narcissus and Achilles, the world is built not only through a strong sense of adventurous atmosphere, but of perennial narratives. Further it

¹³⁷ At least for the first 70 hours or so.

sets those narratives far beyond the confines of verifiable historic records into the age of Archaic Greek poetry. As classicist Jan Bremmer describes, “it is extremely difficult to determine the age of the average Greek myth” given that “many tales were recorded relatively late” (2014). For instance, Homer, active sometime around the late 8th century BCE, “refers to the Theban Cycle¹³⁸, the Argonauts and the deeds of Herakles” centuries before his own lifetime (2014). So, the kind of Greekness that *Beyond Death* constructs is at once proximate in its themes and locale, but profoundly ancient and remote in its stories. Yet, those stories and characters are still understood to be resonant today.

This form of resonance is imputed by Bremmer to the idea of the “collective importance of myth” (2014). Myths were recounted, put into writing, and performed for centuries, but Bremmer locates one motivation for myth-making that is particularly important: colonization. As he explains, “the Greek colonization of the East¹³⁹ promoted feverish activity in the invention of mythical founders and genealogies” (2014, 3). Characters like Perseus, Theseus and Jason weren’t just folkloric heroes, they were justifications for philhellenic identification and expansion. Bremmer notes that the “popularity of myth lasted well into the Roman Empire”, where it became “part of a cultural tradition whose importance increased as Greek independence diminished”, and where “as various cities lost their political significance, it was their mythical past that could still furnish them with an identity” (2014, 5). What Bremmer, and Matalas above, make clear is that any form of *real* Greece has long been divorced from its mythological aesthetic attributes, at least since the era of Roman conquest.

A final note about cultural resonance in specific myths comes from the work of German linguist Harald Haarmann’s work on myth more broadly (2015). As he explains, the mixture of myth and environment, or what I’ve called place, form “sets of conventions which condition our mindset” (13). In other words, this is an issue where connotations about a place or culture “distort our view of reality in many spheres” (13). Where Greekness is concerned, that connotation entails that “historiography, science and philosophy emerged – as the offspring of myth” (13). Haarmann describes myth as “an integral part of our human condition” which at a core level “accompanies intellectual striving for knowledge-construction” (247). So, what *Beyond Death* accomplishes is engaging with a much more robust collections of stories, places, and characters than its Egyptian counterpart does. Those myths are understood as fundamental to Western cultures *today*. Another way to describe this process is what Roland Barthes refers to as the semiological system of myth (1972, 113). In Barthes’ view, myths are produced by the association of signification to specific signifiers, leading to the production of signs¹⁴⁰, and are part of an ongoing process that constantly attaches new meanings to already existing signs. Greek myths attached attributes to characters. Film, as a new myth form, attaches moving image and new connotations to older myths. Magic cards attach numbers and mechanics to Greek

¹³⁸ Which includes the myth of Perseus

¹³⁹ Presumably the coasts of Ionia (modern day Turkey), Pontus (northern Anatolia), the Black Sea coasts, etc.

¹⁴⁰ Which cards like those in *Magic* are purpose-built for.

myths and their media representations. Barthes describes myth as a form unconcerned with media specificity, where “whether it deals with alphabetical or pictorial writing, myth wants to see in them only a sum of signs, a global sign, the final term of a semiological chain” (113). That global sign here is Greekness.

9.6 Greekness from the Source

Greekness, as structured through philhellenism is not uniform, even in simulation form. Philhellenism structured *AC: Odyssey* to an extent that it consistently tried to evade any problematic subjects, like Greek slavery, that might shock modern audiences and does so through a pseudo-historical approach (up until it fully devolves into a blockbuster sci-fi action film). *Beyond Death* differs quite strongly from that formation by absconding from historical events and places. It adapts the mythology of Greece, a philhellenism of the cultural idea of Greece. Perhaps Rosewater’s words are useful a final time, remembering that he thinks of top-down design as understanding *the source material*, he describes the process of returning to *Theros* as having to “concentrate” the Greekness (2020). That Greekness is formed by cards structuring oral histories that remain resonant today, at least in a way that the game developers understand it. In effect, what Rosewater sees as *concentrating* is pushing Barthes’ myth process forward, continuing a longer chain of signification. Likewise, this kind of mythology requires constant iconic simulation, selecting only those subjects that resonate with audiences.

In parallel, classicist Luca Giuliani has explained in terms of cultural adaptation in media, “all media—whether television, radio or print—aspire to a form of reportage that is extensive, rapid and generally understandable” (2013, xi). Games are a natural fit into this paradigm if their media specificity is considered and accounted for. Giuliani further explains that to make things generally understandable “the complexity of reality must first be reduced to a level where it is intellectually (but also aesthetically and morally) manageable” (2013). This of course brings up many of the issues relating to iconic simulation and articulated resonance, namely the idea that complex cultural categories must be made *manageable*. So why is Greekness more manageable than Egyptianness? In part, *AC: Odyssey* focuses on the historical and the somewhat fantastic everyday experience of Greek life produces a vision of Greekness rooted in the real. *Beyond Death* produces the opposite, a version of Greekness rooted exclusively in myth. This is what Giuliani describes as “the myth versus everyday life distinction”, a paradigm of artistic production that tends to produce and interpret art as one or the other, seldom as both aspects (2013, 244). The implication is that there are many kinds of Greekness found in games media because the Euro-American sensibilities allow for both kinds to coexist, as opposed to representations of Orientalized cultures, which evidently struggle to even recognize points of resonance.

In other words, collectively in the West, we relate to Greekness in a way we don't to Egyptianness. What the mythological construction of Greekness in *Beyond Death* provides is a formation of Greek culture beyond the confines of geographic space and reality. Media historian Marco Benoit Carbone explains this as the idea that "Greater Greece¹⁴¹ binds together ideas about geography and history to create a memory that sustains local formulations of heritage, aspirations for tourism and development, constructions of cultural identity, and even myths of an ethnic 'descent' from the Greeks" (2022). In the case of Homeric myth, Carbone describes how Greece appears to Europeans, and Americans as "Hellas¹⁴², the putative cradle of Europe," while "connecting [places] symbolically and economically to supra-local networks" (2022). What he describes is the use of a mythological past to display ancient Greek myths, on one hand to perpetuate the "Mediterranean as static, ancient, small and quaint", and on the other "the United States of America as dynamic, novel, vast, in-becoming" (2022). Both locales are proximate to Greekness, but what they draw from it is altogether different. Whether European or American, Greekness is part of the core societal fabric. Greekness represents and informs Westernness in a way that Egyptianness does not. Further, as the sequel aspects of *Beyond Death* indicate, **Greekness begets more Greekness**, as the signification process continues to unfurl, in greater density, complexity and breadth.

Although *Theros: Beyond Death* may have started with an unassuming baking video, the maximalist roster of media representations and ideological framing it is situated in has a much longer tail; one that runs through virtually all Euro-American cultures. Mythological creatures like the Minotaur, and its liminal location at the edge of the Greek world, circumscribe Greekness and the Greek world. Monstrosity and the touch of the mythological are presented as intrusions into cultural records of art, poetry, civilization, heroism, healing, and so on. Conversely, *Amonkhet's* Mummymania is not liminal; it is intrinsic to Egyptianness. Except, perhaps, for those moments of Western domination, such as *Origins'* Ptolemaic Egypt. This is the tension to discuss and to conclude my analysis of resonant simulation on: The idea that Greekness across these games is positioned as natural, intrinsic and a vehicle for self-identification, while Egyptianness is exotic, terrifying, Orientalized and something to possess or destroy. It is not surprise then that the simple answer to the question of how *Theros* structures Greekness is found in its very name, as a space of perpetual adventure and magic; *Summer*.

¹⁴¹ Often associated with the *megali idea*, a concept that advocates for the restoration of the Greek Golden Age or Byzantine Greek empires, a "Greece of Two Continents and Five Seas", which is an ultra-nationalist idealization of Greece sovereignty and culture championed by Greece's far right party, Golden Dawn.

¹⁴² Traditional name for Greece.

X CONCLUSION: CULTURAL SIMULATION AS TECHNICAL ACHIEVEMENT

*Other arts, other ages may have pursued, under the name of style, the essential core of things;
here, nothing of the kind: each object is accompanied by its adjectives,
substance is buried under its myriad qualities, man never confronts the object,
which remains dutifully subjugated to him by precisely what it is assigned to provide.*
– Roland Barthes, *The World as Object*, 1972, 5.

10.1 From Archaeological Dig, to Museum, to Game World

This project began with a question about how blockbuster games simulate culture. In that formulation, there were already numerous terms to define and organize, which this project has pursued across these four case studies. I was concerned with inaccuracies in game worlds that represented cultures, and how those errors or modifications would eventually lead audiences to a hyperreal simulacrum that was deeply alienated from the actual culture at play (Baudrillard, 1994; Eco, 1986). This line of thinking ran through many of the early analyses on *Assassin's Creed*. Questions about whether one locale or another had been accurately represented often popped up in historical and archaeological papers in particular. However, as criticism on the franchise developed, some critics were less concerned with accuracy than they were with how the games chose a specific time, place, and protagonist to follow (Shaw, 2015; de Wildt and Aupers, 2019; Lauro, 2020). There was a sense that even when the games were accurate, they were redeploying cultures (in their broadest sense) as a motif that suited the game's needs, understood as the company's needs. Unfortunately, critical work on *Magic: The Gathering* had not tackled that aspect of the game yet, but the public talks given by Mark Rosewater entailed a similar approach (2016).

I initially thought of how games like *AC* and *Magic* could manipulate, shift, and replicate the building blocks that had been so difficult to access in physical space. After all, relocating one temple had taken the better part of two decades, and that reality doesn't account for the artifacts that could not be relocated, let alone those that have been lost to time. What if games could use impeccably accurate information to produce virtual worlds simulating Ptolemaic Egypt and Classical Greece, would they then be real in some sense? What if it was possible to produce any number of these simulations, to scale, with digitally reconstituted relics and historic sites? Was there even a *real* locale left to model? Considering the centuries of Egyptian antiquities being smuggled to Europe, which *Origins* deals with tangentially, that preceded the relatively benign projects of contemporary game companies, brought up a subsequent series of questions. Why were Egyptian pyramids blasted open to excavate and export sacred objects, while Greek temples were generally restored and preserved in situ? Why did archaeologists like Perring view Egypt as fertile ground for gentlemanly treasure hunts, while Schliemann donated the Mycenaean tomb discoveries back to the Greek crown? I had no definitive answers at the time, but there was a palpable sense that the West's relationship with the cultures of classical antiquity was not

uniform. In other words, the *West* viewed Egypt and Greece differently, despite recognizing both as pillars of the Mediterranean. The popular fascination with Egyptian and Greek cultures was widespread, visible in pop-up books, movies, and videogames, yet across Europe and America vastly different things were the focus for each culture.

Videogames in particular articulated a specific anxiety of hyperreal simulation accounts found in the works of Baudrillard and Eco: infinite replicability and increasing degrees of technical fidelity. This is why the technological tentpole aspect of videogames has been at the forefront of this entire study (Acland, 54). In the early work of Ted Friedman, games were simultaneously terrifying in their media effects connotations, but wonderfully innovative in their ability to construct virtual spaces (1994). Likewise, Janet Murray's discussion of the holodeck painted a generally optimistic view about the power of narratives in cyberspace, about the potentials of reimagining the world (1997). However, authors working on museum exhibits were already attuned to the risks of constructing narrative spaces that could be filled with cultural iconography (Eco, 1986; Haraway, 1984). Haraway's work prefigured the kind of scientific cultural simulation that would take form in games like *Assassin's Creed* and *Magic: The Gathering* over the last three decades, as she locates the impetus of natural history museums in a drive towards "exhibition, eugenics, and conservation," rooted in notions of "preservation, purity [and] social order" (57). A focus on the topography of the land and the size of the game world would sidestep pesky connotations of imperialism, and justify specific power dynamics as natural or historic, as is the case in Shaw's *Tyranny of History* (2015).

Notably, the scientific strand of museum that Haraway described was viewed by curators as an inoculation to the "dread disease of imperialist, capitalist, and white culture," as it would elevate museum subject matter above the vices of low culture (57). The main function of museums was to avoid the "fusion of culture and entertainment" that Horkheimer and Adorno understood as the doubled "debasement of culture" and "compulsory intellectualization of amusement" (114). However, tourism scholars like Wang, and museum scholars like Bennett, viewed museums as inherently subject to the relations of capital and empire that funded their lavish halls. Museums whose imagery now runs through *Assassin's Creed Discovery Tour*, predominantly drawing on the collections of the Louvre (Paris), Musee d'Orsay (Paris), Metropolitan Museum of Art (New York), J. Paul Getty Museum (Los Angeles), Antikensammlung (Berlin), and the British Museum (London), were always already rooted in the imperialist practices that filled their collections for centuries¹⁴³. Imperialism which also shaped fields of study in those cultures, and the media stereotypes that arose out of that colonial mode of viewing (Said, 1993; Mukherjee, 2017). There is an ongoing inevitable cross-pollination as these games try to find legitimate sources of information to buttress their simulations. In Horkheimer and Adorno's sense, these games are attempting to rebut claims that games debase culture, by intellectualizing them through museum armature, or linking them to legacy media seen as

¹⁴³ Notably, *Discovery Tour: Ancient Greece* does include a handful of images from the Akropolis Museum and the National Archaeological Museum in Athens. This is not the case with imagery in *Discovery Tour: Ancient Egypt*.

relatively more prestigious. Furthermore, specific instances of the digital museums tie objects like Bram Stoker's *The Jewel of the Seven Stars* (another cursed mummy novel), to museum exhibits, to simulation, and to blockbuster action films (figure 10.1). Games were never exempt from the kind of intermingling between the colonial aspects of early archaeology and pulp literature. They simply added another medium to remediate stereotypes and to legitimize their operations.

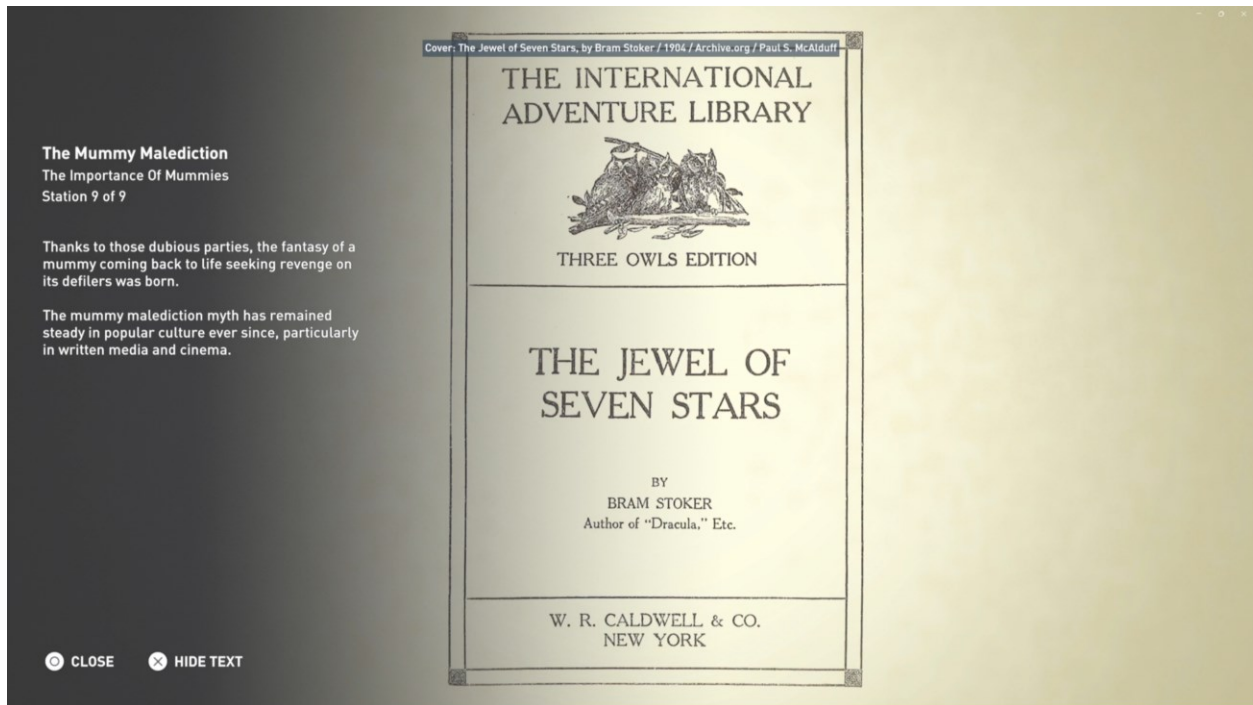


Figure 10.1: *The Mummy Malediction*: from Stoker to the museum, to the game (Ubisoft, 2019o).

European colonialism and its construction of Ancient Egypt and Classical Greece was already present in pop culture media that became sensations in the 1990s, as were the corporations ready to profit from these highly lucrative trends. Toy lines from Hasbro, cartoons that acted as a storefront, prestige shows on cable television and genre film were all making use of the iconography that museums had cultivated for decades to churn out these cultures as product. Antiquity was hip, in the public domain, removed from current political issues, and infinitely replicable across media and franchises. In this epoch of vertical and horizontal expansion across cultures and media, games were another step on the franchising processes that Johnson has discussed (2013). As he explains, “media franchising extended this logic of industrial connectivity, not merely offering iconic brands across multiple markets, but also formalizing collaborative production across boundaries of market, production culture, and institutional identity to reproduce culture over time and across media sectors” (233). In Johnson’s account, Hasbro and Disney were key actors in this franchising boom, and they intersected with a variety of other companies, like the educational publishing magnate Scholastic, videogame

company Square Enix and toy-manufacturer Lego Group (233-234). This, of course, meant refining and replicating intellectual properties, but it also entailed leveraging the technical specificity of each corporation. Hasbro's purchase of Wizards of the Coast in 1998, after the failure of the *Mummies Alive!* cartoon and toy line, looms large in this historic trajectory, as it opened an entirely different media technology to the corporate giant: card games. Across the ocean, Ubisoft, operating out of France at the time, had secured a spot as the largest videogame distributor in the country (EGM, 1994, 174) and would rapidly expand its production arm from 1996 onward (Bertz, 2011). Both companies were slowly preparing the field and gearing up towards new kinds of media production.

10.2 Egyptianness and Greekness: Twin Concepts

Returning to the project's central question, **how do blockbuster games simulate culture**, is essential now that a broader arc of cultural simulation has been laid out in this project, focused on games that implicate museum exhibits, art, literature and film. One way to answer that research question is to focus on the gameplay mechanics, or in other words the technological tentpole aspect of each game. This was my reasoning for including two technically distinct franchises instead of focusing on only one. Ubisoft pushes computer graphics in a breakneck race towards absolutely photorealistic representation and has attempted to legitimize its cultural cachet as a science-adjacent museological and 21st archaeological partner (Google, 2022). Conversely, Wizards distills the incommensurably massive whole of *a culture* and adapts its characteristics in the systems at work inside *Magic*. On the one hand, realistic simulation, and on the other, systematic simulation. At an exclusively technical level, Adam Chapman's categories hold up well (2017). However, it is in the continuities between franchises that another kind of simulation becomes more apparent.

What I experimentally termed *iconic simulation*, or the simulation of a system predominantly, and often exclusively, through its most iconic aspects according to the producers or intended receivers of the media object. My reasoning for trying to find another axis of simulation to consider was the repeated invocations of resonance by both companies, which is not an emergent or configurative resonance in Apperley's sense (2001), or a historic resonance in Chapman's view (at least not exclusively) (2017). What the industry seemed intent on providing audiences with was the exact thing they imagined players already desired. It was about articulating the subject matter and media format to match expectations, or in other words *articulated resonance*. Iconic simulation necessitates articulated resonance because icons are context-specific; each audience has different levels of resonance with different aspects of any given subject. In other words, **simulating culture in blockbuster games meant using iconic simulation, which could only be accomplished through reliance on articulated resonance**. This also meant that systematic and realistic resonance were two sides of the same coin, articulating an iconic view of cultures wholesale. This was the production of culture as Barthes's

semiotic formulation of a *-ness* inflection of places and cultures like Rome and Italy, as new cultural mythologies (1972). This is what the epigraph at the start of this chapter is meant to indicate, the reduction of the vastness of a culture, in a way that serves the needs of a game company, as a commodity.

In *Odyssey*, Greekness appears in its realistic simulation form and is characterized by an exceptionally lavish world, which is informed as much by the cartographic layout of the Greek landscape, as it is by historic accounts from Herodotus, and by the established mythologies that have been popularized by writers like Homer and Hesiod. It purports to be what Greeks at the time experienced, with a few artistic liberties. And, to its credit, *Odyssey* is arguably the most lavish and complete media object with respect to constructing Greekness. Dozens of cities, myths and texts are woven into the fabric of Ubisoft's simulated Greece. Spartans are as distinct from Athenians, as they are from the people of Korinth, Argos, Messara, and 24 more poleis. Democracy is modeled, if imperfectly, as is Sparta's oligarchic diarchy, through a vast series of quests and a deep roster of characters. Likewise, creatures from Greek folklore are reimagined through the game's existing franchise blend of fantasy, history and sci-fi. Given its gargantuan breadth, *Odyssey* is the benchmark in terms of game design maximalism, and by extension it is the maximalist simulation of Greece available to audiences today. *Odyssey* is commonly recognizable as the foremost technologically inflected blockbuster representation of Greece in games. Yet, even in its enormity, there is much left unsaid when it comes to the cities of Greece that were most proximate to foreign cultures (like the Ionian Dodekapolis or those colonies closest to Thrace and Dacia around the Black Sea), the treatment of slaves in the Greek world, and the space afforded or barred to women, to name a few aspects. The game tiptoes around these issues constantly.

Theros: Beyond Death (2020)'s Greekness may seem by comparison to be relatively modest. After all, how could a card game match the magnitude of *Assassin's Creed*. Yet, as viewer numbers and sales figures in chapters past have indicated, *Magic* towers over the game industry in general, and over the tabletop space more specifically. *Magic* is central to the medium, and its advances in representing cultures often come through the development of new game mechanics and novel uses of cardboard real estate. A simplistic way to convey that fact would be to say that the invention of cards that can model time was for TCGs what the passage from silent film to talkies was for cinema. *Beyond Death* experimented heavily with the classification of how religion and mythology could be conveyed on virtually every vector of card design. Thematically, *Beyond Death* achieves the systematic simulation of Greece by circumventing real events and places and inserting its entire world in the Homeric myth. It dehistoricizes Greece altogether, with cultural practices and signifiers becoming an aesthetic and a diffuse system of connotations about adventure and mythology, rather than any real city or people. It presents specific myths, the underworld, and many of the heroes immortalized in the works of Greek poets, while fully evading the Greek people. It gets to present a Spartan aesthetic without Sparta, and it accesses the pantheon of Gods without the moralizing stories that often

present those gods as monstrous. All the aesthetic enjoyment, none of the problematic context. *Magic* sidesteps cultural issues differently than *AC*, but it does so, nonetheless. Ultimately, the realistic or systematic aspects of Greekness are secondary to each game's use of iconography to produce iconic simulation: *Odyssey*'s focus on historic events with a dash of myth, contrasted by *Beyond Death*'s myth-centric approach. Consequently, iconic simulation more broadly constructs Greekness by elegizing Greek antiquity, through the use of historic events, poleis iconography, complex institutions, plays, philosophic texts, and obscure, but it constantly omits or excludes the unsavory aspects of Greek antiquity.

On this omission, Roland Barthes offers a particular insight¹⁴⁴: “The critic’s ‘I’ is never in what he says, but in what he does not say, or rather in the very discontinuity which marks all critical discourse” (1972, xx). That which is left unsaid is understood here as “a secret practice of the indirect, [where] in order to remain secret, the indirect must here take shelter under the very figure of the direct [...], of discourse about others” (xxi). In other words, discontinuities in the formation of Greekness are a kind of shell game, where shameful aspects are hidden behind other aspects the audience’s gaze is drawn to. Barthes compares the critic to a logician who stacks his work “with true arguments and yet secretly asks us to appreciate only the validity of his equations, not their truth,” entailing that the representative act is not actually about the subject matter but about those who produce it, an individual “who creates himself by seeking himself” (xxi). For games like *Odyssey* and *Magic*, this means appreciating the craft because of the enormous undertaking, while forgiving or ignoring the discontinuities. We look the other way because they are the best games ever made, for the purpose of representing Greekness. The particular issue with Greekness, as opposed to other kinds of Barthesian mythologies, is that it sits at the root of most Western cultures, if for no other reason than the western collective association with Athenian democracy. Therefore, Greekness is necessarily contorted to exclude all regressive aspects because its essence is viewed as progressive thought in the ancient world. As Glenn Most has discussed, concerning the links between Ancient Greece and contemporary Europe, “cultural heritage works differently from geographical configuration, it operates in terms not of necessity but of choice: the present defines itself, in terms of its own interests and projects, by selecting freely from the past elements that for whatever reason it wants to call its own” (2021, 276). Another way to describe this process is the juxtaposition Acland makes between perceived “ideological incoherence” and the deployment of “ideological slipperiness” (2020, 55). By their nature as designed products, games are coherent systems of rules, code¹⁴⁵, and procedures. However, they are ideologically nebulous, as *Magic* avoids any political connotations, and *Assassin’s Creed* opts for a both-sides construction of every conflict. As Acland further describes, “One can easily identify the strategic slipperiness of American blockbusters, such that they invite interpretations and pleasures that slide the work toward whatever political pole happens to be advantageous to winning a widely disperse audience” (55).

¹⁴⁴ Provided we replace his understanding of the critic with the figure of the game designer

¹⁴⁵ We can understand the card game language as computer code, which is visible in its operation to audiences. It is a syntax system.

Greekness in this sense, is to be free, valorous, seafaring, humorous, wise, mercantile, and shrewd.

Greekness, as a signifying category, a system of connotations, is represented in the owl iconography, mercantile ports, acropolis, and democracy of Athens, as it is in the warrior culture and shield iconography of Sparta. It is even often located at the level of the everyday. It is found in winemaking, olive pressing, bronze smelting, sculpture, and religious life. It is the province of poor fishermen as much as Olympic athletes. However, it is not seen in the desperate faces of the downtrodden and oppressed that were involved in the function of all public life, and it is certainly not imagined as something that audiences would wish to see, to the extent that the game bends over backwards to drive the audience away from anything that would shock. *Odyssey's* Greece is one where a patrician hero, verging on outright demigod, occupies the camera's cinephillic focus, and where everyone else is relegated to the background, as extras to protect or henchmen to kill. *Theros'* Greece is not even really a *real* place, as much as it is an aesthetic composed of mythological motifs. Greekness is here reconfigured to be about mythology, oral culture, sculpture, pottery, monsters, and a pervasive ambient sense of magic. Once again, Greekness is located only in the loftiest of characters and stories. Between both games, Greece is a land of perpetual adventure, constituted by the repetition of epic battles and stories that players get to participate in. Greekness is something for audiences to identify *with*.

On the other hand, Egyptianess appears as the mirror image of Greekness. In *Origins*, the framing of the country, its landscape, its peoples, and its events privileges the Macedonian Greek Ptolemies and their immediate Greco-Roman or patrician social circles. The main characters orbit the Greek world that has taken root in Egypt, or they have to deal with its intrusions into their lives. Even when individuals are shown to be treacherous or self-interested, like Caesar and Cleopatra, the Greek administration of Egypt is either naturalized or explained away, while Egyptian locals are often left by the wayside. To its credit, *Origins* unflinchingly deals with the evils of colonial occupation, slavery, and oligarchy, though it tends to critique Rome more than Greece as well. Realistic simulation of Egyptianess is marked by pyramids, mummification, ritual sacrifice, and occult prophecy, but never by the normal lives of everyday people. Even in its seeming realism, *Origins* is thematically extreme in its representation of misery, sorrow, poverty, exploitation, and in positioning the main character as a savior in contrast. It is surreal in the way that a crime thriller is surreal. Audiences understand the cities and places as accurate, but events as over-the-top. In this filmic structure, Bayek is exceptional, and relatively free from the dystopian view of ancient Egyptian life, but he is nevertheless always Egyptian, and fairly working class, at least compared to where the franchise would go next. *Origins* is also rooted in the discoveries, dig sites and construction of Egypt's landscape that arose in Egyptology, and therefore shares its fascination with pyramids, funerary complexes, and mummies predominantly.

This version of Barthes' omission entails that Egyptian literature, arts and daily life are mostly nonexistent. Egypt is here a living museum, rather than a living culture. One example is

the outright exclusion of Egyptian philosophy, whose Greek counterpart is often featured in *Odyssey*. A body of philosophy which includes multiple stylistic genres and famous texts like the *Maxims of Ptahhotep* (1986 [2375-2350 BCE]) and the *Instructions of Kagemni* (1996 [2613-2589 BCE]), spanning millennia. Likewise, there is no discussion of Egyptian pottery art, gastronomy, alcohol manufacturing, agriculture, or sculpture inside the game. Even parenting is presented only in its most extraordinarily tragic formulation. If there is an omission, it is the near totality of daily life. In Raymond Williams' sense, the cultural record sits only at the level of institutional attention, not really engaging with Egyptian arts and a class of cultural elites, nor with everydayness and the lives of the common folk. *Origins'* Egypt is one of extreme irregularity, a perpetual state of crisis, where only dictators and warlords enjoy any kind of normal life, yet it is also lavish, topographically coherent and without a doubt the most complex representation of Egypt since Sierra's *Pharaoh* nearly two decades earlier.

Amonkhet shares in this problem of thematic simplicity matched with technical complexity, but with respect to card game technical language. Where *Origins* relies on the photorealistic reproduction of tombs and the filmic legacy of action-adventure romps, *Amonkhet* needs to find complex systems to remodel, which contemporary Western audiences will still resonate with. Greek myth was replete with examples of heroes and known historic characters, but as discussed in chapters prior, Egyptian persons proved difficult to translate intelligibly. Audience knowledge was spottier, and so resonance became a massive limitation rather than a boon, leading to the comparably lean inclusion of Cleopatra VII Philopator and Tutankhamun, a smaller subset of Egyptian deities and a superlative focus on mummification to compensate. The product did include Egyptian cartouches, but only as an aesthetic element, bereft of their context or signifying substance. Once again, Egypt bereft of anything resembling normalcy, and with a focus on the 19th century Egyptological mummy's curse as a motif. This was a predictable, if somewhat disappointing outcome, given the broader media stereotypes concerning the locale. As Day remarks, "given the popularity of *The Mummy* and its sequel *The Mummy Returns* (Sommers dir. 1999, 2001) – films that accentuate the abjection and villainy of mummies – it seems that public debates about archaeological ethics have largely been resolved in favor of a glamorized, materialistic (mis)interpretation of archaeology" (174). *Amonkhet* opted for the simplest way out: relying on the superlative Western resonance with mummies. In its realistic simulation form, Egyptianness resembles a man-on-a-mission revenge thriller with exotic tomb raiding elements, and in its systematic form it is exclusively focused on the mummy as the main organizing icon of Egyptianness. Rather than omitting the undesirable parts, as their Greek products do, both companies opt to hold fast to the few things that dominate the Western imaginary.

A final note on these twin concepts is the positioning of Greekness and Egyptianness relative to each other. Greekness in both games is exemplified by deep references, socio-cultural knowledge, and imagination, fully recalibrating every aspect of the culture to dance around problematic aspects. On the opposite end, Egyptianness is marked by a myopic focus on a

limited set of people, institutions, and icons; a relative failure of imagination, excluding most of the local culture in favor of focusing either on Greek elements or funerary practices. Both games are incapable of escaping the iconography of pop culture, which is itself rooted in either the 19th century colonial administration of Egypt, or the millennia-spanning veneration of Greece as the root of *Westernness*. Greekness is aspirational, something with which audiences are expected to identify. Egyptianness is exotic, something which audiences are expected to discover or possess. These are the articulated resonances of both cultures. However, their intermingling in *Assassin's Creed* is notable. Bayek's Egypt virtually cannot escape Greekness as an organizing vector, and Cassandra's story is set up as an antecedent culture. Greece and Egypt are presented as symbiotic.



Figure 10.2: Greekness and Egyptianness as ideas (Lazongas, 2022).

A crucial digression can be found in the work of Greek artist Yorgos Lazongas, whose work was the subject of a floor-wide exhibition at the National Archaeological Museum in Athens in 2022. Lazongas' work combines modern art staging, film projection, sketching, classical sculpture, photography, and Homeric myths. As explained by the museum, the avant-garde exhibition is “a dialogue between antiquity and contemporary artistic creation” (2022). With specific respect to the simulation of Greece and Egypt, Lazongas juxtaposes items from

both cultures, statuettes of sirens and pharaohs, and explains that “The Mediterranean is an idea, not a place” (figure 10.2). Mirroring, and at times diverging and dovetailing with what *Assassin’s Creed* and *Magic* are constructed to produce, Lazongas’ work sheds light on a broader cultural connotation of Mediterraneanness, which encompasses both Greekness and Egyptianness among many other categories. Both cultures are indelibly bound by a shared past even today. The exhibit privileges Greek art, but by including Egyptian works, and positing a broader Mediterranean identity, it plays with a self/other dichotomy that runs through the games as well. Both franchises position Greekness as proximate, familiar, and known, contrasted by an exoticized, dangerous, and distant Egyptianness. In other words, Greece is the Western power most proximate to the exotic orient (in Said’s sense), while Egypt is the nearest oriental locale and amenable to Western sensibilities. Audiences are expected to identify with Greek culture and to want to consume Egyptian culture, in a way that implies an invisible yet understood occidental/oriental division in between the two. As is the need of the games industry, and its financial interest, both cultures are experienced in a bombastic maximalist manner though. From a semiotics standpoint, Greekness and Egyptianness are thus produced anew as commodified mythologies for audiences, often bereft of their real-world richness in subtle ways. This is of course, a resonant notion drawn from and supported by the broader configuration of blockbuster media, which circles each company, and their franchises.

10.3 Blockbuster Resonance & Intertextuality

Developers for both game series have, in many of their behind-the-scenes documentaries or industry events, gestured to the influence of pop culture touchstones, most often in the form of blockbuster films. *Odyssey* wears its allegiance to *300* (2012) quite proudly on its sleeve, *Spartan Kick* included, and there are multiple references to *Clash of the Titans* (1981) and *Jason and the Argonauts* (1963). Likewise, there is a range of cinematic language borrowed from *Troy* (2004), both in presentation of characters themselves (the Brad Pitt/Achilles/Deimos superimposition is one example) and in their garb, though intentionality is harder to gauge in cases where the connotation is implicit. The diffuse language of cinema found in *Origins*, which originates from films like *Cleopatra* (1963), *Raiders of the Lost Ark* (1981), *The Mummy* (1999), *The Mummy Returns* (2001) and *Stargate* (1994), is less located in the protagonist character, but equally runs through the game’s broader structure. In this discussion, one aspect that couldn’t make the cut in their respective chapters (due to spatial constraints) is the wealth of blockbuster film and pop culture references that can be found in quest names and achievements for both *Origins* and *Odyssey*, producing a meta discourse linking the franchise to pop culture, in the way that Rosewater described internal processes behind *Magic* development (2016).

Movie tropes line up with each game’s cultural context, though specific famous American films and their titles appear as achievements outright. This is the case for *Origins*’ “Ben-Hur” achievement, awarded for winning chariot races, a nod to the film’s lavish hippodrome and the

epic action races (Wyler 1959; Rotten Tomatoes 2014; figures 10.3 and 10.4). In case there was any doubt about the game's action-adventure leaning, there is also an achievement called "Raider of the Lost Tomb" awarded for looting tombs. There are of course quest names that also accomplish this function, such as "Seven Farmers", a play on Akira Kurosawa's *Seven Samurai*



Figure 10.3: *Ben-Hur* remastered Blu-Ray trailer (Rotten Tomatoes Classic Trailers 2014).



Figure 10.4: Hippodrome racing (Ubisoft, 2017).

(1954), where players assist seven farmers-turned-guerillas. There are also broader genre connotations in the achievements, like the “Slasher” achievement which requires players to kill three enemies with one hit, metaphorizing the slasher film genre.

Odyssey continues in these referential practices. The first achievement players can get in the game is called “This is Sparta!”, awarded for finishing the “Battle of 300” prologue quest, which is an outright quote from *300* (Snyder 2007). There are once again achievements that reference action movies, like “Blood Sport,” awarded for defeating a mercenary in the arena, and a reference to Jean-Claude Van Damme’s 1988 martial arts action film (Arnold). There is even a pirate questline achievement called “A Pirate’s Life for Me,” referencing the famous George Bruns track, which is the song for the Pirates of the Caribbean attractions at Disney parks, followed by “Stranger Tides,” a reference to the celebrated pulp novel *On Stranger Tides* (Powers 1987), which was the basis of the fourth *Pirates of the Caribbean* film (Marshall, 2011). Another quest entitled “There Can Be Only One” is the catchphrase from the Christopher Lambert and Sean Connery historical science-fiction film franchise *Highlander* (Mulcahy 1986). There is also a bundle of quests about a femme-fatale cultist beginning with *I, Diona*, mirroring the plot and naming structure of *I, Tonya* (Gillespie 2017), including a follow-up quest named “A Handmaid’s Story” in reference to *The Handmaid’s Tale* (Atwood 1985; Miller 2017). A final movie referenced in both games is “Are You Not entertained,” a quest in *Origins* is reprised in *Odyssey* as an achievement, a call back to Ridley Scott’s *Gladiator* (2000), as gladiatorial combat in the game, which indicates referential links between games, as well as with media external to each installment. Overall, both games feature an abundance of call-backs to action movies, but also towards pop culture more generally.

These references stitch together the game with a range of other films and pop culture references audiences are expected to know, which the sequel doubles down on. What this plethora of overt literary, musical and filmic references indicates, combined with the more abstract aspects of resonance, approaches Brian Ott and Cameron Walter’s discussion of intertextuality (2000). Although there are divergent approaches to theorizing the concept, they refer to a trend in early 1980s scholarship where “media critics observed that films and television shows had increasingly begun quoting and referencing other popular cultural artifacts” (429). Likewise, they note that by the late 80s, intertextuality was argued to at times be a key quality of texts, and at other times located in the audience’s unconscious; intertextuality as something that either audiences or authors *do* (429, 430). Ultimately, Ott and Walter begin to consider intertextuality as a process in which producers, texts and audiences interact, which I would roughly equate to articulated resonance as a strategy. This strategy deployment and deliberate reliance on resonance also dovetails with Henry Jenkins’s approach to intertextuality more broadly, and more specifically radical intertextuality (2007, 2011).

Jenkins has referred to intertextuality as the set of “relations between texts that occurs when one work refers to or borrows characters, phrases, situations, or ideas from another”, without the need for those two works to be in the same media format (2001, 287). This matches

what the case studies above describe. However, the evolution of each game franchise as a cohesive system of references, narrative approaches, rules, techniques and technologies that allow for the production of specific installments also dovetails with Jenkins’s ideas about radical intertextuality: “a movement across texts or across textual references within the same medium,” where a company or media object calls back to itself (2007). Each company relies on radical intertextual references to build its own design language, which as a reminder, Rosewater has called *magic-ese* and Guesdon has displayed as a form of automobile design (2018; Figure 10.5). On one hand, Rosewater has discussed the development of *Magic* as an exercise in forming a cohesive language for design an unlimited number of stories *in*. On the other, Guesdon views the links between each title as older and newer automobile models, which can vary in terms of the structure. Likewise, what Guesdon calls “the setting”, visualized as a car chassis above is actually an entire culture in the case of each game, and this parallels what Rosewater describes as the sum total of tropes, media, and cultural references that they rely on to produce resonance. Both approach what Jenkins understands as radical intertextuality, to the extent that each game franchise is always in conversation with its past installments and its future projects.



Figure 10.5: Intertextuality as engine design (Guesdon, 2018).

In this view, both franchises are intertextual, in Ott and Walter’s and Jenkins’ sense, in how they integrate myriad references. Their distinguishing feature from non-blockbuster games is their gargantuan sizes (in budget, technical development and in symbolic complexity), which the games employ to leverage the vast basin of resonant references. In using this variety of cultural symbols, each of the franchises discussed here surrounds each title with a constellation of blockbuster media objects to produce a sort of *a-ha!* Reaction. One different way to visualize

that reaction has become the basis of memes drawn from Quentin Tarantino’s extravagant *Once Upon a Time in Hollywood* (2019; figure 10.6). When DiCaprio’s character sees a scene from his own show, he quickly whistles and points it out to Pitt’s character, indicating a recognition and self-identification of what he knew was already part of the broadcast. This is articulated resonance at its simplest. In a similar fashion, players are inherently and repeatedly told what aspects of gameplay tie back to what film, with the end result being that each game has its own roster of previous installments to call back to. *Magic* doesn’t do this as overtly, but its selected themes and cards presuppose resonant associations from the get-go anyway, as is the case of veiled references to Wonder Woman in *Beyond Death*’s amazon locale or Amonkhet’s adherence to Universal mummy films.



Figure 10.6: The pointing Rick Dalton frame – Articulated resonance exemplified (Tarantino, 2019).

That resonance is built through the choices of films, and assorted legacy media associations, which are definitively located in the blockbuster category. As Acland explains, some franchises are directly blockbusters because of their structure and magnitude, like the James Bond, Batman, Marvel and Bourne franchises, but there are indirect blockbuster properties which “appear as cross-media commodities,” that range from theatre releases, to home sales and assorted products, but crucially “generate online clips, interviews, press coverage, and topics of commentary” (2020, 54). Association with existing blockbuster films and platinum albums partakes in the existing status of big-ticket media objects as “dark suns of symbolic efficiency, selling the capitalist operations that produce such blasting and deafening spectacles” (55). Both franchises are blockbusters directly, in how they market technical advances and the cultural centrality of the product, yet they are also blockbusters by association with other

blockbusters. Further, only in combining all of these elements do Ubisoft and Wizards successes become intelligible: myriad references, maximalist scale, reliance on known tropes, vaunted technical advances (whether digital or analog), or in other words “the sum of that multitude of extras [which] produces the blockbuster” (Acland, 55). Further, the reticence of games companies and media moguls in the face of financial risk that Jenkins noted over a decade ago, is resolved in the blockbuster strategy, which is a “conservative strategy, especially when [it relies] on pretested stories and talent (Jenkins, 9; Acland, 39). By using only existing successful intertextual motifs found in resonant media, game companies discussed above deploy and refine blockbuster resonance.



Figure 10.7: The unholyest of unions.

As a result of their uses and adherence to resonant production agendas, *Assassin's Creed* and *Magic* have become central game industry players, to the extent that it is virtually impossible to describe open-world adventure games or trading-card games without referring to them, and because of their largesse, they employ references to the biggest franchises and forge associations with them. The *AC* game design has become an entire language of play, miraculously recovering from the disastrous launch of *Assassin's Creed Unity* (Ubisoft, 2014; Giant Bomb, 2014). Even at the direst time for Ubisoft, game critic Brad Shoemaker expressed disbelief that videogames could look as amazing as they did (Giant Bomb, 2014). On the other hand, half a decade later, fellow reviewer Jeff Gerstmann lambasted Ubisoft's formulaic design that had become calcified and expressed disappointment in the fact that virtually all third-person action games now use Ubisoft's parkour design (Giant Bomb, 2020). Meanwhile *Magic* has become an entire language of design that shapes Western CCG/TCG design. It should come as no surprise then that in

February of 2021, Wizards announced massive partnerships through its *Universes Beyond* product line, which would allow them to produce *Warhammer 40,000* products, in partnership with long-time tabletop rival Games Workshop, as well as partnering with Middle-Earth Enterprises, which retains rights to the Lord of the Rings intellectual property (Hall, 2021a). *Universes Beyond* would subsequently announce its collaborations resulting in: *Street Fighter*, *Fortnite*, *Final Fantasy*, *The Walking Dead*, *Stranger Things*, and *Dr. Who* products line (Hall, 2021b; 2021c). In effect, Wizards is tightening ranks with Capcom, Epic Games, Square Enix, AMC, Netflix, and BBC and providing them with a franchising arm in the card game space. Notably, these collaborations cross media format lines continuously, and include toy companies, videogame producers, cable television networks, streamers, and government sponsored broadcasters in the loop. Though, perhaps most predictably of all, Wizards and Ubisoft are joining hands to produce an *Assassin's Creed* line (2021c; Figure 10.7). Where Ubisoft has produced an armature for representing whatever historic locale they wish, Wizards has perfected *magic-ese*, its language of thematic signification more broadly. It makes perfect sense that both properties would mesh well, as they don't really compete in their business ventures yet collaborate in the production of blockbuster resonance. If blockbusters are the dark suns of media as Acland describes them, then resonance is the act of collapsing them into black holes and luring audiences to their orbit.

10.4. Limitations, Reception & Positionality Revisited

Although this project is intended to be a focused, yet exhaustive overview of these two franchises, and their form of cultural simulation, there are numerous aspects that cannot account for the magnitude of *Assassin's Creed* or *Magic*. First, each franchise has dozens of installments, and I could only cover two from each. The purpose of this selection was to have a kind of symmetrical structure and to be able to contrast Greekness with Egyptianness, and realistic with systematic simulation. However, the franchises are ever evolving, adding new product lines, cultural locales, and production styles to their repertoire. As such, this project is more precisely the study of how two corporations undertook cultural simulation in the late 2010s.

Another limitation is in the very process of data collection and qualitative analysis I've attempted. Namely, I'm one person, and I have my own position to consider. I've tried to consider my own position, the relative distance to the subject matter and prejudices I've accumulated through media consumption over decades (Kłosiński, 2022). However, as Leon Anderson has argued, any study that has an *n* of one, one single test subject, is inherently limited (2006). Further, one of the main issues with treating my assessment as an encompassing analysis is gauging the importance of specific pieces of game content, and that the exposure or contact with that content is treated uniformly when it isn't. I completed all the game content, but the vast majority of players don't and so their experience can vary intensely. For instance, in *AC: Origins*, three quarters of players complete the prologue quest, and one third of players

completed the final main quest. In contrast, only 3.9% of players completed the platinum trophy that includes all the content for the core game. However, the Discovery Tour is divorced from the main game achievements and paints a different picture. Only 8.1% complete a single tour out of the dozens available, and only 1.9% completed the entirety of the daily tour. So, the importance accorded to the tour as a panacea for the game’s construction of Egypt as a pseudo-orientalist action-adventure is perhaps overblown, when players are twenty times more likely to finish the entire story than one set of tours. For *Odyssey*, 95.8% of players finished the prologue, and 36.8% finished the main game, which is substantially larger, and 4.9% completed the platinum trophy. However, *Discovery Tour: Ancient Greece* isn’t even part of the trophies. So, at the very least, it is highly possible that another researcher running the same project could arrive at different conclusions, especially when the variation in player choices found in *Odyssey* is considered. Conversely, thinking through Laurel Richardson’s work on qualitative writing, the objects of this study are not something that researchers can apprehend through triangulation (1416). A different way to conceive of Greekness and Egyptianness, of articulated resonance and iconic simulation is to think of them as “symmetry and substance with an infinite variety of shapes, substances, transmutations, multi-dimensionality, and angles of approach” (1416). Crystallization, rather than triangulation, would entail that there are multiple methods of approach to this subject matter, and even that the subject matter continues to evolve as the franchises grow and shift.

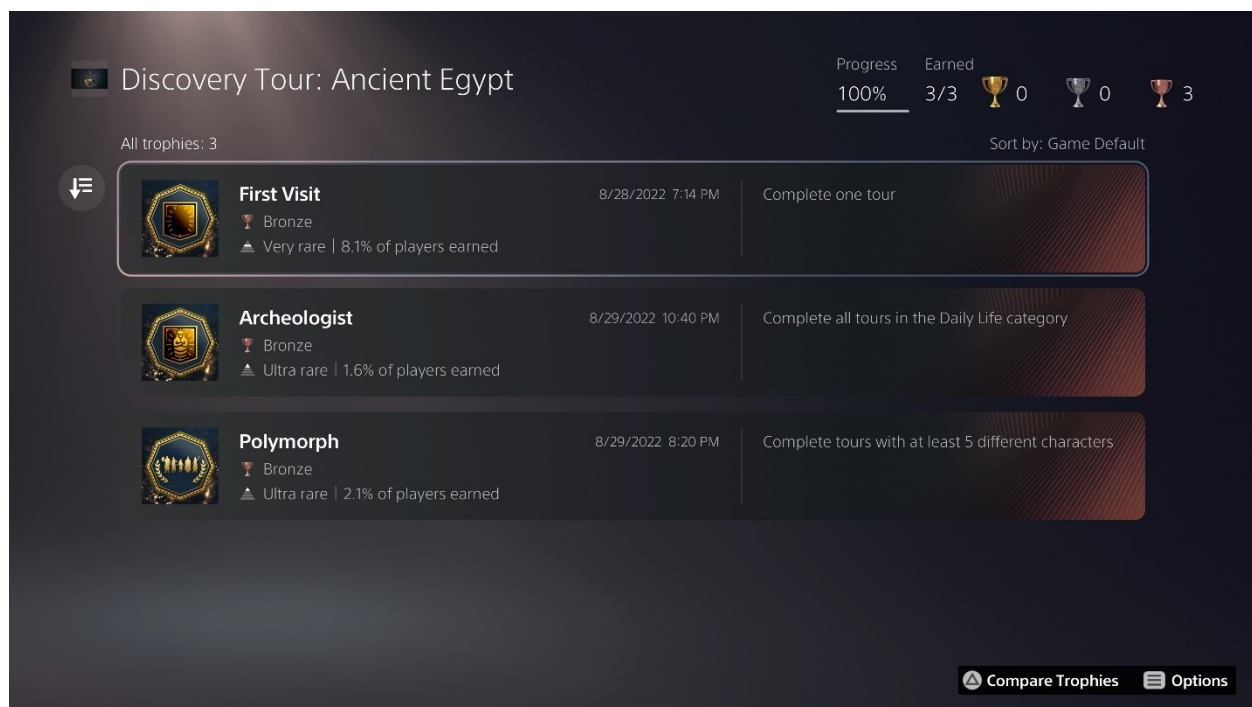


Figure 10.8: *AC Origins Discovery Tour: Ancient Egypt trophies (Ubisoft, 2017).*

Although unintended at first, the project evolved into something resembling and informed by Lawrence Grossberg’s conjunctural analysis, a general approach for studying, among other

aspects, the “war of positions: articulations of the old and the new, interacting across levels,” which includes “social relations”, “cultural identities”, “economic formations” and “structures of identifications” (2019, 43). I have deployed what Grossberg refers to as a “matter of strategic judgment” in arranging cultures, narratives, locales, products, and historic moments into a narrative about how the blockbuster game industry grapples with the cultures of antiquity, and how it seeks to commodify them (43). This entailed mapping of dimensions that take form through the interaction “historical specificity, constructed from the identification of the enduring effects of the old, the emergence of the new, and the effects of their articulation” (59). However, this means that my work is situated with one foot in multiple disciplines. It is part game analysis, part semiotics, part cultural studies, part museum studies and part archaeology. It is also none of these expressly. So, there is a real risk that practitioners in those fields may look on this work and see gaps, either in methodology or in critical rigor. Ultimately, I align with Grossberg’s sentiment that “the point of cultural studies is to tell better stories, where ‘better’ is measured by both the willingness to grapple with empirical complexities, and the ability to open up possible ways of moving forward toward a more human world” (59). Empirical rigor was articulated through the game studies aspects, seeing as the objects discussed were unique inflection points in new media development. Semiotics and cultural studies need the tools provided by game studies to continue updating their perspectives, and game studies need them to understand the conjecture in which game development sits. Likewise, the perspective of professionals is needed in order to cross reference critical accounts of these games with the language and methods used by developers, found in accounts of industrial reflexivity (Caldwell, 2008).

However, for the project of better stories to continue moving forward, the voices of marginalized communities need to be centered. Thinking back on a recommendation I received years ago from my colleague Ryan Scheiding, I have tried to carry forward Trinh T. Minh-Ha’s notions of “starting from the source,” “intersubjective situation” and “talking nearby” (Chen, 1992, 82-87). The purpose of this framework, for me, was to foreground notions I held deeply about my own relation to Egypt and Greece, from childhood reading, to adolescent fascination and now into this work (82). I am not a part of either of these communities, yet like them, Romania is a site for the collective Western imaginary, for fetishized monstrosity and mythological tales. Balkanist discourses have produced the locale as something between the West and the Orient (Todorova, 1997), yet it also participates in contacts with Rome, Greece and Egypt in Antiquity. Many of the Thracian, Dacian and Greek colonies described earlier as those places cut out from *Odyssey*, were located where other people now live. My intersubjective position is therefore of a hybrid nature, European but not quite, from a country told it is European, but only in certain ways. Like Trinh, “I can only speak while learning to keep silent,” and my work can only ever be a study of the conjecture of Euro-American corporations commodifying specific cultures in games (83). In the spirit of talking nearby, I cannot say what better Egyptian or Greek representation looks like, because it is not my place to do so. I do not claim to know or fully understand what Egyptianness or Greekness are like for those who are part of those cultures and spaces, only what companies here construct and what those

constructions highlight. As such, this account is an account of what Western companies implicitly think is resonant, not what those places are. To quote Charles Acland one final time, what companies produce is “relatability”, an imagined “responsive parallelism” where the other is imagined as us (2020, 291). What better stories in Grossberg’s sense entail is identification, to be drawn into the complicated reality of someone else’s life, as opposed to “matching an impression about what is everyday and what is not” (292). In effect, better stories entail going against resonance, or at least the resonance that cultural outsiders have, in favor of what insiders know.

10.5 New Interventions & New Directions

At the Foundations of Digital Games conference in 2022, a panel of speakers from various countries got together to speak about “the role of cultural heritage in a de-centralized gaming industry of the future” (2022). This included cultural and national connotations either in the process of game development, or in the representation of a culture inside games. Vered Pnueli and Renard Gluzman spoke for Shenkar College, as a pioneer in Israeli game design¹⁴⁶. Lina Eklund presented on the *Swedishness* of the Swedish game industry. Kristine Jorgensen spoke about transformations in the Norwegian games industry. Ricardo Fassone spoke about what was going in the Italian industry. Most importantly for this project Elina Roinioti spoke about the Greek games industry, and its push away from representing classical antiquity, which it viewed as tied to right-wing ideas about nation and heritage (2022). All spoke about the struggle of smaller markets to compete with the markets of Western Europe, America, Canada and Japan which they characterized as a center of the games industry.

It seemed as though these smaller contexts could hope for better stories in the form of indie games and artistic projects, but that the battle with blockbuster studios had long been lost. This is to say nothing of the fact that countries from the African and South American continents were not present to voice their issues with the global games industry. This gathering of critics from a handful of nations is an indicator to the dependencies fostered by blockbuster game companies, which mirrors the development of the film industry before it. This is a problem of centers and peripheries. Likewise, it is a problem of cultures that are proximate enough to identify with, cultures deemed desirable or exotic, and cultures outright forgotten in the development of the industry. So, the consolidation of the blockbuster games industry is a pressing problem, and one that will only grow as companies like Ubisoft and Wizards continue to churn through various cultures. Why buy games with lower budgets from those places, when there is a perfectly viable blockbuster product here? That’s assuming that there is enough capital investment to even get projects off the ground as centralization of financial capital becomes ever more intense.

¹⁴⁶ Gluzman would speak the following day about the representation of Israeli culture in games, often through the funding of the Israeli Defense Force in the 90s for games like *Jane’s IAF: Israeli Air Force* (EA, 1998).

Given the current situation that is shaping up in the games industry, there are three primary axes along which the study I began here can continue, and is already shaping up, regardless of my work. The first is to begin moving away from studies that privilege a single critic or observer. This can include moving towards the production axis, directly interviewing developers, and getting a more rounded view of design intentions. However, perhaps more importantly, like Gilbert's studies on educational impact, there is a need to begin analysing the reception of these newer titles as it pertains to cultural heritage, education, and tourism. A recently announced study by games scholars Nick Bowman, Alexander Vandewalle and Rowan Daneels seems to be doing just that, studying perceptions of cultural heritage by players in *Assassin's Creed Syndicate*, *Origins* and *Odyssey* and is positioning their work more in line with the archaeogaming movement that Andrew Reinhard propelled (Vandewalle, 2022; Reinhard, 2018). So, audience studies have an opportunity to produce invaluable insights into how articulated resonance is received or perceived by audiences.

The second is to continue covering different cultures as franchises move through them, to establish broader patterns and relations of dominance between cultures featured in both franchises. This is certainly easy given that Ubisoft held their annual UbiForward conference, which has now replaced traditional E3 participation and announced an enormous bounty of games for the next few years. First, in 2023, *Assassin's Creed Mirage*, a more traditional return to the middle east, will focus on Baghdad and feature a DLC called *Forty Thieves*. Followed soon (release dates TBA) by *Assassin's Creed Codename Red*, a Japanese Sengoku Jidai ninja installment, and *Codename Hexe* (Figure 10.9), set during the witch trials of the Holy Roman Empire, presumably responding to the *Witcher* franchise's success (Schreier, 2022). *AC: Valhalla* (2020) is only now wrapping up its content rollout cycle and according to Ubisoft earner calls has become the highest selling game in Ubisoft's history, breaking the 1B USD revenue ceiling (Phillips, 2022). *Magic* is chugging along with a variety of other cultural locales in tow, including *Cyberpunk Japan* (2022), *Scandinavia* (2021), *India* (2016) and *Art-Deco New York* (2022). It is arguably more challenging to scope a study that looks at these installments than it is to find instances of cultural adaptation.

A third way to study these franchises is to move up the river, and to consider the broader processes of how the games industry is becoming centralized and hits dependent. Given Ubisoft's celebration of the 1B USD ceiling, which Hasbro has also been touting in regard to *Magic*, there is a decidedly more political economic approach that can be taken to study blockbuster game companies (Bernevega and Gekker, 2022; Nieborg, 2011, 2014, 2020). This is certainly important as these industries operate only due to the gargantuan capital investments required to fund these multi-year extravaganzas. Yet, another way to consider how the blockbuster games industry is shaping itself is to take up Felan Parker's work on the formation of a canon of prestige games, and the notion of games as art which found a historic adversary in the late Roger Ebert's work (Parker 2014, 2017). Arguably, *Assassin's Creed's* and *Magic's* repeated



Figure 10.9: *Assassin's Creed Mirage*, *Code Red* and *Code Hexe* stills (Ubisoft, 2022)



Figure 10.10: Game Awards 2022, Al Pacino announcing best performance (2022).

invocation of Hollywood' studio era, through extravaganzas *Ben-Hur* (1959), *Jason and the Argonauts* (Chaffey 1963), *Cleopatra* (Mankiewicz 1963) and *Thief of Baghdad* (Berger et al. 1940), is indicative of an ideological position and affiliation with the Golden Age of Hollywood. This is of course evident in the larger shifts in trade shows, and the inclusion of actors at the Game Awards (in-game or on-stage), over the last decade, beginning with Samuel L. Jackson and now including Al Pacino, Daniel Craig, Danny Glover, Michael Rooker, Danny Trejo and Kim Basinger (figure 10.10; Game Awards, 2012; 2022). Not to mention elegiacal speeches about the power and technical apotheosis of games as a new narrative form in the words of Christopher Nolan and Rian Johnson (2020; 2022). At an institutional level at least, this arm of the game industry is trying to propel itself to legitimacy. Ubisoft is doing this somewhat differently, by hitching its boat to museum curation, inserting its games into exhibits directly, merging old institutions with the representational power of games, to the extent that the game takes up more than half of the entire "Vikings" exhibit at the Pointe-a-Calliere Museum in Montreal (figure 10.11). This merger of games and museums is discussed elsewhere by Lina Eklund et al. as the movement from "contentious consumer object to cultural heritage" (2019, 1).

A final indication of how games are proceeding differently towards media canonization and taking unexpected paths to legitimacy can be seen in the above collaborations of Wizards and other corporations. However, Ubisoft has more recently shifted to discussing a new industry term: PRI, *Player Recurring Investment* (Totilo, 2022; Ubisoft, 2022b). This new metric measures how often players log in to play games, how much time they spend and tracks usage more closely, with company CEO Yves Guillemot explaining that higher PRI means that players

spend more money, and that the games are more profitable in the long run (Ubisoft, 2022b). *Valhalla*'s reputed 130-hour playtime was directly tied to this new service model metric and is how Ubisoft now measures success for *all* products (Ubisoft, 2022b, Totilo, 2022). The shifts from blockbuster premium product to a service model also entail a different kind of analysis that is attentive to the franchise aspects and a new way of engaging with players, especially as Ubisoft's mysterious *Assassin's Creed Nexus* looms on the horizon, promising a persistent platform hub connecting all *Assassin's Creed* games online at all times, with multiplayer included (Ubisoft, 2022a).



Figure 10.11: Vikings exhibit – Valhalla stills, and looped video as historic evidence (Musee Pointe-a-Calliere, 2022).

Since Espen Aarseth's intervention in 1997 some 25 years ago, game studies scholars have tried to carve out a niche for the field in faculties across the world. The discipline often focuses on the uniqueness of games, their interactivity, the immersion they afford, the online communities they can foster and the particularity of code. However, the big picture looks utterly different today than it did in 1997. Between the massive franchises that have emerged, the technological strides and the transition of multiple media formats to bespoke service models,

game studies cannot afford to exclude comparison with other media. Aarseth was concerned that game studies would be colonized by older disciplines, but it seems that in the meantime, the games industry reshaped itself to allow for slippages between itself and legacy media. Frankly, the games industry might not be as concerned with those divisions as we are. At the level of capital, of corporate strategy, conglomeration and franchising, games may in fact now be fully coextensive with other media formats. Further, industry-wide purchases by Disney, Microsoft and Sony continue to shutter smaller studios or to bring them into the fold (Microsoft, 2022; Khalid, 2022). So, if the industry is in an era of media format and studio system conglomeration, it's past time game for scholars to attend to the blockbuster form, and the studios that stand behind it.

As Shira Chess and Mia Consalvo recently remarked, “game studies as a subfield of media and/or communication studies, has occupied an odd place within the larger discipline,” often “relegated to an outsider status” (2022). As they argue, however, videogames should, *and do*, matter to the broader discipline. I've argued that games are imbricated with films, tv, museums, books, literature and more, as the case studies in this project have endeavored to show. The fusion of culture and amusement that Horkheimer and Adorno were fearful of has certainly come to pass, and games have grown far past objects of mere amusement (not that they ever were). In response to that early cultural studies anxiety about *lower* forms of culture, I approached game studies and semiotics in tandem, as a more hybrid framework. Semiotics has been a part of this work because games are so integrated with diffuse signification processes, and mythology construction, that collaboration between the two subfields seems to me only logical. Game studies offers refined frameworks that are media specific, highlighting the unique qualities of games, while semiotics allow for the media-agnostic contextualization of the games and what they contain. Games studies is essential to the continued evolution of communication studies, semiotics, and cultural studies, because games are an essential part of the current media landscape, and the ascendant custodians of popular culture. In other words, games are at the center of the current cultural conjuncture.

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APPENDIX I: AMONKHET CARD SUPERTYPE DISTRIBUTION

Card Supertype	White	Blue	Black	Red	Green	Multicolor	Split	Colorless	Total (x/269)
Creatures	22	19	20	22	24	14			121
Enchantment	7	7	8	4	5	1			32
Sorcery	2	4	7	7	3		3		26
Instant	7	9	4	7	7		7		31
Planeswalker	1		1			1			3
Artefact								14	14
Legendary	1	1	1	1	1	4		6	15
Land								11	11
Basic Land								20	20

APPENDIX II: AMONKHET CARD SUBTYPE DISTRIBUTION

<i>Card Subtype</i>	White	Blue	Black	Red	Green	Colorless	Total
<i>Angel</i>	3						3
<i>Cleric</i>	3	7	3	1	2		16
<i>Human</i>	11	6	4	8	6		35
<i>Bird</i>	4	3	1				8
<i>Wizard</i>	2	1		2	1		6
<i>Zombie</i>	4		8				12
<i>Warrior</i>	9	5	2	11	6		33
<i>God</i>	1	1	1	1	1		5
<i>Soldier</i>	2						2
<i>Cat</i>	2				3	1	6
<i>Camel</i>	1				1		2
<i>Crab</i>		1					1
<i>Drake</i>		3		1			4
<i>Serpent</i>		2					2
<i>Sphinx</i>		2					2
<i>Illusion</i>		1					1
<i>Naga</i>		4			5		9
<i>Rogue</i>		1		1			2
<i>Shapeshifter</i>		1					1
<i>Demon</i>			3				3
<i>Crocodile</i>			1		2		3
<i>Bat</i>			1				1
<i>Minotaur</i>			5	6			11
<i>Jackal</i>			2	4	2		8
<i>Insect</i>			2		2		4
<i>Horror</i>			2				2
<i>Beast</i>			1	1	1		3
<i>Archer</i>			1	1			2
<i>Scorpion</i>			2				2
<i>Dragon</i>				1			1
<i>Manticore</i>				2			2
<i>Hyena</i>				1			1
<i>Lizard</i>				1	1		2
<i>Druid</i>		1			4		5
<i>Hippo</i>					1		1
<i>Spider</i>					1		1
<i>Wurm</i>					1		1
<i>Snake</i>					2		2
<i>Hydra</i>					1		1
<i>Antelope</i>					1		1
<i>Embalm</i>	8	7		1	1		17

APPENDIX III: DISCOVERY TOUR SUGGESTED ORDER (WITH THEMES AND TOUR GUIDES)

- 1 **Urban Household**(Education, Archaeology – Aspasia)
- 2 **Wine** (Trade, Food – Markos)
- 3 **Life of a Greek Woman**(Trade, Economy – Aspasia)
- 4 **The Akropolis of Athens** (Athens, Archaeology – Aspasia)
- 5 **Mycenae** (Mythology, Architecture – Herodotos)
- 6 **Gods of Olympia** (Mythology, Religion – Barnabas)
- 7 **Agora of Athens** (Athens, Trade – Aspasia)
- 8 **The Oracle of Delphi** (Mythology, Religion – Herodotos)
- 9 **Piraeus** (Athens, Trade, Aspasia)
- 10 **Sanctuary of Asklepios at Epidauros**(Religion, Architecture – Herodotos)
- 11 **Bronze in Argos**(Trade, Economy – Herodotos)
- 12 **Perfume** (Trade, Economy – Markos)
- 13 **Spartan Education** (Education, Sparta – Leonidas)
- 14 **Battle of Marathon** (Great Battles, Heroism – Herodotos)
- 15 **Thermopylai**(Sparta, Great Battles – Leonidas)
- 16 **Battle of Amphipolis**(Sparta, Great Battles – Herodotos)
- 17 **Battles of Pylos and Sphacteria** (Great Battles, Heroism – Herodotos)
- 18 **The Olympic Games**(Mythology, Festival – Barnabas)
- 19 **School of Greece – Music**(Athens, Art – Aspasia)
- 20 **Knossos** (Mythology, Archaeology – Herodotos)
- 21 **School of Greece – Theater** (Festival, Athens – Aspasia)
- 22 **Gods and Love**..... (Mythology, Religion – Markos)
- 23 **The Laurion Silver Mines**(Athens, Economy – Aspasia)
- 24 **Sparta Social Classes**(Sparta, Politics – Leonidas)
- 25 **Wheat and Agriculture** (Economy, Food – Markos)
- 26 **Spartan Politics** (Sparta, Politics – Leonidas)
- 27 **Democracy in Athens** (Athens, Politics – Aspasia)
- 28 **School of Greece – Philosophy** (Education, Politics – Aspasia)
- 29 **Pottery in Athens**(Trade, Art – Aspasia)
- 30 **Dyeing and Fashion** (Economy, Craft – Markos)

APPENDIX IV: DISCOVERY TOUR ORGANIZED BY ZONES (TOURS, DISCOVERY SITES AND HISTORICAL LOCATIONS)

<i>Zone Name (Island Packaged Together)</i>	<i>Sobriquet or Slogan</i>	<i>Tours</i>	<i>Discovery Sites</i>	<i>Historical Locations</i>
Kephallonia Islands	Land of Lost Dreams	N/A	10	20
Megaris	Frontlines of the War	N/A	2	13
Phokis	The Land of the Gods	1	17	25
Malis	Wild Lands of the North	1	5	1
Lokris	Salt of the Earth	N/A	2	3
Andros	Land of Plunder	N/A	1	N/A
Abantis Islands (Euboea, Skyros)	Islands of the Fall	N/A	5	12
Attika	The Land of Democracy	11	76	60
Pirate Islands (Keos, Seriphos)	Lands of Plunder	N/A	N/A	5
Obsidian Islands (Hydrea, Melos)	Playgrounds of Ares	N/A	2	1
Argolis	Birthplace of Medicine	3	27	27
Korinthia	Land of Beautiful Corruption	2	7	21
Paros Island	N/A	N/A	N/A	2
Naxos Island	Vineyards of Dionysus	N/A	4	9
Volcanic Islands (Nisyros, Anaphi, Thera)	Forge of the World	N/A	N/A	N/A
Silver Islands (Delos, Mykonos)	From Riches to Rebellion	N/A	2	21
Pephka	Home of Heroes	N/A	1	2
Messara	Triumph of Theseus	1	6	14
Southern Sporades (Kos, Samos)	School of Medicine	1	5	4
Lakonia	Valley of Warriors	3	19	22
Arkadia	Breadbasket of the Peloponnese	1	7	11
Elis	Origin of the Olympics	2	21	28
Boeotia	Land of Perpetual War	N/A	6	19
Messenia	The War Factory	1	6	5
Kythera Island	Home of Tyrian Purple	1	3	7
Makedonia	Rise of an Empire	1	9	3
Achaia	Shipyards of Greece	N/A	4	3
Hephaistos Islands (Thasos, Lemnos)	The Wealth of the Gods	1	4	12
Petrified Islands (Chios, Lesbos)	Land of Sapphic Love	N/A	7	10

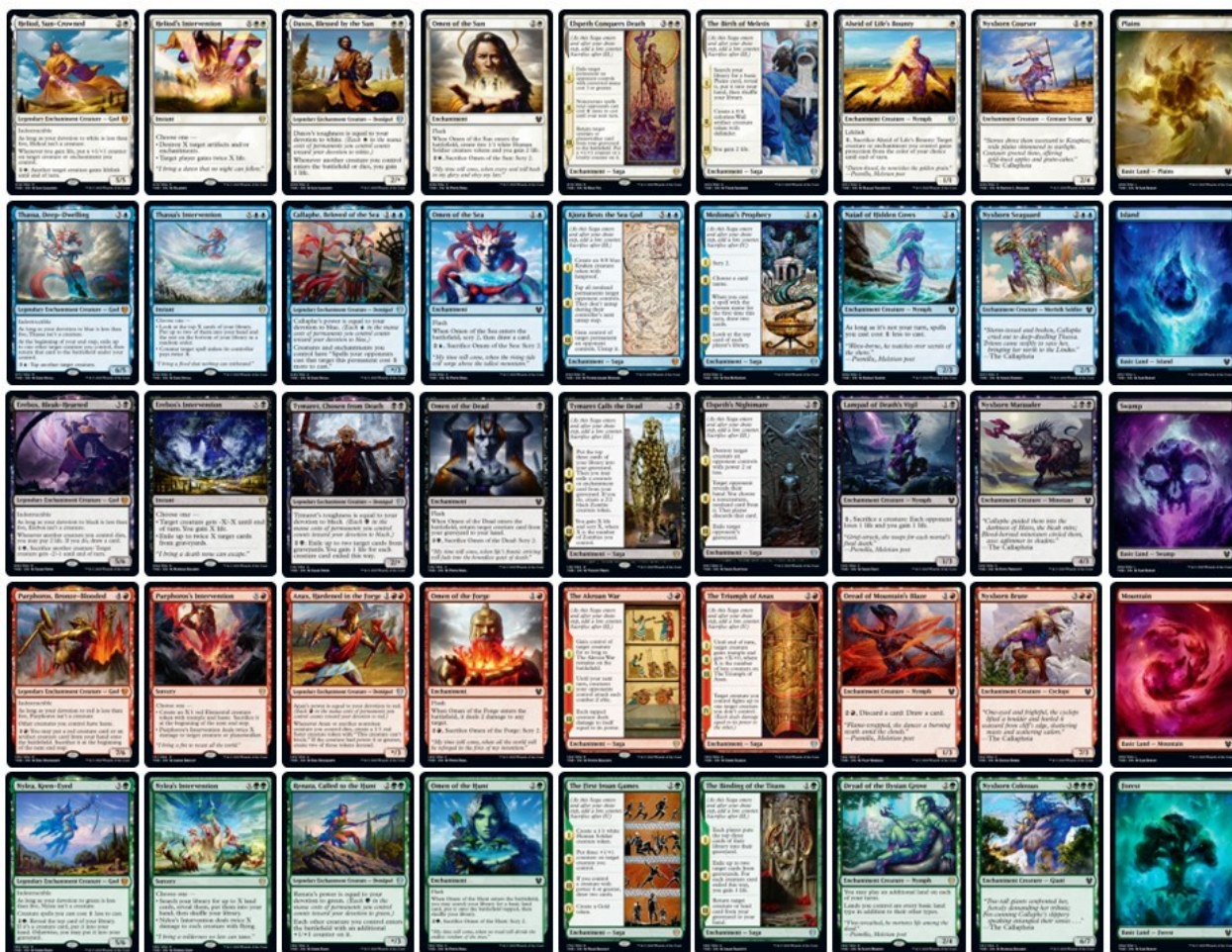
APPENDIX V: BEYOND DEATH SUPERTYPE & SUBTYPE DISTRIBUTION

<i>Beyond Death</i>	White	Blue	Black	Red	Green	Multicolor	Colorless	Total x/254
Creatures	19	23	22	22	25	20	1	132
Enchantment	17	16	20	15	18	4		90
Sorcery	3	3	3	6	3	2		20
Instant	5	8	6	4	5			28
Planeswalker	1					2		3
Artefact							11	11
Legendary	5	4	3	2	3	13	2	32
Land							8	8
Basic Land							5	5

APPENDIX VI: BEYOND DEATH SUBTYPE DISTRIBUTION

Creature Subtype	White	Blue	Black	Red	Green	Colorless	Total
Nymph	1	1	1	1	1		5
Archon	2						2
Saga	2	2	2	2	2		10
Unicorn	1						1
Aura	5	4	5	4	5		23
Human	11	6	3	6	8		33
Cleric	3		2		1		6
Demigod	1	1	1	1	1		5
Chimera	1	2			1	1	5
Spirit	1	1	1				3
Soldier	7	1			3	1	12
God	2	1	2	2	2		9
Cat	3					1	4
Centaur	2					3	5
Advisor	1						1
Warrior	2				4	4	10
Scout	2					2	4
Giant	1	3	1	2	2		9
Pegasus	1						1
Griffin	1						1
Wizard		7				1	8
Kraken		2					2
Merfolk		5	1	1			7
Turtle		1					1
Fish		2					2
Siren		1					1
Elemental		1		2	1		4
Horse		1	1				2
Sphinx	1	2					3
Harpy			2				2
Beast			1		2		3

APPENDIX VII: BEYOND DEATH CARD CYCLES AS LATTICE



Horizontal Cycle Order (left to right)

1. Gods
2. Interventions
3. Demigods
4. Omens
5. Rare Sagas
6. Uncommon Sagas
7. Nymphs
8. Nyxborn
9. Basic Lands

Vertical Cycles (Themes by color)

- White:** Life, protection, poeis.
- Blue:** Exploration, oceans, resurrection.
- Black:** Death, underworld, resurrection.
- Red:** Destruction, combat, revelry.
- Green:** Hunting, growth, contest.