

History

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The Ancient World in Digital Games: Themes, Trends and Challenges in Current Research

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Abstract. *The study of digital games set in the ancient world has developed as a distinct branch of historical game research, yet it differs in important ways from broader studies of historical digital games. Its origins lie in earlier scholarship on the reception of antiquity in literature, theater, film, and visual culture, and this intermedial background continues to shape both its theoretical foundations and its critical vocabulary. Digital games inherit established representational patterns from these media but introduce unique challenges related to interactivity, immersion, and player agency, making them an important yet complex site for the reception of antiquity.*

One of the most prominent themes is the question of authenticity and accuracy. Unlike games based on recent history, titles set in antiquity contend with fragmentary evidence and interpretative uncertainty, which makes authenticity less about factual reconstruction and more about creating a convincing atmosphere through selective detail and visual conventions. Closely related is the issue of intertextuality: many games borrow heavily from cinematic and literary portrayals



of the ancient past, blending historical research with well-established cultural tropes. Another dominant research trend concerns the representation of violence and warfare. Most games centered on antiquity focus on military conflicts, heroic combat, and conquest, reinforcing a vision of the past as defined by perpetual war. This focus reflects popular expectations but narrows the scope for depicting other aspects of ancient life such as civic culture, trade, or intellectual traditions. Educational applications have been explored, yet they remain constrained by the limited thematic range of existing titles, which often privilege spectacle over complexity. More recent work has turned to ideological and identity-based readings, including studies of gender roles, cultural stereotypes, and racialized imaginaries. While these debates are less prominent than in research on later historical periods, they underscore how contemporary assumptions shape depictions of the ancient world.

Overall, scholarship on ancient-themed digital games is growing but remains uneven, with significant opportunities for deeper engagement with non-military narratives, player reception, and the impact of emerging technologies such as VR and AR.

Keywords: *digital games, historical games, game studies, popular culture, ancient history, classics, historical sources, digital sources, methods of research, multidisciplinary, history of science and technology, information technology, computer science.*

Стародавній світ у цифрових іграх: теми, тенденції та виклики в сучасних дослідженнях

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Анотація. Дослідження цифрових ігор, що відтворюють світ античності, сформувалося як окрема гілка в межах вивчення історичних ігор, однак воно істотно відрізняється від студій, зосереджених на історичних іграх в цілому. Дослідження ігор, що відтворюють стародавній світ, пов'язані з попередніми студіями реценції античності в літературі, театрі, кінематографі та візуальній культурі в широкому розумінні. Цей міжмедійний контекст і далі визначає як теоретичні основи, так і критичний інструментарій. Цифрові ігри успадковують усталені моделі репрезентації з інших медіа, проте додають нові виклики, зумовлені інтерактивністю, зануренням та ігровою агентивністю, що робить їх особливо складним, але перспективним об'єктом дослідження.

Одним із провідних напрямів є питання автентичності та достовірності. На відміну від ігор, що зображують новітню історію, проекти на античну тематику стикаються з фрагментарністю джерел та інтерпретаційною невизначеністю. Через це автентичність постає радше як створення переконливої атмосфери за допомогою вибірових деталей і візуальних конвенцій, а не точного відтворення фактів. Тісно пов'язана з цим проблема інтертекстуальності: чимало ігор активно використовують кінематографічні та літературні образи минулого, поєднуючи історичні дані з усталеними культурними кліше. Іншим домінантним напрямом є репрезентація насильства та війни. Більшість ігор, що звертаються до античності, зосереджені на військових конфліктах, героїчних двобоях і завоюваннях, підсилюючи уявлення про минуле як простір безперервної війни. Така перспектива відповідає масовим очікуванням, але водночас звужує можливість відображення інших аспектів античного життя - громадянської культури, торгівлі, інтелектуальних традицій. Хоч освітні можливості досліджуються, вони залишаються обмеженими через тематичну одноманітність наявних ігор, що часто віддають перевагу видовищності



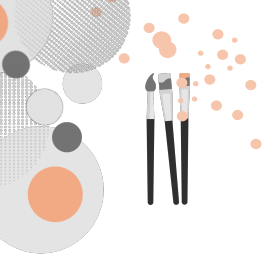
перед складністю. Останнім часом зростає інтерес до ідеологічних ідентичнісних прочитань, зокрема до гендерних ролей, культурних стереотипів і расових уявлень. Хоч ці дискусії менш розвинуті, ніж у дослідженнях ігор на сюжети пізніших епох, вони демонструють, як сучасні уявлення впливають на відтворення античності.

Загалом науковий дискурс у цій сфері розвивається, але залишається нерівномірним, залишаючи значні можливості для глибшого вивчення немілітарних наративів, реценції гравців та впливу новітніх технологій - таких як VR та AR.

Ключові слова: *цифрові ігри, історичні ігри, ігрові студії, масова культура, історія стародавнього світу, античність, історичні джерела, цифрові джерела, методи дослідження, міждисциплінарність, історія науки і техніки, інформаційні технології, комп'ютерні науки.*

Problem statement. Research on historical digital games has expanded rapidly over the past two decades, identifying major themes such as authenticity, pedagogy, ideology, and identity. Yet, when it comes to games set in the ancient world, the field remains less clearly defined. Theoretical discussions about accuracy and authenticity tend to become more complicated because the distant past is represented through fragmentary sources and is strongly mediated by earlier portrayals in literature, theater, and cinema. As a result, both game developers and players often rely on familiar cultural tropes rather than historical reconstruction, which raises questions about how such images of antiquity are created and interpreted. The whole principle of adherence to “historical reality” lacks the source material base that could have supported a strict analytical approach of distinguishing truth from fiction.

At the same time, the practical side of research remains uneven. Studies on the educational potential of historical games rarely focus on antiquity, and those that

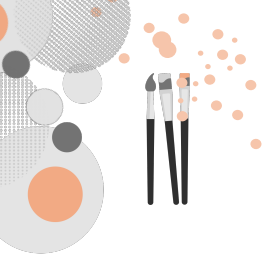


do tend to concentrate on warfare and political history, leaving out aspects such as religion or everyday life. Existing scholarship is scattered across classical reception studies, media theory, pedagogy, and game studies, with limited dialogue between them. This paper seeks to bring these strands together, outlining the main directions of research on games set in the ancient world and pointing to areas that require further thematic and methodological development.

The Aim and the Subject of the Study. The aim of this paper is to provide a systematic and structured overview of current research on digital games set in the ancient world, identifying the main directions in which scholarship has developed and highlighting areas that remain understudied. By mapping the field in this way, the paper seeks to clarify how existing work approaches questions of authenticity, educational potential, ideological interpretations, and identity construction, while also pointing to themes and methods that require further attention.

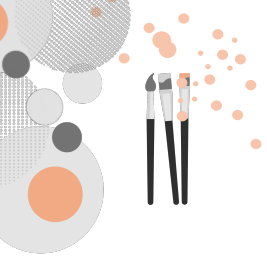
To achieve this, the study draws together research from multiple disciplines - classical reception studies, history, media studies, game studies, and pedagogy - organizing it into a coherent account of how the ancient world has been examined through the lens of digital games. The focus remains strictly on the object of the representation of the historical past within games: how antiquity is depicted, interpreted, and reimagined in interactive form. Broader philosophical, social, or political questions surrounding gaming culture, as well as the role of games in modern society beyond their treatment of historical content, fall outside the scope of this paper. In this way, the article aims to provide both a clearer understanding of what has already been accomplished in the field and a roadmap for future research directions.

Historiography of the problem. The scholarly examination of video games set in the ancient world developed as an extension of an already vibrant field: the study of antiquity's reception in modern culture. Before digital games became a subject of inquiry, researchers were deeply invested in analyzing how ancient Greece



and Rome were represented in literature, theater, film, and later television. Foundational works on classical reception in cinema - such as Irene Berti, Maria G. Castello, and Carla Scilabra's (editors) volumes with studies on cinematic receptions of classics in general and of ancient violence in particular [3, 4] and Chris Davies's explorations of allegory in Hollywood blockbusters [10] - established a conceptual toolkit for understanding how classical themes migrate across media, blending historical elements with contemporary cultural and ideological concerns. These early investigations framed antiquity not as a static heritage but as a flexible resource, reinterpreted in response to shifting social and political contexts. It might be argued that it is within this tradition that the study of antiquity in video games first emerged, carrying forward concerns with authenticity, adaptation, and creative transformation.

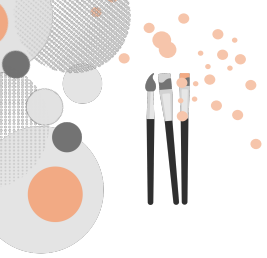
The first steps toward defining this research field occurred arguably in the early 2000s, when scholars began to notice that video games were joining film and television as major vehicles for imagining the ancient world. Dunstan Lowe and Kim Shahabudin's (editors) volume *Classics For All: Reworking Antiquity in Mass Culture* [21] was among the earliest attempts to articulate how games both inherit and diverge from earlier modes of classical reception. Lowe argued that video games introduced a new dynamic - interactivity - that fundamentally altered the way audiences engage with ancient settings. This observation set the stage for subsequent discussions of agency, simulation, and historical play, distinguishing game-based reception from purely narrative media. Around the same period, Paul Christensen and Dominic Machado published their concise but influential survey, *Video Games and Classical Antiquity*, which identified emerging patterns in the representation of Greco-Roman themes and called for more systematic research [7]. It may be argued that these works signaled a turning point: games were no longer peripheral curiosities but key sites for understanding the popular imagination of antiquity.



By the 2010s, the field began to consolidate around two overlapping trajectories. The first examined questions of accuracy and authenticity in ancient-world games, reflecting the broader discourse on historical fidelity in digital media. Davide Secci [40] showed that by the end of 2010's digital games developed genre-diverse representation of classics, thus indicating that depiction of the ancient world in digital games had reached the point where game mechanics started being studied particularly in the dimension of how they affect the perception of ancient history. Jeremiah McCall provided a genre-based framework, mapping how different game types mediate antiquity through distinct conventions and design priorities, from strategy titles to role-playing adventures [27]. He demonstrated that authenticity in these games is less about reconstructing the past than about negotiating expectations between historical scholarship, entertainment imperatives, technological affordances, and, probably most importantly, genre conventions [28].

The second trajectory extended the long-standing interest in intertextuality and creative reception. Ross Clare's *Ancient Greece and Rome in Videogames* [8] represents a milestone here. Rather than focusing solely on representation, Clare foregrounds the playful and transformative qualities of classical material in game worlds, emphasizing how myth, history, and transmedia storytelling converge to create layered narratives. The idea that games operate as creative adaptations rather than faithful reproductions gained further traction with Julliette Harrisson, Martin Lindner's, and Luis Unceta Gómez's edited volume *Playful Classics* [16]. This collection reframes classical reception as an inherently generative process, showing how interactive media amplify the interpretive freedom already present in earlier adaptations, like novels or cinema.

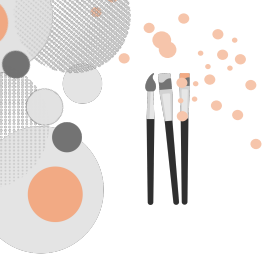
As the field matured, thematic branches crystallized. One major strand interrogates the ideological dimensions of ancient-world games, probing how depictions of empire, violence, and gender intersect with contemporary discourses. Another explores their pedagogical potential, examining how titles like *Total War*:



Rome II or Ubisoft's *Discovery Tour* modes serve as tools for experiential learning. Both strands often intersect with debates about authenticity, since the educational and ideological impact of these games is deeply conditioned by the claims they make (either implicitly or explicitly) about historical truth. Finally, the persistent engagement with intertextuality signals a defining characteristic of this research area: it is closely interlinked with the broader study of classical reception. Scholars often trace the lineage of game imagery and narratives back to earlier media, noting how video games recycle, hybridize, and adapt motifs from film epics and even fantasy literature. In doing so, in its contemporary phase, the field situates itself not in isolation but as part of an evolving cultural conversation about antiquity which continually fluctuates between fidelity and invention.

Not yet fully researched aspects of the topic. Although scholarship on digital games set in the ancient world has grown noticeably in recent years, several areas still appear to be underexplored and would benefit from further systematic attention. Much of the existing work continues to focus on a relatively narrow group of prominent titles, most notably Ubisoft's *Assassin's Creed* series and Creative Assembly's *Total War* franchise. While these games are central to the discourse for understandable reasons, this concentration leaves smaller-scale projects, independent productions, and mobile games less thoroughly examined, many of which offer distinct narrative strategies or experimental mechanics.

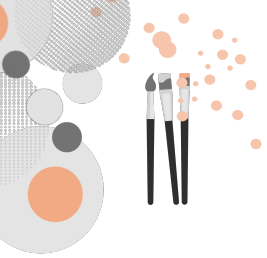
Another field that needs further attention is player reception. Many studies focus mainly on the analysis of game content and design, paying more attention to what games show than to how players understand and react to these depictions. There is still relatively little research that explores differences in player experience, including the role of cultural background, previous knowledge of history, or personal identity. This issue becomes even more important in light of the increasing use of games about the ancient world in educational settings, where it is essential to examine how students interpret and make sense of such interactive representations.



Issues of race, ethnicity, and colonial discourse in games set in the ancient world are still relatively new in academic debate. There is already substantial research on these topics in games focused on later historical periods, as well as in classical historiography itself. However, their connection to digital representations of ancient cultures has not yet been examined in sufficient detail. Research on gender is gradually expanding, yet it is often addressed separately, with fewer studies exploring how gender interacts with other social categories such as class, authority, or social hierarchy within game worlds.

Many of the limitations in this field are similar to those found in historical game studies more generally, but ancient settings bring several specific difficulties. One of the main challenges concerns the nature of the sources. In comparison to modern history, the evidence for antiquity is incomplete and often debated. This makes it harder to evaluate claims of accuracy and authenticity in games, since both scholars and developers must rely on interpretations and reconstructions that include a degree of speculation. Another problem lies in the long tradition of cultural reception. Games about antiquity frequently draw not only on historical research but also on visual and narrative models shaped by art, literature, and especially film. As a result, it can be difficult to distinguish between references to the ancient past itself and references to its modern representations.

In addition, concepts such as ethnicity and identity functioned differently in the ancient world than they do today. For this reason, analyses of race or nationalism in these games must proceed with caution, as there is always a risk of applying modern categories to premodern societies. Finally, many games set in antiquity focus heavily on warfare and imperial expansion. Themes such as everyday life, social diversity, and peaceful cultural interaction receive much less attention, both in game design and in academic research. This leaves considerable space for further study.



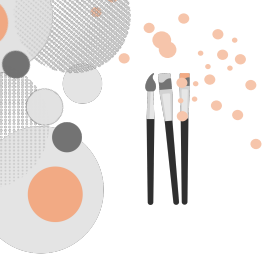
The influence of new technologies, including virtual and augmented reality as well as AI based content generation, has only recently begun to attract scholarly interest. These technologies create new ways of experiencing and interacting with ancient settings, and they may significantly reshape both representation and reception. However, research in this area is still at an early stage. As such technologies become more common in entertainment and education, they are likely to generate new questions and directions for future research.

The main material of the paper

Introduction - Reception of Antiquity in Popular Culture

The study of video games based on the ancient world has emerged from broader research on the representation of antiquity in modern culture. For decades, scholars have examined how classical stories, figures, and themes are adapted for new audiences in literature, film, and other forms of popular media. This earlier work created a basis for analyzing how similar material appears in digital games. What sets games apart is their interactive nature. Players do not only watch or read about the past, but take part in its reconstruction. They can move through historical settings, influence events, and in some cases reshape them. By combining approaches from classical reception studies with attention to elements specific to games, such as agency, immersion, and simulation, researchers have situated ancient themed games within a broader process of cultural reinterpretation.

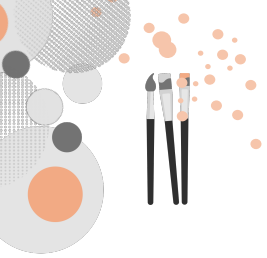
Research on the reception of antiquity in popular culture more generally forms an important background for these studies. Scholars have shown that references to Greece and Rome often reflect present day social and political concerns as much as they relate to the historical past. Classical material remains highly adaptable. Myths, symbols, and historical events are repeatedly reworked in different genres and media, where they can function as allegory, visual spectacle, or social commentary.



Film has been one of the most visible stages for this process. Irene Berti and Marta García Morcillo's [4] trace how filmmakers adapt ancient texts and myths, blending attention to historical setting with artistic license in order to reach modern audiences. Chris Davies [10] makes a similar point, showing how ancient wars and heroes are often reimagined as pre-defined archetypes for modern conflicts, turning antiquity into an allegorical canvas. Both studies underline the cinematic medium's power to merge visual spectacle with historical storytelling, reinforcing the idea that antiquity remains a flexible cultural language.

Beyond cinema, research has widened to cover the broader field of popular media. Dunstan Lowe and Kim Shahabudin's *Classics for All* [21] examines the reworking of classical themes across radio, television, film, and other mass media, while the volume edited by Konrad Dominas, Elżbieta Wesołowska, and Bogdan Trocha's *Antiquity in Popular Literature and Culture* [11] considers their presence in novels, comics, and other cultural products. All these studies highlight how classical themes are continually reinvented to speak to different audiences and contexts.

More recently, scholarship has turned its attention to creativity itself as a defining feature of classical reception. *Playful Classics* [16], edited by Juliette Harrisson, Martin Lindner, and Luis Unceta Gómez, explores how modern creators (from game developers to playwrights and musicians) appropriate and expand ancient narratives in new directions. Similarly, *Ancient Violence in the Modern Imagination* [3], edited by Irene Berti, Maria García Morcillo, and Carla Scilabra, investigates the representation of violence, showing how portrayals of ancient brutality often serve as a mirror for modern anxieties. These works show that engaging with antiquity is not merely a conservative exercise in preservation: it is also a catalyst for innovation, enabling contemporary culture to reshape and reinvent the past for its own purposes.



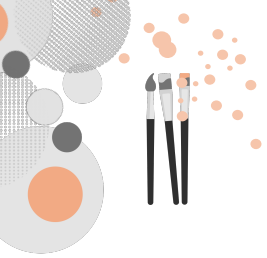
Accuracy and Authenticity of Representations of the Ancient World

As research on digital games set in antiquity has developed into a more distinct field, questions of accuracy and authenticity have taken on a central role, much as they have in historical game studies more generally. Scholars emphasize that these concerns go beyond the factual correctness of dates, events, or material objects. They also involve a broader sense of realism, that is, how convincing and believable the game world feels to players during play.

In games focused on the ancient world, these issues often become even more visible. Lowe, for example, discusses the representation of antiquity in video games and observes that creative choices frequently outweigh strict historical accuracy [20, p. 85-87]. In many cases, the aim of producing engaging and accessible gameplay takes priority over precision. This tension highlights the ongoing balance between authenticity, entertainment, and playability that shapes the digital reception of the classical past.

The tension between accuracy and authenticity is further explored by Paul Christensen and Dominic Machado, who point out video games' reliance on simplified tropes of antiquity [7, p. 107-110]. They note that while such depictions facilitate accessibility for broader audiences, they risk perpetuating reductive understandings of complex historical eras. In a similar vein to Adam Chapman [6, p. 42-45], they assert that historical video games privilege narrative and mechanics over factual representation, thus reshaping players' engagement with history. Fraser Brown [5] discusses *Total War: Rome II*, highlighting its prioritization of authenticity over strict accuracy to create a compelling player experience. Brown argues that such prioritization facilitates player immersion, even as it deviates from scholarly interpretations of historical events or practices.

Juan C. García explores the immersive potential of role-playing games set in ancient times, arguing that these games enable players to "live" antiquity through participatory narratives. This lived experience, according to García, fosters a unique



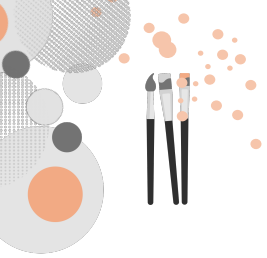
connection to historical contexts, allowing players to engage in interpretive acts that merge personal agency with historical imagination [14, p. 247-251]. Garcia's work is concerned primarily with non-digital games, but it demonstrates the characteristic approaches that digital and non-digital games alike tend to utilize when using the ancient world as a setting.

Tristan French and Andrew Gardner examine classical action games and focus on the ways these games construct a sense of a "real" past through claims of authenticity. They show that such games combine historical details with creative interpretation in order to maintain player interest [13, p. 63-66]. According to their analysis, developers must find a balance between presenting material evidence from the past and designing gameplay that is clear and engaging. By mixing recognizable historical features with speculative or fictional elements, these games produce an image of the past that feels emotionally meaningful to players, while still referring to established historical contexts.

In a 2019 study, Aris Politopoulos and his colleagues analyzed *Assassin's Creed: Odyssey* and explored how the game brings together action driven gameplay and attention to historical authenticity. They argue that the title achieves a balance between entertainment and educational value. Archaeological data and historical references are incorporated into the game world, resulting in an immersive representation of ancient Greece that invites active exploration rather than passive viewing [36, p. 319-322].

Expanding this reception focused perspective, Ross Clare examined the role of transmedia storytelling. He shows how digital games contribute to the circulation of classical narratives across different media platforms. In this way, players are able to engage with both mythological and historical aspects of Greece and Rome through interconnected and interactive formats [8, p. 7-11].

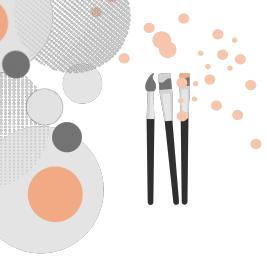
The question of heritage in games is taken up by Michał Mochocki, who concentrates on digital recreations of ancient sites. He shows that these



reconstructions can serve as powerful tools for immersion and education, while at the same time warning against the distortions that arise when developers simplify complex historical realities or prioritize aesthetics over accuracy [33, p. 951-960]. A more recent contribution by Alexander Vandewalle and collaborators shifts the focus to player perception. His survey highlights the tension between realism and enjoyment, suggesting that players tend to value games more highly when a convincing level of realism is achieved, even if that realism involves selective liberties rather than strict historical fidelity [42, p. 463-465].

The creation of user modifications, commonly known as mods, for games set in the ancient world represents another area of research that has not yet been fully developed. Games such as the Total War series have attracted particular attention. Christian Ghita and Georgios Andrikopoulos [15, p. 119-124] analyze how discussions about realism unfold within modding communities. In their examination of the “Total Realism” project, they show that players often assume the role of historical interpreters. Modders may seek a higher level of detail and accuracy than that offered in the original game, even when professional historians were involved in its development.

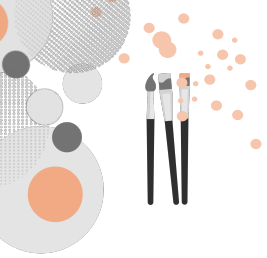
Jan Hatlen also explores how students interact with history through gameplay and points to the educational value of modding. He discusses well known modifications such as Rome: Total Realism and Europa Barbarorum, both of which aim to increase historical accuracy and deepen immersion. His study suggests that while playing such modifications can support historical learning, creating them may offer even greater benefits. The process requires research, critical evaluation of sources, and engagement with historical debates. Furthermore, the attempt to achieve greater historical fidelity often becomes a subject of active discussion within player communities, where ideas about authenticity and interpretation are openly debated [17, p. 191-193].



While the study of accuracy and authenticity in historical games often focuses on factual fidelity and perceived realism, research on games set in the ancient world reveals a strong overlap with the domain of intertextuality and creative reception. This is likely caused by the tendency of representations of antiquity in games to draw inspiration not only from archaeological and historiographical evidence but also from centuries of artistic, literary, and cinematic reinterpretations. As a result, the authenticity players experience may be as much a product of established cultural depictions, such as classical sculpture, modern interpretations of Homeric epics, and Hollywood peplum films, as of direct historical scholarship.

Scholars such as Lowe and Secci have noted that developers often rely on a “received” version of antiquity, selecting imagery and narratives that resonate with popular expectations while adapting them to gameplay requirements [20, p. 74-28; 40, p. 282-284]. French and Gardner similarly emphasize that claims to authenticity in classical action games are inseparable from the creative reworking of ancient myths and cultural symbols. This positions accuracy research within a wider reception framework, where the notion of “authenticity” may encompass fidelity to influential intermediary sources as much as to primary historical evidence [13, p. 68-73]. Consequently, the boundary between studying accuracy and studying creative reception is thin, and both areas benefit from an integrated methodological approach that accounts for the layered, mediated nature of the ancient worlds that games present.

In recent years, discussions of accuracy and authenticity in games set in the ancient world have increasingly focused on the role of genre in shaping historical representation. Scholars generally agree that genre influences not only gameplay mechanics and visual style, but also the ways in which players approach and understand the past. García, in his study of role playing games set in ancient contexts, argues that such titles emphasize everyday experience, identity, and

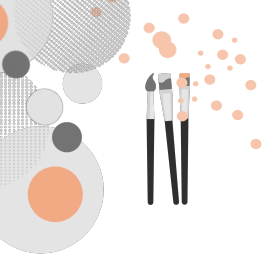


cultural practice. They allow players to engage with antiquity from the perspective of individual action and personal choice [14, p. 253-258].

Secci, in turn, draws attention to the wide range of genres that depict the ancient world, including strategy games, simulations, and educational projects. He suggests that each genre highlights particular aspects of the past while downplaying others. Strategy games, for example, often concentrate on warfare and politics, whereas role playing games are more likely to focus on myth, character development, and personal narrative [40, p. 270-278]. These observations indicate that representations of antiquity are shaped by the structural limits and conventions of specific genres, which mediate how the past is presented and experienced.

As McCall has argued through the *Historical Problem Space Framework*, games create distinct “problem spaces” where historical possibilities are defined by the interaction of agents, goals, and choices available to players [27]. This perspective highlights how genre conventions, such as those present in strategy, role-playing, or action-adventure games, constrain and enable the types of histories that can be told. His later comparative analysis of *Assassin’s Creed Odyssey* and *Hegemony* demonstrates how the action-adventure and grand strategy genres, respectively, encourage players to engage with antiquity in fundamentally different ways: the former through narrative immersion and individualized experience, the latter through systemic modeling of warfare and politics [28].

Although questions of accuracy and authenticity have long been central in the study of historical games, games set in antiquity raise several additional problems. One of the main difficulties concerns the nature of the sources. The historical record for ancient Greece and Rome is incomplete and often debated. In contrast to modern history, where games can be compared with a wide range of written and visual materials, reconstructions of antiquity depend on limited and sometimes uncertain evidence. As a result, it is not easy to determine whether a game is “faithful” in any



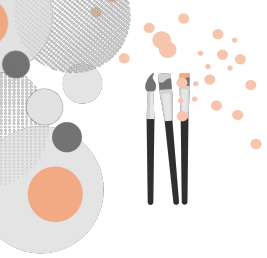
straightforward way, especially when historians themselves disagree on key aspects of politics, everyday life, or military organization in the ancient world.

Another challenge stems from the gap between popular images of antiquity and the complexity of academic research. Game developers frequently rely on familiar motifs such as marble temples, gladiators, or Spartan warriors because these images are easily recognized by players. However, such representations are shaped by a long history of cultural reception and mythmaking as much as by historical evidence. When scholars evaluate accuracy, they must therefore consider not only the difference between the game and the ancient past, but also the earlier reinterpretations that have influenced modern ideas about antiquity.

A further issue relates to methodology. Many studies of accuracy in ancient themed games rely primarily on textual analysis and close reading. Systematic research on how players understand and evaluate authenticity remains limited. Apart from a relatively small number of empirical studies, such as the work of Vandewalle, Daneels, Simons, and Malliet [43], there is still little evidence about whether players distinguish between historically grounded reconstructions and more stylized versions of the past, or how these differences shape their perceptions of antiquity. Without broader empirical approaches, including interviews, surveys, or reception based research, debates about authenticity risk remaining focused mainly on academic standards rather than on how authenticity is actually experienced during play.

Games as Historical Pedagogy

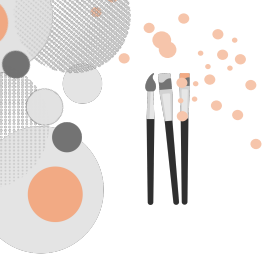
The educational potential of games set in the ancient world has become a recurring theme in recent scholarship, particularly as teachers and researchers continue to test how digital environments can complement traditional instruction. One of the earliest sustained discussions is found in J. F. Hatlen's chapter "Students of Rome: Total War", which explores the classroom use of *Rome: Total War* as both a teaching aid and a case study in the problems of historical representation. Hatlen



shows how the game's appeal lies in its capacity to make abstract political and military processes tangible for students, but he also underscores the need for critical framing [17, p. 186-192]. Without guidance, learners may absorb the game's own selective emphases (usually on warfare, conquest, and imperial power) rather than developing a nuanced sense of Roman society.

McCall has done much to systematize this line of inquiry. His works are not confined to antiquity only [for example, 25 and 26], and they provide a methodological backbone that has systematized (and it could be argued, even shaped) approaches scholars use to think about using ancient-world games in teaching. McCall insists that games should not be judged primarily by their factual accuracy, but rather by their capacity to create what he calls a "historical problem space," in which students can experiment with decisions, constraints, and trade-offs analogous to those faced by historical actors [27]. Within this framework, titles like *Rome: Total War* or *Assassin's Creed: Origins* become tools for cultivating historical thinking skills: students are not passive recipients of information, but active participants in negotiating competing interpretations of the past.

The release of Ubisoft's *Assassin's Creed: Origins Discovery Tour* in 2018 provided another case that has attracted scholarly attention. Perrine Poiron examines this educational mode, which strips away combat and narrative in favor of guided tours through digitally reconstructed environments. For Poiron, the Discovery Tour represents an unusual intersection of entertainment and pedagogy, one that reveals the growing willingness of developers to position their products within educational settings. Yet her study also raises questions about the compromises involved: while the Discovery Tour offers richly detailed landscapes, its presentation is still shaped by game design choices and the imperatives of accessibility, often simplifying or harmonizing evidence in ways that may obscure ongoing scholarly debates [37, p. 83-85]. Continuing in this direction, Andreas Hellerstedt and Peter Mozelius investigated student perceptions of game-based learning in history, emphasizing that

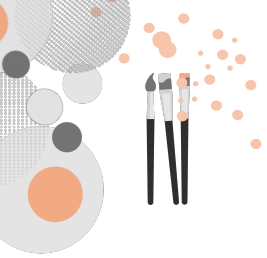


learners value both immersion and clarity of historical framing. Their findings suggest that educational uses of games set in antiquity can succeed when they balance interactivity with scaffolding that supports critical reflection. Additionally, Hellerstedt and Mozelius point out a critical nuance: preferences among learners vary significantly. Some students appreciate a more structured approach that integrates games into a clear instructional framework, while others thrive in exploratory environments where discovery drives the learning process [18].

Research on the educational use of games set in the ancient world continues to face several limitations. Many studies are based on small classroom experiments and focus on a limited number of well known titles, particularly Rome: Total War and Assassin's Creed: Origins. As a result, less prominent or independent games receive little attention, which restricts our understanding of the wider educational potential of ancient settings in digital media.

Another issue concerns the tension between educational objectives and the priorities of commercial game development. Even when games are adapted for classroom use, such as Ubisoft's Discovery Tour mode, they often highlight warfare, large scale architecture, and visual spectacle. Aspects such as everyday life, social complexity, and diversity tend to be simplified or marginal. Teachers are therefore required to supply additional explanation and critical context.

Furthermore, research on student reception remains limited. Although there is substantial theoretical discussion about the capacity of games to support historical thinking, there is less empirical evidence about how students actually interpret these representations. We know relatively little about how learners distinguish between entertainment and academic knowledge, or how their previous understanding of history shapes their experience. Without more systematic reception studies, including interviews, long term surveys, or classroom based observation, the field risks attributing educational value to games without fully examining how they are understood by different groups of students.

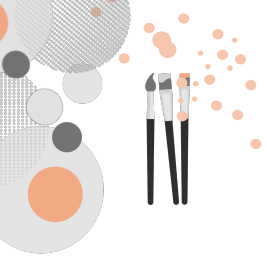


Violence as a Predominant Characteristic of Antiquity in Games

The representation of violence and war has long been a central theme in how antiquity is reimagined in modern culture, and scholarship has paid close attention to its persistence and transformation across different media. In cinema, for example, depictions of Roman warfare often carry contemporary political and cultural resonances. Alex McAuley shows how post-9/11 films have reframed images of Imperial Rome through the lens of modern military anxieties, with Roman legions standing in as allegories for contemporary armies grappling with questions of empire, occupation, and moral legitimacy [23, p. 242-247]. In a similar vein, Davies [10] traces how Hollywood blockbusters use antiquity to reflect modern conflicts, reading ancient battles less as reconstructions of the past than as allegories for warfare in the present, whether through narratives of resistance, conquest, or the ambiguous morality of empire.

The broader cultural fascination with ancient violence has been studied in detail with modern methodology in the edited collection *Ancient Violence in the Modern Imagination: The Fear and the Fury* by Berti, García Morillo, and Scilabra [3]. The volume emphasizes both the appeal and the discomfort generated by images of brutality in antiquity. It demonstrates how ancient violence serves as a flexible resource for modern storytelling via vastly different media: it can be used to entertain, to moralize, or to critique contemporary sensibilities about war and aggression. What emerges from these studies is that antiquity often acts as a mirror for present-day debates about conflict, empire, and human suffering, with representations of violence oscillating between glorification and condemnation.

When it comes to video games set in antiquity, scholars have repeatedly noted how war and violence dominate the way the past is represented. Lozano makes this point especially clear, arguing that violence operates as the primary “language” through which antiquity is expressed in games [19, p. 151-157]. Battles, conquests, and spectacles of destruction not only drive gameplay but also define what many



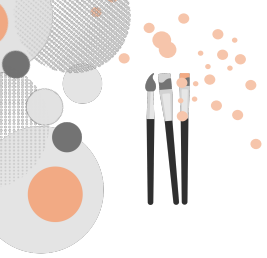
players come to associate with the ancient world, reinforcing the idea that antiquity is best remembered through scenes of war.

This emphasis has been explored in more detail through case studies of individual games and genres. Machado examines various ways in which *Total War: Rome II* adopts and adapts narratives about the Battle of the Teutoburg Forest and its key figures from ancient historiography, translating literary tropes of strategy, leadership, and heroism into interactive mechanics. In doing so, the game does not merely reconstruct historical battles; it repackages them according to conventions of both modern gaming and ancient storytelling [22]. By drawing on classical sources, the game weaves a narrative framework that resonates with contemporary audiences while invoking the grandeur of ancient warfare.

McCall develops a related line of inquiry by looking at how digital games simulate the “face of battle” in the Roman Republic. His analysis highlights the tension between conveying the chaotic, human experience of combat and reducing warfare to playable systems that inevitably simplify, abstract, or aestheticize the realities of violence [24, p. 109-111]. McCall’s analysis highlights the potential for games to act as interactive historical simulations that engage players with the strategic and human dimensions of warfare.

The theme is further broadened in Schulz’s study of *Total War: Attila*, which shifts focus to the Migration Period. He shows how the game constructs a narrative of large-scale destruction and upheaval, offering a vision of antiquity marked by relentless conflict and collapse. This interpretation, while compelling as a dramatic experience, also raises questions about how games shape cultural memory by emphasizing catastrophe and military struggle over other dimensions of ancient societies [39, p. 165-169].

A common conclusion in this scholarship is that video games set in antiquity tend to place violence and warfare at the center of their engagement with the past. As a result, the ancient world is often presented primarily through scenes of military



conflict, while diplomacy, religion, and everyday life receive less attention. The image that emerges is one in which large scale battles dominate, and other aspects of ancient societies remain secondary. At the same time, these studies show that such representations are shaped not only by modern game design practices but also by long standing literary traditions and contemporary expectations about what makes antiquity suitable for gameplay.

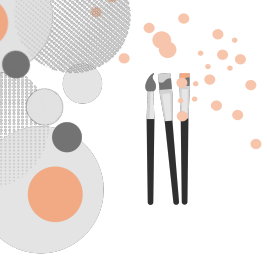
Despite the strong emphasis on violence and war, this research area has several limitations. Many studies focus mainly on major strategy franchises such as Total War. Although these titles are influential, they represent only one way in which antiquity is portrayed in digital games. Other genres, including role playing games, independent projects, and educational reconstructions, have received far less attention, even though they may treat conflict in more complex or varied ways.

Another limitation is the tendency to focus on battlefield mechanics and tactical systems, while giving less attention to the cultural and social meanings of violence in the ancient world. Ritual practices, symbolic acts, and religious dimensions of conflict, for example, were central to many ancient societies but are rarely examined in relation to their representation in games. Finally, there has been limited research on player reception. It remains unclear how players interpret these depictions of violence, whether they view them as historically grounded, purely entertaining, or as a mixture of both.

Representation of Identity in Digital Games

Research on identity in antiquity-themed digital games has developed along two closely related but distinct lines: the study of race, colonial discourse, and national identity on the one hand, and the representation of gender on the other. Both approaches explore how games reframe antiquity through the lens of modern cultural categories, often projecting contemporary concerns back onto the ancient past.

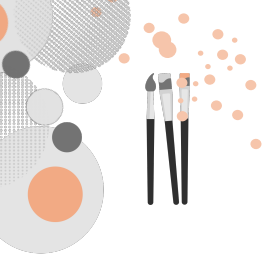
The study of ideology and identity in games set in antiquity sits at the crossroads of game studies, cultural theory, and classical reception. Building on



postcolonial readings of digital media such as those by Souvik Mukherjee, scholars have examined how video games reproduce, question, or subvert narratives of empire, nationalism, and cultural hierarchy. Mukherjee's work highlights how colonial structures of thought are not erased in games but often reshaped into interactive experiences, which both reflect and challenge dominant historical imaginaries [34, p. 32-38, 118-123]. This is especially relevant for antiquity, where the long-standing perception of the "classical world" as a foundation of Western identity often intersects with contemporary ideological debates.

National identity has been a recurring focus in this discussion. Alberto Muñoz, for instance, has shown how *Civilization V* encodes particular ideas of the nation, progress, and the past, presenting them as seemingly natural outcomes of historical development [35, p. 852-858]. While not limited to antiquity, such insights are crucial for understanding how games set in the classical world position ancient societies as cultural ancestors of modern nation-states, reinforcing familiar genealogies of "Western civilization." Similarly, Ramon Mir and Trevor Owens scrutinized Sid Meier's *Colonization* to reveal how representations of Indigenous peoples are shaped by ideology. Arguably, this approach resonates strongly with the way antiquity itself has been mobilized to justify hierarchies of race, culture, and power [32, p. 94-101].

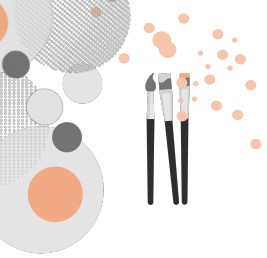
The importance of such work becomes even clearer when placed alongside scholarship on race in antiquity itself. Denise McCoskey has demonstrated that identity in the ancient world was far more complex and unstable than the rigid categories later imposed by modern racial thinking [29, 30, 31]. Her studies of Ptolemaic Egypt, Hippocratic medicine, and the broader legacy of race in classical reception show that the ancient past cannot be reduced to neat binaries of "Greek versus Egyptian" or "black versus white." This historical complexity is often simplified or ignored in digital games, where the visual representation of ancient peoples tends to align with modern racial expectations.



Recent work has begun to address this gap directly. Bradley Banker examined *Assassin's Creed: Origins* and the debates it sparked around the racial identity of Egyptians and Greeks, illustrating how the game became a platform where older scholarly disputes resurfaced in popular form. Banker notes that while Ubisoft attempted to craft an inclusive narrative, the visual and narrative choices in the game nonetheless activated deep-rooted assumptions about race and heritage [1, p. 148-154]. Such studies point to the double role of games: on the one hand, they can open new spaces for engaging with identity in antiquity, but on the other, they risk perpetuating myths and stereotypes that scholarship has long since problematized.

Compared to the relatively extensive work on race and colonial discourse in games set in the modern or early modern eras, scholarship on these themes in antiquity-themed games remains relatively modest. One reason for this disparity lies in the historical distance itself. The ethnic and cultural identities of the ancient world - Egyptians, Greeks, Romans, Carthaginians, and countless others - do not map neatly onto the categories of race and nation that dominate modern political and cultural discourse. As a result, the ideological stakes of depicting antiquity are not always as immediately apparent to scholars as, for example, the representation of Native Americans in colonial-set games or African peoples in simulations of imperial conquest. Where modern contexts invoke living legacies of oppression, exploitation, and cultural survival, ancient contexts often seem less directly tied to current political struggles, and so attract less critical urgency.

This chronological distance has two major consequences for the field. First, much of the existing research tends to concentrate on moments where antiquity is explicitly mobilized in service of modern identity politics - such as debates over Cleopatra's ethnicity or the portrayal of Egyptians in *Assassin's Creed: Origins*. These cases, as seen in the work of Banker [1] or McCoskey's broader studies of race in antiquity [29, 30, 31], highlight how games can become entangled in contemporary controversies despite their ancient settings. Yet outside of such

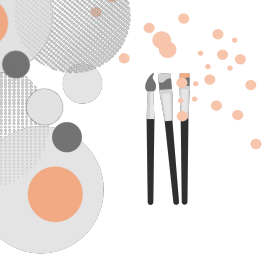


flashpoints, there has been relatively little sustained inquiry into how games reconstruct ancient ethnic categories, or how these reconstructions resonate with present-day ideas of nationhood, heritage, or belonging.

Second, the field has not yet systematically addressed the way national identity is coded into the design of antiquity games themselves. Titles such as the *Total War: Rome* series or *Civilization* present the ancient world as a collection of proto-nations, each with its own personality traits and destinies. This framing implicitly projects modern categories of nationalism backwards onto antiquity, but scholarship has only begun to unpack its implications. While Muñoz shows in his study of *Civilization V* how games dealing with more recent history can be scrutinized for how they encode national myths and geopolitical ideologies [35], it can be argued that antiquity-focused studies lag behind in this regard, even though similar processes are clearly at work.

Overall, the research into race, colonial discourse, and national identity in games set in antiquity remains underdeveloped not because these issues are absent, but because their relevance is more difficult to pin down. The very remoteness of antiquity has led many scholars to prioritize accuracy, authenticity, or broad cultural reception over the more politically charged questions of race and nation. Yet as the growing debates over Cleopatra or the broader Mediterranean world suggest, these issues are far from irrelevant. They demand further attention, particularly if we wish to understand how ancient games contribute to the ongoing negotiation of identity and power in the present.

Research into gender identity in video games set in antiquity has developed in close dialogue with broader debates on representation and inclusivity in digital media. A number of recent works have examined how women, in particular, are depicted in games that draw on classical settings, highlighting both the opportunities and the limitations of these portrayals. These studies show that games do not merely

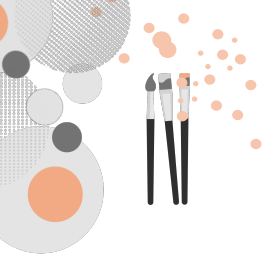


recycle the ancient world but also filter it through contemporary cultural expectations of gender roles.

One strand of research has focused on the representation of women within narrative and gameplay. Sarah Beavers critiques *Ryse: Son of Rome* for its reliance on stereotypical and largely passive female figures, which reflect more about modern gender biases than about ancient society [2, p. 78-83]. By contrast, Richard Cole considers the figure of Kassandra in *Assassin's Creed: Odyssey*, arguing that her presence as a female protagonist introduces new possibilities for reimagining antiquity, despite the presence of the stereotypical views outlined by Beavers. Cole shows how Kassandra's story challenges traditional narratives of male heroism, though at the same time Ubisoft's decision to present her alongside a male alternative protagonist reveals the persistent hesitancy of the industry to fully embrace female-centered storytelling [9, p. 196-202].

Other scholars have investigated the treatment of well-known historical women. Jane Draycott examines Cleopatra in *Assassin's Creed: Origins*, showing how the game negotiates between scholarly interpretations of Cleopatra's political agency and popular stereotypes that emphasize her sexuality and allure. Draycott argues that the digital Cleopatra simultaneously reinforces and disrupts the established tropes, reflecting both historical research and mass-media legacies [12, p. 165-171]. Meanwhile, Robin Tuplin explores the representation of female sex workers in *Assassin's Creed: Odyssey*, noting how the game brings marginalized figures into focus but often frames them within familiar patterns of exploitation or exoticism, thereby missing the opportunity to expand cultural understanding of women's lives in antiquity [41, p. 213-220].

The conversation extends beyond characters on screen to the broader structures of the industry. Nanci Santos situates the *Assassin's Creed* series within Ubisoft's corporate practices and the wider video game sector, arguing that issues of representation cannot be separated from questions of who produces these games and

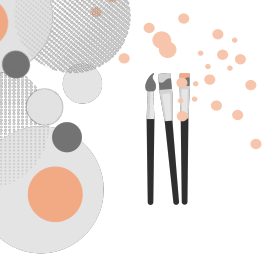


under what institutional framework. Santos highlights how corporate strategies, audience expectations, and market demands shape which female figures from antiquity are deemed worthy of inclusion and how they are portrayed [38, p. 29-36].

The body of research outlined above demonstrates the growing importance of gender-focused analysis in the study of games set in the ancient world. By scrutinizing how women are represented or overlooked scholars reveal both the possibilities for reimagining antiquity in inclusive ways and the persistent cultural and industrial barriers that limit such efforts. Yet the field is still developing: while leading female figures such as Cleopatra or Cassandra have received attention, the everyday roles and identities of women in ancient societies remain underexplored, as do the intersections of gender with race, class, and sexuality. These gaps indicate the need for further work that treats gender not as a marginal theme but as a central lens for understanding the reception of antiquity in games.

While the study of gender in ancient-themed video games has made significant strides in recent years, it remains limited in both scope and depth. A notable concentration of scholarship has gathered around a small set of high-profile titles, particularly Ubisoft's *Assassin's Creed* series and Crytek's *Ryse: Son of Rome*. These games, with their large audiences and ambitious attempts at recreating antiquity, naturally attract critical attention, but this narrow focus risks obscuring the diversity of approaches to gender representation across the wider field. Independent and smaller-scale productions, for instance, are often overlooked, even though arguably they sometimes experiment more boldly with female roles, alternative narratives, and non-traditional perspectives. By privileging only the most visible games, research may unintentionally replicate the very exclusions it seeks to critique.

Another limitation of current research is its narrow thematic focus. Most studies center on iconic figures like Cleopatra or Cassandra, whose fame in both history and modern marketing makes them easy case studies. However, this leaves

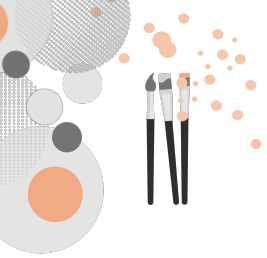


the lives of more "ordinary" women (such as mothers, workers, priestesses, or entertainers) largely unexplored. While these roles were essential to ancient societies, they are often absent or pushed to the sidelines in digital games, and academic work on them is just as rare. Examining these portrayals, or even noting their absence, would help us understand which gendered experiences are considered narratively or commercially valuable when the past is reconstructed.

There is also the issue of intersectionality, which has not yet received enough systematic attention. Gender is often analyzed in isolation, without considering how it overlaps with other parts of identity like race, class, or sexuality. In antiquity, these categories were deeply connected and shaped a person's social role in complex ways. Modern games reproduce or change these intersections, yet research rarely investigates how they are represented or how players interpret them. Without this broader perspective, discussions of gender risk becoming too narrow to capture the layered nature of identity in both the ancient world and its digital recreations.

Finally, the study of player reception remains a significant gap. While scholars have analyzed how developers design female characters or write gendered stories, much less is known about how the players themselves actually engage with these depictions. These limitations suggest that while the field has built a strong foundation, it is still in its early stages. Moving toward a richer understanding of how gender in these games reflects and reshapes our view of the past will require looking beyond famous titles, adopting intersectional methods, and focusing more on the audience.

Conclusion. Over the past two decades, the study of digital games set in the ancient world has made significant progress, but important gaps and imbalances remain. Much of the scholarship is concentrated on a small set of high-profile titles - most notably *Rome: Total War* and the *Assassin's Creed* series - while smaller or experimental productions rarely enter the discussion. This narrow focus reflects the prominence of these games in popular culture, yet it risks overlooking alternative



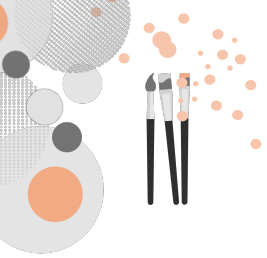
approaches to antiquity that might challenge or complicate the dominant images of the past.

Methodologically, the field has leaned heavily on close reading and textual critique of individual titles. These approaches have been valuable, but they provide only a partial picture. We still know too little about how players actually respond to games, how they perceive questions of authenticity, or how their prior knowledge shapes the experience. Without more systematic reception studies, whether through surveys, interviews, or classroom ethnographies, there is a danger of projecting scholarly concerns onto players rather than capturing how games are experienced in practice.

The issue of accuracy also remains particularly complex when it comes to antiquity. The fragmentary and contested nature of the evidence makes it difficult to assess fidelity in any straightforward way, yet many studies still approach accuracy as if it were a stable benchmark. What is needed are frameworks that take into account not only the surviving sources but also the long chain of receptions through which antiquity has been transmitted in literature, art, and film, and which continue to shape what players recognize as “authentic.” However, the appearance of studies dedicated to taking into account ludic specifics of games as a standalone form of media, including genre conventions, can be considered a step into this direction.

Biases in thematic emphasis are also apparent. Violence and warfare dominate much of the scholarship, reflecting both the focus of the most successful commercial titles and the centrality of these themes in modern popular imagination of antiquity. Other aspects of ancient life - religion, everyday practices, social diversity - remain in the background. Work on identity and ideology has begun to appear, but often concentrates on a few emblematic figures or controversies, leaving broader questions of race, gender, and colonial discourse underexplored.

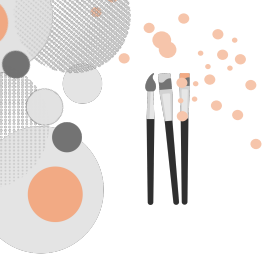
Finally, there is a methodological divide that remains difficult to bridge. On one hand, game studies have developed a set of analytical frameworks tailored to



the interactive medium: attention to rules and mechanics, models of player agency, notions of immersion, and theories of procedural rhetoric all provide powerful tools for understanding how games generate meaning. On the other hand, classical reception studies bring a long-established methodological tradition for tracing how antiquity is mediated, appropriated, and reinterpreted across cultural forms. This includes philological close reading of texts and motifs, intertextual analysis that situates modern works within the chain of receptions stretching back to antiquity, and the examination of how classical imagery is mobilized for ideological, political, or aesthetic purposes in different contexts. These approaches are particularly adept at unpacking the cultural afterlives of myths, symbols, and historical figures, showing how they acquire layered significance as they pass through successive retellings in literature, art, cinema, and beyond.

The challenge lies in reconciling these traditions. Classical reception studies are rooted in textual and visual criticism, often privileging stable artifacts that can be compared across time. Game studies, by contrast, treat the text as dynamic, shaped not only by its design but also by the contingent actions of players. Whereas reception studies emphasize continuity and transformation of meaning through cultural transmission, game studies stress the variability of play, the constraints of mechanics, and the interpretive agency of users. Bringing these perspectives together requires methodological flexibility: one must account simultaneously for the diachronic layers of classical motifs and for the synchronic structures of interactivity that condition how players encounter them.

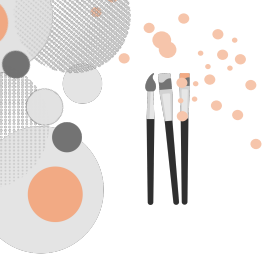
Developing such an integrated approach is crucial if scholarship is to move beyond parallel analyses of “the classical content” and “the game form.” Without synthesis, there is a risk of either reducing games to another static medium within the reception tradition, or, conversely, treating antiquity as mere setting while overlooking the deep cultural histories that inform its digital representation. A dialogue between the methodological richness of classical reception studies and the



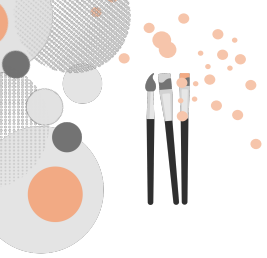
theoretical innovations of game studies promises not only to sharpen our understanding of ancient-themed games, but also to illuminate how digital interactivity itself reshapes the very processes of cultural transmission and reinterpretation that reception studies have long examined.

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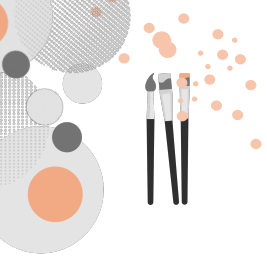
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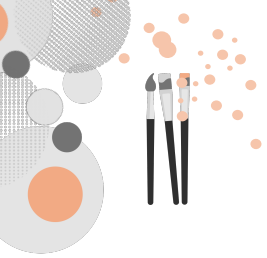
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