

CHEAT CODES OF THE GODS: NARRATIVE AND GREEK MYTHOLOGY IN  
VIDEO GAMES

by

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## **DEDICATION**

I dedicate my thesis to my entire family, dogs and all, but primarily to my mother, who gave me the idea to research video games while sitting in a Thai food restaurant. Thank you, Mum, for encouraging me to write about the things I love most.

I'd also like to dedicate my thesis to my dear group of friends that I met during my Master's program, and plan to keep for the rest of my life. To Chelsi, Elisa, Hannah, Lindsey, Luise, Olivia, Sarah, and Tuesday—thank you for doing your part in keeping me sane throughout this project. Or should that be the other way around?

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## I. INTRODUCTION

In 1972, engineer Al Alcorn from Atari created *Pong*, the virtual table-tennis game that became a classic staple of the video gaming world (Kent). The 1960s to the 1980s contain some of the game industry's most prominent landmarks, from the creation of the first interactive video game *Spacewar* by Steve Russell in 1961 to Nintendo's release of *Donkey Kong* in 1981 (Kent). Video games sought to go further in technological advancement, from Square Enix's foray into role-playing games (RPGs) with 1988's first *Final Fantasy* to Nintendo's critically acclaimed *The Legend of Zelda: Ocarina of Time* in 1998, one of Nintendo's first games with 3D graphics. From there, developers continued to create new stories in this new and constantly improving genre. The first cited video game taking inspiration from Greek mythology comes with the text-based adventure game<sup>1</sup> *Madness and the Minotaur* by Spectral Associates in 1981 ("Madness and the Minotaur"), and the world of applying Greek mythology to video games only blossomed from there, including the *Kid Icarus* series (Nintendo 1987-2013) and 2008's *Rise of the Argonauts* (Liquid Entertainment).

Over the past forty years, video games have become a staple in the world of narrative activity. From point and click mystery games to story-based roleplaying games (RPGs), this relatively new format of telling a story opens the way to redesigning the production of narratives of all kinds. Poems, paintings, novels, movies, and now video games take influence from Greek mythology, reused and revitalized throughout the history of the Western civilization. Many games take inspiration from mythology and literature—the *God of War* series (Sony 2005-2018), for example, takes heavy influences from Greek

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<sup>1</sup> A text-based game uses a text-based user interface and players type commands in to further the game's story.

and Norse mythology, as well as *The Banner Saga* (Stoic Studio 2014). However, influence and inspiration may not mean accuracy. Retelling Greek myths is not a new concept: multiple novelists rework the classics to fit their new stories, like Rick Riordan's *Percy Jackson and The Olympians* series (2005-2009) or Madeline Miller's *The Song of Achilles* (2011). These novels prove that reframing the oral and written tradition of myths to fit a new narrative can be successful, and films followed suit with the visual marvels of *Jason and the Argonauts* (1963) and *Clash of the Titans* (2010), but video games are a new medium entirely. Interacting with the narratives past just reading or watching them was relatively unheard of until games allowed players to immerse themselves as *part* of the story, rather than on the outside looking in. For my research, I played through several Greek mythology-based video games to judge their accuracy in portraying the myths correctly, and to evaluate the relationships between narrative and simulation when combining Greek mythology and video games; if either of them suffer for the other's success or if they work together to tell a coherent, new story with classical influences.

The four games I chose as my primary sources for this project come from 2015 to 2020 in publication date. I chose more recently published games because new properties are available for new scholarship and research, and I want to explore uncharted territory in the games I picked. In order of earliest to latest publication, the games are *Apotheon* (Alientrap 2015), *Assassin's Creed: Odyssey (AC:O)* (Ubisoft 2018), *Hades* (Supergiant 2020), and *Immortals Fenyx Rising (IFR)* (Ubisoft 2020). In order to get the best understanding of how mechanics affect the narrative, all four games are different genres—different types of narratives in different types of gameplay. Where *Apotheon* is a side-scrolling two-dimensional platformer game, *Hades* is a dungeon-crawler set in an

isometric angle (also known as “two-and-a-half-D”), meaning a three-dimensional perspective that reveals more of the surrounding setting than a top-down or two-dimensional game could achieve. *Assassin’s Creed: Odyssey* is an RPG, where players choose one of two possible protagonists, while *Immortals Fenyx Rising* is an adventurous open-world game with one protagonist, where players explore the world as it unfolds to them. These four games all use Greek mythological influences to further their stories in various ways, and my research finds out how and why they differ in gameplay mechanics, storylines, use of mythologies and culture, and narrative design.

Translating literature between mediums is no easy task, but Janet Murray documents the shift from paper to program in her book *Hamlet on the Holodeck: The Future of Narrative in Cyberspace* (1997), which investigates “narrative microworlds” and how new technologies have the capabilities to tell new stories (Murray 6). Murray, a professor at MIT who teaches courses about electronic fiction, explores how digital creators redefine narrative “not by replacing the novel or the movie but by continuing their timeless bardic work within another framework” (Murray 10). Video games are an example of this reframing—telling the myths without replacing them, rather adapting them into a new, digitized light. Murray argues that we “rely on works of fiction, in any medium, to help us understand the world and what it means to be human” (Murray 26)—just like the Greeks used the gods of the Pantheon to help them understand the world.

In order to explore these ideas in my thesis, I plan to employ Murray’s game studies approach to better understand the effects of transitioning from one medium to another. Along with Murray in game studies, I use Jesper Juul’s *Half-Real: Video Games between Real Rules and Fictional Worlds* (2011) to investigate the ever-shifting

relationship between the fictional world and the real world. I also plan to use myth studies for this project, following Eva Parisinou's essay exploring the evolution of Greek myths and Edith Hamilton's contemporary retellings, as well as translations of Homer's *The Odyssey* and *The Iliad*, Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, and *Theogony* and *Works and Days* by Hesiod. By using these sources alongside the games I chose, I aim to understand the links between modern media and classic mythology and how game developers do not depend on Greek mythology to create their story, but rather use different aspects of it to craft an independent story steeped in classical influences. The relationship between narratives within the myths and the games themselves are linked for all four games, but I believe the games use their source material differently to create different stories based on the same mythological inspirations. Narrative in nature is an unstable force; stories change as time goes on. Greek myths were originally religious narratives that rusted *into* myths as they lost practice, but also how people came to understand the world (weather caused by Zeus, seasons caused by Demeter and Persephone, etc.). By incorporating these stories into video games, the two work together to create new stories that aim to inform and entertain; with my thesis, I aim to illustrate the different ways each game accomplishes this, whether it be through familial ties of the characters, storytelling techniques, artistic choices, or utilizing mythology as living religion.

In her article on "Mythology" (2010), Eva Parisinou explains "myth" to be "a traditional story which expresses human perceptions of, and reactions to, a variety of aspects of the world" (396). The word "myth" comes from the Greek word *mythos*, meaning "story", or "a network of Greek stories" (Dowden and Livingstone 3). In CrashCourse's introductory episode to their series on world mythologies (2017), host

Mike Rugnetta references mythography, or the theory of mythology, and EB Tylor's claim that myths were a form of "primitive science"—people understood the world they lived in based on the myths told to them (CrashCourse). Rather than claiming mythology to be true or false, CrashCourse bases their retellings and information as interpretations of the mythologies they reference, including but not limited to Greek mythology. They work with a definition of mythology that focuses on fiction rather than fact; storytelling is the main goal of mythology in the present time, as the characters and narratives faded from religion to retellings in novels, movies, and now, video games. CrashCourse tells the audience that "mythology has been argued about and theorized for over a hundred years, and many myths can be read, and understood, in a number of ways" (CrashCourse Mythology #1 2:04-2:13), and this claim also applies to video games in how the different developers took the classical influences and coded them into their own, new stories.

Edith Hamilton's book of Greek myth retellings, aptly titled *Mythology* (2013), delivers abridged versions of the Greek epics documented in Homer's *Odyssey* and *The Iliad*, as well as the creation stories included in Ovid's *Metamorphoses* and Hesiod's *Theogony*. While all these sources are included in my project for details and accuracy's purposes, Hamilton includes an opening chapter titled "Introduction to Classical Mythology" that gives a brief background on the Greek pantheon and why these gods were (and are) so popular: "The Greeks made their gods *in their own image*... Until then, gods had had no semblance of reality. They were unlike all living things" (7, my emphasis). Part of the success of Greek mythology's staying power—and many other world mythologies' staying power-- is that the main pantheon of gods were like us—human, with flaws and humanlike characteristics that set them apart from the non-

anthropomorphic gods of other mythologies and religions. Greek mythology includes multiple monsters, of course—the Gorgons, the Minotaur of Minos, the Furies, and Cerberus are just a few examples—but the gods and goddesses were the worshipped ones, even when they took on animal forms. The monstrous characters were important to many myths, and like with many other religions, the Greeks sought to understand their world through these preachings turned stories—for example, the tales of Persephone staying in the underworld with Hades for six months, and Demeter’s sorrow from missing her daughter causing the winter season (Ovid 109-116). Through making their gods relatable through their stories, with Demeter’s grief at losing her daughter and Persephone’s worries about marrying so young, the Greeks created a pantheon almost like a real human family. David Leeming comments on how Greeks understood their society through their gods and goddesses in *The World of Myth* (2016):

More than any other Pantheon, the Greek hierarchy of gods and goddesses is modeled on human families. The official Olympian gods, the family of Mount Olympus, headed by Zeus, is simply the most powerful of Greek families. Like other members of the rich and powerful classes, the Olympian family is marred by instances of immorality, arrogance and stubbornness... They were not to be trusted and they could not be counted on for mercy. They were an exaggerated version of what a human family might become if endowed with infinite power.

They were a mirror of human nature itself. (Leeming 98)

These human qualities are what make Greek gods so memorable, so reproducible into new forms of media like video games. *Hades*, for example, follows Zagreus as he tries to escape the underworld his father, Hades, governs over, and he addresses the other gods

and goddesses he encounters as distant family members— “Uncle Poseidon”, for one, when he finds one of his boons in the near endless dungeon-crawler. While a large part of the popularity of Greek mythology comes from Greco-Roman culture spreading through Europe and dominating religious practices, alongside Christianity (Madsen), the Greek gods are a family (albeit a dramatic and tangled one) and part of the reason the Greek myths are so popular in the first place. People see something likeable in these gods, and thus, they are posited into all sorts of media to tell new stories with familiar faces.

Jesper Majbom Madsen discusses the spread of Greek religion and subsequent mythology in “Eager to be both Greek and Roman” (2020), and how Greek culture traveled outside of Greece’s national borders to Rome and the rest of Europe. He posits that Greek influence in new Roman cities was modest at the outset (154), but over time, “the adoption of Greek norms and customs was the result of a gradual process by which active decisions were made to embrace Greek deities, cultural institutions—such as the gymnasium, the theater, and various religious festivals— and the adoption of Greek as the language of culture” (156). He also argues that “the choice of personal names, the decision to embrace Greek gods, and the efforts to introduce Greek cultural institutions into the civic landscapes testify to how people in the hinterland did adopt Greek culture over time and developed a sense of belonging to the Greek world” (156). Madsen’s chapter from *From Trophy Towns to City States: Urban Civilization and Cultural Identities in Roman Pontus* documents how Greek culture and religion spread outward over time, focusing on Rome, but his points apply to present day. Without the gradual spread of Greek imperialism over Europe, Greek mythology would have had much less influence over popular culture today. The video games in this project tell stories of their

own, but their classical influences come from a centuries-long cultural spread and takeover by the Greeks and the Europeans as a whole. For example, all four of the games feature talented voice acting—but all in *English*, not Greek, and by British or American voice actors, rather than actual Greek actors. If one omits that important cultural history, and the alternate historical narratives within these video games would tell very different stories.

In reference to all mediums of storytelling, David Fraudenfelder remarks that “good stories have a profound effect on all cultures and that comparison of similar stories from different cultures can illuminate both sides in ways otherwise impossible” (210). While Fraudenfelder’s article, titled “Popular Culture and Classical Mythology” (2005), is pedagogical in focus, he makes the main point that myths are a story-oriented genre; while originally rooted in religion, myths were passed down from generation to generation, their immense staying power one of the primary tokens that made them malleable into new forms of media today. That staying power is something that CrashCourse notes as well: “A myth is a story, but it’s a special kind of story that... has two primary characteristics: significance and staying power” (CCM#1, 5:07). Significance and staying power are the two characteristics of Greek myths I focus on throughout this project, as those characteristics are part of the reason they get translated and transformed into video games at all. Fraudenfelder comments that with Greek mythology, “the comparison of conscious retellings of tales serves unique and valuable intellectual purposes” (211); he references films, rather than video games, but his argument relates to mine in that retelling the myths in new mediums and integrating them

into new stories can prove to create a unique experience for the audience— whether they be holding popcorn or a controller.

In similar regard to the shifting forms of storytelling from page to program, Juul's *Half-Real* discusses how video games are simultaneously a segue from and a direct link to traditional storytelling. He states "the player's experience of the game fiction appears not to require much consistency—the world of a game is something that the player can often *choose* to imagine at will. Fiction plays a different role in different games and game genres" (6). He continues with a brief history of video games and game studies, a relatively new field at the time of this project, and a study on the "rules" involved in playing video games. He argues that the relationship between rules and fiction in games is inherent: "video games [are] part of a bigger complex of *transmedia storytelling*, where content can move *between different media*" (Juul 17, my emphasis). Like films and novels, video games can take elements of popular stories (like Greek myths) and integrate them into their own narrative design. Juul adds that his book talks about "*game ecology*, where the video game incorporates other kinds of games and inspires other types of games"; the four games I picked for this project are all heavily inspired by their Greek-inspired predecessors (and *IFR* was made by a large amount of the same production team from *AC:O*). While *Half-Real* discusses games in a general study, his points on rules and fictional worlds in all sorts of game genres relates to my project in how the player moves through each game, creating their own stories through their choices and adhering to the "rules" within the game.

Juul cites Murray's book, *Hamlet on the Holideck*, in how stories affect readers, movie-watchers, and gamers. Murray posits that "written narrative traditions have moved

closer to the computer and computer-based environments have become more story-like”, and that the computer has become a new and improving medium for telling stories digitally (59; 73). She provides ample examples of computerized storytelling like *Zork*, a text-based adventure game in which players type their actions into a search bar to explore the world written for them on the screen. Murray also discusses the different characteristics of digital environments, narrowing them down to four properties: procedural, participatory, encyclopedic, and spatial, that then fit into two main characteristics, being immersive and interactive (71). Immersion and interactivity in games are important features in keeping players invested and playing the game, Murray argues, and parallels Juul’s points about set rules in games by discussing “conventions” that keep the immersion from fading. This immersion quality applies to all four of the games I chose for this project; by adding familiar, mythological faces and stories to a newly crafted narrative to seat them in, the myths and the games work together to make a new story, capable of immersing the player in a new environment while also offering recognizable story elements from the pantheon of old.

While Murray discusses the fantasy and gaming worlds’ powers of immersion, Joseph Laycock writes in “How Role-Playing Games Create Meaning” (2015) about JRR Tolkien’s theory of “escapism” in games, and how players make their own meanings in RPGs based on how they play them (180), dropping themselves into an idealized fantasy world and creating the story as they see fit. Inside that fantasy world, players with the ability to customize their character’s appearance, armor, statistics, and weapons are shown to remember the game better, as well as come back to it more often (Turkay & Adinolf). Laycock also asserts that “narrative is perhaps the oldest form of world-making.

We are narrative creatures, and stories render the world apprehensible. Narrative tells us about the world we live in and our place within it” (185). This argument applies to the ancient Greeks and how they interpreted their world through the stories that create their mythology we know today; learning about the world we live in through stories is one of the most universal ways of understanding our surroundings, evident in not just Greek mythology, but other world myths, as well. CrashCourse’s series seconds this notion about Greeks using the mythology we know as the religion they relied on, but that nobody knows who wrote them down, aside from the famous Homer, Hesiod, Ovid, and Virgil—another call back to mythology’s significance and staying power. Even without true “primary sources”, relying on retellings from philosophers, poets, and artists, Greek mythology’s stories were retold and republished long into the present day, where the gods of old become characters in new forms of media. Greek mythology’s tales are fluid, ever-changing, and their constant adaptations attest to their staying power. Paul Christensen and Dominic Machado comment on that power of adaptation in video games with their article “Video Games and Classical Antiquity” (2010); “video games are the medium through which a large and growing percentage of students get their primary exposure to the ancient world... It is, therefore, incumbent upon classicists to take video games seriously” (107).

Structurally, I plan to devote one chapter to each of the games I chose to focus on each game separately, rather than combining them into chapters based on issues I find within the games. By concentrating on one game per chapter, I can organize my thoughts about each one in a more linear fashion, also including my secondary sources (both those sources including the games themselves and the various game and myth studies articles)

across all four chapters. I organized the four chapters in chronological order of game publication in order to simultaneously examine how technology surrounding games has evolved through the four documented, as well as the representation of Greek mythology from 2015-2020.

*Apotheon* (Alientrap, 2015) is the subject of my first chapter. Protagonist Nikandros, abandoned by the gods, rises to Mount Olympus to take revenge on the pantheon who left humanity behind. *Apotheon* is stylistically different from the other games in this project, as it runs as a 2D platformer rather than an open-world 3D game, but Alientrap devoted their time to making *Apotheon* as mythologically and artistically accurate as possible—the art style throughout parallels that of Greek amphoras, or wine jars, black-on-red terracotta with intricate scenes and characters from mythology carved into them. Unfortunately, *Apotheon*'s gameplay suffers because of its dedication to the art style and mythological accuracy, but the game's narrative intertwines with Greek mythology to create a new story with classical influences that jumped straight from terracotta to TV screen.

My second chapter covers *Assassin's Creed: Odyssey (AC:O)* (Ubisoft, 2018), an RPG where players choose their protagonist of either Cassandra or Alexios, and choose their weapons, fighting style, and armor as the game progresses. The customizability allows players to craft their own narrative within the game's pre-established story, making Cassandra or Alexios an assassin, a hunter, or a brawler—and, for the first time in the *Assassin's Creed* series, players are given the ability to choose whether to be a male or female hero. While the other games in this project focus on interactions with the gods themselves, *AC:O* takes players back to how ancient Greeks viewed the gods: as

religion, as faraway figures to worship or curse. Instead of interacting with the immortals, *Kassandra/Alexios* forges their own story, searching for remnants of their past and trying to save the future from the evil cults that try to run Greece. The immense customizability combined with the ability to choose different paths for the protagonist creates a game that does not make use of its Greek mythology influences as much as the other games in this project but takes a more geographical approach to Greek culture: with a detailed, multi-location map that players can freely explore, *AC:O* frames its story as one based in realism, including multiple real-life figures from Greek and Spartan culture.

My third chapter covers *Hades* (Supergiant Games 2020), a game where players act as *Zagreus*, son of Hades. *Hades* focuses in on the familial ties of the Greek pantheon and how the gods interact with each other outside of the myths they are known for; gods and goddesses talk to *Zagreus* as a member of their extended family, offering him boons and assistance as he tries to break his way out of the Underworld to see the surface world. Through interactions with the gods, the monsters *Zagreus* fights, and the myths intertwined with the game's own story, *Hades* focuses in on the connections between characters in Greek mythology, on their flaws as a family dynamic. Supergiant's attention to detail in the conversations between gods and goddesses, as well as the immense replay value from the gameplay itself, both lead to *Hades'* story being intricately woven with its classical influences, creating a game that utilizes Greek mythology to tell its own story about families that many outside of the Underworld can relate to.

Chapter four covers Ubisoft's *Immortals Fenyx Rising* (2020), which follows the entirely customizable *Fenyx* through their adventure to free four imprisoned deities and fight *Typhon* the Titan to save humanity. What is unique about *Fenyx* as a character is

their role as both hero and storyteller; while they are the hero of their own story, told in frame narrative format by a bantering Zeus and Prometheus, they also recall mythology as stories they told to friends and family, meeting each new deity as if they were a celebrity. Fenyx's story follows the epic hero's narrative format, especially with the inclusion of their own prophecy, paralleling Achilles in *The Iliad* (Homer, 12 B.C.). *IFR*'s immense customizability in players' protagonist, armor, weapons, and even bird companion adds a personal touch to each playthrough, as well as the open-world style of the game itself. With no set order to complete the story in, *IFR* gives players the freedom to create their own version of the narrative, using Greek mythology's cast of characters (monsters included) to show a new, interactive take on the epic hero's odyssey.

My conclusion presents my findings and summarizes my thoughts about modern media using classical influences to create new narratives. Through combining Greek mythology with the game's own concepts, each game I studied for this project utilized their influences differently, whether focusing on artistic influences, geography and culture, family connections, or narration and storytelling. Greek mythology goes hand in hand with video game narrative design to create new stories based in classical influences, and each game portrays that link between mythology and gaming in unique and contrasting ways.

## II. THE AMPHORA'S GOD-KILLER: ART STYLE AND ASSASSINATION IN *APOTHEON*

Alientrap's *Apotheon* (2015) follows Nikandros (nye-CAN-dree-ohs), human warrior of zero words and occasional grunts of pain, as he challenges the Olympians for vengeance when the gods abandon the earth. Stylized artistically to parallel the style of Greek amphoras, large wine vases, *Apotheon* showcases itself to be dedicated to the classical influences it builds itself upon. While Nikandros himself is fairly blank as a player character (so players can easily identify with him), the Olympians he meets are far more antagonistic than the interpretations in other games in this project. Alientrap focused on the mythological accuracy in their game; as a result, their original story intertwined with the mythology feels rich and full of content for players to discover. On the other hand, the gameplay itself suffers from the attention on history. With no dedicated targeting system, fighting enemies gets tedious and frustrating. *Apotheon* may not be the easiest game to battle through, but with its concentration in historical and mythological accuracy, Nikandros' story works alongside the classical influences and artistic inspirations to form a new narrative that jumped straight from a Greek amphora into the modern gaming console.

*Apotheon*'s art style, as mentioned, borrows heavily from the Greek style of painting on vases. By employing this unique art style, the game applauds its Greek influences in a way unlike the other games in my project, as it takes directly from the source to create a new story in familiar colors. Black-figure pottery was a common art style for amphoras, especially for representations of iconography and mythology. Tyler

Jo Smith discusses the prominence of black-figure pottery and Greek amphora art in “Greek Vases: From Artistic Personalities to Archaeological Contexts” (2012), mentioning that “although Greek vases are rife with depictions of gods and heroes, it is all too often assumed they are mere snapshots of antiquity and that their decorated surfaces exist in large part to *illustrate the stories better known to us from ancient texts*” (549, my emphasis). *Apotheon* takes full advantage of this notion in their game; by implementing this artistic style, it tells the stories of ancient Greek mythology in a new, high-definition manner. Figure 1 shows an image of a Greek amphora, titled *The Bateman Amphora*, and the black-on-red painterly style of black-on-red terracotta; Figure 2 shows the title screen of *Apotheon*, illustrating the parallels between the two mediums of art in life and art in the game.

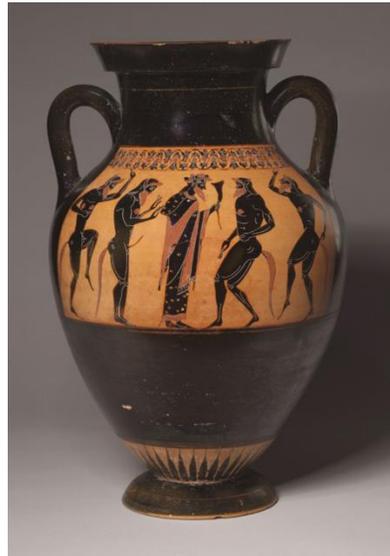


Figure 1. *The Bateman Amphora*, by a Lysippides painter circa 530-520 BC (Picture by Cleveland Museum of Art in Ohio).



Figure 2. The opening loading screen for *Apotheon*. Still from *Apotheon* (Alientrap 2015).

*Apotheon* takes heavy influence from the classic art style, evident in the first loading screen alone; in Figure 2, the game presents (from left to right) depictions of Dionysus, Demeter, Apollo, Artemis, Ares, and Aphrodite (*Apotheon*). By using this art style, *Apotheon*'s inspiration clearly comes from Greek mythology, and they aim to stay as accurate to the actual black-figure pottery as possible. The entire game is rendered in this art style, but Alientrap puts their own spin on it in certain areas; each god and goddess have their own dedicated location throughout Mount Olympus, and they all appear differently throughout the game. For example, Artemis' grove has a green background to portray a lush forest, where Apollo's palace is golden yellow to signify wealth and prowess (Alientrap). Staying true to their inspirations while simultaneously adapting it to fit their own narrative exhibits *Apotheon*'s dedication to being historically accurate while also crafting a new story in a video game. Utilizing the black-figure pottery art style through the narrative shows Alientrap wants to tell their story as close as possible to the mythology that inspired it, especially with the different interpretations of the gods and

goddesses that parallel their more traditional visual representations, evident with their choice in black-on-red terracotta. Figure 3, below, shows another example of Greek black-on-red terracotta on a different amphora. Figure 4 shows Poseidon in *Apotheon*, proving the parallels between the game and amphora art.

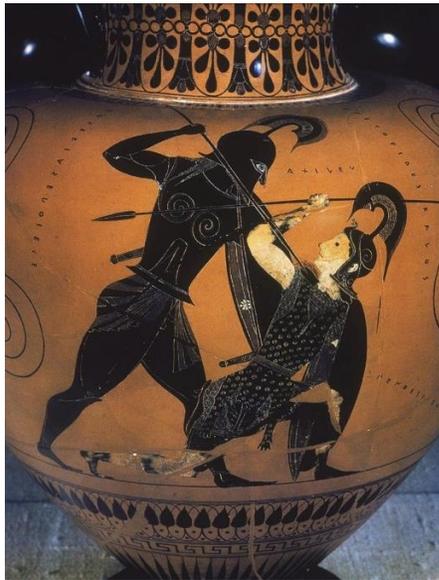


Figure 3. A Greek amphora titled *Achilles killing Penthesilea*, by Exekias circa 530 B.C. (Picture by University of California).

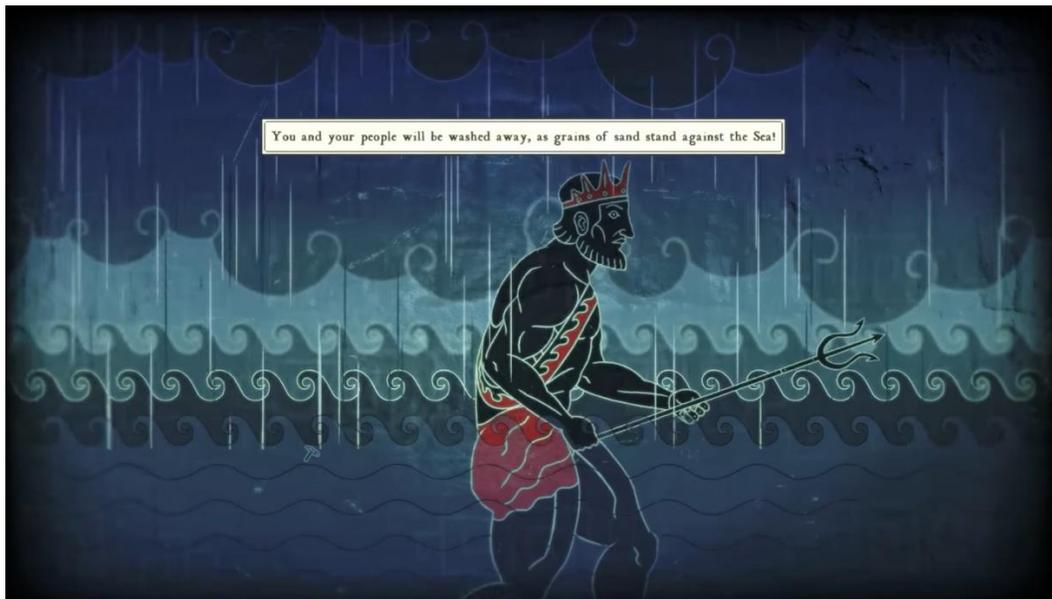


Figure 4. Poseidon challenges Nikandros in the middle of his home turf, the ocean. Still from *Apotheon* (Alientrap 2015).

While *Apotheon* adds more details with the help of technology, it remains true to its influences of black-on-red terracotta in linework, limited uses of color, and working in two-dimensions. By utilizing the classical art style from amphora jars, *Apotheon* successfully creates a new story using the most clearly classical influences of any of the games in my project. While *Hades* (Chapter 3) and *Immortals Fenyx Rising* (Chapter 4) feature the gods and goddesses of Greek myth as well, they are stylized in their own art styles, both of which I cover in the games' respective chapters. With a player-driven story through Greek art, *Apotheon* parallels its source material while also creating something new within modern media, showing the versatility of video games as a storytelling mode and the flexibility of adapting Greek mythology into modern media formats.

In an interview with part of the Alientrap team, Christian Rollinger asks creative director Jesse McGibney why they chose specifically Greek mythology, to which McGibney replies that “books, movies and many other video games have drawn inspiration from the vast library of Greek myths, either directly or indirectly” (20), and that *Apotheon* “tries to take a wider look at the entire mythology, bringing together recognizable elements from many sources... However, [McGibney] wouldn't call any of the narratives in *Apotheon* ‘adaptations’, as that was never the goal. They're more like cameos or allusions that help support the gameplay and its main storyline” (23-24). Rollinger's interview (2018) focuses on the creative process and influences behind the side-scrolling platformer, meaning the gameplay travels sideways as the player progresses, rather than in an open-world manner. Side-scrolling was a clear choice, as to fit with the two-dimensional art style they adapted from amphora to screen.

*Apotheon* is the story of Nikandreos, which in Greek means “victory of man” (Rollinger 19), as he ascends to Olympus to fight the gods for revenge. Regarding the narrative design, McGibney notes that “because of player agency in video games, it’s often very difficult to use classical storytelling structures that follow a linear path” (20-21). Player agency is one factor that does not apply to books or movies that use classical influences—something that makes video games unique is how they allow players to insert themselves in the narrative of the game itself by choosing how it plays out. *Apotheon* has a storyline to follow, but the order players achieve checkpoints can be varied depending on which god or goddess they choose to fight first, thus crafting their own story through the game’s semi-open world aspect. In my own playthrough, I chose to fight Apollo first, then Artemis, and finally descend to Hades to find Persephone to complete Demeter’s quest (Alientrap). Player agency is important in video games as it makes players feel like they made a difference to the story, in comparison to watching or reading it.



Figure 5. The map of Mount Olympus. Still from *Apotheon* (Alientrap 2015).

AlienTrap's mythological and historical consultant, Maciej Paprocki, discusses the choice of Greek mythology for *Apotheon's* narrative and those Greek myths "distinguish themselves through their richness and interconnectedness: almost every character, be it god or mortal, features in at least several works that reveal his or her strengths, limitations, fears and wants" (19-20). Harkening back to those characteristics of Greek myth—significance and staying power—Paprocki echoes Fraudenfelder's argument that Greek myths are story-oriented in nature, and the varieties in translations, retellings, and interpretations are what crafted that staying power that kept Greek mythology in the modern mind when creating new stories, whether they be games, novels, or films. Fraudenfelder refers to film when he argues that "the comparison of conscious retellings of tales serves unique and valuable intellectual purposes" (211), but his argument applies to video games, as well. Modern media influences other modern media (Kasavin), and the numerous films, novels, and previously published video games all influenced *Apotheon* as it delved deep into Greek mythology.

Unlike the other games in my project, *Apotheon* adds another aspect to their dedication to historical accuracy: throughout the game, there are small stone steles that, when interacted with, display different quotes from famous Greek authors. While their primary source is with Homer and Homeric hymns, they also include quotes from Nonnus, Euripides, Hesiod, Apollodorus of Athens, and several other authors. The inclusion of quotations from famous ancient authors proves that AlienTrap did their research on the people considered the founding storytellers of Greek mythology. For example, Homeric hymn 27, dedicated to Artemis, goddess of the hunt, is placed in front of the door into her grove and reads:

I sing of Artemis, whose shafts are of gold, who cheers on the hounds, the pure maiden, shooter of stags, who delights in archery, own sister to Apollo with the golden sword. Over the shadowy hills and windy peaks she draws her golden bow, rejoicing in the chase, and sends out grievous shafts. The tops of the high mountains tremble and the tangled woods echoes awesomely with the outcry of beasts: earthquakes and the sea also where fishes shoal. (*Apotheon*)

*Apotheon* includes small passages from various authors throughout the map, whether traversing the rivers of Hades or running around the Acropolis on Mount Olympus.

*Apotheon* takes place *after* the stories within Greek mythology itself, creating a new story parallel to its originals. For example, upon challenging Ares, Nikandros must defeat some of Ares' former opponents before challenging the god of war himself. One of these challengers is Diomedes, whose spear managed to pierce Ares' torso once before (Homer, *Iliad*); *Apotheon* places a plaque outside Diomedes' arena with a quote from Homer's *Iliad*, the source material (Alientrap). By including the different quotes from a variety of authors, *Apotheon* illustrates a vast knowledge of Greek mythology and the primary sources associated with it. Regarding storyline itself, Paproki tells Rollinger that "*Apotheon's* story would be a sequel to surviving narratives within Greek myth. This post-mythological setting gave us more leeway in terms of narrative development: it remains an unexplored period within the Greek mythic history, a relatively empty canvas onto which we could paint our own vision of what happened next" (18). Nikandros defeats Diomedes, Ephaltes, and Otus (sons of Aloeus who imprisoned Ares [Homer, *Iliad*]) in Ares' domain alone; he hacks-and-slashes through his own tale with the

involvement of the classics, a sequel to the well-known stories of Greek mythology that the player themselves writes.

In comparison to the other games in this project, Nikandros is a unique protagonist in his silence. Where Zagreus and Fenyx chatter and banter with the divine, and Cassandra's dialogue gets hand-picked by the player themselves, Nikandros is entirely mute, and never says a word throughout the entire game (aside from the odd "hyah" or "oof" during battle sequences). As for appearance, he is little more on the screen than a black silhouette against the colorful backgrounds, adhering to the black-on-red terracotta art style *AlienTrap* aims to mimic, but he gets the occasional splash of blue or red depending on the armor and weapons that players get to equip. McGibney comments on player agency in the design for Nikandros, and why they elected to create a new hero rather than pluck one from an established epic: "pre-existing Greek heroes already have their own stories, and those weren't the story that we were trying to tell. The player character Nikandros isn't really a character in his own right... Nikandros *is* the player" (17). Nikandros does not talk or move of his own volition—his actions are the player's actions, giving the player total autonomy over *AlienTrap* and Greek mythology's newest epic hero.



Figure 6. Hera appears before Nikandros after the game's prologue concludes and comments on their similarities. Still from *Apotheon* (Alientrap 2015).

Like *Hades*, *Apotheon*'s team aimed to focus on the “father overthrown by son” dynamic that is heavily present in Greek mythology; Paproki confirms with that “since the game is very strongly influenced by the divine succession myth, we focused on father-son relationships within the myth, with Nikandros as stand-in for Zeus’ son and his eventual successor” (Rollinger 19). Unlike *IFR* and *AC:O*, which give players the choice to play as a male or female protagonist, *Apotheon* does not allow for choice or customization of the main character. Nikandros, as McGibney argues, *is* the player, a blank slate for anyone to project onto. While the lack of customization may affect player retention of the narrative itself (Turkay and Adinolf), *Apotheon* is packed with Greek mythology influences, references, and artistic choices, making the game hard to forget in mind’s eye due to its unique appearance.

*Apotheon* functions in 2D, rather than the 3D open-world (*IFR* and *AC:O*) or 3D isometric (*Hades*) that the other games in this project were programmed in. Without as much freedom to explore Mount Olympus as they please, players have no choice but to

focus on the game's narrative, even if they can choose which gods and goddesses to defeat first. While *Apotheon* takes its artistic style from Greek amphora and black-on-red terracotta, it also takes influence from classic 2D platformer games outside of Greek mythology's grasp, such as *Super Mario Brothers* (Nintendo 1985), *Shovel Knight* (Yacht Club Games 2014), and the *Megaman* series (Capcom 1987-2018). As the technology for developing video games progressed throughout the decades, many developers opted for 3D games with the advancements in technology, but some decided to "stick with the classics" of 2D platforming, like the recently released *Shovel Knight* game and, of course, *Apotheon* just one year later. However, *Shovel Knight* takes influence from its 2D platformer predecessors in both controls and 32-bit art, versus *Apotheon's* Greek mythology backbone. *Apotheon* is unique in art style, based in black-on-red terracotta, but the previously mentioned games are more polished in mechanics; where *Shovel Knight* is a relatively simple dungeon-crawler game, *Apotheon* has its quirks with gameplay due to the developer's primary focus on the story and cast of mythological characters.

As much as *AlienTrap* focused on Greek mythology and accuracy, retaining a deep connection to its inspirations, the gameplay itself suffers as a result. Swapping between weapons gets dicey in the middle of battle, especially as the weapons themselves break after extended use. With no targeting system to allow players to focus on one target at a time, the game feels messy and panic-inducing with several enemies attacking at once. The puzzling platforming levels offer no guidance other than a checkpoint to reach; for inexperienced players, this can get frustrating, and some may give up on the story as a result. (I had to resort to walkthroughs and video playthroughs to get past certain levels.)

For instance, when descending into Hades to find Persephone, Nikandros must cross the five rivers to get to the house of Hades: Styx, Lethe, Archeron, Cocytus, and Phlegethon, which is an upward platforming level where players are chased by rising flames. Along the way, Nikandros battles past several undead warriors and must pick door locks while avoiding the flames until he reaches three shootable targets—but without a proper targeting system or crosshairs to aim at, shooting the targets takes several tries, and the player does not have a lot of time to get all three. If a player were to give up on the game because of the gameplay being too difficult, the narrative itself would suffer as well. Without the proper ending to the story of *Apotheon*, the experience would be akin to ripping out the last chapter of a novel; missing the integral ties to end the narrative in a neat bow. Gameplay is a major aspect that ties into the success of a game, and without dedicated coding to make it feasible to finish, *Apotheon*'s storyline could have been abandoned or “rage-quit” by players not required to finish it for research purposes, and their attention to mythical detail within the dedicated amphora art style would be lost.

The gods and goddesses' interpretations themselves differ from the other games in my project—instead of assisting the player through their quest, Nikandros must kill the Olympians to enact revenge upon them for abandoning and ruining his home village, Dion. Apart from the select deities of Demeter, Persephone, Hades, Hephaestus, and Athena, Nikandros must eliminate the other members of Olympus and receive their godly powers. The deities are also far more antagonistic than in other games; in *Hades*, the Olympians like Zeus and Poseidon are sociable with protagonist Zagreus and make jokes, while *Apotheon*'s interpretations are less friendly. Figure 7, below, shows Apollo making not-so-polite conversation with Nikandros. Something interesting to note is that

*Apotheon* is the only game in my collection to even *have* Hera and Apollo present; *Hades* and *IFR* make no references to these two deities whatsoever.



Figure 7. Apollo meets Nikandros and has some biting commentary about Earth. Still from *Apotheon* (Alientrap 2015).

*Apotheon* shows the Greek divine's dark sides: apathetic, selfish, with a holier-than-thou mentality that many interpretations of Greek mythology look past. *Hades*, discussed in Chapter 3, has moments where Zagreus must pick between two different gods to get one boon ability, and the unchosen god, feeling ignored, sends enemies to attack—but the problem is quickly forgiven and forgotten after Zagreus finishes the battle (*Hades*). Nikandros gets no such mercy, but the contrast between Zagreus and Nikandros' treatment from the gods exhibits the dynamism and versatility different video games and development teams take when creating new stories with classical influences. Christensen and Machaldo argue that “one significant possibility for the future is regular and active involvement of classicists in the production of video games... Opportunities exist for classicists to become involved in writing... other classically themed video games and to thereby take an active role in shaping [gamers'] impressions of the ancient world in an

entirely new way” (109). Alientrap hired mythology consultant Paprocki for *Apotheon*, and the dedication to accuracy is clear throughout the game with the stone steles of historical quotes, the appearance of minor characters, and the carefully stylized art style. *Apotheon*'s gameplay may be clunky, but it is worth it to play through Nikandros' climactic fight with Zeus on the ruins of Dion after he ascends to godhood.



Figure 8. A newly immortalized Nikandros battles Zeus amidst the ruins of Dion. Still from *Apotheon* (Alientrap 2015).

The conclusion of *Apotheon* is also unique from the other games in my project, as Nikandros stands alone at the beginning of a new age and a new mythology. After defeating Zeus, Nikandros walks through his destroyed hometown a giant (literally, as the combination of the different godly powers made him grow ten times his original size), until he comes across a pile of clay that he strikes with Zeus' lightning, now his, and creates a new man to restart humanity. *Apotheon*'s treatment of humanity directly parallels Hesiod's documentation of the origin story of humanity from *Works and Days*: "For now it is a race of iron; and they will never cease from toil and misery by day or night, in constant distress, and the gods will give them harsh troubles. Nevertheless, even

they shall have good mixed with ill. Yet Zeus will destroy this race of men also” (42). *Apotheon* takes this quote from Hesiod to heart in the crafting of their story: Zeus and the other Olympians abandoned humanity, leaving them to fend for themselves without the assistance of the divine’s godly powers. Hera explains the issue to Nikandros upon their first meeting: “The law of Zeus is absolute, and the Olympians are compelled to obey. Without the seeds of Demeter, your crops fail... Without the grace of Artemis, your fields are barren” (*Apotheon*). Nikandros lives through the Iron Age that Hesiod writes about, and the player must navigate through this age as the last human to survive Zeus’ might.

Murray’s points on transmedia storytelling extend to *Apotheon* in how strictly the game follows its classical influences, effectively shifting from translation to code the stories of the Greek pantheon. Writing at the turning point of computerized storytelling, Murray notes that “we can expect a continued loosening of the traditional boundaries between games and stories... To understand the new genres and the narrative pleasures that will arise from this heady mixture, we must look beyond the formats imposed upon the computer by the older media it is so rapidly assimilating and identify those properties native to the machine itself” (64). *Apotheon* appears somewhere in the middle; while it is a fully functioning video game with its own narrative, the inclusion of the stone stele quotes roots it in its source material more securely than the other games in this project. The game relies heavily on its influences to craft its story, blurring the boundary between video game and story through its strong ties to its origins. Unlike *Hades* or *IFR*, where the gods and goddesses have unique designs and personalities unique to their respective games while still respecting the source material, *Apotheon* uses the canon of Greek poets

and authors to set the foundation for Nikandros' adventure. Murray writes that "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); video games also fit this argument, as through programming a video game, the rules are set to make it parallel to our world. As McGibney notes, "just because something is ancient doesn't mean it should be isolated from society and exempt from new interpretations" (26-27). Nikandros' world may not be a close interpretation of the modern world, but it acts as a window into the world of ancient Greek myth that players can directly interact with and play through a new, inspired story of their own.

Paprocki discusses the choice of Greek mythology for *Apotheon's* narrative and that they "distinguish themselves through their richness and interconnectedness: almost every character, be it god or mortal, features in at least several works that reveal his or her strengths, limitations, fears and wants" (19-20). Harkening back to those characteristics of Greek myth—significance and staying power—Paprocki talks about how Greek myths are unique. While some stories were more popular than others and the different "authors" favored some symbols and characters over others, they all belong to one metaphorical "canon" in how all the different myths and tales are enhanced by this combination of contradicting elements and continuity mishaps. Paprocki continues with that

Greek myth has been adapted to new media and contexts to *keep it alive*: its enduring popularity testifies that it was a successful strategy. In fact, I believe that *myths demand to be adapted*: they live in our imaginations because they subtly

shift from retelling to retelling to accommodate divergent perspectives, clashing voices, changing circumstances. (27, my emphasis)

*Apotheon* achieves its want to be as historically and artistically accurate as possible in creating a new story from Greek influences. With art style lifted straight from a cracked amphora, the two-dimensional platformer game is littered with clear-cut references to Greek mythological characters, from the mighty Zeus to Ares' antagonist Diomedes, and the respect and care coded into each reference comes through with each interaction. While the gameplay gets clumsy occasionally without a dedicated targeting system and fiddly buttons to get around, *Apotheon's* story does not suffer if players grit their teeth through it. Nikandros, the silent hero, sets himself apart from the other games in this project by killing the gods and ascending to godhood alone, rather than being surrounded by aid throughout his story. *Apotheon* creates their new story leaning on Greek mythology as influence, and players take Nikandros from zero to hero through the halls of Mount Olympus. In the next chapter, I cover Ubisoft's *Assassin's Creed: Odyssey* and how Cassandra and Alexios, the game's pickable protagonists, interact with Greek mythology as religion, rather than physical characters one talks with, and how the *misthios* creates an alternate narrative throughout Greek history.

### III. THE *MISTHIOS* MAKES AN ALTERNATE HISTORY: *ASSASSIN'S CREED: ODYSSEY* AND MYTH AS RELIGION

*Assassin's Creed: Odyssey* (referred to as *AC:O* throughout this chapter) (Ubisoft, 2018) takes a more Spartan approach to Greek mythology in video games; players take on the helm of a Greek mercenary as they attempt to reconnect with their family and rid Greece of enemy mercenaries. Rather than interacting with the gods themselves, as with the other games in this project, *AC:O* refers to the Olympians as ancient Greeks did—as gods, rather than beings to interact with or gain power from. Like with *IFR*, players are granted the ability to choose their preferred protagonist, Alexios or Kassandra, marking *AC:O* as the first game in the Assassin's Creed series to give players the ability to choose to play as a woman. For the purposes of this chapter, I will refer to the protagonist of *AC:O*, titled “The *Misthios*” (Greek for mercenary), as Kassandra, as I chose to play as a woman for my own research and gameplay. Customization plays a large part in *AC:O*, from designing armor to picking special abilities, and the power of choice is a heavy one with game-changing choices throughout the story. While *AC:O* does not directly interact with the Greek gods and goddesses, it makes a new narrative steeped in history that players get the chance to play in—*Assassin's Creed's* tagline is “history is our playground”, and with the *misthios* as their avatar, players get the chance to create a new story in 431 BCE.

Unlike the other games in this project, *AC:O* functions as a window into the reality of ancient Greece, instead of a mystical adaptation of it. Rather than having Kassandra interact with the gods and goddesses herself, the citizens of Greece she interacts with reference the gods and goddesses as deities to be worshipped with temples

to be dedicated; in comparison to *Apotheon*, where Nikandreos, discussed in the previous chapter, ascends to Mount Olympus to converse with (and kill) the gods, *Kassandra* has no divine intervention from the Pantheon. *Kassandra*'s world is that of ancient Greece itself—the gods are unseen forces, feared and revered for their power, but not atop the mountain to interact with whenever she pleases. *Kassandra*'s story is more historically accurate and leans on the fact that these characters were, in her time, worshipped as gods before they became stories and myths instead of actively practiced religion. I examine *AC:O* differently than the other games in this project, which all have their protagonists directly interacting with the immortals and crafting their narratives with divine intervention on their side. *Kassandra* tells a more realism-based story, saving her family with prayers to the gods and her own abilities—without boons or special powers from the gods and goddesses, like the other three protagonists featured in previous and later chapters. *AC:O* intertwines religion, architecture, and culture with the game's overarching narrative to tell a historically accurate, alternate history narrative about ancient Greek and Roman people, rather than gods and goddesses.

*AC:O* functions as a loose frame narrative: at the beginning of the game, players meet the Assassins, a group of scientists who use a virtual reality system, the Animus, to explore the lives of the protagonists of the different games. For *AC:O*, Layla Hassan uses the Animus to take on the role of *Kassandra* to explore Greece through her eyes after finding her and Alexios' DNA on the Spear of Leonidas. Figure 9, below, shows Layla starting the Animus during the prologue.

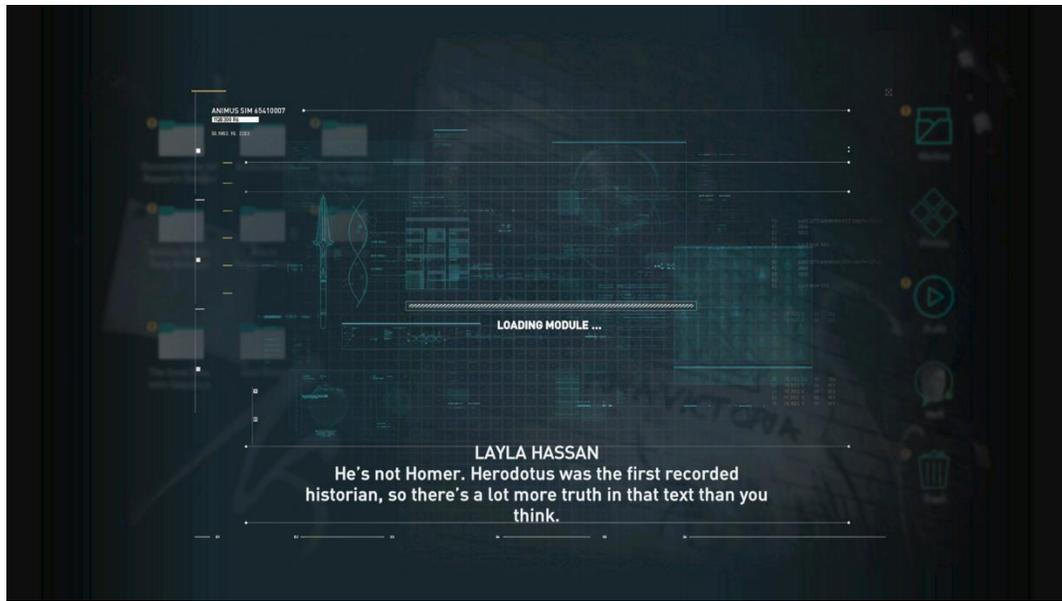


Figure 9. Layla Hassan activates the Animus, the simulation technology used to tell the stories within the Assassin's Creed series. Still from *Assassin's Creed: Odyssey* (Ubisoft 2018).

The frame narrative of *AC:O* is not as present as *IFR's* until the very end of the game, but functions as a link to the present-day world while exploring ancient Greece. The game generates backgrounds in the same shades of blue as the Animus screen in Figure 9, harkening back to Layla while playing the game as Cassandra. The frame narrative parallels the player's experience as they play the game themselves; the player experiences the game as Cassandra the same way Layla experiences the history of ancient Greece as Cassandra. The player and Layla engage in similar experiences by creating a new story via Cassandra as their avatar through ancient Greece.

Kassandra's story starts in 431 BCE, the beginning of the Peloponnesian War with the citizens of Athens versus citizens of Sparta. The player can choose whether to side with the Delian League (Athens) or the Peloponnesian League (Sparta), and craft their character based on which side they choose. However, the main story is Cassandra trying to reconnect with her fractured family after she and her brother were left for dead by their father, Nikolaos, after the Oracle of Delphi urged him to kill them (*Assassin's*

*Creed: Odyssey*). Rather than following a story steeped in godly influence, Cassandra's story is entirely her own; she meets several famous figures from Greek and Roman history, but her story is separate from the canon of history as it happened-- an alternate history narrative based in Greek culture and religion, what we now know as Greek mythology. Where Nikandros, Zagreus, and Fenyx consult with the gods in a more literal sense, Cassandra prays to them, blasphemes in their names, and finds links to their power as gods, but she never finds *them*.

Kassandra's interactions with the gods and goddesses are based more on a religious point of view of the gods, where the other three protagonists in this project (especially Fenyx, who I discuss more in Chapter 4), interact with them personally as legends of stories and godly characters-- as characters from mythology, rather than a dedicated religion. G.S. Kirk in "Greek Mythology: Some New Perspectives" (1972) comments on the connection between mythology and religion; the fact that "myths are either identical with or a part of religion was widely assumed in the last century, mainly because many Greek myths were concerned with the birth and development of deities" (74). The connection between mythology and religion is inherent; religious figures from what we know as mythological characters now slowly became these characters as their religions lost practice. Greek religion passed through time and transformed into mythology through oral tradition-- people told these stories to their children, who then told them to their children, and so on until they were documented in written word. Kirk comments on the oral tradition shifting to literacy: "Greek mythology as we know it is a literate mythology, one based on genuinely traditional tales (no doubt), but one that was elaborated and adjusted for several generations in accordance with developed literary

criteria... Literacy makes an enormous difference to a mythical tradition. In Greece the content of oral myths was retained as the basic plot-element of literature, but new kinds of elaboration and variation changed the underlying emphases” (77). These “new kinds of elaboration” that Kirk mentions refers to how myths changed through time and storytellers: different authors emphasized different aspects of each myth, whether it be that Persephone willingly married Hades instead of going against her will or that Achilles and Patroclus were far closer than Homer’s *Iliad* let them on to be (as is the case in several modern retellings of “The Rape of Persephone”<sup>2</sup> and modern translations of the *Iliad*)<sup>3</sup>.

At the release of *AC:O*, Aris Politopoulos, Angus A.A. Mol, Krihn H. J. Boom, and Csilla E. Ariese put out their review of the classical aspects and historical accuracies of Ubisoft’s latest *Assassin’s Creed* game (*Odyssey* is the eleventh installment in the series). In “‘History Is Our Playground’: Action and Authenticity in *Assassin’s Creed: Odyssey*” (2019), the game series’ “I was there when it happened” experience is one of the main praises sung, as well as the extended cast of characters: “There is the main historical figure Herodotus—the ‘father’ of history—who acts as ‘guide’ throughout the game, giving hints and quests to move the plot forward ... Other key figures that the player interacts with include the sculptor Phidias, the politician Alkibiades, the ‘father’ of medicine Hippocrates, and the philosopher Democritus” (Politopoulos et al. 319). However, parts of the gameplay come into question regarding said historical characters—none of the “canon” names dropped into the narrative are targets for assassinations, only

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<sup>2</sup> Examples of modern retellings of “The Rape of Persephone” include online comic series *Lore Olympus* by Rachel Smythe (Webtoon) and the *Abandon* book series by Meg Cabot.

<sup>3</sup> Examples of modern retellings of *The Iliad* include the novel *The Song of Achilles* by Madeline Miller (referenced in the introduction) and the film *Troy* (2004), directed by Wolfgang Petersen.

fictional characters made for Cassandra's story are (Politopoulos et al. 321). Historical effects are also a target of criticism in *AC:O*; "no matter how few or many lives the player takes, history will not really change one way or the other. The player meets and talks to plenty of characters, and witnesses many events, but the violent story of the player as protagonist is disconnected from any historical reality" (Politopoulos et al. 321). The game is part of history, yet simultaneously not, as nothing Cassandra does affects history itself. While the game is based in Greek history and mythology, Cassandra's story within the game canon is separate from the history we know from the world itself.

The simultaneous parallels with and divergence from history marks *AC:O* as an alternate history narrative, a genre of fiction where historical events happen slightly differently than they did in real life. The genre of alternate history narratives is not new to literature—or video games. *Assassin's Creed* prides itself on its historically accurate narratives, and each of their games take place during some sort of historical era. Lars Cornelis puts the collection of games in chronological order in his timeline for the website Beyond Video Gaming; from *Assassin's Creed*'s eponymous first game taking place during the Third Crusade, or the fourth game's events happening during the 18th century at the height of piracy (Cornelis). Games make alternate versions of history that the players have a hand in creating. Cassandra's story is more historically based than Nikandros', as she explores what we now know to be ancient Greek and Roman ruins instead of the fictional Mount Olympus. Of course, religious beliefs could count as an alternate history with believers in such an alternate history to back it up. What modern society calls Greek mythology now was simply the known religion practiced in ancient Greece and Rome. Kirk notes this connection and that "there is an important overlap

between myths and religion, its extent is one of the hardest parts of understanding myths in general” (74). Mythology—for my purposes, focusing on Greek mythology—was once practiced as an active religion; citizens of Greece believed in these gods and goddesses creating their known world and worshipped them as such. Cassandra’s world is this world, interpreted and coded into a video game, centuries later, and the player creates their own alternate history narrative through playing the game.

On the other hand, rather than affecting historical canon, Cassandra and the player create their own take on history. Christensen and Malchado note that “the past as we have it was just one potential outcome of many and that outcome did not seem inevitable to the people living through it” (108); Cassandra, living through her own history, did not know the outcome of the Peloponnesian War or any other historical event that happens in her future, our past. The Battle of Thermopylae, for example, acts as the tutorial for *AC:O*—players get a taste of combat playing as King Leonidas to defeat the Persian army. Politopoulos et al. comment on the rather gory tutorial and the game’s combat as a whole: “Should the Peloponnesian War—epic and exciting in *Odyssey*, but no doubt a ruinous, deadly conflict in actuality—be made into a playground in the first place?” (322). While the outcome of the Peloponnesian War is inevitable to players in the present world, playing the tutorial as Leonidas gives the narrative a form of urgency. Leonidas did not know the outcome of the Battle of Thermopylae as he lived through it; players live through that war through Leonidas’ avatar in *AC:O* and learn the combat mechanics of the game while simultaneously solidifying Leonidas and the Spartans’ win against the Persians. After the tutorial, players pick which *misthios* they wish to play the game with and create their history through the choices they make throughout the game.

The ability to choose the gender of the protagonist is something that Vanessa Hemovich discusses in “Princess to Protagonist: Redesigning the Video Game Superhero” (2018). She argues that “female game heroes are vastly under-represented in video game storylines, and, unlike their male counterparts, depictions of women characters are highlighted by prominent attributes tied to sexual appeal over aptitude-defining features and trait characteristics” (205); while she published her article in the same year that *AC:O* released, Hemovich’s statement on female heroes still applies to game studies, especially since neither *Hades* or *Apotheon* give players the options to choose their protagonist’s gender, where *AC:O* and *IFR* do. Of course, *AC:O* was the first, and at that point, only game in Ubisoft’s series that allowed gender-pickable protagonists:

Consumers questioned the noticeable lack of playable women characters in [*Assassin’s Creed: Unity*, released in 2014], to which Ubisoft’s creative director Alex Amancio responded by implying the addition a female assassin would be too much work. “It’s double the animations, it’s double the voices . . . and double the visual assets. Especially because we have customizable assassins. It was really a lot of extra production work,” Amancio said. The backlash against Ubisoft was immediate... A number of industry professionals also pointed out the level of actual work involved to create an additional female character was severely overestimated to justify traditional “male hero” stereotypes already deeply embedded in the *Assassin’s Creed* franchise (211).

The gender of the *misthios* that players choose to play the game with affects the story majorly; Cassandra and Alexios are siblings, and whichever of them players pick to play

as their protagonist, the other becomes the leader of the antagonistic Cult of Kosmos that the player meets later in the game. Choosing to play as Cassandra over Alexios also affects voice lines from other characters; some male characters will cat-call her or call her derogatory terms, whereas Alexios does not get a similar treatment. Of course, Cassandra is equal to Alexios in power and biceps; she can (and will) assassinate whoever she needs to achieve her quest. Hemovich continues, “given the deeper level of engagement video games offer, the impact of media messages presented across such platforms is worthy of consideration, particularly in light of stereotype reinforcement” (207). Women play powerful roles in game development, narrative, and mythology; it seems only fair that women are represented as such in the media they consume and the games they play. Laycock asserts that “role-playing games do shape how players see the world and themselves” (179), and this applies to Hemovich’s article on how women see themselves represented in games. The ability to choose a female protagonist in *AC:O* and *IFR* significantly affects gameplay, retention, and replay value, as discussed with Turkey and Adinolf’s research on customization in games. Spartan women are no wilting flowers, after all.

Along with choosing the protagonist and their weapons, gameplay itself is a major aspect that leads to a game’s success. In comparison to historical accuracies like Politopoulos et al.’s review, or Hemovich’s quote about Ubisoft giving players gender-pickable protagonists, Brandin Tyrrel’s IGN review of *AC:O* (2018) homes in on gameplay and battle tactics. Tyrrel narrates over game clips in his video review and gives visuals for the examples he notes for how the gameplay enriches the story. Tyrrel mentions the large “conquest battles” that trigger after siding with a faction in a particular

region and mentions that “they mean disappointingly little to the story. Regardless of whether you’re attacking or defending, which side you join, or who ultimately wins, the war machine keeps turning” (Tyrrel 3:59-4:10). Throughout his eight-minute review, Tyrrel talks about all sixty-plus hours of gameplay and the story packed into each second of it.

While Tyrrel’s playthrough and my own are very different, we both made full use of the skill trees included to help refine different perks for our protagonists (he chose Alexios, where I picked Kassandra). The different abilities within each of the three skill trees—titled “Hunter”, “Assassin”, and “Warrior”, for archery, stealth, and melee attacks, respectively—gave both of our playthroughs different tastes and tactics to win the day, as shown in Figure 10 (Tyrrel 4:59-5:17). Tyrrel’s article does not mention the mythological aspects within *AC:O*, but his attention to gameplay in his review adds valuable commentary about the game, as the story and the gameplay go hand in hand to create the unique experience of a video game ensconced in classical influences. Figure 10, below, shows the different skill trees players can pour points into to improve the respective powers the *misthios* has, including hunter, warrior, and assassin.



Figure 10. The different skill trees the *misthios* gets to upgrade their skills. Still from *Assassin's Creed: Odyssey* (Ubisoft 2018).

Choices in customization affect the story, but players are often faced with story-changing choices through different cutscenes in-game, as well. For example, near the beginning of the game, Cassandra is accosted by two hitmen assigned to kill her by order of the Cyclops, the first of many mercenaries she must assassinate. However, upon defeating them, she can choose to either let them go or kill them both. I chose to let them go—and it was clearly the wrong choice, as they came back a few hours later with bigger, better weapons and Cassandra *actually* had to kill them. This is one small example of how choices affect the gameplay of the story; if I had not chosen to let the two hitmen go free, they would not have almost taken me out later. Different choices affect the gameplay and the narrative as a whole; while the two hitmen were easily dealt with along the road, bigger choices like killing Spartan leaders or stealing from temples can affect the storyline many hours later into the story.

In “Video Games as Interactive Literature” (2015), Anne Winchell talks about how video games give players the power of choice— but that “video games demand that

players interact with the decisions to make those choices and then live with the consequences” (2). Turkey and Adinolf comment on how the power of choice will help players retain the game’s story better, as they have more autonomy over the narrative; “autonomy is crucial for peoples’ motivation, implying that if people feel control over an activity, they will feel more motivated to come back and do the same activity. Many design features such as feedback, challenge, choice, and interactivity, are known to increase players’ agency and sense of control” (2) Figure 11, below, shows the different options Cassandra faces when in dialogue. The different icons represent “types” of interactions—peaceful or violent, shown below, are the two most common options.



Figure 11. Cassandra contemplates her choices—to kill or not to kill her target, the Wolf of Sparta. Still from *Assassin’s Creed: Odyssey* (Ubisoft 2018).

With options on how and where to direct Cassandra in the story, players have more incentive to continue playing, as they feel in control of the narrative itself. Turkey and Adinolf pose that “players’ motivation and willingness to continue playing is encouraged by game design aspects such as challenge, fantasy, curiosity, narrative, character design, feedback, clear goals and tasks, and by providing users ways to feel control in the virtual

world” (1). They also argue that sense of control in the game world directly relates to playability, as controlling the appearance and actions of the player’s character leads to a sense of player agency that makes players want to come back for more (Turkay and Adinolf 1-2). Role-playing games (RPGs) like *AC:O*—long, intensive narrative-based games where players act as their own character—allow players to create their own story as the game’s main plot plays out. For my playthrough, I played as a primarily pacifist Cassandra; in Figure 11, I chose “I’ve come to get answers” instead of killing the Wolf, who it is revealed is her father. *AC:O* balances its game narrative and the mythological influences by allowing players to choose the direction they wish to go in the game, rather than watching it play out on a screen or reading it in a book. Video games as a genre of storytelling media have a unique way to tell stories—rather than reading or watching the story happen, players make it happen through their own choices as they progress through the game.

As previously mentioned, *AC:O* does not directly interact with the Greek pantheon, but it takes a less fantastical approach by having the gods referred to as ancient Greeks would have referred to them during the actual period. Politopoulos et al. refer to the game as “provid[ing] its players with a richly reconstructed past world... people tend to be dressed and act appropriately, and scenes of daily life fit within scholarly expectations” (317); instead of creating a new narrative with direct influence from Greek mythology, *AC:O* uses the culture itself to craft a game using classical influences. Unlike the other games in this project, which have their respective protagonists gaining help from the gods and goddesses (*Hades* and *IFR*) or battling them to gain their power (*Apotheon*), Cassandra does not interact with the divine at all. *AC:O* stands apart from the

other games in this project without direct influence from Greek mythological characters, but the setting is clearly inspired by the culture that sparked Greek myth in the first place (Politopoulos et al.). Cassandra tells her story on her own time without help or harm from gods and goddesses, and each battle she wins is one without divine intervention.

Kassandra herself never meets any of the epic heroes referenced—they remain as myth, as do the Olympian gods and goddesses. Various epic heroes are referenced throughout *AC:O*, and at one point a character compliments Kassandra by saying she fights like Achilles (*Assassin's Creed: Odyssey*). To get “synchronized” with the game’s map, referring to checkpoints within the Animus software in the game’s frame narrative, Kassandra must climb various landmarks that pay homage to the different Greek gods—a towering statue of Zeus and a temple dedicated to Apollo are just two examples (*Assassin's Creed: Odyssey*). Hamilton argues that “a familiar local habitation gave reality to all the mythical beings” (9), referring to the different temples dedicated to the gods and how at one point, all the characters of Greek mythology walked the same paths as ancient Greeks did. This notion is present in all the games in this project, but especially with *AC:O*, as Kassandra views the gods and goddesses as faraway legends, rather than interacting with them herself. She is a hero of ancient Greece of her own volition, without any divine intervention like with Zagreus (*Hades*, Chapter 3), Nikandros (*Apotheon*, Chapter 1), or Fenyx (*IFR*, Chapter 4). Kassandra gets help from various NPCs throughout her journey, but the only assistance she receives from the gods themselves is Ikaros, her eagle companion, who acts as an “eye in the sky” when locating new missions or loot.

Regarding the rules embedded in transmedia storytelling and shifting narrative from page to program, Juul comments on the different kinds of game media transforming into different mediums. He writes that “while there is no single medium or set of props that is the ideal game medium, games do exist, and do contain recognizable features... There is no set of equipment or material support common to all games. What is common, however, is a specific sort of immaterial support, namely the upholding of the rules, the determination of what moves and actions are permissible and what they will lead to” (48). Each game in this project is different in its production, narrative design, and how they use the mythology to craft a new narrative in the world of Olympus, but each game has rules, lines drawn to keep players from, say, becoming a god (which doesn’t stop Nikandreos, but that is part of his story regardless). Juul continues with that

computers [and game consoles] are capable of performing the operations defined in the rules of games, operations that are normally performed by humans, as well as keeping track of the game state, something normally done by using cards and board pieces. What we have is therefore an ecology of game media that support games, but do so differently. Thus *games can move between different media*—sometimes with ease, sometimes with great difficulty. (48, my emphasis)

While Juul refers to computerized chess in this quote, his argument applies to *AC:O* in that the *Assassin’s Creed* franchise takes their games between different parts of history, creating different adaptations of the media we recognize from books and films. *Odyssey* takes inspiration from Greek history and mythology, and the battle between Athens and Sparta; *Valhalla* (Ubisoft, 2020) follows Norse mythology and the time of Vikings fighting the English, and the first *Assassin’s Creed* game (Ubisoft, 2007) follows 1191’s

Third Crusade (Cornelis). Winchell argues that “video games have been telling stories since the very beginning... different concepts are used in video games to tell different stories and analyze how these stories are unique from the traditional stories told in literature”—and *AC:O* adapts Greek history, culture, and mythology to create a new story in the time of gods and Spartans.

*Assassin’s Creed: Odyssey* may not follow a similar format to the other games in this project, but its influences from Greek mythology are clear in setting, narrative, and character design. Historical accuracy comes before effect, but players get the chance to run around ancient Greece as Alexios or Kassandra, a huge step in the world of gender equality within video game protagonists after the game series’ male-dominated predecessors. With the freedom to choose their protagonist, weapons, skills, and even dialogue, *AC:O* crafts a new story for players and their chosen hero as they explore Greece’s various mythological landmarks. Using the influence of the Olympians and Greek history as their playground, *AC:O* creates a new narrative, using the medium of gaming to allow players to, well, *play* within the world of Greek mythology. In Chapter 3, I study Supergiant Games’ *Hades*, their 2020 release that follows Zagreus, son of Hades, as he tries to escape the Underworld and find his long-lost mother. Chapter 3 focuses on familial ties between the gods and goddesses of mythology and how the integration of a new god in Zagreus enhances the bonds between the weird and wonderful family of the Greek pantheon

#### IV. KEEPING UP WITH THE OLYMPIANS: *HADES* AND THE FAMILY PANTHEON

Supergiant Games' 2020 release, *Hades*, has a simple premise: players take on the role of Zagreus, prince of the Underworld and Hades' son, as he fights his way *out* of said Underworld. With the power of the other gods and goddesses of the Greek pantheon on his side, Zagreus gains boons throughout his travels that assist in attack, defense, and speed boosts, as well as talismans of luck and extra health. However, Supergiant's rogue-like dungeon-crawler is far more than a simple multi-run video game. Packed with over twenty thousand recorded voice lines and dozens of references to even the most minor characters, *Hades* sets itself apart from the other games in my project due to one aspect integral to the popularity of Greek mythology: through utilizing the connections between the gods and goddesses of the Greek pantheon, Supergiant brings in Zagreus as the newest member to show players a story with familiar, familial faces. By leaning on some of the original drama of the Greek godly family, while also bringing in original characters and concepts, *Hades* creates a new narrative based in mythology, focusing on the family dynamics that made Greek myths so relatable in the first place.

Hamilton discusses this core of Greek mythology and how that familial relatability produced that staying power; "the miracle of Greek mythology—a humanized world, men freed from the paralyzing fear of an omnipotent Unknown" (Hamilton 8). This theme of familial drama is one that Supergiant developer Greg Kasavin wanted to focus on with *Hades*, according to his interview with *The Washington Post's* Gene Park (2020). Kasavin says that "there's a reason these characters have fascinated people for thousands of years, and my hypothesis is that it's not because of lightning powers or water

powers... It's because they're this really messed up family. If the gods aren't perfect, then what chance do any of us have?" (Park, "Interview"). Kasavin's sentiment of family "fun" rings true in *Hades*' writing, especially in interactions between Zagreus and his godly family as they help him escape the Underworld (see Figure 12).



Figure 12. Poseidon appears before Zagreus and offers his assistance. Still from *Hades* (Supergiant Games 2020).

In the above figure, Poseidon, god of the sea, offers his first boon of many to Zagreus. The word choice of "little Hades" and "your uncle" solidify the slightly awkward familial bond between the two characters, as this screencap comes from my first playthrough. The Greek gods and goddesses might be at each other's throats quite frequently, but they are family, something that *Hades* illustrates with both writing and voice acting performances throughout the game. Interactions between Hades himself and his son are clearly strained, but there is *some* sort of bond between them. With each escape attempt, Hades remarks on Zagreus' futile efforts to leave the Underworld. Zagreus usually replies with a witty one-liner, to which Hades scoffs at: before the fight with Hades, the final major fight before Zagreus truly escapes to the surface, Zagreus interrupts his father's poetic

comment about snow with “If you’re quite finished teaching me about this snow phenomenon, can we get on with brutally trying to kill each other, here?” (*Hades*). The conversations between Zagreus and Hades add to the relatability and humor of both the game and its classical influences. As the story progresses, players learn of Zagreus’ true mission in all his escape routes: to find and finally meet his mother, Persephone, goddess of spring, after she left the Underworld. He decides on this mission after ransacking Hades’ desk and finding a note left by Persephone to Hades: “Hades: I can no longer tolerate my life here in this place. So, I am leaving, even if it kills me. I won’t be returning to Olympus. If there is a place where I belong in this world, it must be somewhere between heaven and hell. Perhaps it’s on the coast and has a little garden. Take care of Cerberus; I shall miss him. Persephone” (*Hades*).

The Hades and Persephone myth is the primary focus in *Hades*. While their story has several different versions, from Ovid’s in *Metamorphoses* to other modern interpretations, *Hades* adds a son into the mix by introducing Zagreus. However, Zagreus’ role in both Hades and Persephone’s story and *Hades* as a separate narrative feels seamless; with the Greek myths as backbone to his new story, Zagreus assimilates into the classical pantheon with ease. Developer Kasavin’s fascination with Greek mythology added to the game’s success, as the passion put into the project enhanced each intricate detail, but Kasavin himself points out that *Hades*’ family drama is a unique spin on Greek myths; he believes that modern media with classical influences inspires other modern media inspired by Greek mythology (Park, “Interview”). For example, *AC:O*’s development team were a large part of the team that worked on *IFR*, and the latter is clearly heavily inspired by the former in writing style, gameplay tactics, story setting, and

characters. These influences are visible in other countless Greek myth-inspired media, like books and movies, but video games are unique in their focus on the player/consumer.

Juul comments on the role of the player and how narrative design plays different parts for each person who engages with the game. In *Half-Real*, he writes that due to several aspects of video game mechanics, like save points, creating new characters, modifications to the game's coding (mods), and non-playable characters (NPCs) discussing game mechanics themselves, "the fictional worlds of many games are contradictory and incoherent, but the player may not experience this... the world of a game is something that the player can often *choose* to imagine at will" (6). He also refers to games as being a mode of "transmedia storytelling", a complex ideology of content shifting from media to media. Just as books get adapted to films, mythology gets adapted to video games, using classical influences to create a new narrative. In *Hades*, the player can imagine Zagreus talking to the assorted characters of Greek mythology as it happens on screen—with voice acting performances, character portraits with unique expressions, and comedic writing, players get a new narrative experience as the gods and goddesses come to life through video games.

Park's review of *Hades* (2020) comments on the human factor of each of the characters, harkening back to Leeming's and Hamilton's research on just why Greek myth has lasted for so long. The relatable aspects of all the characters in *Hades*, god or mortal, leaves players wanting more content and coming back for more playthroughs to discover more details about the gods and goddesses that help Zagreus out of the Underworld. Park writes that "*Hades* gives us characters to fret over, relationships to ponder. It trusts us to care about Zag's personal and haunting questions about himself that

are not only worth asking, but most importantly, worth answering” (Park, “Review”). Relying on those characteristics of significance and staying power that command Greek mythology’s popularity, *Hades*’ narrative leans on the classical influences to get players invested in the story from the get-go. With familiar faces and references to classic epics and tales, bringing in Zagreus for the player to interact with them allows players to craft their own, new narrative with assistance from gods and goddesses of old—not quite reworked into a new story, but revitalized, molded into a game where they can still be themselves.

Park introduces his interview with Kasavin with a brief definition of replay value: “It’s the beckoning call to return to a game after completing it. Something about it, how fun it is, or how engaging the story was, keeps us coming back. Returning to a game is a harder proposition altogether than books and film... To achieve replay value, a game must feel exciting and rewarding” (Park, “Interview”). Park goes on to laud *Hades* and *Supergiant* for the game’s immense amount of replay value, even after dozens of playthroughs. With over twenty thousand lines of recorded dialogue between the assorted cast of Greek gods and goddesses and protagonist Zagreus, “the game’s ability to weave several story threads despite the supposed limitations of the repetitive rogue-like genre, in which playing the same short game over and over again is the whole point” (Park, “Interview”). Park’s review of *Hades* sings praises of the game’s replay value, narrative design, and character development. Park discusses the rouge-like genre in video games, meaning games where players are expected to die repeatedly and go into the next playthrough stronger after learning from mistakes, equipping stronger weapons and abilities, and start over again... and again, and again. *Hades* depends on players needing

several rounds to properly complete the game, and with each failed attempt out of the Underworld, players get more dialogue to unlock between characters, more attempts to beat each boss battle after trying it several times over. Park praises the replayability of *Hades* as “failure is a progression of the story. Every setback is a chance to move forward as a playable character, and as the protagonist on this hero’s journey. Every recurring boss battle has new dialogue, revisiting past gameplay sessions, remarking on your new equipment or abilities and sometimes even switching them out for new characters” (Park, “Review”). The concept that each failure adds to the story is clear in-game: in one playthrough I did, Zagreus finds Ares, the god of war, who comments on how many enemies he killed since his first attempt at escaping the Underworld (see Figure 13). In another, god of sleep Hypnos teases Zagreus for dying (again) and returning home far quicker than expected (see Figure 14). As Zagreus is a god, his “deaths” merely send him back home—The House of Hades—and he gets the chance to talk to the NPCs that live at the House, choose another weapon and talisman of luck, and try to escape the Underworld again.

Another aspect of player agency in *Hades* comes with choosing and customizing the weapons themselves; each weapon serves a different purpose, whether it be long-distance with the Heart-Seeking Bow or up close and personal with the Twin Fists Malphon, fashioned as boxing gloves. In Zagreus’ room, players can unlock a scrying pool that shows them how many attempts at escape they have made, as well as the number of villains killed overall, adding to player agency and want to replay to see the numbers increase. But the game remembers each death, whether it be the death of a NPC, a boss, or Zagreus himself, giving *Hades* a feeling of accomplishment when NPCs

comment on your triumphs, like Ares and Hypnos do below. Note how Ares refers to Zagreus as “my kin”, also adding to the familial bond shown throughout.



Figure 13. Ares commends Zagreus for his killing prowess in his escape attempts. Still from *Hades* (Supergiant Games 2020).



Figure 14. Hypnos, subtitled “Sleep Incarnate”, comments on Zagreus’ latest escape attempt after he returns home upon death. Still from *Hades* (Supergiant Games 2020).

Immersion within the narrative itself is another important aspect that leads to both a game and a story’s success. Laycock writes that “sacred narrative, in the form of myth, has always been a means by which human beings achieve a sense of propinquity with sacred

times and places” (185), referencing the way ancient Greek people used the mythology we know now to better understand their world. *Hades* exhibits this “sense of proximity” by using classical influences and characters; by building a new story on top of Greek building blocks, they allow players to feel close to the Greek gods and goddesses through interacting with them via Zagreus, the middleman (or middlegod?) between the player’s world and the world of Greek myth. Interacting with the different characters of Greek mythology in a new, player-focused way in video games lets *Hades* create its own narrative with classical influences intertwined.

Zagreus does not only interact with gods and goddesses, however—as previously mentioned, he meets several heroic humans and demigods, including Theseus, Orpheus, Eurydice, Patroclus, and finally Achilles, who plays the role of Zagreus’ mentor and trainer. Part of the story of *Hades* is that in-between escape attempts, Zagreus can befriend (and even romance) some of the NPCs that live in and around the House of Hades. Their friendship and romance “routes” involve new dialogue options available to read and learn, and references to minor stories from Greek mythology, including the fury sisters Megaera, Tisyphus, and Alecto; Dusa, a floating head fashioned after Medusa, and Thanatos, the god of death (Supergiant). One of these routes, though strictly platonic, includes reuniting epic hero Achilles with Patroclus, who in *Hades* (and many modern interpretations of Homer’s *Iliad*), was Achilles’ closest friend and lover (see Figure 4). Achilles and Patroclus were two famous Greek warriors through the Battle of Troy, and both perished during the fight. After Patroclus’ death at the hands of Hektor, Achilles went into a frenzy at the loss of his closest companion and (rather dramatically) killed Hektor; however, due to the prophecy attached to Achilles, Hektor’s death later caused

his downfall as well (Homer). Figure 15, below, shows Achilles talking to Zagreus about Patroclus.



Figure 15. Achilles laments the loss of Patroclus to Zagreus in one of his cutscenes. Still from *Hades* (Supergiant Games 2020).

In the canon of *Hades*, Achilles tells Zagreus he received “a hero’s welcome” upon his death and Hades himself assigned him to his son’s training—while Patroclus lands in Elysium, the level of the Underworld reserved for righteous and heroic mortals who deserve peace in death at the end of their life (Ogden 92). As Zagreus, players get the chance to reunite the two warriors in Elysium by interacting with them and gifting both nectar, a form of currency throughout the game (*Hades*). Through interacting with Achilles and Patroclus and eventually reuniting them, players directly interact with the Greek mythology that influences the game. While in *The Iliad*, Achilles and Patroclus never get the chance to come together again after they die, *Hades* turns the old narrative into their own story, giving both heroes the chance to see each other again through the player character’s decisions. Player agency is one of the most unique parts about video games as a medium: with books and movies, viewers can only read and watch as each

scene plays out, unable to interact with the story from the inside. Games allow players to *play*, to become part of the narrative through their protagonist, and routes like Achilles' and Patroclus' in *Hades* exhibits the power of player agency within the world of Greek mythology. Laycock argues that

games, then, can be thought of as *modern forms of ritual and myth*. Although they do not have the same status as ritual and myth in world religions, these games are powerful because they utilize humanity's most primal faculties of meaning production. On a small scale, games invoke the very mechanisms through which all human culture is created. By doing so, they create a unique mental space in which players rethink their world and their selves in order to *create new worlds* and new selves (185, my emphasis).

By letting players interact with characters of age-old tales, *Hades* lets players choose their own stories within well-worn myths, forming their own new narratives with classical influences.



Figure 16. Zagreus meets epic hero Theseus and the Bull of Minos in Elysium. Still from *Hades* (Supergiant Games 2020).

Murray discusses adapting old stories to new mediums and clarifies that technology would not *replace* the tried-and-true forms of storytelling but *remodel* them: “[the computer] promise[s] to reshape the spectrum of narrative expression, not by replacing the novel or the movie but by continuing their timeless bardic work within another framework” (10). This other framework is what she refers to as “cyberliterature”, or narratives designed with new technologies in mind. With video games, player participation factors into the narrative expression as well; rather than progressing from point A to point B as novels and movies do, video games allow players to jump around the story at their own pace, with certain checkpoints in place to make sure players do not go too far without experiencing important plot points first. This is evident in all the games in my project. *Apotheon* (Chapter 1) gives players the mountain of Olympus to travel through, with no established starting point; *AC:O* (Chapter 2) is an entirely open world of the different islands of Greece, with some locked to players until they reach certain levels, and *IFR* is similarly open in design, allowing players to jump from landmark to landmark at their own discretion, which I go into more detail about in Chapter 4. However, none of the other games I reference in this project have the same level of replayability as *Hades* does, as they are contained stories usually completed in one playthrough. With *Hades*, players must replay the game several times to properly progress through all points of the story; the plot point that Zagreus finds the letter proving Persephone is his mother cannot be unlocked until after at least ten escape attempts, and the other two Fury sisters cannot be unlocked until after defeating Megaera several times over (*Hades*). Story-based video games work similarly to books in this manner of plot

points and driving the narrative forward, whether it be by turning the page or completing the level. Murray continues,

we rely on works of fiction, in any medium, to help us understand the world and what it means to be human. Eventually all successful storytelling technologies become ‘transparent’: we lose consciousness of the medium and see neither print nor film but only the power of the story itself. If digital art reaches the same level of expressiveness as these older media, we will no longer concern ourselves with how we are receiving the information. We will only think about what truth it has told us about our lives. (26)

Murray’s point about understanding the world through stories parallels how the ancient Greeks understood their world through mythology; they learned about their world through stories they took as canon, stories we take as myths now and reform into new forms of narrative via video games. The technical evolution of narrative allows storytellers to create something entirely new with a video game—a story that people literally interact with. *Hades* includes numerous references to Greek mythology and conversations between gods and goddesses throughout the game, from the eternally punished Sisyphus to guard dog Cerberus, and players can converse with whichever member of the pantheon they please and gift nectar to their favorites. For my purposes, I focused on Achilles and Patroclus because of my love of *The Iliad*, but I also favored Athena, as her boons served me best throughout all my playthroughs. While it was not physically me speaking to these legendary characters, I as a player still had the freedom to make Zagreus talk to whoever I wanted him to talk to, harkening back to the importance of player agency.

Selen Turkay and Sonam Adinolf speak more in-depth on player agency in “The effects of customization on motivation in an extended study with a massively multiplayer online roleplaying game (MMORPG)” (2015). They argue how “autonomy is crucial for peoples’ motivation, implying that if people feel control over an activity, they will feel more motivated to come back and do the same activity” (2). With the flexibility to choose who I talked to, whose boons I picked, and what weapons to play with, I replayed *Hades* repeatedly both to see how the story progressed and because, frankly, I enjoyed immersing myself in the world of Greek mythology. Laycock comments on the fine line between the story world and the real world in his article as well; stories are captivating because of that uncertain divide between what is real and what is not. He argues that “all of the worlds of fantasy roleplaying, no matter how fantastic, are constructed by rearranging and repurposing familiar elements... fantasy is always a repurposing of the familiar... all imaginary characters are based on either real people or other characters” (186). *Hades*, as well as the other games in my project, fit Laycock’s argument because all its characters are household names of the pantheon who interact with Zagreus, acting through the player. *Hades* dabbles in the fantasy roleplaying that Laycock talks about by letting players act as Zagreus and talk with the Greek gods, goddesses, and heroes, “repurposing” classical characters to create a new narrative.

Like *Apotheon*’s protagonist Nikandreos, discussed in Chapter 1, *Hades* parallels the “son surpassing the father” trope that populates Greek mythology with Zagreus attempting escape from his father’s realm. However, Zagreus does not just act as the player’s way into the world—he is fully voice-acted, with his own distinct responses to people talking to him. Rather than acting as a blank slate for players to project onto,

Zagreus is an individual, much like *AC:O*'s Alexios/Kassandra or *IFR*'s Fenyx, who acts as his own person throughout the game's narrative. Figure 16 shows Zagreus talking to Theseus and the Bull of Minos (referred to as Asterius) upon their first meeting, illustrating Zagreus' quick-witted personality, especially in comparison to silent Nikandros or Kassandra, who gets dialogue options that the player chooses between. Figure 16 also shows how he is aware of the characters he interacts with and their fame in Greek mythology; in Figure 17 (below), in another conversation with Theseus and Asterius, Zagreus references another epic hero, Heracles (Hercules), to try and annoy the pompous Athenian hero. Zagreus references how he beat them previously, harkening back to the game's (and Park's) emphasis on replay value to experience the entirety of *Hades*' storyline.

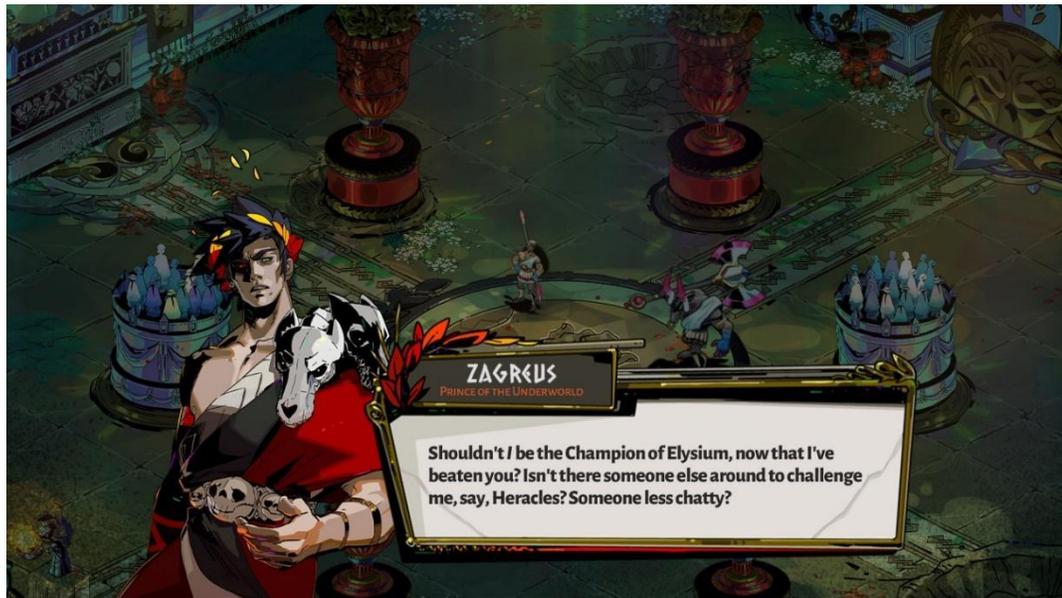


Figure 17. Zagreus provokes Theseus by mentioning how he beat him once already in battle, harkening back to Park's comment on replay value. Still from *Hades* (Supergiant Games 2020).

The subtle references to other Greek characters throughout *Hades* add detail and polish to both the game as a whole and the narrative design; long-time scholars and Greek myth fans recognize each name-drop, where new players get the chance to learn about

mythology through the game itself. Zagreus himself is a reference to the cult of Orphism, who believed him to be a first incarnation of the god Dionysus—and Dionysus, Orpheus, and Zagreus all have dialogue relating to the cult in-game, where Zagreus pranks Orpheus into believing that he and Dionysus are one and the same (*Hades*). By including references to minor events and characters, *Hades* is bursting with Greek mythology knowledge, rounding out the game’s narrative by incorporating as many classical influences as possible.

*Hades* is one of the most intricate and detailed games leaning on Greek myths out of the ones I chose for this project. With subtle references to minor characters, interactions between the big names of the pantheon, and everyone doting on new member Zagreus, the familial, humanized aspects of the gods and goddesses that proved their popularity today shone throughout each level of gameplay. The gameplay itself proved interesting and fun, especially with each different boon and weapon to choose from, and the freedom to pick whatever I wanted to play with. Greek mythology’s influence on *Hades* is heavy, but the game stands alone as a unique venture into the classical references it clearly reveres, evident with Park’s review and interview with Supergiant developer Greg Kasavin. *Hades* employs Greek mythology as reference points to create their own story, proving that video games can and will continue to create new forms of telling stories in modern media formats, and the Greek pantheon’s familial touch adds detail and humanized facets to a game primarily about death. My final chapter covers Ubisoft’s 2020 release, *Immortals Fenyx Rising*. Protagonist Fenyx exhibits the roles of both epic hero and epic storyteller in this game, and *IFR* pays homage to the tradition of

oral storytelling with its use of a frame narrative, references to epic heroes, and the creation of a new epic hero in storyteller Fenyx.

## V. THE EPIC HERO, THE STORYTELLER: THE NARRATOR'S ROLE IN *IMMORTALS FENYX RISING*

Ubisoft's 2020 release *Immortals Fenyx Rising* (referred to throughout this chapter as *IFR*) is not the development company's first foray into Greek mythology, but it is certainly one of the most detailed. Players take on the role of Fenyx, a fearless warrior left alone as every other mortal was turned to stone by Typhon the Titan, and the journey to free the imprisoned gods and goddesses to save the world. Fenyx encounters five imprisoned deities—Hermes, Aphrodite, Ares, Athena, and Hephaistos—and frees them from Typhon's grip, harkening back to the original clash between the Greek gods and the Titans. What is unique with *IFR* is that players unfold the story as they see fit, getting to choose which order to free the gods and goddesses in (sans Hermes, who somehow frees himself first), customize Fenyx's appearance, gender, armor, weapons, and even their bird companion, Phosphos. (For the purposes of this chapter, Fenyx will have she/her pronouns, as I chose to play as a female Fenyx.) Fenyx herself is a storyteller and tells those she interacts with about how she was known for her telling of mythological tales, implying that until she met the gods themselves, she engaged in exactly what her own game does: telling Greek myths in new ways. Fenyx acts as the conduit between her world and the player, bringing the latter into the former through her story intertwined with Greek myths, another example of new forms of narrative design through video games. *IFR* sets itself up to hold another tale of another great Greek hero like the classics, but the interactive format of video games gives players a chance to feel like the hero, too. Fenyx acts as both subject and storyteller in her own story, following the classic hero's

journey narrative throughout the game as she interacts with the gods, epic heroes, and mythology that she engaged in herself.

Fenyx is not the only storyteller in *IFR*: through a frame narrative format, fire-bringer Prometheus tells Fenyx's story to Zeus, king of the gods, and the two banter back and forth as players unfold Fenyx's story through their own gameplay. The frame narrative also acts as a form of dramatic irony—Prometheus knows Fenyx's story already as he tells it to Zeus, who interjects with witty quips about the other characters Fenyx meets in her story. For example, after the player finishes the prologue, Zeus comments on Prometheus' storytelling skills, complaining, "Wait. That was just the prologue? How does it take someone THAT long to begin a story? Odysseus made it home faster" (*Immortals Fenyx Rising*).

Zeus harkens back to Odysseus, who after leaving Troy after the Trojan War, takes ten years to return to his home of Ithaca. (Zeus is, of course, being hyperbolic, as the prologue for *IFR* takes up to an hour, tops.) Zeus and Prometheus reference several Greek heroes throughout Fenyx's story, and Fenyx herself must defeat their "corrupted essences" after Typhon stole them from the Underworld to use as his pawns. Fenyx's story parallels those of the heroes that came before her, but with one key difference: instead of being a story, transcribed and told over generations, Fenyx's story is interactive, depending on the player to further it. *IFR* knows its sources well and pays homage to the original form of oral storytelling by having Prometheus tell Zeus Fenyx's story, but it is the player who becomes the storyteller through playing the game. With new forms of narrative design, video games have become a unique form to tell a story—

as it is a group effort between developer and consumer. Both Ubisoft *and* the player tell Fenyx's story.

In reference to fantasy worlds within RPGs, Laycock argues the dependence on the player to drive the story forward because of the player's *want* to drive it forward. He notes that "once players are able to mentally step into the realm of play and antistructure, there is no way to predict what structure they might conceive" (186). While video games are structured with set plot points players must hit, there is no timeframe for when they must hit them; *IFR* has one set ending, but there are multiple ways to get there, multiple outcomes for achieving said plot points in different orders. Laycock also notes that "fantasy worlds are not separate from the world of daily life but have a relationship with it. Because fantasy worlds are ultimately derivative of the world of daily life, they are reflections of this world and enable a reflection on this world" (186). Fantasy worlds—in this case, Fenyx's world—directly parallel the world outside of the screen. Players can learn Greek mythology from new forms of media, as argued by Fraudenfelder and Christensen and Machado; whether it be films or video games, classical references live on through modern media. Greek mythology intertwines with each video game in a different way that tells a new story each time, regardless of repeating characters. Aphrodite features heavily in both *Hades* and *IFR*, but her interpretation in both games is different, primarily in appearance. The two development companies took the goddess of

love and interpreted her in different ways, emphasizing the uniqueness of Greek mythology; everyone interprets it in their own style.



Figure 18. Aphrodite in *IFR* (left) vs Aphrodite in *Hades* (right). Stills from *Immortals Fenyx Rising* (Ubisoft 2020) and *Hades* (Supergiant Games 2020).

In Figure 18, Aphrodite is shown interpreted by both Ubisoft and Supergiant Games for *IFR* and *Hades*. While they are both interpretations of the same goddess, they are drastically different in appearance. While *IFR* went for a more traditional look with her toga and gold jewelry, *Hades* opted for a stylized approach, tinting Aphrodite’s skin pale pink, and leaving her nude, covering her with long strands of carefully draped hair. The two different illustrations of the goddess of love show how each game developer depicted her based on their interpretations of her through mythology.

With no true author, Greek mythology lives on through the published retellings of various translators and authors, moviemakers, and now through video games. While playing games or watching movies based in mythology does not give players a “full” education on the mythology as a whole—*Hades*, for example, focuses more on Hades

and Persephone, so players may not get more information on, say, Athena or Poseidon—games are interactive by nature; players tell their own stories through the gameplay and the choices they make. So, players choose which aspects of the stories they wish to learn in the game’s narrative, such as subplots that allow for more focus on specific characters over others. *IFR* does not have subplots like *Hades* does, but players can choose to focus on specific collectibles that give them more content in the story, like the various mosaic puzzles players can solve or the other Myth Challenges throughout the game. Like how one has the freedom to rewatch a movie or reread a book, games are replayable—but players can choose different sides of the story to follow, different characters to focus with and different choices to make. Video games are unique to storytelling because instead of just hearing the tale as it plays out, players get a chance to directly affect it through their own choices, from customization of the player character to integral game choices.

As for the narration of the storytelling, as discussed before, *IFR* plays through a frame narrative, with Zeus and Prometheus interjecting through different parts of Fenyx’s adventures. Unlike epic narrators, like the narrators of *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey* (though Odysseus takes over narration for Books 9-12, so it gets dicey), Prometheus and Zeus are invested in Fenyx’s story. Rather than telling it as a third person outsider, like the two previously mentioned epic narrators, Prometheus and Zeus tell Fenyx’s story with a want for her to succeed, rather than simply telling her story unbiased. They also add a touch of comedy—when Fenyx goes to one of the vaults required to help Aphrodite break free of Typhon’s spell, Prometheus documents it: “Fenyx carefully approached the vault guarded by boars, boars not unlike the one that mauled Adonis to death”, to which Zeus replies with “You sure Adonis wasn’t bored to death listening to one of your stories?”

(*Immortals Fenyx Rising*). In *The Odyssey*, the narrator invokes the power of the Muses to understand the characters he sings of, but the characters themselves soliloquize of their own feelings, rather than having the narrator discuss their feelings for them. For example, upon realizing his incoming suffering upon leaving Ogygia, Odysseus laments “much have I suffered, labored long and hard by now / in the waves and wars. Add this to the total—bring the trial on!” (Homer, book 5, lines 245-248). This format of storytelling transfers over to *IFR*: while Prometheus and Zeus tell Fenyx’s story, Fenyx herself lets the player know how she feels through interactions with other characters, like Hermes, or by talking to herself out loud. After a particularly hard battle, Fenyx wonders aloud to herself, “what would my brother do? Ligyron would probably take on Typhon single-handedly, like when he bested the entire Spartan fleet. Who am I kidding? I’m in way over my head” (*Immortals Fenyx Rising*). Similar to Odysseus talking out his feelings, Fenyx does not rely on the narrator(s) to discuss what *she* feels in the moment. Fenyx is the player’s character, customizable and free to specialize in whatever weapons and armor the player chooses, but her conflicts about becoming an epic hero like the ones in her stories is a character trait no player can change (which I will discuss in more detail later in this chapter).

Customizing Fenyx is one of the first things players get the chance to do after a long exposition-heavy cutscene, and it sets the precedent for the rest of the game being choice-driven. Players can customize almost every aspect of their protagonist. Figure 19, below, shows the hair customization menu for Fenyx, as well as how I made her look throughout my gameplay.



Figure 19. The menu for customizing Fenyx’s gender and appearance, as well as how my Fenyx appears throughout my game. Still from *Immortals Fenyx Rising* (Ubisoft 2020).

To some players, customization may seem like a small aspect of the game, but studies show that being granted the ability to customize features of the gameplay affect player’s opinions of the story and gameplay. While Turkey and Adinolf’s study focuses on customization and player retention, their points about player agency and the power of choice apply to three of the four games I chose for this project. Turkey and Adinolf posit that “customization may satisfy players’ need for autonomy, increase their sense of control over in the game world, and motivate them to come back to do the same activity” (1); in *Hades* and *IFR*, players get the chance to customize player character Zagreus’ powers in the former title and Fenyx’s appearance in the latter (see Figure 19). *AC:O* allows players to choose between protagonists Alexios or Kassandra, as well as choose their armor, weapons, and mounts to ride across Greece on. *Apotheon* allows little to no customization for Nikandros, but the game plays out as players make choices of their own, allowing a small amount of player agency in comparison to my project’s other three titles.

Turkay and Adinolf also define three different kinds of customization in games: Functional, meaning customization in game mechanics and causing a major effect on gameplay; Cosmetic, meaning avatar customization that leaves little to no effect on gameplay, and Usability, or customization that helps with player performance, like interface customization and display settings (3). For my purposes, functional customization applies to *Hades* and *AC:O*, as players get to pick perks and boons for Zagreus and Cassandra/Alexios, like their strengths in battle or what skills players choose to refine. Cosmetic customization applies to *AC:O* and *IFR* as players get to choose how their protagonist looks, whether it be appearance, armor, or types of weapons. While customization and player agency have no effect on the mythologies within the different games, they have greater impact on the gameplay itself, intertwined with the narrative. With customization and ability to choose, Turkay and Adinolf argue that players remember the games better and have more motivation to replay them—all four games in my project are player-driven by choices, whether they be plot changes or hair color. Each game has choices integral to the enjoyment of playing them, and the choices I made in my playthroughs affected the research I gathered.

Rather than sticking with one form of gameplay like *Hades*' love for the dungeon-crawler format, *IFR* follows *AC:O*'s lead with an open world of Greece for the player to explore of their own volition. Dozens of side quests pepper the island Fenyx flies through, including Myth Challenges, where Fenyx must shoot an arrow through several hoops, dash from one end of an area to another in a timed race, or rearrange mismatched pieces of a mosaic to recreate a familiar image from Greek mythology. Figure 20 shows

the finished mosaic of Narcissus, the boy who became transfixed by his reflection and refused to look away until he died (Hamilton 111-113).



Figure 20. The finished mosaic of Narcissus with Fenyx standing on top of it. Prometheus calls Zeus a narcissist for admiring his reflection instead of paying attention to the conversation. Still from *Immortals Fenyx Rising* (Ubisoft 2020).

Each reference, even small ones, add to the detail of the game. With Prometheus and Zeus interjecting with commentary upon each step, *IFR* establishes a grand world built upon classical influences, and makes use of those influences as much as they can. *IFR* leans on the classical influences to create a new way to tell these stories, simultaneously respecting their origins as religious content before they became stories of old. With the Greek gods and goddesses and their stories at the ready, *IFR* creates something new through the video game format, formulating a new narrative with classical influences.

The most intriguing part of *IFR* is how they formatted the plot. Fenyx identifies herself as a storyteller, and with each new quest to free the gods and goddesses from Typhon's grip, she illustrates a great knowledge of Greek mythology, from tales of the Trojan War to how Aphrodite wept for Adonis' death by boar mauling. Fenyx knows these stories; as an ancient Greek, she was raised on them, believed them to be the cause

for her world. However, she establishes her belief that they were *just* stories in the prologue. After encountering Typhon for the first time, Fenyx blurts out to Hermes, “You mean... All the stories are real?” (*Immortals Fenyx Rising*). Rather than accepting the gods and goddesses as truth, as *Hades* does by having players act as Zagreus, *IFR* sets up Fenyx’s story as her meeting the legends of old—and she reacts to each new meeting as if she is meeting a celebrity. She asks each god and goddess several questions or gushes about their power upon meeting them, like if Athena really beat up Ares during the Trojan War, or complimenting Aphrodite for her beauty and how she started said war about it, to which (a Typhon-corrupted) Aphrodite heartily denies.

Each of the gods and goddesses have their own voices, their own personalities interpreted from the stories they are famous for. The writing throughout *IFR* is sharp and witty, both with the divine and the mortal speakers (or, in the mortal case, *speaker*, as Fenyx is the only mortal throughout the game). As Leeming points out, the Greek pantheon is a primarily *human* place; instead of the fear-inducing Egyptian gods, these gods had mishaps and made mistakes, making them seem human to the ancient Greeks.

The four deities Typhon imprisoned had their godly “essence” stolen from them, the power that gives each of them their godly abilities, but the removal of the essence was, for some of them, a good thing. Upon meeting Aphrodite, transformed into a tree, Fenyx finds her to be far more hospitable and kindlier than the Aphrodite she heard tales about. Hephaistos is transformed into a robot of his own creation, his memories of his suffering taken from him, and he seems fairly chipper about the whole situation. Athena, shrunken down to appear like a child, shies away from Fenyx’s duties as her champion and does not know how to help her, in comparison to how she assisted Achilles and

Odysseus during their heroic travels (Homer). By erasing what they are known for, the gods and goddesses feel even more humanized; aware of their flaws and misdoings, they worry what Fenyx will think of them after hearing echoes of their true selves in the dungeons their essences are trapped within. Of course, once Fenyx gains and returns the essences, the gods and goddesses return to their regular selves. Snarky Aphrodite and all-knowing Athena butt heads with Hermes at the Hall of the Gods, the “home base” of the game, where Fenyx can upgrade her weapons, stamina, and health, and purchase new abilities to help her on her travels. However, even after they transform to their whole and godly selves, the four immortals that Fenyx rescues do not look down upon her (metaphorically, anyway); they chat to her when she returns to the Hall of the Gods, joking around and teasing her for her “distasteful” armor. Another aspect of customization for Fenyx lies here at the Hall of the Gods; players choose which weapons to upgrade and what abilities to purchase. (I poured most of my upgrades into archery and axe-wielding.) Rather than accepting the hero’s knowledge in one particular weapon, players pick which one Fenyx becomes infamous for, increasing replay value for players who wish to see how each weapon affects gameplay. No matter what weapon or armor players pick, the gods and goddesses treat her as she should be treated: a hero, someone they can rely on and joke with. Even though the choices in weapons and armor do not affect the story, they affect the player; giving them the ability to choose what they want Fenyx to wear and wield makes players more attached to the game itself, as they feel their choices had a direct effect on how their playthroughs unfolded, no matter what Hermes says about what they wear. Just like in *Hades*, the relationships between the different gods and Fenyx herself makes the immortals feel more human and relatable, and

that human aspect is one of the many reasons why Greek mythology is still adapted into new forms of media today.

As a Greek hero, Fenyx is laden with a prophecy she must follow to free the gods and goddesses and defeat Typhon. Like other Greek heroes, Fenyx's prophecy guides her through the entirety of her story. Fenyx receives this prophecy from the priest of Apollo:

Father of your line is not father of your kin,  
a mountain, crowned, with flowing locks is how you win.

The monster shambles, hungry for immortal flaws.

The true hero owns them all, stolen from the beast's jaws.

With the winged herald's aid, go on the attack,  
and sooner than later, change them all back.

A pearl in rough seas, forge fires lit,  
a wise child convinced, a feather's weight of wit.

Eldest of Thetis, Father overthrown.

Hero on high, it's time for you to come home (*Immortals Fenyx Rising*).

In comparison, Achilles tells the prophecy from his mother, Thetis, in Homer's *Iliad* like this:

Mother tells me,  
the immortal goddess Thetis with her glistening feet,  
that two fates bear me on to the day of death.

If I hold out here and I lay siege to Troy,  
my journey home is gone, but my glory never dies.

If I voyage back to the fatherland I love,

my pride, my glory dies...

true, but the life that's left me will be long,

the stroke of death will not come on me quickly (Homer, book 9, lines 410-416).

Prophecies are dominant in most Greek hero stories; they set the hero with an outline of what they must do to achieve glory. Fenyx is the only character of the protagonists in my four games to receive a prophecy directly from an oracle to start her journey, marking her as unique in how her story directly parallels that of the Greek heroes, taking heavy influences from them as she forges her own epic tale. Both Fenyx and Achilles' prophecies tell of their lives and what they must do to succeed. Fenyx must free Aphrodite ("a pearl in rough seas"), Hephaistos ("forge fires lit"), Athena ("a wise child convinced"), and Ares ("a feather's fate of wit") with Hermes, "the winged herald's aid", to defeat "the monster" Typhon. However, "Eldest of Thetis" directly references Achilles, whose prophecy tells that if he stays and fights in the war, he will die a hero, but if he goes home, he will live a long but ordinary life (Homer). By using a prophecy as a skeleton for the rest of the game, *IFR* deems itself to be a story fit to stand with heroes like Achilles and Odysseus because it follows a similar format: A hero receives a prophecy, goes on a great journey, and either returns home a hero or dies a legend. *IFR* sets itself apart from *The Odyssey* or *The Iliad* because it creates a story akin to Homer's epic poems but gives players the ability to take part in Fenyx's story themselves. Achilles was given a choice to stay and die or surrender and live; Fenyx, however, is the only mortal left alive. She, and the player, must take on her burden alone.

Fenyx herself goes through a significant amount of character development throughout *IFR*'s narrative. At the start of the game, she is introduced as a wannabe

warrior, someone who never got to see the battlefield for herself, as she was always in her brother's muscular shadow. Ligyron, Fenyx's older brother, is a source of inspiration for her; many times throughout the game, Fenyx talks to herself and wishes that her brother was with her after he was turned to stone, like the rest of humanity. She often doubts herself and wonders what her brother, the natural born hero, would do in her place. Most epic heroes throughout Greek mythology fit the same profile as Ligyron: ambitious and brave, willing to barge into any situation and save the day. Fenyx, however, does not. She is nervous and uneasy as she meets the gods and goddesses, waxing lyrical about their feats while worrying she cannot achieve similar victories herself. As she frees the Olympians from Typhon's imprisonment, she gains far more than the gods' favor—she gains confidence as she takes on all these missions and puzzles and fights by herself. She does not shy away from the climactic fight with Typhon, and with the gods and goddesses on her side, Fenyx pushes her brother aside to become the newest epic hero.

Within both game and myth narratives, Fenyx is coded as the epic hero from the beginning of the story, from the moment when she washes up on the shore of Greece after her boat shipwrecks. As a storyteller herself, however, she plays a unique role in her game; narrators and storytellers are integral to Greek mythology, as its roots come from oral traditions. With each connection to a mythological story she finds in the world, whether it be Atalanta or Athena, Fenyx recalls a specific happenstance from their respective myths. When working to save Athena from Typhon's imprisonment, Fenyx must remember each of the twelve labors of Herakles, the arduous penance carried out by the epic hero in service to King Eurystheus (Hamilton). While Fenyx does not have to accomplish the same gargantuan feats as Herakles (though saving the world from Typhon

is almost on the same scale), she must remember each of the labors in order, from Nemean Lion to Cerberus himself—and she lists them off with ease, thanks to her skills in storytelling and, apparently, her very good memory (*Immortals Fenyx Rising*). Even Zeus and Prometheus note how “epic” it was, with pun fully intended. With Zeus and Prometheus telling Fenyx’s story in the frame narrative and Fenyx herself interacting with the characters in the stories she told, *IFR* adds Greek mythology’s oral origins and narrator character to the more interactive format of a video game, allowing players to directly interact with Greek mythology’s cast of characters while also forging their own narrative with Fenyx as their hero.

*IFR* does not shy away from developing Fenyx’s character as the story progresses, but where the Greek gods and goddesses affect her story, her story affects them in return. At the conclusion of the story, after Fenyx frees all four of the imprisoned gods and goddesses, they remark on how thankful they are for her changing their viewpoints on their character. However, they realize they all have one thing in common: a mutual distaste for their father, Zeus.

ATHENA: And we’re going to help you [beat Typhon]. I’ll give you a big head start by summoning a storm to blast away the ice blocking the path up the mountain.

HERMES: Since when can you do *that*?

ATHENA: Since Zeus let me “borrow” a storm to wreck the Greek fleet after the Trojan War. Favorite status comes in handy.

ARES: Psh. All I ever got was empty promises.

HEPHAISTOS: At least you didn’t get thrown off a mountain.

APHRODITE: You think that's bad? Zeus forced me to marry *you*.

ATHENA: None of you want to be his favorite. Trust me. Zeus's only trying to make up for the fact that he murdered my mother<sup>4</sup>.

ZEUS: They're... They're all right. I'm a terrible father. (*Immortals Fenyx Rising*)

*IFR* does not shy away from admitting Zeus's parental mishaps—and for once, Zeus realizes them as well. Before this moment, while exploring various vaults to free the imprisoned deities, Prometheus comments on Zeus's fatherly skills as well, especially with Athena, who Zeus clearly favors throughout *IFR*. To err is human, and Zeus finally realizes the err of his ways through Fenyx's story; with her helping his sons and daughters (and daughter-in-law, in Aphrodite's case), he saw their true feelings about him, and by the time Fenyx ascends Titan's Peak to face down Typhon, Zeus resolves to be a better father to all his kids—and not just Athena. However, in a plot twist worthy of Zeus himself, Prometheus confesses that Fenyx is not only a demigod—she is *Zeus'* child. When Fenyx scales Titan's Peak to confront Zeus for how he treated mortals, it is then that he admits Fenyx taught him that both humans and his children are more important than himself; with Fenyx's help, he realized that the gods, including himself, are flawed and selfish, and Fenyx resolves to help Zeus learn from and work through his past mistakes (*Immortals Fenyx Rising*). Once again, the human factor of the Greek gods comes into play here. Aside from being all-powerful and immortal, the gods and goddesses have their own familial issues, just like humans do. As stated before, Leeming argues that “the Olympian family is marred by instances of immorality, arrogance and

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<sup>4</sup> Here Athena refers to Metis, Zeus' first wife whom he swallowed (Hesiod 29).

stubbornness... They were not to be trusted and they could not be counted on for mercy. They were an exaggerated version of what a human family might become if endowed with infinite power. They were a mirror of human nature itself” (98). Leeming and Hamilton both stress the importance of the human quality of the Greek pantheon; their staying power is a direct response of the relatability of the myths themselves, myths present throughout *IFR*, and within the new narrative of the game’s own storyline, players get the chance to learn more about the Olympians in a new, player-driven way.

Murray talks about “electronic fiction” in *Hamlet on the Holideck* and how writers and programmers alike are drawn to the new and developing format of storytelling. She says that electronic fiction draws people in because “they want to write stories that cannot be told in other ways” and that “[she] find[s] [her]self anticipating a new kind of storyteller, one who is half hacker, half bard” (Murray 9). Video games are echoes of this new kind of storyteller Murray anticipated; through coding and narrative design, games create a new form of narrative that allows players to interact with and affect the story from small dialogue switch-ups to major game choices. Laycock argues that “RPGs are fun exactly because the decisions one’s character makes have consequences” (194), and “one way that RPGs facilitate a reflection on the world is through game mechanics... Not only combat, but psychological reactions, social encounters, and economic exchanges” (196). Video games are fun because players choose the way the story plays out, another form of customization that allows players to make the story their own. In *IFR*, the order I freed the gods and goddesses in was Aphrodite, Athena, Hephaistos, and finally, Ares, who was turned into a chicken. When Fenyx found Ares, he bemoans that Aphrodite rejected him in his poultry form, to which

Fenyx replies “But I got Aphrodite back to her old self again. I think you might have a shot with her” (*Immortals Fenyx Rising*). If I, as the player, went for Ares first, or perhaps Athena first, that line of dialogue would have been completely different; since I chose to free Aphrodite first, I got that exchange between Ares and Fenyx, unique to the order which I freed the four gods. Choices affect the game in both major and minor manners, like freeing the goddess of love first, or picking out Fenyx’s armor and weapons.

Time is unique to video games in that players have the freedom to save and quit the game—and the narrative—and indulge in other games in between. Where readers have this freedom with books, and movies can be paused and resumed later, games are unique in that where books and films will start from the same spot immediately upon opening the book or pressing play, players might stop the game in the middle of an important level and, in some cases, forget where the story was going. Narrative time is different in video games; while the story is encapsulated in one video game cartridge, like a movie’s run-time or a book’s page count, but with the open-world aspect of *IFR*, games can take anywhere from thirty to several hundred hours to complete. *IFR* is often compared to *The Legend of Zelda: Breath of the Wild* (Nintendo 2017) for its many puzzles, challenges, dungeons, and most importantly, the freedom to run around the world and play as one pleases. Open-world games often suffer from putting an accidental “pause” on the story within the game, as players want to explore the world and get every piece of treasure, defeat every puzzle, etc. *IFR* is similar in this regard; with dozens of dungeons to play through, Myth Challenges, and tons of other Greek mythological “Easter eggs” to find in the puzzles scattered around the world, the story sometimes sat

on the backburner as I flew around the world to fully flesh out the story, before I completed the story itself.

Fenyx the storytelling warrior leads players through ancient Greece on Daidalos' borrowed wings to create her own epic story. With the frame narrative of Prometheus and Zeus adding commentary and some necessary background, the Greek mythology intertwined with the game's narrative design shines through even with the smallest of references, like the Narcissus mosaic and other Myth Challenges Fenyx faces. Fenyx herself is crafted by players to be whoever they want their hero to be, whether male or female, blonde or brunette, axe-wielder or archer, and the various customization options lead players to better retain the game and the mythology within it, as they fashioned their hero themselves. Fenyx's story relies on classical influences, like prophecies and epic heroes, but successfully makes itself unique through gameplay mechanics like the various Myth Challenges, the Tartaros vaults, and freeing the gods and goddesses from Typhon's grasp. The deities Fenyx meets are immortal, but their struggles parallel those of the mortal world, further proving their relatability and human-like qualities are what made their stories so popular and lasting for generations of storytellers. Electronic fiction, like a video game, is a "sensation-based storytelling medium" that, as Murray argues, helps us understand what it is to be human (26). Stories affect *us* as readers, viewers, storytellers, and now players, as video games continue to leap forward into new ways of storytelling. The power of the narrator plays a heavy role in the story of *IFR*, with Fenyx the storyteller acting as simultaneous storyteller and story subject, with Prometheus' frame narrative adding an *additional* narrator to the mix, emphasizing the importance of storytelling and the narrator's prominence in both traditional media and now, video

games. *IFR* rides that wave with Daidalos' infamous wings, the wings Fenyx uses to glide around the island she tells her story through, with the assistance of the Olympian family and other characters of Greek mythology. Much like the novels, films, and games that came before it, *IFR* once again proves that video games and Greek myth go hand in hand to create a new narrative based on classical influences.

## VI. CONCLUSION

Greek mythology's many tales have traveled from oral tradition to the written page, to the movie screen and now the video game console. Transmedia storytelling posits that stories have the freedom to transfer between different forms of media, and the concept of Greek myth telling new stories through video games is the newest addition to this phenomenon. While the games I chose for this project are just four examples of Greek mythology crafting new narratives through video games, they all pose unique ways to go about it.

For my thesis, I examined the four games in a different way, not only because each game called for different types of study, but to show how each development company took Greek mythology and focused on a different tenet of what makes it so intriguing. *Hades* (Chapter 3) homed in on the family manner and the relatability of the different gods, whereas *Apotheon* (Chapter 1) paid more attention to artistic integrity and historical accuracy through their design. *Assassin's Creed: Odyssey* and *Immortals Fenyx Rising* (Chapters 2 and 4) were both published by Ubisoft, but both games take different approaches to mythology—*AC:O* utilized it as religion, and took an alternate history narrative to tell Cassandra's story, while *IFR*'s narrative is more whimsical and comedic, with their protagonist as heroic storyteller and epic narrator. Each game required different modes of study when it came to use of mythology in their stories, while the gameplay itself took a relatively new form of study—playing through them all myself.

*Apotheon* (Alientrap 2015) takes a different spin than the other games I researched: silent hero Nikandros must kill the Olympians to exact revenge on them after abandoning humanity. In a side-scrolling platformer echoing Greek black-figure

terracotta art, Nikandros travels through Mount Olympus and assassinates the immortals alone, receiving help from sly Hera along the way. Players find out more about Greek mythology through stone steles scattered throughout the map with quotes from famous Greek poets and authors written on them. While *Apotheon* dedicates itself to being the most historically accurate and artistically parallel to Greek culture and mythology, the gameplay makes it a struggle to finish, but the dedication to adapting Greek mythology into such a stylized video game format makes it worth the hassle. Mostly.

*Assassin's Creed: Odyssey* (Ubisoft 2018) is by far the longest game in this project, finishing at approximately sixty hours of gameplay, but each moment within the game's narrative is deeply dedicated to Greek history and culture. While the *misthios*—which players get to choose between siblings Alexios or Kassandra—does not encounter any Greek deities, the game itself shows to be beautifully historically accurate, even with its lack of effect on history itself (Politopoulos et al.). Kassandra's narrative is inherently choice driven, giving players the freedom to craft their own narrative based on choices in skills, weapons, armor, and dialogue, which can turn the story in whichever direction they choose. Greek culture has a heavy role in *AC:O*, and with history as their playground, players get to experience it as they choose.

Dungeon-crawler *Hades* (Supergiant 2020) has players take on the helm of Zagreus, Hades' son, as he attempts to escape his father's domain with the help of his godly family. The familial aspect of Greek myth is an important one, and a large part of the significance and staying power that has rooted Greek myth into present society, as argued Leeming and Hamilton. Hamilton acknowledges the relatability of the gods and their human characteristics that made them so popular, and *Hades* uses those

characteristics to their advantage in creating a new narrative based on the Olympian family and their newest addition.

*Immortals Fenyx Rising* (Ubisoft 2020) takes a more open-world approach, and heroine Fenyx is the player's way into the world of Greek mythology. Fenyx's tale is told via Prometheus and Zeus through a frame narrative, intertwining the human hero with the divine as Fenyx saves the gods and goddesses from titan Typhon's grip. Fenyx's appearance, gear, weapons, and story are all customizable, which according to Turkey and Adinolf assists players with retaining the game's narrative—the more player agency they feel, the more they will want to continue the story itself. Fenyx is a unique take on the epic hero, as she herself is a storyteller, but she soon gathers her confidence to change the world, becoming a hero both to herself and the gods and goddesses she assists in the process. *Immortals Fenyx Rising* takes the Greek pantheon and, like *Hades*, shows them as they are: flawed divine creatures with human characteristics that make them malleable into multiple interpretations, and hence, multiple games.

I arranged my chapters in chronological order based on the games' publications in order to study several aspects that depend on time to develop: the technology used to create the games themselves, the storytelling and narrative design throughout each game, and the utilization of Greek mythology from *Apotheon*'s release in 2015 to *Immortals Fenyx Rising*'s publishing in 2020. Of course, technology evolved over the five years I covered, and *Apotheon*'s two-dimensional callback to early gaming feats contrasts heavily from *IFR*'s open world, beautifully rendered three-dimensional designs, but the use of Greek mythology changed as well. *Apotheon* and *Assassin's Creed: Odyssey*, chapters 1 and 2 of my project, took a stricter approach to adapting Greek myths for their

own storylines; *Apotheon*'s interpretation of the gods and goddesses jumped straight from the art of ancient Greece, leaning on concrete evidence from classical poets and historians to present an antagonistic view of the gods that abandoned Nikandros. *AC:O* from 2018 took a historical take—while Cassandra never converses with the gods themselves, she interacts with them as a follower of their religion, visiting their temples and praying to them. The games I covered in chapters 1 and 2 of my thesis cover a realistic view of the pantheon, and their interpretations of Greek mythology show a want to portray the gods respectfully, as close to their real-world documentations from historians.

*Hades* and *Immortals Fenyx Rising* (chapters 3 and 4) were both published in 2020, and their interpretations of Greek mythology are looser and more based in satire. *Hades* focuses on the Hades and Persephone myth by telling the story of their son, Zagreus, a new god added into the family pantheon, and his interactions with the other characters of Greek mythology are comical in nature. While it is clear Zagreus has a deep respect for the gods and goddesses (except perhaps Theseus, which I discussed in chapter 3), he talks with them as friends, rather than far-off deities. As a god himself, Zagreus has the freedom to address the gods and goddesses as family members, and the writing throughout *Hades* illustrates a funny and familial bond between him and the rest of the Greek pantheon. Fenyx, however, is not a god or goddess (at least until the end of the game reveal, which I talked about in chapter 4), but she talks with the gods and goddesses she meets with a slight degree of *sass* in her tone. As a storyteller herself, she knows the deities well enough to treat them with the proper respect due to them, but she harkens back to some of their less prestigious tales and they laugh with her, instead of smiting her down for her disrespectful comments. Because *Hades* and *IFR* were released slightly

later than *Apotheon* and *AC:O* were, their interpretations of Greek mythology are more lenient and comedic. While they follow some of the same stories covered in the earlier games I studied, the two games published in 2020 take the strict portrayal of Greek mythology shown in the 2015 and 2018 releases and loosen their grip on the reins, showing a funnier and more modern interpretation of Greek myths.

Video games have always told stories, as Winchell, Hemovich, Murray, Juul, Fraudenfelder, and Christensen and Machaldo all argue. Whether they be the story of an abandoned spiteful human warrior, the son of the God of the Dead, a storyteller-turned-hero, or a Spartan mercenary, games have been telling stories for almost as long as *Pong*, *Spacewar*, and *Donkey Kong*. Video games tell all sorts of stories—alternate history narratives, original stories, spin-offs, and parodies of every genre and style imaginable. Like books and movies, video games have the capability to tell a myriad of stories, whether influenced by Greek mythology or not. Greek mythology has transformed from practiced religion to oral tradition-telling, to stories that have the ability to mold and move into different forms of media, telling their stories in new and exciting ways. Video games are just one of the many ways mythology can tell its stories, whether Greek myths or any other mythical tradition from around the world; players learn through games, just as they can through other forms of media, and with a hands-on approach in learning mythology through video games, players gain a more in-depth understanding of these famous stories due to playing through them themselves. Greek myths are far older than this still new form of storytelling through games, but the two go hand in hand to create new stories for players to experience—stories that players themselves have a role in completing.

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