Museums of Myth and Mechanics of Mythography in Mythological Video Games

Alexander Vandewalle
Department of Communication Studies, University of Antwerp
Sint-Jacobstraat 2
2000 Antwerp, Belgium
alexander.vandewalle@uantwerpen.be
&
Department of Literary Studies, Ghent University
Blandijnberg 2
9000 Ghent, Belgium

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INTRODUCTION
The field of historical game studies (cf. Chapman et al. 2017) has often described historical video games as museums. Hess (2007, 346) considered *Medal of Honor: Rising Sun*'s (2003, EA Los Angeles) simulation of World War II as 'a type of digital museum allowing visiting gamers to select the items they wish to learn about'. Similarly, Anderson (2019, 178) uses the term 'interactive museum' to refer to how *Valiant Hearts: The Great War* (2014, Ubisoft Montpellier) employs 'world building through lore—such as through item text descriptions—as well as affective game design aesthetics to create a learning experience closer in similarity to touring a museum than reading a textbook'. The games-as-museum metaphor largely depends on their capacity to allow players to move through historical game spaces and/or interact with historical artifacts, which oftentimes receive descriptions not unlike those found on museum plaques. This paper examines how these insights may be applied to *mythological* video games (i.e., those which present mythological storyworlds known from ancient texts).

In order to explore the museal qualities of mythological video games, we will consider mythological video games as transmedial equivalents of the literary genre of mythography. Ancient Greco-Roman mythography – such as Apollodorus' *Bibliotheca* or Hyginus' *Fabulae* – attempted to transform the 'huge and slippery mass fantasy' of Greek mythology into 'a manageable corpus of unchanging stories, the Greek mythology of the handbooks' (Hansen 2013, 19). Mythographers provided a systematic, coherent retelling of the ancient myths, in an 'unadorned' (Zajko 2015, 198; Trzaskoma 2022, 155) and 'simple' (Fowler 2017, 16; Trzaskoma 2022, 152) style without grand literary aspirations. The genre has also proven popular in modernity: Thomas Bulfinch's *The Age of Fable* (1855) 'became one of the most popular books ever published in the United States and the standard work on classical mythology for nearly a century' (Richard 2009, 33), while more contemporary works such as Stephen Fry's *Mythos* (2017), *Heroes* (2018) and *Troy* (2020), or Liv Albert's *Greek Mythology* (2021) illustrate how mythographical literature captivates audiences in the 21st century.

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The present presentation will consider several high-profile mythological video games – *Age of Mythology* (2002, Ensemble Studios), *Smite* (2014-, Titan Forge Games), *Immortals Fenyx Rising* (2020, Ubisoft Quebec), *God of War* (2018, Santa Monica Studio) and *God of War: Ragnarök* (2022, Santa Monica Studio), *Apotheon* (2015, Alientrap) and *Hades* (2020, Supergiant Games) – as mythographical collections of their respective traditions. The way in which these games collect, synthesize, or 'mashup' (Cole 2022) different mythic narratives into a coherent 'mythic storyworld' (Johnston 2018, 121-146) resembles methods used in literary mythography.

In particular, this paper draws attention to several game design techniques and/or mechanics which allow these games to be considered in relation to mythography, including (but not limited to):

> **(1)** *(voice-over) narration*: the mythic background of in-game locations, characters or objects is recounted, potentially by the characters of myth themselves. For example, upon arriving in *God of War: Ragnarök*'s Asgard, players hear explanations of Heimdall's Gjallarhorn, the Valkyries, and more.
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> **(2)** *quests and activities*: players are encouraged to complete storylines or side-activities which retell or reenact specific mythic episodes. This is the case with the revealingly called side-quest *This Belongs in a Museum... Err... Pantheon* in *Immortals Fenyx Rising*'s *A New God* DLC, where players collect various artifacts of myths (e.g., the 'Sheaf of Demeter') which are subsequently described, or the various levels of *Apotheon*, each inspired by different gods and stories related to them.
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> **(3)** *in-game codices or menus*: dedicated diaries, menus or codices which elaborate on mythical elements found in the game. In *Hades*, players complete the 'Codex of the Underworld', which provides detailed information on the game's characters, worlds, and more; in *Age of Mythology*, the 'In-Game Help' menus provide further explanations of mythical characters; and in *Smite*, 'Lore' texts contextualize ancient myths within the original narrative of the game.
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> **(4)** *objects with which players interact*: myths are presented through objects found in the game world. In *Apotheon*, players encounter stone slabs (Greek *stelai*) which reveal fragments from ancient literature (e.g., Homer, Hesiod) upon interaction.
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> **(5)** *lore books*: additional paratexts in which the game's mythological background is further elaborated. Both *God of War* (Barba 2020) and *Immortals Fenyx Rising* (Barba 2022) were complemented with a lore book two years after release, retelling the games' underlying stories from the perspective of the game characters.

Through these various mechanics and techniques – which were discovered through game text analysis – mythological games also collect, combine and present ancient mythic narratives in similar ways as museums: the final result is an explorable exhibition of collected myths, potentially with explanations for interested visitors. The listed mechanics and techniques additionally allow us to discern two frequent modes of mythography in games: the first is *environmental mythography*, where the mythographical retellings are carefully arranged throughout the game world as a form of environmental storytelling (Jenkins 2004). The second is *actorial mythography*, where the myths are recounted by one of the game's mythological characters themselves (e.g., Zeus and Prometheus in *Immortals Fenyx Rising*), potentially revealing further information about these characters through their status as narrators.

Finally, this paper lists some limitations of current mythography in games, such as the frequently optional nature by which the collected stories are accessible to players, and suggests several creative alternatives by looking at historical games with similar mechanics (e.g., *Pentiment*; 2022, Obsidian Entertainment) or games with built-in museum questlines (e.g., *The Elder Scrolls Online*; 2014-, ZeniMax Online Studios).

The current analysis contributes to a growing body of research studying the reception of mythology in games: while there is already a substantial tradition of historical game studies scholarship, an equivalent 'mythological game studies' is still in its infancy (Vandewalle 2022). This paper provides further insight into how players encounter ancient myths in games. Furthermore, the list of mechanics and techniques could prove useful for designers interested in incorporating mythology in their games.

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