

# Greek Game Developers' Opinions on the Representation and Reception of (Ancient) Greece in Games: An Exploratory Interview Pilot Study

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## EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Recent years have seen rising academic interest into how video games engage with classical antiquity. Parallel to the release of commercially, critically, and scholarly acclaimed games such as *Assassin's Creed Odyssey* (Ubisoft Quebec 2018) or *Hades* (Supergiant 2020), a rising amount of articles, volumes, and monographs appeared that investigate how Greco-Roman antiquity is represented, simulated, depicted, or 'received' (Hardwick 2003) in games (Rollinger 2020; Clare 2021; Draycott & Cook 2022). Scholarship applying such 'classical reception studies' to video games has, for example, focused on the audiovisual reconstruction of antiquity (e.g., André 2016), the representation of ethnic/demographic groups (e.g., Draycott & Cook 2022), narrative and mechanics (e.g., Cole 2022), the simulation of history (e.g., Flegler 2020), among various other topics.

Simultaneously to these developments, game studies has seen increased attention into local game production contexts. Liboriussen & Martin (2016) conceptualize such 'regional game studies' as the body of research investigating game development in "areas outside of Western Europe and North America". In addition to individual studies of production in industries such as Czechia and Iran (Šisler et al. 2017), Poland (Felczak & Garda 2023) or Australia (Keogh 2023), collections as those by Wolf (2015) and Swalwell (2021) have greatly expanded our understanding of game production on an international scale.

Until now, regional game studies and classical reception studies have not met. With the exception of Lowe's (2022) analysis of the Japanese game *Athena* (SNK 1986), studies on classical reception in games have generally focused on games by North American or Western European studios (e.g., Creative Assembly, Santa Monica Studio, Supergiant, Ubisoft). However, since it has both been argued that the contexts in which antiquity games are made are in need of further investigation (Chapman 2020, 242), and that regional game studies should be an important aspect of game studies going forward (Cullen et al. 2022, 203), it seems relevant for both

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fields to cross paths and explore how antiquity is received by regional game studios. This paper is a first step towards combining these two research areas, and will present the results of an exploratory interview pilot study on how Greek game developers perceive the representation of (ancient) Greece in video games.

So far, except for the research efforts of a single author (Roinioti 2020a-b; 2023), scholarship has rarely discussed the Greek game industry. After a troubled period in which video games were banned in public and private spheres in Greece (2002-2011), games came to be classified as art/entertainment and eligible for cash rebate schemes in 2017 (Roinioti 2020a). While still a small sector, the Greek game industry is growing through continuing efforts of the Game Developers Association of Greece, and by presenting their work at events on both a national (e.g., Athens Digital Arts Festival) and international scale (e.g., Nordic Game Conference; Gamescom). Roinioti (2023, 3) argues that, parallel to these infrastructural evolutions, also runs an aesthetic development of Greek games, which have gradually reinvented themselves into highly expressive texts characterized by a “new-Greek anti-kitsch movement”, as exemplified by future productions such as *Selini* (Cymban forthc.).

During a research stay at Panteion University (Athens) in September and October 2023, I interviewed twelve Greek game developers. Of these twelve, eleven were specialized in video games, and one in analog games. The sample of participants included (a) developers from Greek game studios (e.g., Cymban, Happyland Games), as well as (b) freelancers and (c) Greek individuals in important roles (e.g., head writer, creative director) in non-Greek studios (e.g., Jonas Kyratzes from the Zagreb-based Croteam). The interviews were semi-structured, had a mean duration of 49 minutes, and were organized either in person (Athens, Thessaloniki, Mykonos) or online. The interview questions included inquiries into the developers’ potential motivations to create (ancient) Greece-based games (or not), their thoughts on the representation of (ancient) Greece in games, their potential affinity with Greek history or mythology, their opinions on whether Greek game developers and industry workers (e.g., voice actors) should be included in, or actively pursue the creation of, productions of (ancient) Greece-based games, among others. Specific games were also discussed with their creators, including *The Talos Principle* (Croteam 2014), *Rum Ram* (Pavlos Alifragis 2020) or *Prometheus Unbound* (Happyland Games forthc.).

This paper will discuss the results of this pilot study, which are to be expanded in future research efforts. Broadly speaking, the interviews showed two main modes of thinking among Greek game developers. The first, rather positive mode derived from developers’ own, often life-long fascination with ancient Greece. These designers wanted to convey their passion for Greek history and/or mythology to a broader audience, potentially with educational ambitions. The second, more negative mode emerged from developers who had not created ancient Greek-themed games before. Some of them believed that they would be “bragging for something they didn’t work for” if they represented ancient Greece in their games, or were demotivated from engaging with it due to overexposure to Greek history/mythology in popular entertainment, their own childhood, and immediate surroundings. Additionally, they noted uncomfortable associations between ancient Greece and extreme political agendas (cf. Roinioti 2020b; 2023). Aside from these findings, the presentation will also discuss developers’ opinions on ancient Greek-themed games created by non-Greek studios, their stances towards historical ‘accuracy’, their thoughts vis-à-vis representing modern Greece in games, their feelings about whether a continuous line of heritage between ancient and modern Greece can even be drawn (e.g., Beaton 2019; Kalyvas 2015), among others.

In conclusion, this paper will contribute to current scholarship by combining classical reception studies with regional game studies, focusing specifically on one local game sector that scholarship has not investigated extensively so far. While the

analysis is in need of further expansion (e.g., additional interviews), the preliminary results can already be presented at this stage, and the overall research will benefit greatly from feedback at the 2024 DiGRA conference.

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