

Kidnapping Women, Conquering Countries: Female (Under-)Representation in Asterix Video Games

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

The Asterix multimedia universe is ever-expanding, as the characters and stories from the comic book series *Asterix* (1959–ongoing) continue to be adapted not only into films and TV series (such as the live-action film *Asterix & Obelix: The Middle Kingdom*, released in 2023, and the upcoming Netflix series *Astérix*), but also into a considerable number of video games, the latest of which are *Asterix & Obelix: Heroes* (GameXcite GmbH 2023) and *Asterix & Obelix: Slap Them All! 2* (Mr. Nutz Studio 2023). And yet, the various video game adaptations which have appeared since the 1980s (Garin 2022) have attracted less scholarly attention than the Asterix comic books, their audiovisual remediations and their respective translations (see, e.g., Almagor 2015; Almagor 2016; Almagor 2020; Barnett 2016; Bell 2006; Brown 2015; Elliott 2011; McElduff 2016; Nye 1980; Pinet 1978; Screech 2005; Tosina Fernández 2022). This strange imbalance, which I attempt to redress, is, perhaps, all the more regrettable given the significant advances which have been made in the study of the crossroads between comics and video games (see, e.g., Bittanti 2008; Hanson 2021; Lippitz 2019; Rauscher et al. 2021; Toniolo 2015) and in the academic discourse on transmediality and video game adaptations (see, e.g., Blom 2023; Elkington 2021; Flanagan 2017; Fuchs and Thoss 2019; Sullivan et al. 2023; Thomas 2022). In light of these remarkable developments in our collective understanding of video game transpositions, and in light of the still ongoing expansion of the Asterix multimedia franchise, a detailed discussion of at least some of the many as yet neglected Asterix video games seems timely.

Though not specifically concerned with the adaptation process itself, my work-in-progress paper sets out to explore a selection of Asterix video games by focussing on female representation and its relationship with anti-colonial resistance within the following titles: *Asterix & Obelix XXL* (Étranges Libellules 2003); *Asterix & Obelix XXL 2: Mission Las Vegum* (Étranges Libellules 2006); *Asterix at the Olympic Games* (Étranges Libellules 2007); *Asterix & Obelix XXL 3: The Crystal Menhir* (OSome Studio 2019); *Asterix & Obelix XXXL: The Ram from Hibernia* (OSome Studio 2022). Although

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the majority of these video games position the player as an indomitable Gaulish man who has to thwart Roman expansionist ambitions in a variety of geographical contexts, women (when present) are persistently relegated to the role of submissive non-player characters. In fact, whereas the earlier of these video games uncritically rehearse misogynistic tropes such as the 'damsel in distress' (*Asterix & Obelix XXL*) and the 'woman as a reward' (*Asterix at the Olympic Games*), the more recent ones seem more alert to the prejudices underpinning these tropes and occasionally highlight them. In *Asterix & Obelix XXL 3: The Crystal Menhir*, for instance, Obelix explicitly refers to Rezy Stance, the leader of the Phoenician Resistance, as a 'damsel in distress' upon hearing her cry for help; Razzledazzleus, the high priestess of Tyre, more vigorously condemns the abduction of Avina Grandir as a retrograde act when she asks: 'Kidnapping a woman to conquer a country? What kind of backward times are we living in?'. Even so, *Asterix & Obelix XXL 3* ultimately fails to accord much agency to its various racialised as well as gendered 'others' (Mukherjee 2017, 42–43, 54–58, 65–66, 68–70; van der Merwe 2021, 40, 45, 47–48). A damsel in distress for most of the game, Avina eventually turns into the rescuer of a 'dude in distress', as she endeavours to 'defrost poor Getafix' towards the end. And yet, quite significantly, this only happens off screen. The subversive power of the Hibernian Keratin is similarly contained throughout *Asterix & Obelix XXXL: The Ram from Hibernia*.

My paper particularly aims to investigate the subaltern position of female characters in these various male-driven interactive narratives of anti-colonial resistance. To this end, I draw upon useful insights provided by research on the (under-)representation of women and on the reproduction of colonialist logics and practices, primarily (but not exclusively) in historical video games (see, e.g., de Bruin-Molé 2020; Consalvo 2021; Draycott 2022; Draycott and Cook 2022; Heritage 2021; Jansz and Martis 2007; Mukherjee 2023; Mukherjee and Hammar 2018; Murray 2018; Shaw 2014; Wainwright 2019), and I perform a multimodal character analysis which pays due attention to the interconnected 'narrative', 'audiovisual' and 'procedural layers' of each video game (Šisler 2023) and, more specifically, to their characters' 'representational and ludic traits' (Aldred 2023, 441). By adopting a feminist and postcolonialist perspective to combine the study of game mechanics with the scrutiny of what the characters look like, say and do, I attempt to foreground the ideological import of their in-game looks, words, actions and functions. In so doing, I ultimately try to assess the extent to which the Asterix video games examined may be regarded as digital playgrounds wherein gender stereotypes and colonialist logics and practices are not only represented and reinforced, but also played with and, if not overtly subverted, at least occasionally resisted.

While my survey of selected Asterix video games intends to offer a valuable contribution to the flourishing research on the (under-)representation of female characters in historical video games, it also seeks to encourage further work on these and other Asterix video games. Since the games are all part and parcel of a multimedia universe, future analyses could well refine my preliminary findings by taking into account other Asterix-related products across media. Therefore, I would urge not only additional explorations of other Asterix video games, but also further studies which shed more light on the relationship between the source material and the game adaptations and which possibly triangulate my findings about female representation and anti-colonial resistance in the video games with the insights provided by published or original critical discussions of the same issues in Asterix comic books, films and TV series.

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