Feasible Antiquity: Ancient History in the Unity, Unreal, Godot and itch.io Asset Stores

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Today, online asset stores – that is, digital marketplaces where game developers purchase or sell ready-made 3D models, animations, sound effects, and more – take up a prominent place in independent and amateur game development. Online assets are commonly said to help gamemakers save time and increase efficiency in the development process. Current scholarship on engine platforms and asset stores has focused on their accessibility (e.g., Chia et al. 2020; Foxman 2019), forms of labor (Ball 2022), differences and similarities (e.g., Ciekanowska et al. 2021; Hristov & Kinaneva 2021; Toftedahl & Engström 2019), effects on game production culture (Nicoll & Keogh 2019), among other topics. Simultaneously, however, authors have remarked that academic interest in these marketplaces has been "surprisingly sparse" (Ball 2022, 27).

On these platforms, game designers can find numerous assets associated with history or antiquity. Spaces such as the Unity Asset Store or the Unreal Engine Marketplace (now 'Fab') contain heaps of downloadable Greek columns, Roman swords, Chinese temples, Norse axes, and more. The plenitude with which historical or mythological assets are represented in these stores is highly notable, yet in sharp contrast with the near-complete lack of attention that these assets have received in the flourishing field of historical game studies, or 'HGS' (see Chapman et al. 2017). In recent years, HGS has expanded towards new regions (e.g., Mochocki et al. 2024) and genres (e.g., Cook 2022; Lowe 2021), so much so that the field's previously predominant focus on AAA franchises (see Clare 2021, 84; McCall 2022; Wright 2018, 598) is slowly shifting. Nevertheless, asset stores have escaped sustained attention, although their contemporary relevance calls for deeper investigation.

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In this paper, we seek to bridge the gap between the study of asset stores and HGS, and examine how the past is present in these important sectors. In doing so, we answer recent calls (e.g., Keogh 2023) to look beyond purely commercial game development, and take into account more quotidian aspects of game production. So far, Wong (2023) offers the first and only analysis of history in asset stores, focusing specifically on Greco-Roman assets in the Unity and Unreal Engine marketplaces, and the functionality of their search tools. Wong points to several trends in the available types of assets, as well as some transmedial – generally cinematic and televisual – inspirations behind them. Most poignantly, Wong describes these stores as "infrastructures of imagination" and "mediators of historical culture".

Building on Wong's (2023) paper, we argue that asset stores are intrinsically museal spaces, characterized by an "antiquarian" (Metzger & Paxton 2016, 537) engagement with the past, effectively creating individual historiographies that inform future creations. By collecting and presenting various elements of 'history' or 'antiquity', these stores present their own version of what 'history' or 'antiquity' is, not unlike a curated museum collection. Our claim is in line with previous assessments of historical games as virtual museums (e.g., Anderson 2019; Navarrete 2019; Vandewalle 2024), as well as museum applications of game engines (Ciekanowska et al. 2021). These asset museums, we propose, present "multisided" (Foxman 2019, 3) exhibitions of what Clare (2021, 28) calls "popular antiquity", or the image of antiquity constructed by popular entertainment, a composite amalgam of ancient references and modern inspirations.

First, our presentation will present a quantitative overview of, particularly, ancient Greek, Roman, Egyptian, and Norse/Scandinavian assets in the Unity Asset Store, Unreal Engine Marketplace/Fab, Godot Asset Marketplace, and itch.io. These four historical regions represent some of the most widespread and visually recognizable historical/ancient societies. Our choice of platforms is motivated by the fact that Unity, Godot, and Unreal have been described as three of the most popular game engines nowadays (Anon. 2024), with itch.io also being considered as an important space for "independent and amateur" (Keogh 2023, 18) game design. In our overview, we include the following variables: name, historical period, creator, date, type (e.g., weapon, architecture, art piece, audio, animation), style (e.g., 8bit, low poly, photorealistic, 3D scan), store, price, and use of GenAI (if declared). This facilitates easy and comprehensive comparison across our sample, and will deeply inform our understanding of historical interest in asset stores.

Second, we perform a qualitative analysis where we assess how history is, and can be, represented using these assets, and compare the assortment (that is, the individual historiographies) of the four marketplaces. Additionally, we look at specific titles using such assets, and examine what their usage means for the representation of history. For example, the exploration game *Poseidon* (2024, Ghost_RUS Games) employs the photorealistic asset 'Greek Island' (2024, ScaleX) from Fab, whereas the survival game *Summa Expeditionis* (2024, Lobico Games) uses the 'LOWPOLY - Roman Legions' (2021, Codewart Game Assets) asset from Unity. These assets then inform the games' historical representation: *Poseidon*'s aesthetics, for instance, recall *Assassin's Creed Odyssey*'s (2018, Ubisoft Quebec) lavish depiction of ancient Greece, thus contributing to the promotion of one particular 'type' of history in video games.

Finally, this presentation will help us conceptualize what we call a *feasible antiquity*: above all, these ready-made assets present feasible alternatives for history-focused projects with limited resources. Asset stores provide accessible alternatives to the demands and costs of game design (Ball 2022, 22; Foxman 2019, 3–4; Nicoll & Keogh 2019, 2–3). By including variables such as price and style in our overview, we can understand the affordability and feasibility of different types of ancient recreations. Yet, the popular antiquities represented by these stores are also not neutral, as they prioritize particular versions of history above others. Our quantitative and qualitative analyses thus illustrate the potential of these assets to inform and shape feasible antiquities.

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