The characterization of Julius Caesar in video games

Noah Pintelon
Independent scholar
Belgium
noah.pintelon@outlook.com

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Recently, Vandewalle et al. (2024) introduced a framework for the study of characterization (the representation of the traits, motives, and psychology of a character) in video games. Their framework consists of two types of cues or signs: storyworld cues and medium cues. Storyworld cues describe narrative elements that give specific information on characters in the storyworld. This includes elements like the appearance of characters and their actions. Conversely, medium cues relate on how the storyworld is portrayed. This includes elements like the character statistics or the acting. At the end of the article, the authors propose that further research could involve applying the model to specific video games (Vandewalle et al. 2024, 735). In this paper, I do so to investigate in what way the characterization of Gaius Julius Caesar (100-44 BCE), the famous Roman general and dictator, continues the image of a highly militarized antiquity.

The last decades have seen an increasing amount of studies on games set in antiquity, including games set during ancient Rome (Clare 2021; Rollinger 2020). Many of these studies focus on co-called "empire-building games." In these games the player controls a whole nation or city and plays from a godlike perspective (Lowe 2009). This category includes games like *Civilization VI* (Firaxis Games 2016) or *Total War: Rome II* (Creative Assembly 2013). These historical games use conceptual simulation styles which means that the historical content is mainly offered through gameplay rules (Chapman 2016). Studies on these gameplay rules have often highlighted the outdated views of history they promote, like the obsolete linear view of history (Flegler 2020; Machado 2020), or the portrayal of certain factions as uncivilized and unnuanced barbarians (Coert 2018; Rollinger 2016).

Besides these "empire-building games" there are also "hero-based games," where players play as an avatar and control specific characters. These games often follow a stricter narrative (Lowe 2009). Furthermore, they use realist simulation styles which include a high degree of visual specificity to try "to show history as it really was" (Chapman 2016). Examples are *Ryse: Son of Rome* (Crytek 2013) and *Shadow of Rome* (Capcom 2005). However, compared to the "empire-building games" set in ancient Rome these games have received less attention in studies.

In the beginning of antiquity game studies, the characterization of historical figures and people was often studied only as a part of a larger study (Lowe 2009). However, in recent years this has changed with studies who now focus entirely on the characterization of

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historical figures in Roman antiquity games. One such study is that of Bondioli et al. (2019), on the reception of Julius Caesar and the representation of gender and agency in *Assassin's Creed Origins* (Ubisoft Montreal 2017). Reception studies is the sub-discipline of classical studies that examines how the ancient world is 'received' in subsequent time periods (Hardwick 2003: 1-6). Bondioli et al. conclude that, in *AC Origins*, the 'world of politics' (public speeches, plots and schemes, diplomacy) is for women and the 'world of war' (war camps, battlefields) for men. Caesar's agency in the world of politics is thus downplayed in this game while his agency on the field of battle, especially his own martial prowess, is perhaps even overplayed (Bondioli et al. 2019, 7-9). In my research, I will build on this study by looking at the characterization of Caesar in other video games. The goal is to determine if Caesar's characterization from *AC Origins* returns in those games and if the highly militarized image of antiquity is supported by Caesar's characterization.

Specifically, I study the characterization of Caesar in four video games. Those are *Expeditions: Rome* (Logic Artists 2022), *Civilization VI*, *Caesar's Revenge* (Pixel Barons 2024) and *Asterix & Obelix XXL 2 remastered* (OSome Studio 2018). *Expeditions: Rome* is a strategy and role-playing game in which players play as a *legatus* (commander of a Roman legion) who is looking for his father's murderers. During the game, the player visits multiple locations throughout the Roman Republic and meets many historical figures, including Caesar. *Civilization VI* is a turn-based strategy game in which players can choose which civilization they want to play as. Due to an update in 2022 Caesar became available as the leader for the Roman faction. Caesar's *Revenge* is a die-and-retry first-person shooter in which Caesar returns to take vengeance on the senators that betrayed him. *Asterix & Obelix* is a platform-adventure game which features Caesar as the main antagonist.

In my research, I will thus look at Caesar's characterization in these video games. To do this, I use the framework created by Vandewalle et al. (2024) and I use the same distinction between the 'world of politics' and the 'world of war,' as in the article of Bondioli et al. (2019), to differentiate between political and military traits. My hypothesis is that Caesar's military aspects are emphasized in the games since he is mostly known for his deeds as a general and because games set in Roman antiquity tend to focus on war and violence (Serrano-Lozano 2020). However, compared to *AC Origins*, Caesar's political traits are likely to be more prominent in some case studies, especially so in *Civilization VI*, where Caesar is the leader of a whole faction and must manage a whole empire. Therefore, it is probable that political aspects and administrative tasks become more important. But, despite the attention for Caesars political traits in these games, the study shows that Caesar's characterization mainly supports the highly militarized image of antiquity. This image thus remains dominant in games and in the mind of the popular public.

There is however one important issue with analysing games, namely the question of how representative one's analysis is with regards to how other players experience the game. To make sure I consider other possible variations of characterization, I will watch online videos of other players to improve my analysis. This is an element of the Digital Game Analysis Protocol (DiGAP) (Daneels et al. 2022), which helps researchers to report on their analysis in a more transparent manner.

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