

Ergodic Characterization: A Methodological Framework For Analyzing Games Set In Classical Antiquity

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

The ancient cultures of Greece and Rome regularly find their way to the medium of video games. Over the past decade, games set in classical antiquity have gathered a large following and researchers have become increasingly excited by the numerous new possibilities that video games offer the representation and simulation of antiquity. As a result, several academics have pleaded that videogame remediations of the past be taken seriously within the field of classical studies (Lowe & Shahabudin 2009: xvii; Christesen & Machado 2010: 107). Studies on antiquity in video games take various forms (see Rollinger 2020: 5) but often focus on the ludic depiction of classical history (e.g. Ghita & Andrikopoulos 2009; Anglade 2018) or the (audio)visual interpretations of antiquity (e.g. Lowe 2012; André & Lécole-Solnychkine 2011, 2013; Amory 2018; Cuvelier 2018; Saura-Ziegelmeier 2018). One subject that has not received elaborate attention thus far is how these games implement the characters of classical mythology, i.e. the classical gods and heroes. However, this question first requires the construction

of a theoretical model specifically designed to study this ergodic mode of characterization.

Character(ization) theory dates back to Aristotle and has in present times been the subject of numerous studies within literary studies and narratology. Characters are almost universally considered as a combination of ‘traits’, i.e. a “relatively stable or abiding personal quality” in the influential definition by Chatman (1978: 126). Studies of characterization, then, examine how these traits appear in a text, through scrutiny of various textual devices that share information on the characters. Recently within classical studies, De Temmerman (2010; 2014; 2018, with van Emde Boas) has created a theoretical framework to systematically study the processes of characterization in ancient Greek literature. De Temmerman & van Emde Boas’ tripartite model (2018: 19-23) regards characterization as comprising (i) the practice of name-giving, (ii) direct characterization techniques, and (iii) indirect characterization techniques (cf. also Rimmon-Kenan 1983). The subject of character is also studied with increased enthusiasm within game studies (e.g. Lankoski 2010; Vella 2013; Aldred [2014] 2016; Neitzel 2014; Schröter & Thon 2014; Egenfeldt-Nielsen, Smith & Tosca 2016), but no attempt has thus far been made to create a complete framework for characterization in ergodic texts such as video games, where the user actively manipulates the text’s protagonist and thus constitutes a driving force in the characterization process.

This study (which is still in progress, while the first wave of analysis has already produced relevant results) attempts to develop a methodology for the study of ergodic characterization, building on the theory of characterization as it is known from classical and literary studies, as well as on theories of content and character in game studies (e.g. Malliet 2007 and the character studies listed above). The framework hopes to provide answers to such questions as ‘who characterizes?’, ‘who is characterized?’, ‘which types of characters can be distinguished?’ and most of all ‘which characterization techniques can/does the medium employ?’. Throughout the discussion, the framework is employed through application and references to several antiquity games as brief case studies, such as *Age of Mythology: Extended Edition* (Ensemble Studios & SkyBox Labs [2002] 2014), *Rome: Total War* (Creative Assembly 2004), *God of War* (SCE Santa Monica Studio [2005] 2012), *Smite* (Titan Forge Games 2014) and *Assassin’s Creed Odyssey* (Ubisoft Quebec 2018). The chosen examples stem from different game genres and therefore present a variety of game mechanics that illuminate some of the different ways in which classical deities and heroes can be implemented in ergodic simulations. The final stage of the investigation critically reevaluates the framework in light of the performed textual corpus analysis. The results of this investigation not only inform us how contemporary game designers and audiences perceive classical mythology and to what extent these modern remediations show parallels to ancient conceptualizations of divine or heroic characters, but will also deepen our understanding of how character, after all one of the defining constituents in any form of narrative, works in video games.

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