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## **‘Named After the Great Odysseus’: Putting the *Odyssey* in *Assassin’s Creed Odyssey***

*The recent video game Assassin’s Creed Odyssey is one of the most elaborate popular re-interpretations of classical antiquity. Known for its lavishly detailed simulations of historical settings and events, the game is set during the first nine years of the Peloponnesian War (431–422 BC). But why is it called Odyssey? This paper aims to show the connections and similarities between the game and Homer’s Odyssey, by drawing attention to the game’s underlying story structure (which places the game within a large video game tradition of odyssey-like quest-adventures), its specific narrative and world design (which contains various references to the Homeric texts), and its main character (who may be considered as a reflection of Odysseus, due to their similar actions and shared characteristics).*

**Keywords:** *Odyssey*, Homer, *Assassin’s Creed Odyssey*, video games, reception, mythology

The study of antiquity and video games has over the past decade become a rapidly growing subdiscipline of classical reception studies.<sup>1</sup> From early scholarship around the end of the 2000s, the field of study has nowadays evolved into an area of research with its own edited volumes, monographs, conference panels, and more.<sup>2</sup> Classical scholars

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<sup>1</sup> This paper was first presented at the *Sapiens Ubique Civis VIII* Conference held in Szeged, Hungary on September 1–3, 2021. I am deeply grateful to the organizers for the engaging conference and kind welcome, and to the participants for the insightful conversations. I also wish to thank Steven Malliet and Kristoffel Demoen for their comments on an earlier version of this text.

<sup>2</sup> For early scholarship, cf. GARDNER (2007) and LOWE (2009). For edited volumes, cf. THORSEN ed. (2012), ROLLINGER ed. (2020a) and DRAYCOTT–COOK ed. (forthc.). For monographs, cf. ANDRÉ (2016) and CLARE (2021). For dedicated conference panels, cf.

have pled for the importance of studying video games in classical studies, and have drawn attention to a variety of reasons to do so. First, video games are one of the primary media in which audiences engage with the ancient world in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.<sup>3</sup> Second, due to their intrinsically participatory nature, video games present wholly different and innovative experiences of antiquity that offer new possibilities for the reception of the ancient world.<sup>4</sup> Additionally, since the Dutch historian Johan Huizinga considered ‘play’ to be an essential part of culture and of various practices contained within it, to ignore practices of play in our research would mean to exclude essential cultural elements from classical reception studies.<sup>5</sup>

This paper examines one ‘classical antiquity game’, or video game set in classical antiquity: *Assassin’s Creed Odyssey*.<sup>6</sup> This game was released in 2018 by game developer Ubisoft Quebec on PC, PlayStation 4, Xbox One and Nintendo Switch (in 2019, it was also released on Google Stadia). It is the eleventh main game in Ubisoft’s highly popular *Assassin’s Creed* video game series (Ubisoft 2007-), a game franchise that has visited and reconstructed various moments in history and is known for

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for instance the ‘Current research in gaming’ and ‘Integrating games and pedagogy’ panels at the Antiquity in Media Studies (AIMS) Conference in December 2021.

<sup>3</sup> E.g. CHRISTESEN–MACHADO (2010: 107); LOWE (2009: 64); POLITOPOULOS et al. (2019: 322).

<sup>4</sup> For instance, the fact that video games not only present representations of their subject matter (as a literary text, a painting, or a film would) but also consist of intricate simulations that grant players agency (FRASCA [2003]), is a fascinating possibility for reception studies to explore. ‘To simulate’, says FRASCA (2003: 223), ‘is to model a (source) system through a different system which maintains to somebody some of the behaviors of the original system’. So-called flight simulators, for instance, simulate the actual ‘system’ of flying a plane. These systems are processes, and these processes can convey meaning when enacted by a player (i.e. what BOGOST [2007] calls ‘procedural rhetoric’), and these meanings may be explored by classical reception studies. For example, historical strategy games such as *Sid Meier’s Civilization* (MicroProse 1991), where gameplay revolves around the maintenance of a historical empire and the conquering of other empires, may be explored in terms of the systems they simulate, e.g. systems of culture, economics, diplomacy, happiness, and so on.

<sup>5</sup> HUIZINGA ([1938] 2019). Cf. RASSALLE (2021: 4).

<sup>6</sup> For the term ‘classical antiquity game’, cf. VANDEWALLE (2021a: 2–5). For a work-in-progress bibliography on *Assassin’s Creed Odyssey*, see <https://paizomen.com/2020/07/10/assassins-creed-odyssey-2018/>.

its lavishly detailed reconstructions of historical periods and locations.<sup>7</sup> The game is set during the first nine years of the Peloponnesian War (i.e. 431–422 BC), and the player takes up the role of an either male or female Spartan mercenary called Alexios or Cassandra (depending on the player's choice). Cassandra is, however, the canonical protagonist of the game, which means that this paper will use her name when referring to the game's protagonist.<sup>8</sup> The game includes a large (albeit condensed and compressed) version of the Greek world, from Kephallonia in the West to Lesbos in the East, and from Makedonia in the North to Krete in the South (I will use the in-game spelling for names of characters and locations whenever the specific in-game locations are meant).<sup>9</sup> The player lives through several historical events, such as the Plague of Athens (430 BC), the Battle of Pylos (425 BC) and the Battle of Amphipolis (422 BC). The game's main story is divided into three parts, each with their own name. The first is called 'Odyssey' and revolves around the reunion and reconciliation of a broken family, as the player is tasked with finding Cassandra's parents and brother throughout Greece, meeting them for the first time after being apart for decades. The second is imperatively titled 'Hunt the Cult of Kosmos' and sees Cassandra take on the sinister Cult of Kosmos, a shadowy organization that plagues the Greek world and aims to take control of it. A final overarching storyline, called 'Between Two Worlds', involves the slaying of various mythical beasts (the Minotaur, the Sphinx, the Cyclops Brontes, and Medusa) within the context of a larger, mythological storyline centered around Atlantis.

Apart from its sheer scale and both historical and artistic detail, the game's many overt references to ancient sources turn the game into a milestone within the history of ludic classical reception. Whereas in 2009 scholars of antiquity were warned to 'expect the expected' while inves-

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<sup>7</sup> Previous entries in the series have, for example, explored the Italian Renaissance (*Assassin's Creed II*; Ubisoft Montreal 2009), the American Revolution (*Assassin's Creed III*; Ubisoft Montreal 2012), Ptolemaic Egypt (*Assassin's Creed Origins*; Ubisoft Montreal 2017) or, most recently, Viking Age England (*Assassin's Creed Valhalla*; Ubisoft Montreal 2020).

<sup>8</sup> HARRADENCE (2018). As such, 'Cassandra' is the name of the character in the official novelization of the game (DOHERTY [2018]).

<sup>9</sup> Cf. POLITOPOULOS et al. (2019: 319; 321) on *Assassin's Creed Odyssey* and compression, or WESTIN–HEDLUND (2016: 10) on *Assassin's Creed* and shrinking.

tigating video game versions of antiquity – referring to the stereotyped ways in which games often seemed to recreate the ancient world – *Assassin's Creed Odyssey* is an example of a growing trend in video game receptions where game worlds and narratives are increasingly shaped through references to ancient sources and texts.<sup>10</sup> This trend is facilitated by the increased consultation of scholars (e.g. historians) in the process of game development, which is the case for *Assassin's Creed Odyssey*.<sup>11</sup> Regarding the game's references to ancient sources, scholars have found various Greek authors and texts that served as inspirations for the game's representation of history, or that were in some way included into the narrative or world of the game, including Herodotus, Aristophanes, Thucydides, Pausanias, Plato (and Socrates), Pindar, Archilochus, Alcaeus, Anacreon and the Homeric Hymns.<sup>12</sup> Additionally, the game includes several real-world inscriptions, thereby complementing the design of its world with ancient epigraphical evidence.<sup>13</sup>

However, the game's subtitle reveals an affinity with another ancient text, which has largely gone undiscussed in scholarship on the game. At first glance, the subtitle '*Odyssey*' seems incongruous with the game's setting during the Peloponnesian War and the large efforts taken to produce an 'authentic' version of classical, 'Golden Age' Greece. The question this

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<sup>10</sup> LOWE (2009: 74). I thank Hamish Cameron, Julie Levy, Dunstan Lowe and Kate Minniti for their answers to my questions on this topic during a roundtable on Classics and video games on May 1<sup>st</sup>, 2021 hosted by Britta Ager and the Society for Classical Studies. The roundtable discussion is available on YouTube at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IfxmMe8VNa4>.

<sup>11</sup> The consultant for *Assassin's Creed Odyssey* was Dr. Stéphanie-Anne Ruatta (cf. HALL-DANSEREAU [2019]; REINHARD [2019]). For other discussions of scholarly involvement in contemporary video game production, cf. PAPROCKI (2020); POIRON (2021); SERRANO LOZANO (2021). For literature on scholars creating their own games, reconstructions, or modified versions of games, cf. GHITA-ANDRIKOPOULOS (2009); HOLTER et al. (2020); MCMANUS-JUNG (2012).

<sup>12</sup> Cf. GUILBERT et al. (2019: 108) for Herodotus, Thucydides and Pausanias; cf. GAINSFORD (2019) and ROLLINGER (2020b) for Homer, Archilochus, Alcaeus and Anacreon; cf. REINHARD (2019) for Aristophanes, Herodotus, Thucydides and Pausanias; cf. VANDEWALLE (2019) for Thucydides, Pausanias, Pindar and Aristophanes; cf. VANDEWALLE (2021b) for Plato (and Socrates).

<sup>13</sup> Cf. VANDEWALLE (2021c; 2022).

paper seeks to answer, then, is the following: which connections may be observed between the game and Homer's *Odyssey*? It aims to do so by unearthing the game's Odyssean subtext and to propose an understanding of *Assassin's Creed Odyssey* as a reception of the Homeric *Odyssey*. We will discuss this process of reception on three connected and mutually reinforcing levels of meaning. The first section of this paper is focused on the level of the game's underlying story structure and will establish *Assassin's Creed Odyssey* as 'an' odyssey, in accordance with the modern meaning of the word and its frequent usage in video games. The second section, situated on the level of both the game's specific narrative and its world design, considers the game's ties to Homer's *Odyssey* through the exploration of several intertextual references. Finally, the third section will examine the level of the game's main character and provide initial foundations towards a study of how the character of Cassandra may (in part) be thought of as a reception of Odysseus, since both serve as the protagonists of their respective odyssey narratives and share similar characteristics. Throughout the text, references will be made to a freely accessible 'game corpus' (or 'GC') which is available on YouTube and contains the passages of the game that were used and analyzed for this paper.<sup>14</sup>

### 1. *Assassin's Creed Odyssey* as odyssey

A first, 'easy', answer as to why the game is named *Odyssey* lies with the meanings and connotations of the modern word 'odyssey', which is defined by Merriam-Webster's Dictionary as 'a long wandering or voyage usually marked by many changes of fortune', or 'an intellectual or spiritual wandering or quest'. The story of *Assassin's Creed Odyssey* certainly

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<sup>14</sup> The GC can be found at <https://youtu.be/LTIqVfg4Xgs>, and is a compilation drawing from various playthroughs of the game. Recording one's gameplay is a suggested and recommended method within game studies and analysis (e.g. AARSETH [2003: 3]; CONSALVO-DUTTON [2006]; FERNÁNDEZ-VARA [2019: 51]) intended to provide transparency into the researcher's own version or actualization of the game 'text'. Contrary to literature or film (which generally are non-participatory experiences), the specific on-screen form of a video game will look different to each and every individual player due to these players' own in-game choices and behavior. In this context, gameplay recordings provide the readers of a game analysis with a transparent look into the actual form of the game that was experienced and analyzed by the researcher.

offers such a long wandering or voyage, as its story takes the player across the entire Greek world in search of Cassandra's family.

In doing so, the game inscribes itself into a long tradition of video games inspired by adventure stories and quest narratives.<sup>15</sup> Early video games were, for instance, heavily influenced by mythical voyages and Tolkienesque hero's journeys.<sup>16</sup> Examples include *Colossal Cave Adventure* (Crowther & Woods 1977), *Ultima I: The First Age of Darkness* (Garrriott 1981), *The Legend of Zelda* (Nintendo R&D4 1984), as well as the still incredibly popular table-top game *Dungeons & Dragons* (Gygax & Arneson 1974). Some games explicitly indicate their odyssean narrative structures in their title, such as *Oddworld: Abe's Oddyssey* (Oddworld Inhabitants 1997) or *Super Mario Odyssey* (Nintendo EPD 2017).<sup>17</sup> Interestingly, even the classical antiquity game *God of War* (SCE Santa Monica Studio 2005), which revolves around the character Kratos who violently takes on the Greek pantheon, was originally titled 'Dark Odyssey'.<sup>18</sup> This narrative structure (a hero embarks on a quest in an attempt to find specific objects, slay dangerous foes and restore balance to a disrupted equilibrium, whilst undergoing character change throughout this process) has remained popular in games ever since, as is for example evidenced by the success of online worlds such as *World of Warcraft* (Bliz-

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<sup>15</sup> For video games and quest structure, cf. AARSETH (2005).

<sup>16</sup> FIZEK (2012: 26–27); JENKINS (2004: 122); JUUL (1999: 10); JUUL (2005: 72); ROBINSON (2015: 126–127). For the Hero's Journey, cf. CAMPBELL (1949) and VOGLER (2007).

<sup>17</sup> It is also worth mentioning that there have been various video games that revolve more explicitly around (the myth of) Odysseus, such as *Ulysses and the Golden Fleece* (Sierra On-Line 1981), *The Odyssey* (Fasoulas 1984), *The Odyssey* (Duckworth Home Computing 1986), *Odyssey: The Search for Ulysses* (In Utero & Cryo Interactive 2000), *The Odyssey: Winds of Athena* (Liquid Dragon Studios 2006), *The Odyssey* (Crazysoft Limited 2012), *The Next Penelope* (Regard 2015) or *An Odyssey: Echoes of War* (Choice of Games 2019).

<sup>18</sup> SIRIO (2019). During Sirio's interview with Stig Asmussen (game director for *God of War III* [Santa Monica Studio 2010]), it was revealed that the name was changed since the game's marketing team considered it 'too high-brow, and people might not get it' (SIRIO *ibid.*). This brings up an interesting conversation on the connotations of the word 'odyssey' as a seemingly perceived 'high-brow' concept, despite its frequent and recurring use in popular culture. Similarly, the character 'Kratos' (whose name does not refer to the ancient mythological character from, for instance, Aesch. *PB*; cf. LOWE [2009: 82, n. 47]) was originally named 'Dominus' (SIRIO [2019]).

zard Entertainment 2004-) or *The Elder Scrolls Online* (Zenimax Online Studios 2014-) which are full of different quests and adventures.

The same narrative structures are found in *Assassin's Creed Odyssey*, as Cassandra explicitly embarks on a dangerous adventure to bring balance to her original family situation. The three overarching narratives mentioned above (i.e. Cassandra's family reunion, the fight against the Cult of Kosmos, and the task of slaying the mythical beasts) are presented as 'your odyssey' in the game's menu, and the journey of the player consists of various side-tracking adventures (called 'quests') and dangerous encounters with enemies.<sup>19</sup> Additionally, the odyssey-like qualities of the game are also deeply connected to a certain gameplay aspect that *Assassin's Creed Odyssey* introduced to the *Assassin's Creed* series, which is freedom of choice. For the first time in an *Assassin's Creed* game, the player chooses what their character says (out of a variety of pre-determined options) and is even able to choose specific narrative actions that Cassandra performs in the world of the game. These choices may have large consequences, including the life or death of in-game characters. This aspect of player choice was heavily present in the game's marketing campaign: in one of its trailers, a character is heard saying 'As you write your odyssey across the mountains and the seas, remember: the fate of Greece journeys with you', indicating the game's intention on having the player make decisions in order for them to 'write' their 'own' odyssey throughout the game.<sup>20</sup> Note especially the use of the second person singular, a typical technique in video games where the word 'you' refers to both the player and their character, who is virtually bound to the players' actions and decisions.<sup>21</sup> Since the player controls Cassandra, the game simulates not only Cassandra's odyssey but also the player's, and the player is free to choose their own path on their journey.

The general participatory nature of games (i.e. the audience is required to perform meaningful, non-trivial actions in order for the 'text to progress')<sup>22</sup> and the added mechanic of freedom of choice also mean

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<sup>19</sup> Cf. GUILBERT et al. (2019: 111).

<sup>20</sup> The trailer can be found at [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=s\\_SJZSAtLBA](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=s_SJZSAtLBA).

<sup>21</sup> Cf. SCHRÖTER (2013: 28); WALKER (2001); VELLA (2015: 5–6).

<sup>22</sup> Cf. AARSETH (1997: 1).

that each playthrough of the game will be different from another, and that every player chooses a specific balance between progressing the main story, going off the beaten path to explore the game world, listening to the world's inhabitants, and so on.<sup>23</sup> The many possible odysseys that *Assassin's Creed Odyssey* thus facilitates or allows may be considered as exhibiting a similar polytropy as Odysseus is attributed in the first line of the Homeric poem: frequently interrupted by unforeseen and unexpected activities, replete with spontaneous sidetracks to threatening foes or romantic partners, and ever shifting between moments of peace and quiet on the one hand and instances of thrilling action on the other, the story of *Assassin's Creed Odyssey* is an individual odyssey that takes on a specific shape according to the individual that embarks on it.

## 2. *Assassin's Creed Odyssey* and Homer's *Odyssey*

Moving on, then, to a discussion of *Assassin's Creed Odyssey's* affinity with, specifically, Homer's *Odyssey*, this section will explore the relationship between the two by examining various references made to the ancient text by the game. As we will see, most of the relevant references and environments are found near the beginning of the game (indeed, even before the *Assassin's Creed Odyssey* logo is shown to the player), so our attention will primarily be centered around the game's first missions.

The game's main narrative begins on the island of Kephallonia, where the player is first introduced to Kassandra.<sup>24</sup> The audience becomes acquainted with Kassandra's backstory through flashbacks: originally from Sparta and the grandchild of king Leonidas, she was cast from Mount Taygetos as a child by her father after trying to prevent her baby brother Alexios from suffering the same fate.<sup>25</sup> She survives the

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<sup>23</sup> The game's story thus quite nicely resembles NAGY's (2013: 276) description of the *Odyssey*: 'The plot of this story and its main character, once the *Odyssey* is fully told, will be a fusion of many different subplots and even of many different subcharacters.' The participatory nature of the game story means that each individual 'fusion' will be different.

<sup>24</sup> The beginning of the main story is preceded by a prologue which recounts the Battle of Thermopylae (480 BC), which the player experiences as Leonidas (Kassandra's grandfather).

<sup>25</sup> If the player chooses to play as Alexios, Kassandra is his baby sister and it is subsequently her who is initially cast from Mount Taygetos.



fall, however, and manages to acquire a small rowboat and sail away. She reaches Kephallonia, where she is rescued by a man called Markos who decides to take care of her. Markos is a kind but irresponsible man who owes money to many people on the island, including a dangerous figure called the Cyclops. In the present day, Cassandra is contacted by a sinister man called Elpenor (not connected, but perhaps a small reference to, the minor Homeric character who dies at *Od.* 10, 552–560), who asks Cassandra to retrieve Penelope's Shroud for him (i.e. the burial shroud she weaves by day and unravels by night in order to delay the suitors' advances, *Od.* 2, 96–110) from the ruins of Odysseus' palace on the neighboring island of Ithaka (GC1).<sup>26</sup> During this exchange, Elpenor brings up Homer's *Odyssey* and, revealingly, calls it an 'inspiring tale'. Cassandra agrees to his proposal and, as she sails to Ithaka, says: 'Headed to the house of Odysseus on a tiny boat... Let's try not to piss Poseidon off, shall we?' — a clear reference to the Greek myth (GC2).

Kassandra then ventures to Odysseus's Palace, the largest structure on the island, and recovers the Shroud (GC2).<sup>27</sup> The Palace lies in ruins, thereby invoking an oft-recurring iconography of antiquity in video games as a place that is already marked by and full of ruins (GC3).<sup>28</sup> The

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<sup>26</sup> The game identifies its Ithaka with the modern Ithaca (i.e. the island Ithaki), although it is debated whether the modern island is the same island as the one meant by Homer (cf. for example, BITTLESTONE et al. [2005]; BROWN [2020]; GOEKOOP [2010]). The details of this discussion are outside the scope of the present study.

<sup>27</sup> In the game, the Shroud is later fashioned into a hood that Kassandra may wear (the 'Shroud of Penelope', GC12), in keeping with the franchise's long-standing tradition of stealthy protagonists that wear hooded robes.

<sup>28</sup> In an analysis of the remarkably frequent inclusion of ruins in video games with ancient themes, LOWE (2012) distinguishes four modes in which video games reimagine classical antiquity: 'Reconstruction', where efforts are made to represent ancient history as it must have been for the people who lived it; 'Heritage', which focuses on presenting the afterlife of the ancient world (possibly even in the ancient world itself), including its ruins; 'Destruction', centered on the act and process of ruination (not just of buildings, but also of smaller objects such as vases; cf. CLARE [2021: 49–52] on this popular trope in the *God of War* series [2005-]); and 'Fantasy', where 'ruins are retrojected into the ancient past, to replace their own originals' (2012: 72) in an attempt to create a familiar, recognizable image of antiquity as a place that is ruined, instead of the actual antiquity itself. Odysseus's Palace in *Assassin's Creed Odyssey* primarily conforms to the 'Heritage' mode, not simply presenting the ruins of a bygone age but also,

palace design, however, is generic and resembles many other in-game forts and palaces scattered throughout the map (e.g. in Mycenae, on Thera, near Argos, etc.). Interestingly, the Palace includes Minoan and Mycenaean artwork, which decorates not only this palace but various older locations throughout the game world as well. Specifically, the artwork is inspired by distinct Minoan and Mycenaean art pieces that are easily recognizable as such: the Bull-Leaping Fresco, the Ladies in Blue Fresco, the Griffin Fresco, the Shield Frieze Fresco, relieving triangles above entrances, and spiral patterns.<sup>29</sup> Minoan and Mycenaean art is seemingly used as a symbolical indicator that a location, while ‘Greek’, is still older than the ‘Greek’ found in the rest of the world.

The player may then choose to explore the island, and discover various locations inspired by the Greek epic (see Fig. 1 for a map). For instance, the player may find a location called ‘Phorkys Anchorage’ (GC5), which refers to the harbor where Odysseus first arrives back on Ithaca in *Od.* 13, 96–113. The game does not include the ‘two projecting headlands’ from Homer (δύο δὲ προβλήτες ἐν αὐτῷ/ ἄκται, *Od.* 13, 97–98)<sup>30</sup>, but two outward-stretching coast lines on the sides of the harbor may be discerned, which may refer to these headlands.

Nearby lies the ‘Cave of the Nymphs’ (GC6), where in *Od.* 13, 355–369 Odysseus prays to the Naiads and stores his gifts from the Phaeacians. However, while the cave itself refers to Homer, its interior design is original and displays the generic cave design found in caves all across the game. The game may even include the olive tree that Homer mentions as standing between the harbor and the cave (τανύφυλλος ἐλαίη, *Od.* 13, 102), although the island has many of these trees and its presence here could be mere coincidence.

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especially with the character of Odessa encountered in this palace (cf. below), explicitly drawing attention to Odysseus’ lineage and descendants. Therefore, while others have remarked that *Assassin’s Creed Odyssey* generally moves away from the stereotypical ‘white marble ruins’ iconography of antiquity through, for instance, its attention to the polychromy of the ancient world (POLITOPOULOS et al. [2019: 319]), it still presents the motif of ruins at various instances.

<sup>29</sup> Elsewhere, the game also includes other pieces of Minoan art such as the Cup-Bearer Fresco in, for example, the ‘Submerged Minoan Palace’ location south of Keos.

<sup>30</sup> All translations from the *Odyssey* in this text stem from MURRAY (1995ab).

In the *Odyssey*, Athena then asks that Odysseus visit the pig farmer Eumaeus (*Od.* 13, 404), whose farm lies close to the 'rock of Corax and the spring of Arethousa' (*Od.* 13, 408). The game includes both a location called 'Eumaios's Pig Farm' (GC7) and one called 'Raven's Rock' (GC8), which may be identified with Homer's rock of Corax (the Greek word for 'raven'). Its location, however, seems off: following Athena's description, the rock should be near Eumaios's Pig Farm, but the game places it next to Phorkys Anchorage. Seeing as the game takes place during the Peloponnesian War, Eumaios's Pig Farm may also be perceived as an anachronism (one of many found in the game), but the location should rather be considered as the farm which was once, centuries ago, owned by Eumaios, instead of the farm that would currently be maintained by him.

A little bit to the north, the player will also find a place called 'Melanthios's Goat Farm' (GC9), referring to the disloyal goat herd who first appears in *Od.* 17, 212. He sees Eumaeus and the disguised Odysseus, and kicks the latter on his hip (an act he will later pay the price for).

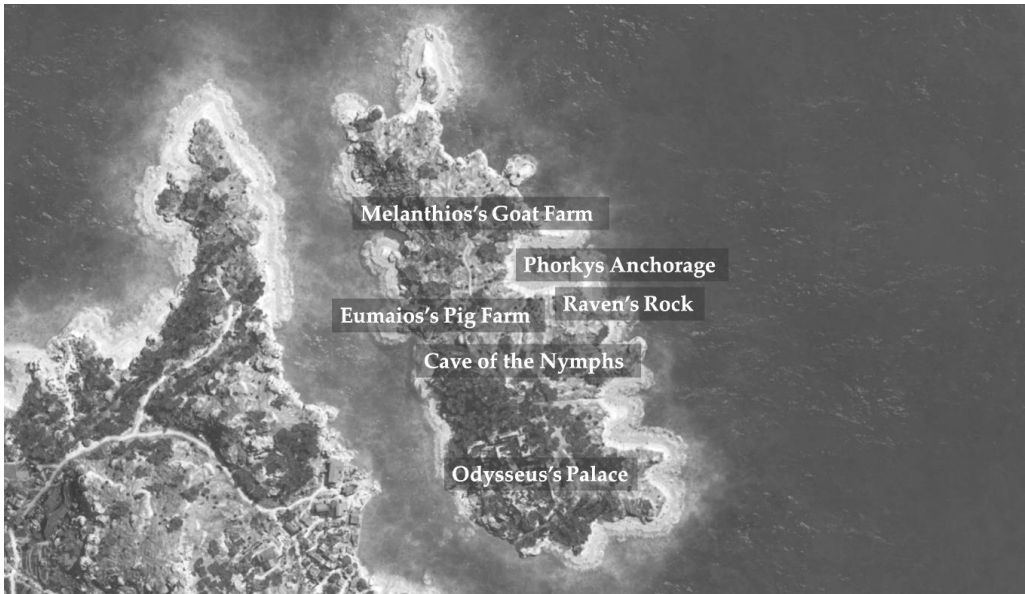


Fig. 1. *Assassin's Creed Odyssey's* Ithaka, including the names of all in-game locations.

The design of Ithaka, as well as that of most other locations on the map, thereby moves away from the exuberantly spectacularized or overly

stereotyped aesthetics that are often found in classical antiquity games.<sup>31</sup> Instead, the (main) game primarily participates in a Rankean aesthetic of realism aiming to show the past ‘how it was’ (albeit with several mythological features).<sup>32</sup>

However, while these various locations may be identified with the ancient descriptions through their names, their actual exterior or appearance does not match the descriptions in the *Odyssey*.<sup>33</sup> For example, in the *Odyssey* Eumaeus’ farm is situated on a high location with a wide view (περισκέπτω ἐνὶ χώρῳ, *Od.* 14, 6) and a beautiful and large courtyard (ἀύλῃ [...] καλή τε μεγάλη τε, *Od.* 14, 5–7).<sup>34</sup> In the game, however, the farm consists of a rather small house with an adjacent pigsty and tiny cabbage field, and without a particularly panoramic view. Similarly, while the *Odyssey* counts almost a thousand swine at the farm (600 females, 360 males, *Od.* 14, 13–20), in the game only a handful can be seen. We have already pointed to the game’s compression of ancient Greece: because of technological constraints (and creative feasibility) the game necessarily ‘shrinks’ Greece, which also allows the player to traverse the game world easier and faster. The developers then created the digital assets for several ‘possible’ locations (e.g. farms, forts, houses, ports, etc.) and reused and reconfigured these assets in different constellations throughout the world to build a visually and architecturally coherent, but still diverse world. The intertextuality with the ancient *Odyssey* therefore lies not so much with the individual intricacies of the locations that Homer describes; rather, the mere presence and referentiality

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<sup>31</sup> On spectacularization (and other similar modes of reception), cf. for example ANDRÉ-LÉCOLE-SOLNYCHKINE (2013: 90–92) or CLARE (2021: 35–57).

<sup>32</sup> CHAPMAN (2016: 61–69). Similarly, for instance, when the Athenian Acropolis appears in the game, it is not due to the game adhering to the so-called ‘Acropolis syndrome’ (ANDRÉ 2016: 71–77) that makes any game setting instantly recognizable as ‘ancient Greece/Athens’ simply by including the Acropolis, but rather because it intends to portray Athens as it was experienced in antiquity.

<sup>33</sup> Cf. FRENCH-GARDNER (2020: 65) on the importance of (recognizable) names in establishing a link between modern receptions and ancient elements, even though the resemblance may stop there.

<sup>34</sup> The argument may of course be made that, since the events of the *Odyssey* have already long transpired in the world of the game, the appearance of these locations has already changed over time.

of the locations in the game is more important than what these locations would actually have looked like according to Homer.

On the game’s map, these locations also receive brief descriptions (GC10).<sup>35</sup> For example, the Phorkys Anchorage is described as follows:

Named for the ancient sea god Phorkys, this bay was the first sight Odysseus saw upon his return. It provides a natural shelter for sailors from rough waters.

Similarly, the description for the Cave of the Nymphs reads:

This cave served as a shelter for the Naiads, young nymphs who spun the sea into a glistening purple cloth. Odysseus prayed here in joy upon his return.

These descriptions serve the purpose of further fleshing out the game world through the addition of backstories to and the recounting of the histories of the locations visited by the player. Interestingly, these descriptions seem to refer to or paraphrase actual lines from the *Odyssey*. The second sentence of the Phorkys description seems to be a paraphrase of *Od.* 13, 99–100, where it is mentioned that the harbor provides cover against dangerous waves created by stormy weather (αἶ τ’ ἀνέμων σκεπόωσι δυσσήων μέγα κῦμα/ ἔκτοθεν).<sup>36</sup> The cave description draws on *Od.* 13, 107b–108a (ἔνθα τε νύμφαι/ φάρε’ ὑφαίνουσιν ἀλιπόρφυρα), although the meaning of the phrase has changed: rather than weaving a cloth with the color of the purple sea, the game mentions that it is the sea that is spun into a purple cloth. The exact meaning of this is unclear: does the game claim that the Naiads are responsible

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<sup>35</sup> In order to access these descriptions, the player must turn on the ‘Historical Locations’ filter. HALL–DANSEREAU (2019) explain that many players did not find this feature. It is also worth pointing out that in a freely downloadable extra storyline released on December 14<sup>th</sup>, 2021 (which saw the addition of the island of Korfu), an extra Historical Location inspired by the *Odyssey* was added called ‘Pontikonisis Islet’, or the location where Poseidon turns the ship of the Phaeacians to stone after it had brought Odysseus to Ithaca (*Od.* 13, 163).

<sup>36</sup> Interestingly, both Homer and the game developers feel the need to explain the namesake of the location: the game explains Phorkys was a sea god; Homer attributes him the description ‘the old man of the sea’ (ἀλίιο γέροντος, *Od.* 13, 96).

for the purple color of the sea (where the purple cloth would be a metaphor for the purple-colored surface of the sea, but which would be strange given that the Naiads were primarily freshwater nymphs occupied with rivers, fountains, brooks, etc.), or does it say that the Naiads are spinning a purple cloth into which a textile sea pattern is woven? Nevertheless, these texts are additionally functional in establishing *Assassin's Creed Odyssey* as an entertainment product with educational potential: by offering the player valuable and mostly well-informed knowledge about the ancient world, the game may educate its non-classically trained audience during their act of play, or even prove interesting for use in pedagogical contexts.<sup>37</sup>

In Odysseus's Palace, the player may also find a so-called *ainigmata ostraka* or 'riddle potsherd' (the artificial Greek compound is used as a singular) that details an enigmatic description of a specific location where the player may find treasure (GC3). The Ithakan *ostraka*, called 'Fatal Attraction', reads as follows:

If you retrace the steps of Odysseus and take the path north, you will find a goat farm in Ithaka where he once met Athena. She helped him with a disguise to reclaim his wife and kill her suitors. Find your reward on a slaughtered goat.

In contrast to the previously discussed location descriptions, this *ostraka* leads to its own 'quest' (although the game does not use this word in this instance). The riddle refers to Melanthios's Goat Farm, where the

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<sup>37</sup> Much has been written and presented on the educational potential and applications of the *Assassin's Creed* series, e.g. GILBERT (2017); KARSENTI-PARENT (2020); MATUSZKIEWICZ-RUFFING (2021); RASSALLE (2020); VINCENT (2021); WAINWRIGHT (2014). Discussion has also revolved around the game's so-called *Discovery Tour*, a version of the game that acts as a 'virtual museum' and strips the game of its story and combat. Instead, guided tours are added, which were written in collaboration with scholars and consist of brief videos, texts and photographs with information on various aspects of the ancient world (e.g. politics, philosophy, art, etc.). On the production of the *Discovery Tour* for the game's predecessor, *Assassin's Creed Origins* (set in Ptolemaic Egypt), cf. POIRON (2021).

player may find their reward (GC9).<sup>38</sup> However, while the enigma mentions that Odysseus met Athena in that farm, Homer recounts that it is near the olive tree by the bay of Phorcys that Athena met Odysseus and gave him the disguise of a beggar (*Od.* 13, 429–438). Note especially the phrase 'If you retrace the steps of Odysseus', displaying the game's intention of having Cassandra (and her player) experience their own odyssey while treading in Odysseus' footsteps.

On Ithaka, the player also encounters a minor side-character called Odessa, who serves as the starting point for the side-quest 'A Small Odyssey' (GC4). Odessa says she is 'named after the great Odysseus' and even claims to be a descendant of the legendary hero (similarly to Cassandra, a descendant of Leonidas). She has embarked on her own odyssey to see the ruins of Odysseus' Palace and to 'seek his greatness'. Much later in the game, Cassandra also finds her in Megara, where she is taking care of her sick father in her large estate (GC15). Cassandra decides to help her but it soon turns out that Odessa is targeted by the leader of Megaris, who wants to seize her large estate and has even tried to arrange a marriage with her in order to acquire it, although Odessa had everyone of the men he sent killed. Odessa thus parallels Penelope, as the person defending a large estate by refusing the advances of outside suitors.<sup>39</sup>

Environmentally and climatologically speaking (GC11), the game places Ithaka in its so-called 'summer' biome: in order to create environmental variety, the game attributes different biomes (each with 'its own flora, fauna, weather systems, and unique topography')<sup>40</sup> to different regions, such as the warm summer climate we find on Ithaka which contrasts with, for example, the decidedly scorched, 'volcanic' biome of the islands Thera, Anaphi, Nisyros, Melos and Hydrea, or the 'deciduous forest' biome comprising not just the islands of Chios, Lesbos, Lemnos, Thasos, Euboea and Skyros, but also the mainland regions of

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<sup>38</sup> The reward is an engraving that players may add to their weapons to enhance their power. The engraving causes a +2% increase in damage dealt with swords and daggers.

<sup>39</sup> It is noteworthy that Cassandra, who we will later consider as similar to Odysseus, may 'romance' Odessa (cf. below; GC15), thereby symbolically referring to a union between Odysseus and Penelope.

<sup>40</sup> LEWIS (2018: 14).

Phokis, Malis and Makedonia.<sup>41</sup> The Homeric epithets associated with the island are also applicable to the island in the game, as the island is fittingly rocky (e.g. κραναήν Ἰθάκην)<sup>42</sup> and surrounded by sea (cf. ἀμφιάλω Ἰθάκη).<sup>43</sup> Since, as we have already mentioned, the game through technological necessity compresses ancient Greece, not much room is left for the absent Neriton mountain described by Homer (ἐν δ' ὄρος ἀντιῆ/ Νήριτον, *Od.* 9, 21–22), although a small forest is present (εἰνοσίφυλλον, *Od.* 9, 22) near the Palace.

Kassandra then returns to Elpenor with the Shroud, who surprisingly hands it over to her and explains that this was all just a test to see her abilities (GC12). He has another assignment for her, which requires her to sail to Megaris where she must kill the man known as the Wolf of Sparta. Before she leaves, however, Kassandra hears that the Cyclops – the dangerous figure who holds sway over Kephallonia – is coming after Markos. This version of the Cyclops is a human who has lost one of his eyes, and instead uses a replacement eye made of obsidian. Kassandra tracks him down and, before eventually killing him, taunts him by inserting his obsidian eye into the posterior of a spontaneously passing goat (GC13). It is remarkable that a Cyclops needs to be defeated and removed of the possession of his eye in order for the journey to start, since it is primarily after Odysseus defeats and taunts Polyphemus that his troubles and wandering begin. As already mentioned, Kassandra also encounters some 'actual' Cyclopes on her journey, but the inclusion of an (albeit human) Cyclops figure at the very beginning of the game next to various other Homeric references is noteworthy, and productive in establishing the game's relationship with the ancient *Odyssey*.

Once Kassandra leaves Kephallonia for good, we see the *Assassin's Creed Odyssey* title card and her journey (indeed, her odyssey) begins (GC14). Both Odysseus' and Kassandra's odysseys are tales of *nostos*, or homecoming: indeed, the very last mission of the game's main story

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<sup>41</sup> Cf. LEWIS (*ibid.*); HALL–DANSEREAU (2019).

<sup>42</sup> Cf. Hom. *Od.* 1, 247; 15, 510; 16, 124; 21, 346; Hom. *Il.* 3, 201. Cf. also *Od.* 10, 417 and 10, 463 for τρηχείης Ἰθάκης (or *Od.* 13, 242), or *Od.* 11, 480 for Ἰθάκην ἐς παιπαλόεσσον (GOEKOOP 2010: 130).

<sup>43</sup> Cf. Hom. *Od.* 1, 386; 1, 395; 1, 401; 2, 293; 21, 252.



('Dinner in Sparta')<sup>44</sup> sees Cassandra literally come home and have dinner with her family in her childhood home in Sparta.<sup>45</sup> Yet, whereas Odysseus traveled ten years to get to Ithaca, we have seen that Cassandra starts her journey right after she leaves it. Cassandra therefore experiences what may be called an inverse odyssey: the goal is still to reunite with her family (similarly to Odysseus' journey), but instead of traveling throughout the Greek world to reach Ithaca, she leaves Ithaca on a quest that takes her throughout the Greek world. The placement of Ithaca at the opening of the game is interesting, seeing as the Odyssean subtext thus colors and frames the game from its very beginning: while the overt Odyssean references largely disappear after this point, the initial references invite players to remember the ancient story and to believe that they themselves are also embarking on their own odysseys.

The Homeric identifications on Ithaca are also tied to the game's 'high concept' approach to its location design. Many of the game's locations are specifically centered around one theme, story, or concept: Nisyros, for instance, consists of only one location (the lair of the Cyclops Arges); the storyline on Melos revolves around the in-game 'Battle of One Hundred Hands', a tournament where Cassandra must fight a large number of enemies (as a metaphor for slaying one of the Hecatoncheires); Keos is the home of pirate leader Xenia, and multiple quests set on the island revolve around pirate-based activities; most of the quests in the Kretan region of Pephka are Minotaur-themed, and so on. Within this context, Ithaca is the island of Odysseus and, by extension, the island of Homer: its purpose is to make the player aware of the

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<sup>44</sup> While 'Dinner in Sparta' is the final mission of the 'Odyssey' storyline, it is still succeeded by an epilogue called 'We Remember'. Depending on how the player has treated Cassandra's family members (her mother Myrinne, her brother Alexios, her father Nikolaos and his adoptive son, Stentor), the player may actualize one out of nine endings with different character constellations. For instance, if the player had chosen to kill Nikolaos upon meeting him, he will not be present at the dinner party and the actualized ending will be different from the one experienced by players who spared him.

<sup>45</sup> On *nostos*, cf. NAGY (2013: 275). NAGY explains that the word *nostos* at once comprises both the hero's homecoming as well as the song of that homecoming (i.e. the *Odyssey*). In this sense, Cassandra's *nostos* is not just her quest to reunite her family, but also the video game *Assassin's Creed Odyssey* itself.

Greek myth that eponymously inspired the game, and to introduce a mythological dimension to the game's main historical narrative. By incorporating the remnants of the Homeric past into the design of the game world, and by actively drawing attention to them, the game also historicizes these mythological stories, and proposes a version of ancient Greece where these stories actually took place.

We see, therefore, that the game is connected to Homer's *Odyssey* in a variety of ways. The main theme of the game's central narrative (a quest to see a family reunited) corresponds to the theme of the ancient text and, while the game odyssey's direction is reversed, similar scenes and quests invite the player to interpret their actions as similar to the ones told by Homer. The design of the game world also includes direct references to locations and descriptions from the Greek poem, and draws attention to the legacy of the Greek myth within the historical context of the game.

### 3. **Kassandra and Odysseus**

One can, however, also think of the game's protagonist, Kassandra, as a parallel of Odysseus. Kassandra is similar to Odysseus, of course, in the primary sense that both are the protagonists that embark on their respective odysseys to return to their family, and that both slay many (mythical and similar) foes encountered on their voyages. The resemblance runs deeper, however, as will be argued in this section.

The first lines of the *Odyssey* offer a brief, though poignant description of its main character. In translation, they read (*Od.* 1, 1–10):

Tell me, Muse, of the man of many devices, driven far astray after he had sacked the sacred citadel of Troy. Many were the men whose cities he saw and whose minds he learned, and many the woes he suffered in his heart upon the sea, seeking to win his own life and the return of his comrades. Yet even so he did not save his comrades, for all his desire, for through their own blind folly they perished—fools, who devoured the cattle of Helios Hyperion; whereupon he took from them the day of their returning. Of these things, goddess, daughter of Zeus, beginning where you will, tell us in our turn.

We are specifically interested here in several aspects that find parallels in *Assassin's Creed Odyssey's* design of Kassandra. Homer, for instance, de-

scribes the many cities and people that Odysseus encountered on his journey (πολλῶν δ' ἀνθρώπων ἴδεν ἄστεα καὶ νόον ἔγνω, *Od.* 1, 3).<sup>46</sup> We have already pointed out how Cassandra visits the entirety of 'Greece' on her journey, and is confronted with various people 'whose minds (*noos*) she learns', since every in-game region contains various quests that bring her into contact with everyday people who need and ask for her help.<sup>47</sup> Homer then focuses on Odysseus' suffering and woes (πολλὰ δ' ὅ γ' ἐν πόντῳ πάθεν ἄλγεα ὄν κατὰ θυμόν, *Od.* 1, 4). He also draws attention to the comrades Odysseus lost (ἀλλ' οὐδ' ὡς ἐτάρου ἐρρύσατο, ἰέμενός περ, *Od.* 1, 6). Cassandra's voyage is similarly full of pain and death. In the game's epilogue (called 'We Remember'), Cassandra meets Sokrates at the Cemetery Road in Athens, where they reminisce about those they lost. Sokrates' first reaction when Cassandra approaches is 'Behold, I've kept myself alive', thereby bringing up the theme of loss and affirming that he is not among those who perished. Cassandra and Sokrates then remember Phoibe, a girl from Kephallonia and friend to Cassandra who was killed by the Cult of Kosmos during the Plague of Athens. Next is Perikles, who also died during the Plague (murdered by the game's main antagonist, Deimos). Finally, they reminisce about Brasidas of Sparta, who became Cassandra's ally after defeating a common enemy together in Korinth and was killed by Deimos in the Battle of Amphipolis. Both Cassandra and Odysseus are therefore heroes partially characterized by their failure to keep the ones around them safe.

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<sup>46</sup> On *Assassin's Creed's* conception of history as a vivid and living place where attention is granted to everyday people and activities, cf. CASEY (2021); GILBERT (2019); GUESDON (2018); HALL-DANSEREAU (2019).

<sup>47</sup> NAGY (2013: 312) has described the concept of *noos* as a mental process of adaptation: 'Odysseus keeps on adapting his identity by making his *noos* fit the *noos* of the many different characters he encounters.' The same applies to Cassandra: isolated from most of the Greek world on Kephallonia (indeed, unaware that the Peloponnesian War had even started; GC12), her quest sees her reintegrate into Greek society and acquaint her with varying perspectives on that Greek world. As a mercenary, she never explicitly chooses sides in the conflict, thereby showing her capability to adapt to different situations. Since the player controls Cassandra's choices, the extent to which she adapts her *noos* to that of others (or, conversely, radically rejects this adaptation) will differ from playthrough to playthrough.

Furthermore, we have already drawn attention to the aspect of choice that *Odyssey* introduced to the *Assassin's Creed* franchise (and that remained in its successor, *Assassin's Creed Valhalla*). Player choice takes many forms in the game, including free roam through the game's open world and character customization.<sup>48</sup> The main way, however, that player choice is integrated into the game consists of dialogue options, which sometimes lead to specific actions within the story. Presented with a given problem, for instance, the player can choose the way Kassandra responds, and sometimes this choice brings with it one of three actions (aside from the general accepting or refusing of quests). These three actions are: Attack (indicated with a crossing swords icon; cf. Fig. 2), Lie (indicated with a scale), and Flirt (indicated with a heart). These three choices are all distinct actions that Homer's Odysseus is shown performing and which he is, arguably, famous for doing.

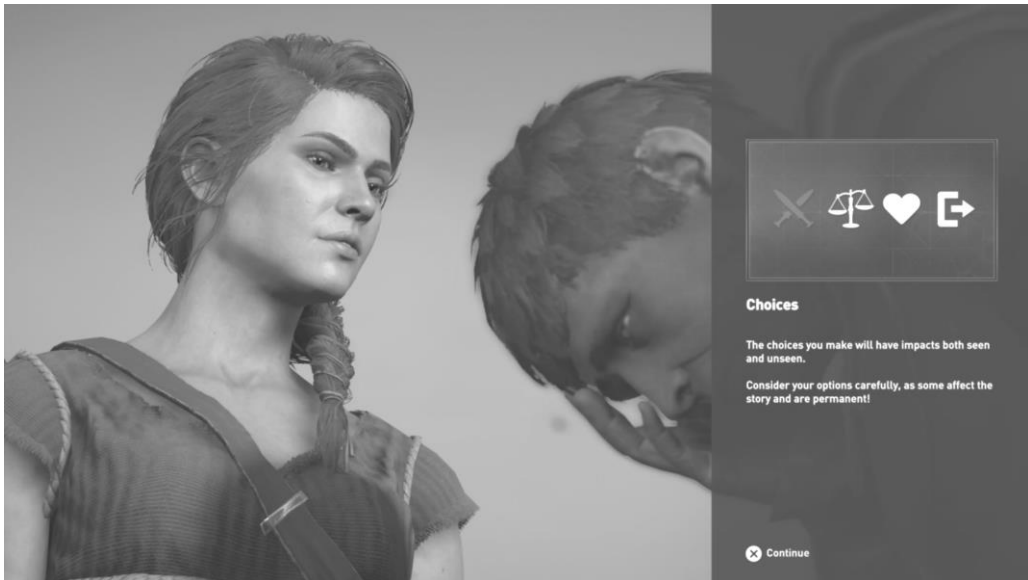


Fig. 2. The game explains the different choices that the player may make as Kassandra.

The Attack option is the least surprising (and by extension, perhaps, convincing) parallel between the two heroes. Violence is still one of the most common forms of action within video games, in part since 'guns and weaponlike interfaces offer such easy immersion and such a direct

<sup>48</sup> The player is, for instance, able to customize their character's weapons and armor, as well as select the special abilities that Kassandra may use throughout the game.

sense of agency'.<sup>49</sup> Similarly, Greek heroes were defined by their glorious deeds, often tied to their feats in battle. Both Cassandra and Odysseus are powerful warriors and well-versed in various types of weaponry: Odysseus is said to be an expert with the spear (e.g. *Il.* 11, 401) and the bow (*Od.* 8, 215, cf. below), whereas Cassandra may use swords, daggers, staffs, heavy blunt weapons (e.g. maces or battle hammers), heavy bladed weapons (e.g. battle axes or scythes), spears and bows. Both heroes therefore exhibit a certain martial versatility and skill that surpass the abilities of the people around them.

The Lie option offers a deeper parallel. Odysseus has been studied in connection to the various lies he tells in the *Odyssey*, such as the several 'Cretan lies' where he assumes different identities connected to Crete and its king, Idomeneus.<sup>50</sup> His lies have, for example, been connected to his need for survival and his gradually accumulated cautious nature.<sup>51</sup> One scholar even considered Odysseus as 'the only Homeric hero who is renowned for lying'.<sup>52</sup> Similarly, Cassandra is able to lie on various occasions and for various purposes (e.g. to help or save a friend, to cover up a crime or failure, etc.). While Cassandra's lies less serve the purpose of her immediate survival, they do establish her (especially in combination with her general verbal abilities, strong enough to challenge even Sokrates at times) as a Greek hero who is not only martially proficient, but also as someone who is skillful with words and capable of manipulating and possibly avoiding dangerous situations through speech.<sup>53</sup>

Finally, the Flirt option allows Cassandra to engage in sexual relations with various characters throughout her journey. Odysseus is similarly depicted in several extra-marital romances in the *Odyssey*. For instance, at *Od.* 5, 225–227, Homer describes a sexual encounter between Odysseus and Calypso:

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<sup>49</sup> MURRAY ([1997] 2017: 181). Cf. also SERRANO LOZANO (2020: 56–58) for a discussion on violence in classical antiquity games. Cf. LEVY (2021) on what classical antiquity games could do 'more' than the mere presentation of violence.

<sup>50</sup> For example, cf. HAFT (1984); SCHMOLL (1990); TRAHMAN (1952); WALCOT (1977).

<sup>51</sup> Cf. HAFT (1984: 299); SCHMOLL (1990: 67); TRAHMAN (1952: 35).

<sup>52</sup> SCHMOLL (1990: 67).

<sup>53</sup> Cf. WALCOT (1977: 9).

So he spoke, and the sun set and darkness came on. And the two went into the innermost recess of the hollow cave, and took their joy of love, remaining by each other.

This scene has been described as exhibiting a ‘casual attitude towards sexual relations’.<sup>54</sup> Cassandra’s attitude towards these matters seems to be of a similarly casual nature, as on multiple occasions she is given the option to engage in sexual activities without the purpose of initiating a romantic relationship. For example, at one point (in the side-quest ‘Age is Just a Number’, set in Delphi), Cassandra may choose to ‘help out’ an older woman named Auxesia whose husband Koragos had lost his sexual drive due to old age. The Flirt action may even lead to a Calypso or Circe-like ‘island romance’: when Cassandra reaches Hydrea, she encounters a woman called Roxana whom she may ‘romance’; similarly, when Cassandra arrives on Mykonos, she has the option to romance a woman named Kyra or a man called Thaletas, which leads to its own associated sub-plot.

When taken together, these three possible actions (Attack, Lie, Flirt) allow to consider Cassandra as a character modeled on Odyssean foundations. Players may also choose to further the relationship between Odysseus and Cassandra by purchasing one of several extra downloadable ‘packs’ for the game, i.e. several pieces of armor or weaponry that the player can buy and which enhance the character’s in-game abilities. One of these is the ‘Odysseus Pack’ (GC16–17), which allows Cassandra to use Odysseus’ armor and weapons and, in doing so, to metonymically ‘become’ Odysseus himself. The Odysseus Pack also allows the player to customize their horse (Phobos) as a fully navigable Trojan horse, referring to Odysseus’ successful plan that ended the Trojan War. It is worth examining the gameplay enhancements of the items included in the Odysseus Pack (cf. Table 1), as these statistically characterize Odysseus in the universe of the game.

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<sup>54</sup> HEUBECK et al. (1988: 273).

Table 1. The Odysseus Pack gameplay enhancements.

Item	Enhancement
<i>Odysseus’ Bow</i>	+19% Hunter Damage +14% Damage with Bow Charged Shot +30% Elemental Damage but -30% Elemental Buildup
<i>Odysseus Greaves</i>	+19% Hunter Damage +14% Damage with Bow Charged Shot
<i>Odysseus Breastplate</i>	+19% Hunter Damage +14% Damage with Bow Charged Shot
<i>Odysseus Belt</i>	+19% Hunter Damage +7% CRIT Chance
<i>Odysseus Hood</i>	+19% Hunter Damage +21% Damage with Bows on Distant Targets
<i>Odysseus Bracers</i>	+19% Hunter Damage +35% CRIT Damage
<b><i>Odysseus Set</i></b>	<b>Gain 50% of an Adrenaline Segment with Hunter Abilities</b>
<i>Trojan Horse</i>	/

As can be seen in Table 1, each item (except for the Trojan Horse, which is purely cosmetic and has no statistical or strategic impact on the game) enhances Cassandra’s so-called Hunter abilities. These are the abilities provided by the ‘Hunter’ class of gameplay, i.e. one of three classes of abilities (Hunter, Warrior and Assassin) that each emphasize a different aspect of combat: while the Hunter class revolves around ranged attacks (any damage done from afar, e.g. with a bow), the Warrior class involves hand-to-hand action and the Assassin class increases stealth. The Odysseus Pack items also give extra damage while using bows and increases the player’s chance of performing a critical hit (‘CRIT’) to an enemy. This shows us that the game perceives Odysseus primarily as a bowman, which fits Hom. *Od.* 8, 215–223 where Odysseus proclaims himself as a master bowman, second only to Philoctetes, as well as the famous episode in *Od.* 21, 416–423 where he fires an arrow through the twelve axes.<sup>55</sup>

<sup>55</sup> In the *Iliad*, however, Odysseus instead appears primarily as a spearman (cf. HAFT 1984: 297; HEUBECK et al. 1988: 359), as he is for example often attributed the epithet δουρικλυτός (cf. *Il.* 11, 396; 11, 401; 16, 26). Given that Odysseus also appears as a bowman in the video game *Immortals Fenyx Rising* (Ubisoft Quebec 2020), which was developed by the same studio as *Assassin’s Creed Odyssey* and released two years later,

The relationship between Cassandra and Odysseus deserves further examination, but I hope to have already shown interesting similarities between them in the previous discussion. Odysseus is, however, not the only parallel with ancient characters that may be drawn. For example, it has been pointed out that Cassandra may be perceived as a Spartan Amazon who challenges the traditional gender roles of ancient Greece.<sup>56</sup> A look into the early concept art created by the developers also reveals the influence of the superhero character Wonder Woman, a character from DC Comics who is equally an Amazonian warrior.<sup>57</sup> At several instances, non-playable characters encountered in the game world will also explicitly compare Cassandra to other heroes or demi-gods such as Achilles or Heracles, elevating Cassandra to a comparable position and facilitating her characterization as a similar Greek hero.<sup>58</sup> These various inspirations co-exist, and Cassandra thus becomes a ground zero for a complex mixture of adaptation processes that imbue her with the identity and characterizations of various well-known names from Greek antiquity.<sup>59</sup>

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we may say that the understanding of Odysseus as a Bowman transcends the game *Assassin's Creed Odyssey* proper and may be considered as a more general conceptualization of the character by Ubisoft Quebec. In *Immortals Fenyx Rising*, the protagonist Fenyx also carries a bow that is named the 'Bow of Odysseus', and often engages in 'Odysseus Bow Challenges' where an arrow needs to be fired through several axes.

<sup>56</sup> DAGIOS (2020: 134–140).

<sup>57</sup> LEWIS (2018: 34). This source of inspiration has also been explicitly alluded to by some of the game's leading developers (HALL–DANSEREAU 2019).

<sup>58</sup> For example, in the quest 'A New Horizon', Herodotos (who becomes Cassandra's companion relatively early in the game and subsequently accompanies her on her odyssey) predicts that 'Heroes like Cassandra will live on in the stories and legends of their triumphs. They live forever.' Similarly, in the side-quest 'Not My Mother's Daughter', the character Zopheras asks Cassandra: 'Did Zeus give you any special powers? You know, Achilles got invulnerability, Herakles got the strength of a god...' Cassandra replies: 'If you know the old stories, you know what Zeus is especially good at', hinting at sexual skills in line with the Flirt action. Note the almost superhero-like descriptions of ancient heroes, as characters such as Achilles or Heracles become defined by a specific supernatural power not unlike those of contemporary superhero characters.

<sup>59</sup> Or, adapting an insight of ANDRÉ–LÉCOLE–SOLNYCHKINE (2013: 93) on the landscape design of classical antiquity games, we may suggest that Cassandra becomes 'a dialogue of forms, which appears as a palimpsest of receptions' (my translation).



#### 4. Conclusion

In summary, why is the game called *Odyssey*? The goal of this paper has been to explore the relationship between the Homeric poem and the modern video game, which despite the subtitle '*Odyssey*' has largely gone unexplored in current research on the game. We have discussed the game on three levels: its underlying story structure, its specific narrative and world design, and its main character. It was pointed out that the game places itself in a long tradition of quest-adventure games, offering players the experience of their own odysseys and the possibility to make meaningful choices on their journey. We have also drawn attention to some striking thematic, narrative, environmental and textual references that lay bare the game's inspiration by the ancient text. Finally, although this topic could be researched further, we have discussed several similarities between the two odysseys' protagonists and seen that these are described by their respective texts in parallel ways. Players may even enhance their character with Odysseus' gear and armor. The game therefore presents itself as a multifaceted re-imagination of Homer's *Odyssey*, where the ancient *Odyssey* is re-interpreted into a historical context and re-enacted by a player: while the game does not explicitly retell the events of the Homeric poem and sets its story during the Peloponnesian War, this historical background is supplemented by a layer of mythology that colors it from its very beginning, asking that we re-enact and 'retrace the steps of Odysseus' with a character that exhibits similar characteristics to Odysseus himself. Whatever form this odyssey takes, however, is up to you.

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