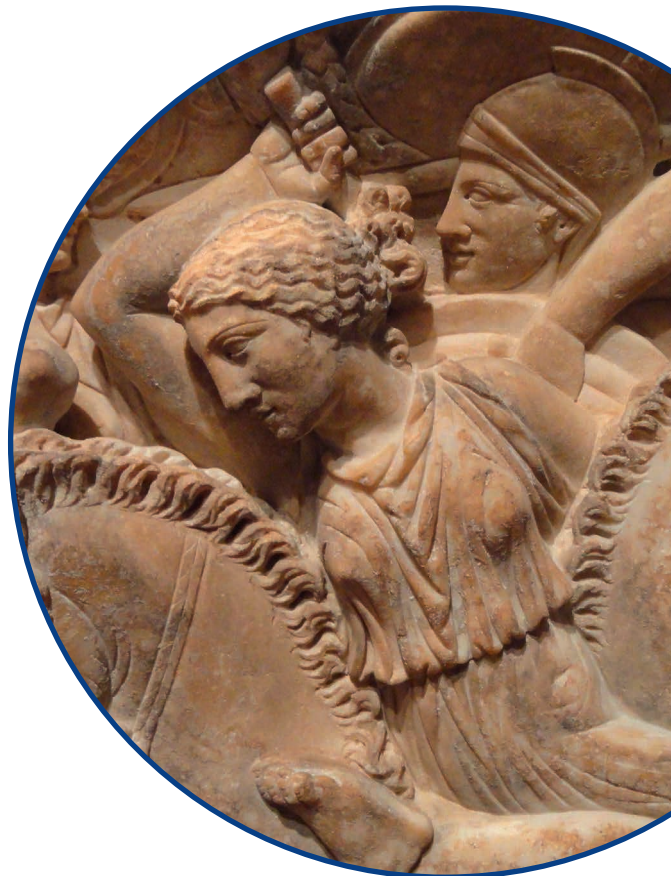


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ALEXANDER VANDEWALLE

(University of Antwerp, Ghent University)

## **Review of Ross Clare: *Ancient Greece and Rome in Videogames. Representation, Play, Transmedia***

**Bloomsbury Academic (London, New York 2021)  
(= IMAGINES – Classical Receptions in the Visual and Performing Arts), x + 230 pages, 25 illustrations. ISBN: 9781350157194 (hardback), \$ 115.00, £ 85.00 hardback, also available as e-book (PDF, Epub, Mobi)**

Increasingly, the study of antiquity and video games is growing into its own separate subdiscipline within classical reception studies. Ross Clare's *Ancient Greece and Rome in Videogames. Representation, Play, Transmedia* (2021) marks an important step in the evolution of this field, as it is the first monograph in English on the topic of Classics and video games. Therefore, Clare's book may already be considered a milestone in this growing body of research simply because of its very existence.

As Clare explains (p. 3), his book is intended for a wide audience (perhaps primarily, however, of classical antiquity scholars), regardless of their familiarity with video games or game studies. As such, one part of the book's introduction, as well as the entirety of Chapter 1, is devoted to an exposition of several concepts crucial to understanding games, including player agency, immersion, cutscenes (and the criticisms thereof) or game genre. Clare does so by drawing upon

the work of several pioneering game scholars (e.g. Aarseth, Murray, Ryan, Juul, Eskelinen). He also surveys the existing body of work on Classics and games, yet while his overview certainly presents a practical summary that will prove useful for those eager to study games, it remains primarily restricted to the Anglophone tradition, meaning that authors not writing in English are often not mentioned. Most notably absent is the French work by Laury-Nuria André, whose 2016 book *Game of Rome. L'Antiquité vidéoludique* is the first monograph in this field altogether, and whose insights into, for example, the spectacularizing forces at work in games such as *God of War* (2005) may have proven valuable to the analysis presented in Chapter 2. Clare also provides an introduction to historical game studies, the research field that specifically concerns itself with the study of history in games and that has grown in size considerably over the past decade.

Clare's primary focus lies with how 'classical antiquity' is imagined and experienced in contemporary popular culture, specifically during – and because of – the consumption of popular media texts. In that respect, video games present a more than intriguing case study, since the medium empowers its audience with agency over how the texts unfold. Yet, at the same time, Clare's analyses aim to uncover broader, what he aptly calls "informal" (p. 8) modalities of antiquity in the twenty-first century.

These, Clare argues, ultimately form their own "transmedial world" (p. 28) of concepts, which he explains as "a shared mental warehouse of impressions of antiquity" (p. 31). This conceptualization will undoubtedly prove valuable for many future academic endeavors involving popular classical receptions.

At its core, the book revolves around three separate case studies, each of which highlights an important and representative aspect of video games and antiquity. The first (Chapter 2) is called 'Finding a New Epic in Action-Adventure Videogames' and investigates the proliferation of cinematic notions of 'epic' or 'epicness' in modern action games. The first part of the chapter focuses on the *God of War* trilogy (2005–2010). Clare successfully points to the adaptation and transformation of visual strategies that entered into the aforementioned "transmedial world" (p. 28) via previous cinematic (and televisual) receptions, including the game's almost "balletic" (p. 45) action, its blood and violence, its reliance on the typically male and muscular iconography of classical heroes, and more. The analysis additionally includes vital discussions of, for example, the protagonist Kratos (tracing his backstory to Euripides' *Hercules Furens*), the game's monster and 'boss' design, its architecture (and the player's destruction of it), its gender representations and more, making it one of the most complete studies of the *God of War* series so far. Particularly

interesting are the brief discussions of the games' control schemes (e.g. p. 48; 55), an aspect that is often overlooked in game research. The *God of War* analysis finally brings Clare to the conceptualization of an epic game tradition, "wherein central tenets of the epic film tradition are borrowed and altered to fit the interactive process" (p. 57).

Yet, Clare also clarifies that this epic game tradition is not confined to highly commercial, corporate, so-called 'triple-A' titles that revolve around Greek mythology. The remainder of the first case study traces similar visions and attestations of 'epicness' in other game contexts, such as the independent game sector (Clare studies *Apotheon* (2015) and *Okhlos: Omega* (2016)) or games that do not deal with epic Greek, but with epic Roman content (specifically, *Gladiator: Sword of Vengeance* (2003) and *I, Gladiator* (2015)). Clare provides convincing arguments to consider these games as similar exponents of the same epic game tradition.

The second case study (Chapter 3) is concerned with 'Ideas of "Rome" in Ancient Strategy Games'. Clare identifies a distinct 'Roman language' that permeates through ancient strategy games, one that emphasizes popular perceptions of 'Rome' as, for example, "organizational and managerial in nature" (p. 81). The chapter studies *Caesar III* (1998) and *CivCity: Rome* (2006), yet the bulk is devoted to *Imperium Romanum* (2008). Clare

draws attention to how this Roman language is infused with contemporary elements, by for example calling out the implementation of modern capitalist economics in these strategy games, and investigates the extent to which players are allowed or even required to engage in acts of colonialism. He concludes that these games oftentimes construct "an ahistorical Rome, a "Rome" firmly of post-antique origins" (p. 115) because of their reliance on the ideas found in the aforementioned "trans-medial world" of popular antiquity. As in Chapter 1, these insights are then applied to different contexts that challenge them, such as *Hegemony III: Clash of the Ancients* (2015), which shows traces of the same language in its depiction of a pre-imperial 'Rome', as well as *Age of Gladiators* (2016) which applies the strategy paradigm to the context of Roman gladiator arenas (and therefore differs from the more action-oriented gladiator games discussed in Chapter 2). Finally, Clare moves on to an analysis of *Age of Mythology* (2002), which transforms the genre structure or 'language' described in the previous analyses due to its more positively intercultural and mythological narrative format.

The third and final study (Chapter 4), entitled 'First-Person Antiquity: Contemporaneity and Experimentality', is concerned with games that have the player look at the in-game events through the 'eyes' of their avatar. While

the notion of identification between the player and a first-person avatar/character is perhaps accepted a little hastily (p. 117), it is Clare's thesis that these games are "bound [...] by their unique treatment of classical materials" (*ibid.*) and that they, through the first-person perspective, additionally possess a particular capacity to convey powerful messages to their player. The chapter comprises three excellent case studies: one discusses the "weird antiquity" (p. 124) of *Salammbô: Battle for Carthage* (2002) and how this 'weirdness', for example, avoids practices of Othering that were noted in Chapter 3; one analyzes how the horror game *Eleusis* (2013), set in modern times, reconfigures the Eleusinian Mysteries into, among others, a contemporary narrative of environmentalism; and, finally, one revolves around how the visual novels *Melos* (2015) and *Helena's Flowers* (2015) transform the classical characters of Sappho and Helen into responses to modern issues of gender and the lack of positive female representation in both games and the game industry. Clare thus concludes that "the first-person framework provides a template for perhaps the most experimental, varied, and immersive virtual ancient worlds" (p. 156), and shows that these admittedly less commercial games fare very differently as far as their reliance on popular or recognizable transmedial tropes is concerned.

After the analyses and a general conclusion follows a brief but welcome

epilogue named 'Next Steps (Or, The Inevitable Sequel)' where Clare takes up a reflective position and imagines future ventures for this work. He proposes the application of his concepts to different games (e.g. the *Assassin's Creed* series (2007–)) or different genres (e.g. gambling or virtual reality games) that did not fit in this monograph. He also suggests the application of his trans-medial framework to games that less overtly deal with the ancient past, such as the *Halo* series (2001–), which consists of first-person shooter games with a science-fiction setting that contain several classical references (for instance, the protagonist Master Chief is part of a group of supersoldiers known as 'Spartans'). The epilogue exemplifies the wide applicability of Clare's work, and it will undoubtedly be interesting to observe where future scholarship takes Clare's insights.

It is clear that Clare's analyses discuss a laudably wide and representative array of games (not all the games discussed by Clare are named in this review). From a practical standpoint, his analyses must additionally be credited for their attention to previously understudied (or, even further, currently unstudied) games and/or genres: in the case of the visual novels, for example, Clare's is the only academic analysis so far. Clare thus notably expands the scope of the field, and offers essential foundations upon which future analyses can be built.

The terms that Clare uses to describe these games that are set in classical antiquity, i.e. “ancient games” (or “ancient gameplay”) do remain somewhat vague and open to discussion. These terms could, for instance, be equally applicable to games *that are ancient*, such as the ancient Egyptian game *Senet*. Authors in the field have so far employed various names to describe ‘the video game set in or engaging with classical antiquity’, with no standard nomenclature currently in use (the situation is different in historical game studies, where ‘historical video game’ has become a relatively standardized term). Clare’s “ancient game” does not provide a concluding solution, although his “antiquity-based game” (p. 4) or “ancient-world games” (p. 8 and *passim*), which are sometimes (but less frequently) used as synonyms, already seem steps in a better direction.

In Chapter 1, Clare expresses his “sincere hope [...] that this book will measure up to and complement” (p. 16) the collected volume *Classical Antiquity in Video Games* (also featuring a chapter by Clare), edited by Christian Rollinger and published in 2020. At the book’s close, the reader can only consider Clare’s enterprise as successful. The field’s first monograph in English is a timely, thorough and captivating product of research that offers a useful gateway into the world of gaming for the uninitiated, and pushes the topic into innovative and crucial new directions for those with prior playtime.

Clare’s focus lies less with how these games incorporate historical processes or recreate the classical past; instead, he is concerned with the role they offer to the player audience, as well as with the wider cultural meanings the games help construe. His analyses are not simply interested in identifying ancient equivalents of the games’ subject materials or in assessing their historical or literary referentiality, but equally in highlighting their existence across a broader cultural spectrum. In doing so, the book is more than a collection of game-text analyses: through the connections it draws between these games and wider transmedial phenomena, as well as with classical antiquity itself, it becomes an important reference point for anyone interested in the *Nachleben* of the ancient world in today’s cultural imagination.

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