

CHAPTER 2

A HISTORICAL ANALYSIS OF WOMEN IN VIDEO GAMES BASED ON CLASSICAL ANTIQUITY

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Introduction

In 2018, the presence of too many hireable women generals in the game *Total War: Rome II* caused a public controversy.¹ Calls decrying a lack of ‘historical accuracy’ arose, despite women military leaders being known historically² and the game only allowing a small percentage of available generals to be women. Their inclusion was also limited to only a few select factions and it had been unchanged since its introduction six months prior. Nevertheless, it was only until then that controversy arose and negative reviews with complaints of ‘historical inaccuracy’ (amongst other things) started appearing.

The history present in historical video games reflects popular historical knowledge,³ whilst the games themselves shape people’s perception of history in turn.⁴ Controversies such as that of the *Rome II* women generals are thus a battleground where popular perceptions of women in ancient history and their representations in video games collide;⁵ a battleground where historians may wish to – or be asked to – join, and one which can easily turn foul. One recent example, with many similarities to *Rome II*’s, prompted many to level considerable vitriol and misogyny at the most prominent woman academic involved.⁶

This risk of online harassment is a deeper problem, as it is levied discriminatingly towards minority groups.⁷ One study found women receive more harassment targeting their gender, even if men experienced more instances of online harassment in total – and more often towards their political stances.⁸ This harassment has a gendered effect, as women retreat from online spaces after harassment more often,⁹ and coping with this harassment can require emotional labour, which can lead to fatigue and withdrawal from public discourse,¹⁰ effectively silencing women’s voices online.

It must also be noted that the controversy surrounding *Rome II* took place in an online context that had experienced a wave of harassment against women working in – or discussing – the video games industry beginning in late 2014,¹¹ though widespread online harassment against people in the games industry was not an entirely new phenomenon.¹² Many have already commented on how ‘historical accuracy’ had become a euphemism for advocating for the removal of visible women, ethnic, sexual and gender minorities (e.g. *Rome II*’s women royals and commanders, *Battlefield V*’s women soldiers,

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Battlefield 1's non-European troops) in media,¹³ or have critiqued the concept's application in media on theoretical grounds.¹⁴

Revelations of widespread sexual harassment, sexism and racism in the games industry – and erasure or diminishment of women characters in their products – make discussions about the representation and the inclusion of women (both real and virtual) in video games even more necessary, if also incredibly poignant. That these allegations have been levied against the company that produces the highest-selling franchise of historical video games (Ubisoft and *Assassin's Creed*, respectively; see Chapter 13)¹⁵ is perhaps even more tragic, though not wholly surprising, considering how the industry treats its workers regularly.¹⁶

It is important, in order to better appreciate the euphemistic nature of cries of 'historical accuracy', to look not only at whatever controversies have arisen under its banner, but to also look at what has escaped the notice of those exclaiming the famous mantra; how this demand for historical rigour has been applied and not applied to portrayals of women in ancient-period video games throughout their history. Knowing what historical inaccuracies have escaped public outcry, can provide important context with which to examine the controversies that have, indeed, arisen.

This study seeks to provide a broad overview through time of the portrayals of women in video games set in ancient history. I will analyse these depictions in terms of their historical *accuracy* and *inaccuracy* (i.e. compared to more scholarly-sanctioned narratives, knowledge and understanding of historical reality).¹⁷ This analysis will be in prose, but will be coded into numerical variables for an overview of the most common historical *inaccuracies* that have been present in games throughout their history, their pervasiveness across time, as well as to track how prevalent major historical issues have been in the portrayal of women in these games.

Although the present study mainly deals with historical concerns, a more thorough feminist analysis of these depictions is just as necessary and would be perfectly complementary; as would an analysis of the portrayal of ethnic, sexual and gender minorities. Moreover, while it would be possible to write entire in-depth publications on how even a single one of these games portrays its women (as many of the chapters in this volume do), for expediency, the content analysis will necessarily be more focused on the dry facts and more visible aspects of these portrayals; e.g. their appearance, actions and dialogue.

De Re Historica

It is interesting to note that some game developers have for a long time been at odds with – and often pushed back against – the idea of more historically informed entertainment products.¹⁸ The developers of *Rome II* had previously eschewed the notion of 'historical accuracy' and stated that a 'dogmatic adherence to the history books' would have been detrimental to entertainment;¹⁹ a sentiment voiced for more than two decades by the developers of the *Age of Empires* series,²⁰ as well as echoed in the subsequent controversy surrounding *Rome II*'s women generals.²¹

However, even within the *Total War* series, a visible paradigm shift has occurred. The main scenario of 2004's *Rome: Total War* begins in 270 BCE, well into Ptolemaic rule in Egypt, but the game included no Greek names for Egyptian characters and no Graeco-Macedonian troops; only native Egyptian troops plucked straight out of the New Kingdom period, as well as generals charging into battle riding a chariot.²²

These were by no means even a fraction of all the *historical inaccuracies* in the game, however. Still, the sequel (*Total War: Rome II*) did away with many of the anachronisms that plagued its predecessor. This meant, for example, a more Graeco-Macedonian roster for the Ptolemies.

Whether the developers opted to rectify these issues in the face of increasing expectations by consumers for 'historical accuracy', or due to additional resources available during development of – and thus, for historical research for – the game, or due to progress in the popular collective knowledge of Ptolemaic Egypt – or a combination of any and all factors – it is difficult to know. The end result was a game more in line with a more academically based understanding of historical reality, rather than general popular notions of it.²³

Strangely, although the rallying cry for the vocal groups protesting against too many women in *Rome II* was that of 'historical accuracy', they seemed to have completely ignored clear anachronisms present since the release of the game. For example, how the capital of the Kingdom of Pontus is Sinope at the start of the main scenario, nearly a century earlier than the actual Pontic capture of Sinope in 183 BCE.²⁴

Although arriving at the same conclusion as previous commentators,²⁵ it is evident that 'historical accuracy' was – logically – not a real concern during the women generals controversy, since many obvious factual errors in the game's depiction of history had gone controversy-free. It was instead an excuse to give the connotation a façade of legitimacy; an excuse that at least one publication espoused uncritically.²⁶

Caveat Emptor

This discussion would not be complete without first addressing an important caveat; namely, that it is indeed the case that all ancient societies were patriarchal, that women occupied lower social positions than men of their respective classes and that they had fewer social and political opportunities. Moreover, most of our literary information for women in the ancient world comes from societies that were highly patriarchal: the Roman and Greek world. Moreover, it is mostly through the lenses of ancient Greek and Roman (male) authors that we receive the overwhelming majority of our literary information on women in other ancient societies.

Most women were severely limited from positions of direct power in Greece and Rome, yet some were, nevertheless, visible, influential and important in their own right. However, in *Rome II*, a game set in the age of powerful Hellenistic queens and upper-class Roman women,²⁷ even the most exceptionally powerful women – e.g. Cleopatra VII, Teuta, Berenice II, Etazeta – were rendered invisible. Only male characters had traits

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and skills, some of which could have something to do with what kind of person their wives (or lovers) were,²⁸ but nothing else until a recent update.²⁹

However, we must not forget that if online commentators wish to address only those historical issues that deal with women in particular, then their arbitrary demands make their actual concerns more transparent to any who wish to see them. Possible defences propped up to justify complaints of ‘historical inaccuracy’ towards the inclusion of women but not towards obvious factual errors might include claiming that these other errors are minor, or that the anachronisms are necessary for a fun experience, or that these inaccuracies do not break immersion.³⁰

This arbitrariness can logically also justify whatever depiction of women is in the game for the same reasons. Saying, in essence, that – in the case of *Rome II* – women generals are in the game to make it more fun to play versus if there were none at all. This arbitrariness should be seen as a reflection of either the extent of the historical knowledge by whomever is making the argument, or their normative beliefs of ancient and modern society, or what their true fixations are (i.e. higher visibility of women in games). There is no logically consistent alternative interpretation.

On the other hand, in relation to the *Rome II* controversy, some ancient history scholars were quoted expressing how the number of women in positions of power in the ancient world would be very small.³¹ This is the second caveat to be addressed. Although it is true that women were barred from direct political and military positions of power in Rome and Greece, the fact is that, for non-Romans and non-Greek societies, we do not know how many is *too many* women.

What are we to make of statements such as those by Tacitus, who quoted Boudica saying that it was customary for Britons to be led to war by women,³² and yet he also claimed that the supporters of Venutius felt dishonour at the prospect of being ruled by Cartimandua, a woman?³³ Or Polyaeus’ account of Cynane (daughter of Queen Audata and Philip II) who killed an Illyrian queen in battle, instructed her daughter Eurydice in military matters³⁴ and was killed in battle against Alcetas, a brother of Perdicas.³⁵

That makes two Illyrian royal women commanding in battle and an additional two Illyrian queens, with Queen Teuta of the Ardiaei.³⁶ Is this evidence of higher opportunities for (high-status) women in Illyria and Celtic Britain to participate and attain roles with military and political power (even if gained as widows of male monarchs)? How does this translate to a percentage usable for a game, something which requires specific numerical quantities?³⁷

Making a perfect recreation of the ancient world is regrettably impossible. Lowering our standards to an acceptable simulation could still be unachievable in most contexts. All media – but especially audio-visual media such as that of most video games – has to make constant executive decisions regarding how to portray the ancient world. It is much easier to accurately recreate the buildings, roads and landmarks of an ancient city than it is accurately recreate its people (and its women), their thoughts and their behaviour. Even so, a myriad of expedient decisions on exterior and interior decorations of an ancient city’s buildings might still be required to build up what we have inherited as ruined foundations. Historical accuracy, authenticity or realism, is thus a very nebulous matter.³⁸

The final caveat is that the following analysis does not necessarily constitute a review of the quality of the games. Artistic license and anachronisms are not, *ipso facto*, a negative for game quality or enjoyment.

Nevertheless, aiming for historical realism does not necessarily also mean uncritically recreating structures of oppression from the ancient world. Entertainment media does not need to unthinkingly regurgitate Greek and Roman ideas of misogyny, Orientalism, xenophobia, cultural supremacy or normative beliefs about women's role in society, nor their modern equivalents.³⁹

Methodology

I endeavoured to obtain a list focused on the more popular video game titles based on classical antiquity, as the higher popularity would have provided larger opportunities for the development of controversies surrounding the *historical accuracy* of women. I defined classical antiquity as the period spanning from the seventh century BCE to the fifth century CE, geographically focused (at least for this study) in north-west Afro-Eurasia. However, I still wished to obtain an exhaustive list to encompass as much games history as possible. To accomplish the goals of the search, I used three different sources to build the list of games.

Although Wikipedia articles are not a highly reliable source of information, as they are user-created content, each article is tagged with the categories to which they belong. Pages that index a list of articles included in a category are automatically generated and are updated whenever a new article receives the relevant tag. The encyclopaedia has a number of different categories for games with historical (or historically-based) settings, from which I could obtain a list of titles that I could then filter further based on whether their settings were based on classical antiquity.

This list would almost certainly be biased for a number of different reasons. Older games that waned in popularity may not have had an article in the wiki. In addition, since only the English-language site was consulted, games popular in other regions that were not as well known in English-speaking circles would also likely have been missed. However, I considered that these issues were an acceptable limitation for this study.

In order to be as exhaustive as possible, I examined a total of five different categories of games with different types of historical settings.⁴⁰ When a game belonging to a larger franchise was found, great care was taken that the rest of the titles of the franchise were also screened and included (if the setting was applicable), as some of the games in a franchise might not have had an individual article and thus could have been omitted. This search was conducted on 15 August 2020 (after the next two, due to its comprehensiveness).

To obtain an even more exhaustive list, I performed another search by parsing through the first ten pages of the top-selling games with the 'historical' tag on the Steam store⁴¹ – one of the largest digital distribution platforms for video games. This would

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have the effect of complementing the previous list with more currently popular titles. This search was conducted on 30 July 2020.

Finally, to include any relevant mobile games currently popular (which may not have had their own wiki article or have been available on Steam), I examined the ‘top games’, ‘top selling games’ and ‘top grossing games’ pages in the Android app store as well.⁴² This search was conducted on 2 August 2020.

I decided to include games that had mythological and fantastical settings or elements clearly based on classical antiquity, rather than only those with settings firmly grounded in the historical past. The analysis for these would then compare the mythology and fantasy with its ancient counterpart, including how mythological women were portrayed and how closely those depictions match known ancient portrayals.

After screening the list of titles, I obtained a total of 202 items, of which 22 were expansions, 1 was a remake, 7 were remasters, 5 were compilations of previous titles, 3 of those compilations were also remasters and 4 were user modifications (mods). This left a total of 169 individual video game titles. The dates of publication for the titles spanned the years 1982 to 2020 – nearly four decades – and included a varied array of genres and settings. Downloadable content (DLC) packs were not itemized separately from the base game, as these can be very numerous and be very small in scale and in scope, and I wanted to avoid additional complexity for the database.

Soon after the searches were completed, however, the classical antiquity video game database Paizomen⁴³ had its first release. When first becoming aware of the database in December 2020, I compared the two databases and found more than 50 titles in my own list that were not then present in Paizomen, whilst more than 100 from theirs were not present in mine, many of them because they lacked a Wikipedia article. The complementariness between both databases is evidence for both the strength and weaknesses of my search strategy, as I overlooked many games that did not have their own articles, but I was also thorough enough in the search to find a considerable number of titles not present in Paizomen.

Reviewing the depictions of women in the list involved playing the game, gathering as much data as possible and annotating all the relevant historical details and issues of their portrayal. For several titles, however, alternative or additional sources were used for the annotation. This was done to overcome the problem of not having a specific console for a particular game, or if playing the game in its entirety was prohibitive, risking too many of the games in the list to go without reviewing. Time limitations would prevent a complete annotation of all the entries in the database for this preliminary study, but I still endeavoured to review as many titles as possible to present a broad enough overview. The sources of information used to assist in the annotation were recorded in a spreadsheet together with the annotations themselves.

The qualitative analysis was then encoded into twenty-four different variables, which looked at the presence, absence and mixed results (values of 1, 0 and 0.5 in the spreadsheet) of *historicity* issues and other details, from whether the game had a fantasy setting, to whether Cleopatra was depicted exclusively in traditional Egyptian regalia (see Table 2.1).

Table 2.1 List of variables used for the summary quantitative analysis

<i>Variables</i>	<i>Definition</i>
No mention of women (in a classical antiquity context)	There was not a single mention <i>or depiction</i> of non-mythological/fantastical women in the game.
Only mentions (no depictions)	Non-mythological/fantasy women were not depicted graphically, only mentioned (does not apply if game is text-based).
Fantasy / mythology setting	Whether the game's setting is fantasy based on the ancient world or on ancient mythology.
Deities	At least one depiction of a goddess.
Mythological women	At least one depiction of a woman from mythology (e.g. Helen, Hippolyta).
Fantasy/mythological creatures	At least one depiction of a creature that has some human female characteristics (e.g. Medusa, Harpies).
Non-mythological human women	At least one depiction of a human woman that is not mythological (though can be fictional).
Women royals/rulers	At least one depiction of a woman as a ruler or a member of a noble or royal family.
Playable women characters	Whether the player is able to play the game in its entirety (or nearly so) as a woman. If the gender of the player character is not specified by the game, or women are only playable for a portion of the game, then use 0.5.
Very few to no minor issues*	Whether the reviewer considers the game to have less than a few minor issues, based on the text reviewing the depictions of women in the game.
Very few to no major issues*	Whether the reviewer considers the game to have less than a few major issues. This is independent from the previous one, as a game can have no minor, but many major issues.
Several major issues*	This variable allows for explicitly distinguishing games with few major issues, games with many major issues and games where neither is applicable. Since some games could have no issues simply because there were no women depicted, this could have led to difficulties during analysis.
Historicity issues not exclusive to women's portrayal*	Whether problems in the depiction of women were part of more general historicity issues with the game. Since some games are mythological in setting, this may not apply, though it was left to the discretion of the reviewer.
Warrior women	At least one depiction of a woman specializing in combat or as a member of the military (including command).

(Continued)

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Table 2.1 (Continued)

<i>Variables</i>	<i>Definition</i>
Amazons	At least one depiction of Amazons (based on the Greek myth).
<i>Boob armour</i>	At least one instance of armour that has been shaped and fitted to conform to breasts as bra cups would, providing a similar outline. Very impractical for combat, no examples known from classical antiquity and employed only for sexualization. ⁴⁴
<i>Bikini / bra armour</i>	Similar to the previous one. At least one instance of armour in the form of an actual bra (i.e. without abdomen protection) and sometimes including a bikini bottom. ⁴⁵
Sexualized (ahistorical) clothing*	A more general category of the former, though it does not include armour. Whether there is at least one instance of highly revealing or sexualized clothing that is not known from the historical record, or is altered from actual historical clothing.
Other ahistorical clothing	At least one instance of some piece of clothing that is neither historical nor a slight alteration of – or addition to – historical clothing.
Egyptian-only Cleopatra	Whether Cleopatra is depicted in the game exclusively as an Egyptian royal, with the style and trappings of pre-Achaemenid Egyptian Pharaohs, but not also Hellenistic royal styles.
Important omission of women*	At least one instance of a famous historical woman that, in the opinion of the reviewer, constitutes an important omission.
Other historicity issues*	Any issues not belonging to the previous categories.
Women as villager / citizens / player advisers	At least one depiction of women in the role of villagers or non-player character in settled areas, or as an individual adviser to the player.
No major additions (for expansions / mods / etc.)	Whether there were no new noteworthy depictions of women in the relevant mod, expansion, remaster, remake or compilation from the base game(s). This should be mutually exclusive with all the ‘issue’ variables (since no additions implies there is no depiction to take issue with).

Note: * Qualitative variables or variables based on the author’s personal criteria.

All annotations of game data were performed by the author and no intercoder reliability analyses were performed. It is very likely other researchers could disagree with some of the assessments in the database; this study can only portray the view of the singular reviewer. However, great care was taken to ensure the issues mentioned and problems highlighted were fair and well informed by current historical *knowledge*.

Nevertheless, it is not unlikely that there are errors stemming from a lack of deeper expertise in one of the many fields of ancient history and archaeology that were relevant for the list of games analysed.

Out of the 202 items in the list, I reviewed a total of 106 completely and reviewed a total of 8 partially, leaving 88 items pending review. There were 3 titles that were not yet released or playable in their entirety before the searches were concluded and an additional 5 were online games that were discontinued or no longer playable. I did not review these additional 8 titles for this initial study. This left 80 items that were not yet reviewed (of which 4 were compilations, remasters or expansions).

The spreadsheet that contains all the data used in this study is freely accessible from an Open Science Framework repository.⁴⁶ I summarize the results obtained for this preliminary analysis in the following section.

Results

Of the 114 reviewed titles, 19 did not include nor mention any non-mythological women in a classical antiquity context; with an additional title (*Caesar II*) depicting only a single woman in a very specific context, leaving 94 that included women. An additional 8 titles only made mention of women in in-game text or narration, with 2 more only depicting women in cinematics and 1 more using portraits of men for women rulers, with the remaining 83 titles depicting women (and female-coded mythological creatures).

On the other hand, 16 titles depicted goddesses, while 21 included women based on ancient mythology and legend, with an additional 5 only making mention of them. Mythological and fantasy creatures with female attributes (e.g. the sphinx, the Gorgons, nymphs) appeared in 14 of the games reviewed – and perhaps also 1 more, but it is unclear – virtually always as enemies (see Chapter 4). Of the 94 titles, 22 had a fantasy or mythological setting, whilst an additional 11 made use of fantasy and mythological elements, but remained somewhat grounded in historical reality. Out of the 114 titles reviewed, 68 titles included women that were not based on myth. Out of these, 44 included women as part of royalty or as rulers.

The player was allowed to play 25 video games as a woman character and 8 more titles either only had this possibility for a fraction of the game, or did not explicitly state the gender of the player character. For all these 33 titles, playing as a woman was only an alternative option to playing as a man, except for *Xena: Warrior Princess*, which only had a woman as protagonist.

In evaluating the historical accuracy of the portrayals of women, 16 titles had very few or no issues, neither minor nor major. An additional 25 had few or no major issues, but a not insignificant amount of minor issues. There were 28 more titles that had several major historicity issues with their portrayals of women. Moreover, the major historicity issues of 27 titles out of the 25 titles with minor and 28 titles with major issues were deemed to be not exclusive to their portrayal of women, which would imply that the

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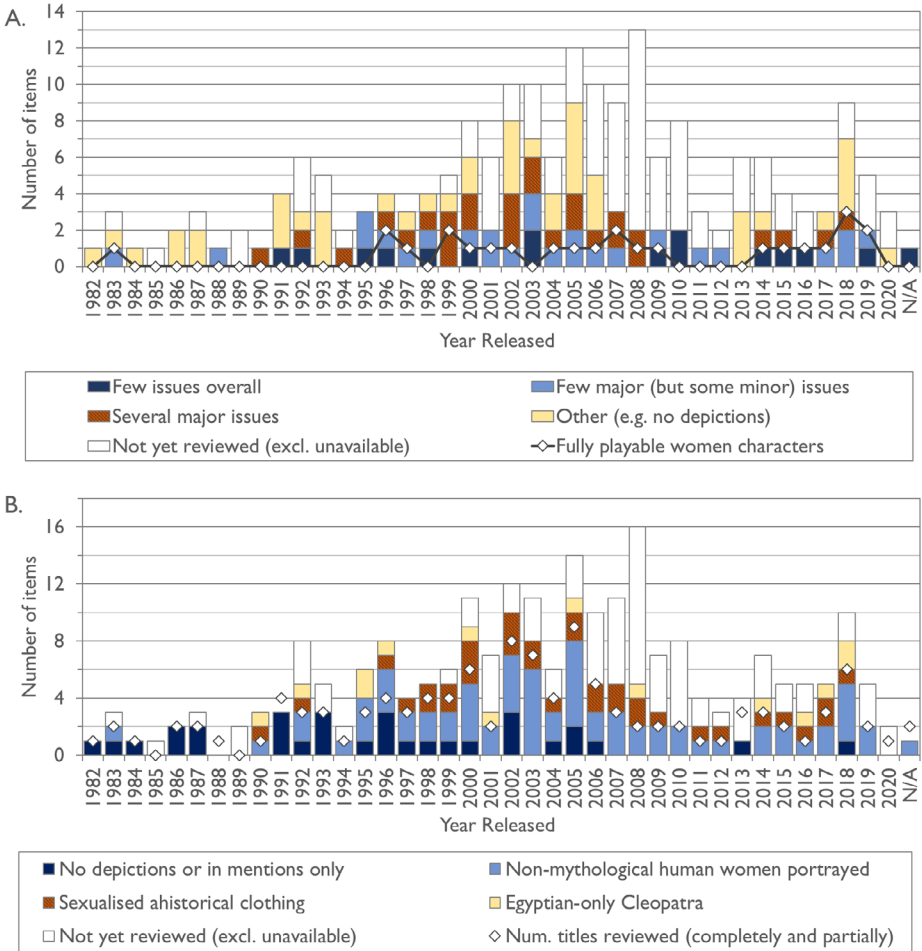


Figure 2.1 Yearly breakdown of: (a) Video game titles divided by the number and severity of historicity issues, as well as the number of titles that allow playing as a woman for the entirety of the game; and (b) The titles that do not portray any human women, those titles that do, number of titles that use ahistorical clothing for the sexualization of women and the number of titles that depict Cleopatra exclusively as a traditional Egyptian monarch. *Note:* The number of titles in (b) does not necessarily equal the number of titles reviewed, as the variables overlap (e.g. if Cleopatra is depicted, then by definition, non-mythological human women are as well). Note also that the titles that have not yet been reviewed do not include games that are unavailable or were to be released after the date of the search.

problems of the remaining 26 titles were. There were 20 more titles that were either expansions, collections, remasters or remakes that did not contain any new portrayals of women. See Figure 2.1(a) for a yearly breakdown.

Of the 83 games depicting women, 31 included women warriors, and 12 of these included Amazons. Out of the 31 titles, 20 used some form of *boob* or *bikini armour*;

armour moulded to follow the contour of a woman's breasts like the cups of a bra and sometimes coupled with a bikini bottom.⁴⁷

When it came to including clothing not based on historical apparel (often done to sexualize women's bodies), 34 games were noted. An additional 26 titles used clothing without historical precedents, or historical clothing modified to such an extent that it lost its semblance to the original. Moreover, all the games that portrayed Cleopatra VII, visually depicted her as a quintessential Egyptian monarch with little to no Hellenistic influence (for an analysis of one such title, see Chapter 11).

See Figure 2.1(b) for a breakdown of some of the aforementioned issues per year of release.

Women can sometimes be added as nameless non-player characters in populated areas. In addition, in strategy video games, women are in many cases included as one of the different available appearance variants of the base 'worker' unit used for resource-gathering and construction (or a separate unit, as in *0 A.D.*). Women can also be added as advisers for the player. Both previous points apply to 34 titles in the list.

Although not exhaustively noted, 7 games made important omissions of known historical women whose exclusion was difficult to justify. Finally, 21 items on the list suffered from historicity issues that were not captured by the previous variables, such as Cleopatra ruling several centuries before her birth (e.g. *Aggressors: Ancient Rome*).

I have reported all the results from the coded variables used for annotation, and though many more specific analyses could be made (e.g. how often is Cleopatra the sole woman depicted in a game), for the sake of brevity I will proceed to discuss the results obtained for this preliminary study.

Discussion

In this study, I have examined the portrayal of women in video games with a setting based on classical antiquity. Through an extensive search, I compiled a list of 202 titles, from which, for this preliminary analysis, I either partially or completely annotated and analysed a total of 114. The results revealed that throughout the history of the depiction of women in classical antiquity video games, major historical *inaccuracies* were not uncommon.

I found that a large majority of the more than 100 video games titles analysed here actually depict women, but a not insignificant portion of these included only a mention of women in text, and some more did not even accomplish this.

A very small number of titles allowed players to play the entirety of the game as a woman, but in virtually all cases, this was only as an alternative to playing as a man. We can see by looking at the yearly pattern (Figure 2.1(a)) that the inclusion of playable women characters again shows only a very mild increase in recent years, although the data is admittedly few and incomplete.

A large number of depictions of women suffered from various levels of historical issues, ranging from very minor to major. Clothing was one of the largest sources of

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anachronisms and a particular focus of the review process. This may have been due to clothing being the most easily accessible and visible aspect of graphical portrayals of women. Moreover, this could also suggest that the inclusion of women in video games often culminates in them being used only as props, or having so little importance in the game that their appearance ends up being the only aspect of their portrayal that can be noted.

In many cases, problems with women's clothing were brought about from attempts by developers to sexualize women's bodies at the expense of historical reality. More subdued forms of artistic license were noted, many of which were not written down as problems specifically, yet the number of issues with women's clothing remained not trivial.

Moreover, a similar issue quite frequently encountered was women's armour in the form of bikinis, bras, or cuirasses with tight contouring of the breasts, sometimes leaving the midriff exposed, and also often with no protection for the chest area above the breasts. Commonly known as *boob armour* or *bikini armour*, such attire is a staple in other forms of fantasy media,⁴⁸ but it is decidedly ahistorical for classical antiquity, where depictions of women in armour from the era show them invariably wearing the same armour as men.

Moreover, as is perhaps the case with men, a large number of women that were actually included in game are royalty, monarchs or some form of ruler, with lower-class women often there only as decoration or as a secondary appearance for citizens and labourers. A very large number of games that showed women royals or rulers included Cleopatra VII, who was exclusively depicted as a traditional native Egyptian Pharaoh and never as a Hellenistic queen from a Macedonian dynasty, as she is commonly shown in her coinage. These depictions also usually characterized Cleopatra as a seductress, sometimes lascivious, sometimes cunning. Some of these depictions also involved a great deal of sexualization, fantasy clothing, if not also Orientalist tropes of Eastern decadence and tyranny.

In general, however, the portrayals of women in games has historically been very limited and games have often failed to portray women even when their inclusion is highly justified (whether a justification is needed is another issue). Often, even well known – or exceptionally powerful – women are simply elided from games.

In summary, there was a small number of titles with very few problems in their portrayal of women. A larger number still only suffered from a number of minor issues or one or two major issues. However, a slightly larger number of titles than the latter had very many major issues in their portrayals of women. When broken down by year (see Figure 2.1(a)), there is no clear pattern where the amount of games with major issues has been declining in recent years; rather, it appears stable throughout. Additional work with the titles that were not reviewed for these initial results – as well as the games from the Paizomen database that had not been included – should provide an even more in-depth picture of the evolution of women's portrayal in ancient history-based video games. Moreover, similar studies focusing on ethnic, sexual and gender minorities could prove a valuable addition to the work presented here.

However, the preliminary evidence is already suggestive for the notion that the portrayal of women in video games has been consistently fraught with a lack of *historical accuracy* across time. Although there have been some welcomed advances by game developers of prominent franchises to present a vision of women in the ancient world less based on modern tropes, progress has not been as fast as it could have been. In many cases, no progress has been made at all in the industry (e.g. *boob armour*). Nearly all video games based on the classical world even to this day do not let women be their main characters, nor guide the design and story of the game. If they do, they do so only as an alternative to playing as a man. Nevertheless, progress in women's representation cannot be achieved without also addressing the rampant discrimination and abuse in the video game industry,⁴⁹ a much more consequential matter.

Recent controversies have shown that the inclusion and portrayal of women in video games with a setting based on classical antiquity is just as linked to modern patriarchal ideas of gender roles for women, as they are to modern ideas of ancient patriarchal society, and less so to the real patriarchal norms of classical antiquity. The rallying cry of historical accuracy has been used to create a backlash against larger and more numerous roles for women in ancient-era (and most other types of) video games. However, throughout the history of these games, women's portrayals (and those of history in general) have nearly always been loaded with errors, omissions and ahistorical elements, with few demanding historical accuracy until women were more visibly depicted in prominent and historically relevant positions of political, military and individual agency.

Notes

1. Scott-Jones (2018b), Watts (2018) and Grayson (2018).
2. See, e.g. Artemisia: Hdt. 8.68 and Polyaeus, *Strat.* 8.53; Rhodogune, Mania, Amage, Cynane: Polyaeus, *Strat.* 8.26, 8.54, 8.56, 8.60; Boudica and the claim that it was usual for Celtic Britons to be led by women in war: Tac., *Ann.* 14.35.
3. MacCallum-Stewart and Parsler (2007), Gee (2008: 197–8), Chapman (2016: 3–29) and Clare (2021: 17–21).
4. Cf. Morris-Suzuki (2005), Chapman (2016: 3–29) and Clare (2021: 17–21).
5. See Morris-Suzuki (2005: 21–5).
6. Heighton (2017 and Boseley (2017).
7. See, e.g. Cassidy, Faucher and Jackson (2014: 279–99); Powell, Scott and Henry (2020: 199–223).
8. Nadim and Fladmoe (2019: 254–8), the study also found that rates of group-based harassment (i.e. based on gender, ethnicity, sexual orientation, etc.) were comparable between men and women, with men being targeted due to their ethnicity or skin colour more often (perhaps due to fewer possibilities for gender-based attacks).
9. *Ibid.*
10. George Veletsianos, Houlden, Hodson and Gosse (2018: 4689–708).
11. Mortensen (2018: 787–806) and Massanari (2020).

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12. Crecente (2013) and Tucker (2019).
13. Reeve (2018).
14. Inderwildi (2018).
15. Tyrer (2019).
16. Semuels (2019), Campbell (2019) and O'Connor (2020).
17. What Chapman (2016: 3–29) calls 'content analysis'.
18. See McCall (2012: 16–17), Chapman (2016: 3–29) and Clare (2021: 17–21).
19. Brown (2013).
20. Games Web (1997) and Rausch (2005).
21. Chalk (2018).
22. TWC Wiki, 'Egypt (RTW Faction)' (2021).
23. But see Chapman (2016: 3–29) and Clare (2021: 17–21).
24. Polyb. 23.9 and Strabo 12.3.11.
25. Scott-Jones (2018b) and Grayson (2018).
26. Murphy (2018).
27. Pomeroy (1995: 120–89).
28. Curiously, it is possible for a Roman man to have a wife who had become inebriated, see: www.honga.net, 'Drunken Wife – Rome – Total War: Rome II' (Total War: Royal Military Academy, n.d.); a crime that could be punishable by *death*: Pomeroy (1995: 153) and Levick (2012: 101).
29. Scott-Jones (2018a).
30. I.e. a video game analogue of *suspension of disbelief*; Clare (2021: 4–5).
31. Murphy (2018).
32. Tac., *Ann.* 14.35.
33. Tac., *Ann.* 12.40.
34. By extension, Cynane would have had to somehow learn – or be taught – this knowledge. Pomeroy (1990: 6) suggests Audata was this teacher.
35. Polyaeus, *Strat.* 8.60; killed by Alcetas: Diod. Sic. 19.52.5.
36. Polyb. 2.4.
37. McCall (2012).
38. See Inderwildi (2018), Chapman (2016: 3–29) and Clare (2021: 17–21).
39. Although their portrayal as a vehicle for critically exploring ancient bigotry could, nevertheless, be interesting.
40. 'Category:Video Games Set in Antiquity' (Wikipedia, 27 July 2020), 'Category:Panhistorical Video Games' (Wikipedia, 3 March 2007), 'Category:Video Games with Historical Settings' (Wikipedia, 3 August 2020), 'Category:Video Games Set in Ancient Rome' (Wikipedia, 10 February 2013) and 'Category:Video Games Set in the Roman Empire' (Wikipedia, 10 February 2019).
41. Steam (n.d.).
42. Google, 'Android Apps on Google Play' (Google Play), see: <https://play.google.com/store/apps/top/category/GAME> (accessed 2 August 2020); and Google, 'Android Apps on Google Play' (Google Play), see: https://play.google.com/store/apps/collection/cluster?hl=en_US (accessed

2 August 2020), although note that the URL for the top-selling and top-grossing games pages were the same, I therefore only cite it once.

43. Vandewalle (n.d.).
44. Toler (2019: 6).
45. Ibid.
46. Orellana Figueroa (2021).
47. Toler (2019: 6).
48. Ibid.
49. Schreier (2020), O'Connor (2020) and Hernandez (2020).