
Peer reviewed version

Link to published version (if available):
10.5040/9781350241954.ch-013

Link to publication record in Explore Bristol Research

PDF-document

This is the accepted author manuscript (AAM). The final published version (version of record) is available online via Bloomsbury Publishing at https://doi.org/10.5040/9781350241954.ch-013. Please refer to any applicable terms of use of the publisher.

University of Bristol - Explore Bristol Research

General rights

This document is made available in accordance with publisher policies. Please cite only the published version using the reference above. Full terms of use are available: http://www.bristol.ac.uk/red/research-policy/pure/user-guides/ebr-terms/
Kassandra’s Odyssey

Richard Cole

Introduction

‘As you write your Odyssey across the mountains and the seas, remember: the fate of Greece journeys with you.’ This overture to the player, from the ‘E3 2018 Official World Premier Trailer’ for Ubisoft’s Assassin’s Creed Odyssey (2018), may verge on the melodramatic, but it highlights one of the defining ambitions of this critically acclaimed open-world role playing game (RPG). That ambition centres around freedom of choice. At a micro level, this means having the option to choose how to respond to events within the game’s historical setting of the Peloponnesian War. At a macro level, that ambition encompasses the entire experience, including the ability to select the protagonist’s gender.

A second trailer aptly titled the ‘Power of Choice’ reinforced this position: ‘In this world, there are no wrong paths. No wrong decisions. Only who you choose to become.’ The developers explained how this would work in ‘Behind The Odyssey! Ep. 1 - RPG Mechanics.’ Not only would players be able to choose between Kassandra or her brother Alexios, both Spartan mercenaries, but they would also be able to continually express their playstyle, personalising everything from the look of their ship to the endgame. While this seemingly infinite array of choice is of course bounded by technical and narratological constraints, such a design-led approach means that players will have ‘[their] own unique experience,’ as Melissa Maccoubrey (Narrative Creative Director) noted in the episode. The ‘Launch Trailer’ and ‘Final Trailer’ brought this full circle; in the former, the protagonist’s mother declares ‘this is your Odyssey,’ while the latter implores players to ‘choose your fate.’

By offering players a choice between a male or female protagonist, Assassin’s Creed Odyssey (ACO) follows in the footsteps of other genre-defining series, including Mass Effect
(2007-2017) and *Fallout* (1997-2018). Unlike these futuristic series, *ACO* takes the arguably more radical step of reinserting female experience into the annals of history. This is no small feat when one considers both the historiographic record,¹ the lack of female agency in most AAA games,² *and* the commercial pressures around marketing female protagonists.³ The choice even earned a quip from the satirical YouTube channel *Honest Game Trailers*, whose narrator pointed out that unlike previous instalments in the franchise, ‘this time they let you be a woman!’

On the face of it, *ACO* appears to rebalance the typical offer. This is made apparent in the game’s disclaimer: ‘Inspired by historical events and characters, this work of fiction was designed, developed, and produced by a multicultural team of various beliefs, sexual orientations and gender identities.’ While equality statements can ring hollow, especially from an industry that has a poor record for tackling sexual harassment, not to mention sexism in general,⁴ this opening is underwritten by Ubisoft’s effort to create not just one compelling protagonist with full motion capture and voice-over, but two. Meanwhile, the number of articles and videos devoted to the question of who players should pick demonstrates that the choice was considered fundamental to the experience.⁵

There is, however, another side to this story. Kassandra’s Odyssey is more complex than the promotional material implies. It also has far reaching consequences for the reception of the ancient world and the future of gender representation in open-world RPGs. As we will see, the initial advertising for *ACO* largely omitted Kassandra, focusing instead on Alexios. The choice between the siblings, furthermore, is in many ways a non-choice. They have the same stats and opportunities, NPCs make no distinction between them, and the script is gender neutral. Despite this, reviews of Kassandra range from gratitude to disdain.

To understand the way design choices are shaping new receptions of antiquity, we need to take a holistic view of the game.⁶ In this chapter, I adopt the idea that the game lets
players ‘be’ a female mercenary in ancient Greece to think about gender representation in historical video games from three interrelated angles. First, I am interested in how the promotional materials for ACO frame its protagonists. Second, I want to consider how this matches in-game experience, which involves analysing different playthroughs (including my own) that highlight unscripted differences between the siblings. Third, I consider how these experiences are discussed by surveying formal reviews and comments on social media. This is in order to move the discussion beyond the way an artefact alone has received and adapted historical, and in this case Classical, materials. I conclude by suggesting that with no defining structural, narratological, or historical limits placed on Kassandra, her character is multifaceted, revisionist and profoundly feminist.

**Framing Kassandra**

According to Kernan, genre, story and stardom underpin the rhetorical strategies of trailers. While Kernan was referring to film trailers, the ads for ACO are no exception. All deliver condensed, audio-visual spectacles that on the one hand emphasise the twinned fates of the protagonist and ancient Greece, and on the other push for the resolution of these dilemmas through mastery of the game’s combat system. The preternatural feats the protagonists perform in the trailers position the game within the action-adventure genre. As we saw with the bombastic E3 trailer, ACO also fits the sub-category of ‘save the world’ games, with their emphasis on destiny. Where these trailers differ from Kernan’s analysis is that rather than drawing attention to stardom, they instead focalise play through the protagonist’s avatar. This shift from star to avatar is important, as it allows for more flexibility in what aspects of the game the trailers divulge. Significantly, Kassandra takes centre stage in just three out of ten trailers, while the most popular, with millions of views, do not feature her character.
The E3 trailer opens with Myrrine, the protagonist’s mother, asking, ‘How can a child save us if he’s sentenced to die?’ The trailer spotlights Alexios, first as a boy being thrown from a cliff, before cutting to show him as a mercenary. Myrrine continues: ‘You were sent by the gods to protect this world.’ Here, protection equates to being able to murder and dismember enemies, with Alexios embodying what Lowe has called the ‘celebration of masculine stereotypes in games.’

Myrrine is the sole women to speak. The only other women consist of a love interest and the snake-haired visage of Medusa. In this heteronormative trailer, which adopts the idea of women as a ‘beautiful evil’, there is only the barest hint that a different playstyle might be available. It is contained within a line spoken by the narrator when we glimpse the adult Alexios. ‘Where we begin does not define who we will become.’ While the narratological emphasis is on Alexios’ Spartan origin and mercenary skills, the sentiment chimes with the game’s focus on personal choice. The use of the third person extends the referent to the player, with the game marketizing self-improvement and inviting players to explore a reality where this is possible. It also hints at the game’s egalitarian approach to gender. Kassandra’s absence, while notable, is therefore more of an absent presence. The trailer glosses over her existence in order to appeal, as we will see below, within a specific market.

Kassandra is similarly absent from the launch trailer. Myrrine once again takes the lead. ‘My son, you’re old enough now. My father’s spear holds a certain burden, but you’re ready,’ she says to a young Alexios, establishing equivalence between the spear’s owner, king Leonidas I of Sparta, and Alexios. For Myrrine, Leonidas was ‘Sparta’s last true hero,’ and yet ‘the same blood courses through your veins.’ Myrrine extols the virtues Alexios will need to live up to this legacy, including courage, cunning, and commitment.

In this and the E3 trailer, Alexios is the quintessential hero of combat-focused RPG games (historical or otherwise). The launch trailer leads with gritty, blood-splattered visuals
(Fig 1), and features a host of male bodies in combat, a style not only familiar from RPGs such as *God of War* (2005-present) and *Gears of War* (2006-2019), but also the filmscapes of Zack Snyder’s *300* (2006), Noam Murro’s *300: Rise of an Empire* (2014), Tarsem Singh’s *Immortals* (2011), and Ridley Scott’s *Gladiator* (2000). Alexios exhibits several of the traits that Anna Kreider coined for male protagonists, including ‘blasé about killing,’ ‘loner,’ and ‘killing spree (humans).’

Even where Alexios is depicted as showing emotion as a result of loss or heterosexual romance, this is, as Kreider points out, business as usual for the “gritty” white male action (anti)hero,’ who manages ‘to-be-sympathetic-while-doing-terrible-things-because-he’s-doing-them-for-LOVE.’ These trailers make use of a form of ludonarrative dissonance, in that they promote a certain type of narration that coheres with the exaggerated machismo familiar to the audiences of combat RPGs, but which does not match the gameplay available (i.e. the ability to play as Kassandra, or indeed less violently).

[Figure 13.1 here]

**Figure 13.1:** Combat sequence from the ‘Launch Trailer’ for *Assassin’s Creed Odyssey* © Ubisoft Quebec/Ubisoft, 2018. Here, Leonidas is fighting the Persians while Myrrine draws comparisons between Leonidas and Alexios.

Between the E3 trailer and the launch trailer, Ubisoft gave Kassandra her first starring role in their ‘Gamescom 2018 - Kassandra Cinematic Trailer’. One of the curious aspects of this trailer is that Kassandra is entirely silent. The viewer is presented with a montage of an armoured figure that ends with a profile shot of Kassandra. The narrator picks up the theme of the game, how the beauty and order of Greece is an illusion that ‘hides many dangers’ and is ‘shattered from within’, with Hades having ‘grown full’ on the conflict between Athens and Sparta. The viewer, and Kassandra, is told that ‘a world of danger lies in your path.’ The
remaining scenes emphasise the threats Kassandra will face, which include naval warfare, wild beasts and mythical monsters, as well as how she will respond, namely, by engaging in combat. We are told that ‘the days of heroes are over,’ and yet the trailer teases its viewers with Kassandra’s potential. The narrator concludes by asking the audience, ‘are you ready now?’

Kassandra’s voice is considered by many to be her defining attribute.\textsuperscript{15} The decision to focus on combat thus exploits the typical framings of the genre at the cost of introducing Kassandra as a distinct character. In the words of Hall, this trailer works to ‘enforce, win plausibility for and command as legitimate a decoding of the event within the limit of dominant definitions.’\textsuperscript{16} At the same time, the trailer does not objectify Kassandra, as is often the case with female figures in video games,\textsuperscript{17} an approach that is also born out in-game, even in quests where the protagonists are semi-nude and competing in the pankration. In the trailer, we catch glimpses of her weather-beaten, war-weary face, but for the most part she is concealed by armour, much like Alexios in his equivalent trailer, which differs only in the selection of combat sequences. These trailers are two sides of the same coin. They promise parity of experience within one overall standard. Such a decision is at once radical (here is a non-discriminatory past devoid of fetishizing tropes), but also typical. As Sherman said in her study of gender and genre, ‘girl heroines seem to be mere twins of the male in adventure games.’\textsuperscript{18} For all the differences between Kassandra and the depiction of women in historical video games, she appears to be a minor variation on the theme of ‘iconic masculine stoicism’,\textsuperscript{19} which is indebted to both RPGs\textsuperscript{20} and the Classics. Her trailer thus dramatizes a paradox of her character. Kassandra is seen as empowering – she is the ‘baddest of badass women in gaming’\textsuperscript{21} – but this empowerment appears to come not from her character, but from the way in which she embodies the masculine.
The ‘Kassandra Cinematic Trailer’ overpromises and underdelivers, with the choice between the siblings presented as visual, rather than substantial. Less than a month later, Ubisoft released the ‘Power of Choice’ trailer. This trailer includes both siblings and forgoes the overarching narrative to concentrate on playstyle. Importantly, this is one of the few trailers where Kassandra takes centre stage (Fig 13.2), informing the viewer that ‘the choices we make, no matter how small, can put us on the path to greatness, or lead us down a road to ruin.’

In the foreground, we see Kassandra, unarmoured, dressed in a dark chiton walking the streets of Athens during a cult festival, perhaps in honour of Athena, whose sunlit statue is subsequently framed against the Parthenon. The trailer then cuts to a forking path and Alexios takes Kassandra’s place as their voices merge, telling the viewer ‘to be who you want to be.’ The opening plays down the intertextuality established by the launch trailer between Alexios and the film 300 (Fig 13.1). Instead, the focus is on coming to terms with the in-game ethical dilemmas the protagonists will face. In the following scene, Kassandra is petitioned by hostages. The trailer visualises Kassandra’s choice – to convince the captors to let their captives go, or stay out of the matter – and shows her empathising with the captives. These scenes eschew combat and spectacle in favour of characterisation. Kassandra is presented as compassionate and yet persuasive, able to navigate moral dilemmas with no simple answers (the captors are preventing a family who might be infected by plague from leaving their area). Her voice is key, with the trailer demonstrating her full register. In the remaining scenes, Kassandra and Alexios outline the other choices available to players, from war and peace to the ability to play as an assassin or soldier.

[Figure 13.2 here]
The ‘Power of Choice’ trailer takes the selection of Kassandra or Alexios as pivotal, and then conflates this with choices made in-game. The implication is that they are distinct characters and offer different means of engaging with the gameworld. The problem with this is that while choosing the path to greatness or ruin will decide the endgame, the impact of choosing Kassandra or Alexios is harder to measure. Aside from the voiceover, there is very little to distinguish the characters. They share the same backstory, milestones and companions, while the game’s scripted events, nonlinear exploration, and character stats make no distinction between the genders. This is made explicit by the game’s director, Scott Philips, in Ubisoft’s ‘E3 2018 Gameplay Walkthrough’ video. Philips notes that Alexios/Kassandra share ‘the same story and gameplay possibilities.’ He goes on to provide a preview of one of the game’s dynamic events, concluding that ‘you will be able to roleplay the hero. It’s all up to you in how you choose to play.’

The emphasis, in both Philips’ commentary and the preview, is that the siblings are blank slates. Alexios will also confront the captives and have to decide how to overcome the impasse. The player may choose different outcomes, but the choices, reactions, and interactions are set. A trailer developed by IGN, entitled ‘Will You Play As Kassandra or Alexios?’, splits the screen to show viewers just how similar the opening is, shot by shot. Camera angles, lighting, focalisation and narrative direction are identical, with each sibling interrupted by the same hired lackeys of a loan shark called the Cyclops. While there are some differences – Alexios hums the theme tune and grimaces when interrupted, while Kassandra sings and then purses her lips – they reside primarily in tonal or expressionistic variations
bestowed by voice actors and animators. That is, until a player chooses to act, as Reparaz shows in Ubisoft’s ‘Gods, Plagues, and Other Early Dilemmas’ gameplay preview video.\textsuperscript{23} Reparaz spares the Cyclops’ lackies when playing as Alexios, but is, in his own words ‘much less merciful’ when playing as Kassandra due to identifying more with the protagonist’s young ward Phoibe, whom the lackies could have hurt. Reparaz’ video highlights how these choices affect not only future events (there is a challenging ambush if the player lets the lackies go), but also character development, as defined by the playing, rather than writing, of the protagonists. Reparaz’ Kassandra is more protective of Phoibe than his Alexios, suggesting that players do – consciously or otherwise – roleplay different outcomes depending on the gender of their chosen protagonist.

The ‘Power of Choice’ trailer presents equal opportunities for the siblings. This could be seen as a powerful step in the right direction in terms of reclaiming female agency and experience in historical video games (both Kassandra and Alexios, for example, can ‘Spartan Kick’ enemies in the same way Gerard Butler did in the film \textit{300}). Alternatively, it could be read as representative of a limitation in game design, of the industry’s inability to dispense with male leads. We can see this at work in both the game’s marketing tagline: ‘Embark on your journey from humble beginnings to living legend as Alexios or Kassandra,’ as well as the ‘Final Trailer’ for the game, where Alexios and Kassandra are entirely interchangeable. The closing scene, in which the narrator contends the protagonist ‘shall vanish, forgotten for eternity,’ emphasises this equivalence, with each sibling taking turns to offer a riposte. This is Kassandra’s second paradox, to which we will return in the following section. It is a paradox that calls into question whether it is possible to identify her as a distinctive character other than within a subjective playthrough due to the uniformity of play.

The situation is much the same in the trailers for the ‘Legacy of the First Blade’, the first DLC to extend the world of \textit{ACO}. Here, Alexios is again privileged as the canonical
protagonist, with viewers expected to empathise with the threat to his family. Only the trailer for ‘The Fate of Atlantis’, the last DLC for ACO, is Kassandra positioned front and centre, the one to meet the gods, with Alexios relegated to a supporting role. The representational imbalance illustrated by these trailers is striking. It is also not confined to promotional videos but extends to other paratexts. Alexios is the default hero for the game’s cover design, with Kassandra appearing the reverse; he is also the lead image on Ubisoft’s website and the game’s homepage. While there are exceptions, with both Alexios and Kassandra appearing on the pediment-inspired menu screen, on average Kassandra appears less frequently (if at all) in most of the pre-launch materials, while even post-launch her unequal pairing with Alexios remains in evidence. The results tally with the wider analysis of video games set in antiquity undertaken by Figueroa in this volume, as well as the quantitative research Burgess, Stermer and Burgess conducted on game covers and the gender coding Near drew attention to in video game box art. Considering the scale of the issue, it is worth reflecting on the drivers behind such disparity.

In July 2020, Schreier published on the sexual misconduct endemic in Ubisoft. Schreier wrote that according to employees, ‘the machismo of Ubisoft’s offices seeps into the company’s games,’ in particular Assassin’s Creed. Directors have claimed it would take too much effort to animate women, while the company’s creative lead and marketing department have systematically undermined attempts to promote gender equality due to the ‘false perception … [that] female protagonists wouldn’t sell,’ despite the evidence to the contrary. Schreier reported: ‘Assassin’s Creed Odyssey went much the same way … The team originally proposed making the sister [Kassandra] the only playable character, according to four people who worked on the game, until they were told that wasn’t an option.’

Kassandra’s Odyssey, from her absence in the E3 trailer to her central role in ‘The Fate of Atlantis’ is representative of the tension between texts and paratexts. Her journey
defines the ‘trade-offs … made behind the scenes in order to ensure playability and, perhaps most importantly in an age where video games present large investment on the part of the developing studios, commercial success.’

While initially overshadowed by Alexios, Kassandra has become more prominent the longer ACOD has been around. The framing narratives of the trailers discussed thus provide ‘a deeper appreciation of the constraints of game design and the commercial pressure of the industry,’ which Rollinger argues could ‘significantly advance our understanding of [the way] historical processes are depicted.’ Gray puts it another way when he suggests that paratexts not only package texts, but help to ‘fill them with many of the meanings that we associate with them.’

Trailers pare down the complexity of a game by editing non-chronological scenes into a powerful micro-narrative that, as Gray argues, plays ‘a constitutive role in establishing a “proper” interpretation for a text.’ The trailers for ACOD create a trajectory of reception, anticipating Alexios as the hero and the one to take action. Kuypers argues that ‘when we frame in a particular way, we encourage others to see facts in a particular way ... filter[ing] our perceptions’ to make certain facts ‘more noticeable.’

The audiences of these paratexts could easily be forgiven for concluding that there would be no female lead. As one fan commented on the E3 trailer ‘correct me if I’m wrong, but didn’t they say that Cassandra [sic] was in the beginning the main protagonist of this game? If that’s true, this trailer is pretty bad on giving that hint!’

The stakeholders at Ubisoft ensured its paratexts would contribute framing narratives that not only situate the game firmly within the genre’s gendered conventions, but also further the myth that such games cannot be led by a female protagonist. Goffman once spoke of the way that framing activities are ‘anchored’ in reality, of the edge that connects the framing experience to the world in which it takes place, and of the strange way this anchor exists on both sides. The effect of such frames, MacLachlan and Reid argue, is to separate
fictional space from reality, to mediate passage ‘from everyday reality to the highly organised space of a fictional world,’ and in the process, to ‘carry metamessages about how to interpret what they enclose.’ Wolf develops this, suggesting that frames ‘not only mark the inside/outside border between artefact and context,’ but also create ‘a “bridge” between its inside and its outside or context.’

In managing commercial, generic, and character-based expectations, the promotional material for ACO demonstrates one way in which developers are able to ‘seduce us into ways of being and acting as they discover a language of video games that is inextricably intertwined with the problems of the … present’. This language, inspired by the game’s cultural context, spills over from the frame into audience receptions of the gameworld. As another player commented on Eurogamer’s ‘Voice Comparison’ video (2018), ‘I've always wondered why Kassandra felt so much more natural to play as but after learning that the devs were forced to make [Alexios] a playable character it makes a lot more sense.’ These receptions are not insignificant, especially for video games, which, unlike traditional media, include optionality at their core. This discretionary feature can be tracked to paint a picture of what an entire audience has chosen. In the case of ACO, it is telling that within a few months of the launch, two thirds of players had chosen Alexios, in contrast to the 50/50 split in testing and the fact Ubisoft predicted Kassandra would be more popular. These statistics are particularly remarkable in light of the fact women make up more than half of the typical audience for adventure RPGs, including a previous instalment in the Assassin’s Creed series that featured a female protagonist. While it would be reductive to assume an even split of male and female gamers would choose their respective gendered avatars, it is likely that the promotional material for ACO, which positions Alexios as the canonical character, is partly responsible for players’ initial preferences.
Playing Kassandra

Trailers and other promotional materials show how Kassandra’s Odyssey was, and continues to be, shaped by marketing forces, industry preferences, and paratextual framing. Let us now move from frame to centre and consider Kassandra in-game. In this section, I will evaluate my experience of playing as Kassandra, alongside the views of other players, to explore the paradoxes outlined above, along with the impact her character might have on the way the ancient world is experienced in historical video games.

In some RPGs, siding with characters locks off storylines, as in the historical-fantasy *The Witcher 2* (2011). Siding with characters is of course different from choosing a protagonist, and yet the interactions I have had with Kassandra are central to my experience, in which I chose to ‘lock off’ Alexios’ storyline. The same is true of other players, as can be seen when fans and reviewers refer to ‘my Kassandra’ or ‘my Alexios’. This is hardly surprising when we consider just how extensive the gameworld is.

Navigating the gameworld as Kassandra develops her character in a way that scripting and plot development cannot. Without setting gender expectations, the game continually presents players with ethical options, including the possibility to flirt, lie, barter with or indeed terminate NPCs. While the procedural rhetoric of the series at times rewards indiscriminate killing, the game does not have the same binary as, for example, *Mass Effect 2* (2010), which gave players the option to be either good or bad in their dealings. Playing as Kassandra, I chose to lie on occasion, while at others I could be virtuous. The Kassandra I know is complex, generous, and sometimes prone to anger. She is imposing, and one has the impression that any threats she makes are genuine. She is persuasive, quick witted, and sometimes awkward. She is, as Krishna wrote on Steam, ‘compelling,’ with a personality that ‘makes you want to be her friend.’ Players clearly identify both as – and with – Kassandra,
a conflation honed by the hundreds of hours spent developing her character in a non-linear, responsive manner. In one quest, where you rescue a woman at the mercy of a mob, Kassandra reprimands the leader, who claims the woman is dangerous, saying ‘she just looks scared to me.’ This is not a dialogue option, and instead reveals how the game establishes sequences that offer players the opportunity to perform or counter the motions Kassandra-as-character epitomises.

Of course, someone playing as Alexios may have a similar experience. What I have outlined does not necessarily make Kassandra unique. The same is true of the way in which the gendered equivalence embodied in the Kassandra/Alexios choice manifests elsewhere in-game. There are male/female bandit options for your ship’s crew, while the legendary armour sets for the siblings are identical except where references to popular culture take precedence. Meanwhile, the primary antagonist will always be the sibling you chose not to play as. Even the romance options, which might endear players to certain personalities, are mostly free to pursue regardless of gender, with Kassandra and Alexios are able to ‘do all the Non-Playable-Characters,’ as the narrator of the Honest Trailer wryly notes. The point here is whether the choice between Alexios and Kassandra is a real choice if the stakes are the same. This is a criticism that has been levelled at other games founded on choice, but which ultimately deliver the same ending regardless of the decisions players have agonised over during gameplay.

To investigate further, we need to explore moments where Kassandra becomes independent of this gender parity, where playing as her can generate reflections on the game and its representation of antiquity. In one quest, entitled ‘It’s Complicated’, the player encounters a smuggler who fears fanatics will slaughter his beloved, who just so happens to be the wife of the smuggler’s partner. ‘There’s always a girl, isn’t there?’ says Kassandra. Her exasperation is vocal and embodied, while the tiredness in her voice hints at the times
she has heard this before. It is a moment that does not have the same gravitas when voiced by Alexios, a rare occasion when the game draws attention to different gendered experiences. Another instance that sheds light on Kassandra’s upbringing and self-perception is when she slays the minotaur during one of the game’s climatic quests. Kassandra declares ‘Mater would be so proud!’ Her surprise and delight mirrored my own at this narrative twist. To hear Alexios speak the lines is to hear, as Nelson put it, ‘the caricature of a hero.’ Kassandra’s achievement feels earnest, with the game’s algorithms working to resituate the player as the driver of new mythic imaginings. This act challenges the patriarchal nature of myth, which Lowe argues has been ‘reinvented’ by video games, and reaches beyond even feminist revisions in that it inverts the base narrative to offer not just another side to the same story, but different outcomes.

The nuances between vocal delivery may be subtle for the most part, but for fans it is a sticking point. In a review of the opening gameplay, Ramée said ‘Alexios, voiced by Michael Antonakos, is more gruff and to the point in his responses, while Kassandra, voiced by Melissanthu Mahut, speaks with a hint of playfulness.’ This playfulness is expressed throughout the game, including in one quest where the player is asked to retrieve three items for an elixir. ‘Could these three items be in more different places,’ exclaims Kassandra, whose resigned frustration not only mirrored my own, but also drew attention self-reflexively to a trope of RPG gameplay. While appreciation for each voice actor’s style remains, like a playthrough itself, subjective, it is possible to quantify by looking at comments on social media.

On IGN’s ‘Will You Play As Kassandra or Alexios?’ video, players favour Kassandra’s voice, hailing it as ‘genuine’ and ‘natural and less stilted.’ On Eurogamer’s ‘Voice Comparison’ video, commentators note how Kassandra’s performance is ‘more “alive”’ and that she sounds like an ‘authentic real person.’ While some players say they
will choose Alexios, either because they are disparaging of female protagonists or because they believe Alexios is more ‘historically accurate’, voice acting matters in terms of translating the gameworld into an authentic experience. As Rollinger notes, ‘what is perceived by players as “authentic”, is more a consequence of rarely explicated preconceptions and assumptions than of specific historical knowledge.’ In this case, authenticity is a by-product of vocal quality and delivery. Crafting the right soundscape for the game, however, has wide ranging consequences. Players comment on Kassandra’s adept delivery of ancient Greek, demonstrating that authenticity can overlap with realism in terms of anchoring players in history. Kassandra’s voice is also innately linked to immersivity and a nuanced appreciation for the game’s scripted events. Nelson Jr puts it another way:

No sequence illustrates the subtle differences between the two main characters better than your parting from Markos, the man who took you in as a child and set you on the path of a mercenary … Kassandra greets him curtly. Alexios… slightly less so … If you choose to hug Markos as Kassandra, her deep sigh and clipped sentences indicate that, for her, it’s a concession to Markos. If you choose to hug Markos as Alexios, you get the sense that this is actually a concession for Alexios himself.

In addition to dialogue, there are other sequences that evoke difference. One is the way the game holds a mirror up to Kassandra. ‘The world is full of mercenaries like you,’ reads a tip on the loading screen, while women give quests, lead states, and hold positions of power in the nefarious Cult of Kosmos. Playing as Kassandra emphasises the way in which this world critiques the demographics of other gameworlds, and crafts an alternative history. The focus on female agency and discovery challenges not just the past players may be
familiar with, but also its construction and dissemination, especially when one considers how most of the game’s setting, from Classical Athens to the ruins of the Minoans, has been preserved and passed down by men. This happens at both the level of the game’s frame story, where the player encounters two female scientists who are attempting to access Kassandra’s genetic memories through the use of advanced VR technology, and within the historical setting of the game’s core narrative, where the photography mode allows players to reclaim aspects of the past by capturing and sharing their experiences as Kassandra. In the words of Kapell and Elliott, this co-opts players into ‘actively … constructing meanings and understanding history as a process rather than a master narrative of Great Men and their actions’, something that is especially potent when one photographs Kassandra interacting with ancient Greece in impossible ways.

This reclaiming and embellishment of the record is representative of the game’s asymmetrical interest in historical accuracy. On the one hand, players can explore ‘historical locations’ marked on the gamemap, which come with descriptions of their purpose and import. On the other, the game is much less interested in lived experience. While the choice to present the siblings as mercenaries allows for some creative flexibility, Kassandra is decidedly atypical. Even the game’s attempt to present Kassandra as unique due to her Spartan origin, whose women were ‘seen as radically different by the Athenian and Roman men who wrote about them,’ does not excuse her unique qualities, since these women only ‘engaged in physical training to strengthen their bodies for childbirth’. As an instrument of fate, she is more akin to the goddess Athena in Homer’s *Odyssey* than contemporary women in Classical Greece. As a fighter, she is analogous to mythical women, such as the Amazon queen Penthesilea, or the historical Artemisia I of Caria. Meanwhile, her name, which aptly translates as one who ‘stands out among men’, continues the long reception of the prophetic Trojan princess, Cassandra. And yet, her character is not segregated from ‘everyday’ women.
in the same way that these exceptional examples are in the record. Her appropriation of historically masculine qualities does not condemn her to the same fate as figures like Penthesilea, while her abilities are not a tainted gift from Apollo destined to torment her. Although some skills may be named after or inspired by the gods, it is the player’s application of these skills that empowers Kassandra to save Greece and become an immortal.

In AC Odyssey, it is skill – both the player’s skill but also the skill of the mercenary to complete quests and right wrongs – that matters. This fantasy is engrossing because it removes the contingencies that would have existed for the purposes of an authentic gaming experience based on the idea that where one begins does not define what happens subsequently. Kassandra’s affinity with fantastical portrayals promotes an unrealistic depiction of ancient Greek women and reinforces problematic stereotypes, but at the same time allows her character narrative freedom inspired by ancient examples, and goes some way towards offering audiences the female protagonists they have asked for. Her character can be read ‘symbolically, for what [she has] to say about women’s relationship with history’, and in this case, gaming culture as well. In creating this amalgamation, AC Odyssey skirts issues of gender bias, discrimination and abuse, and instead presents players with an equal opportunity of experience in what is and would have been an unequal world.

Lowe has written of how in video games, ‘the goals of entertainment and accessibility are continually in tension with historical accuracy, trimming its details, pruning its nuances, and filling in its grey areas.’ It is not, however, quite as simple as this, with entertainment and accessibility always watering down an historical gold standard. Kassandra’s Odyssey offers a means to reflect on the role of women in history, while her performance adds nuance to gaming experience and classical reception alike. This is particularly apparent in the non-diegetic Discovery Tours that players can take with Kassandra as the default lead. These pedagogical expeditions take place within the game’s photorealistic reconstruction of Greece,
and cover topics such as myth, democracy, and architecture. In the tour on the daily life of ancient women, your guide, the wealthy Aspasia, notes that women’s work ‘should be far more appreciated on the whole, but we’re going to acknowledge that now.’ Having played as Kassandra, this tour offered a powerful dichotomy between my playthrough and the lives of ancient women. As the tour points out, women led vastly different lives to men, in that they were not citizens, could be exchanged in marriage, and had limited freedom. Their role was not to be seen, with the exception of courtesans. Against this backdrop, the tour explores the power women might have had (i.e. in controlling their dowery, or as priestesses). Aspasia concludes by saying that despite these restrictions, women ‘held onto their strength and dignity.’

In order to appreciate what this service offers, we need to move beyond the siloed analysis of historical video games identified by Rollinger to think about ‘the role that video game technology can play’ in shaping public history. Lowe has identified a divergence between Classical scholarship and historical video games, with the latter emphasising ‘violent and military aspects,’ while scholarship has incorporated a ‘broader view of ancient culture which prominently includes the experiences of women.’ Combat may still form a large part of ACO, but the Discovery Tours, along with the moments identified above, means that such a distinction no longer holds sway. Unlike traditional media, video games do not present the player with one dominant mode of historical representation, perhaps supplemented by a historical note. There is more than one type of historical process at play in ACO, and more possibilities for cross-disciplinary and ludic learning than in other games.

Jerome de Groot has articulated how historical fictions ‘create, state, and enable different historic encounters, new modes of pastness, a new historicity.’ ACO, thanks to ‘the verbs or actions that a player enacts and experiments with in order to participate in and alter the state of play’, shows how games are engaging this new historicity in a self-aware
manner. *ACO* not only imports a tremendous amount of data relating to antiquity and its reception into its open-world, but it also exports this information in different formats, offering Kassandra as the primary executable to run the instructions. Her character allows players to reflect on the seismic differences between what is possible in-game and what might have been the case in antiquity. In positioning Kassandra as the audience for the Discovery Tour, *ACO* manages to sell players all the benefits of, along with the opportunity to critique, multiple epistemologies in an entertainment system with its own complex referentiality, while also allowing them to customise their experience of these epistemologies, both literally (they can tailor the tour), and subjectively by contrasting ‘their’ Kassandra (and indeed their knowledge of antiquity) with the information provided.

‘You have to forget what you know about the past,’ says Markos in the prologue. In place of this, *ACO* offers an individualistic encounter with several modes of history. Rather than receiving a predetermined account, playing this type of game is, as Rollinger argues, ‘a form of “doing” of even “living” history.’ When that history (and media space) has been firmly established as the domain of male heroes destined to perform great deeds, choosing Kassandra is a decisive imposition inspired by Classical precedents, feminist revisionism, and progressive game design. Just as the plot revolves around Layla Hassan inserting her mind into Kassandra’s memories, so the game is unapologetic in the way that Kassandra injects contemporary affinities and cultural contingencies into its comprehensive and palimpsestic expression of Greece. Southgate has argued that fiction helps popularise the debate about the nature of history. What we see here, though, is the frontier of that debate extending into ownership of history within the context of video game reconstructions.

The game’s marketing of choice ramifies into personal appropriation of historical ideas and their reception. The fate of Greece does indeed journey with the player in the sense that each protagonist offers the chance to retcon everything from historical turning points to
the events described in myth. The difference is that playing as Kassandra liberates both the position of women in the ancient world, who were ‘traditionally praised for silence and invisibility’, and challenges the framing of the game, injecting her presence into a genre that has frequently side-lined women, portrayed them in problematic ways, or at best required players to subvert gendered expectations. The progress made by placing Kassandra in these situations and allowing players the freedom to determine in-game outcomes through the lens of Kassandra/Alexios was in fact inadvertently tested by the developers in the ‘Legacy of the First Blade’ DLC, where the protagonist is forced, regardless of gender or sexual orientation, to have a child. The controversy caused by this decision is evidence of ACO’s legacy of choice in action, with players, particularly those who chose Kassandra and were powerless to prevent her slide from mercenary to mother and housewife, expressing their frustration at the developers for betraying not only the discretionary features of the game, including choices already made, but, more importantly, Kassandra’s character. The fallout from this decision, along with the reparations Ubisoft made, demonstrates the impact that Kassandra has had culturally, both within the gaming community and the industry at large.

Like other forms of historical fiction, games offer the chance to ‘reassert the female presence into history’, to write back but also ‘create something owned’ by the player. ACO does so by appropriating and redirecting its source material, genre, and even its own legacy. It is a rewarding struggle, as reviewers have shown in the way they describe Kassandra. Kim went as far as to write the headline: ‘Two-Thirds of Assassin's Creed Odyssey Players Chose the Wrong Protagonist. Yeah I said it.’ It is also a struggle that is likely to bear fruit, not least because the developers have revealed that Kassandra is the canonical character, and included a choice of gender in Assassin’s Creed Valhalla (2020). The critical and commercial success of Kassandra’s journey is a strong argument for developers to ‘do the hard work to build games that are rich and complex enough to support
narratives that differ from the single-track storylines’. Although the choice between the siblings may seem cosmetic, ACO offers fans the tools to search for something different, not only within Classical contexts and gaming traditions, but also beyond, to construct a new Odyssey.

1 King (2016); O’Gorman (2006).
3 Near (2013).
4 Hern (2020); Schreier (2020). See also the comments section for the trailers, especially IGN’s video ‘Will You Play As Kassandra or Alexios’ (2018), where one user wrote ‘I don't wanna play a cooking simulator so I'll play as Alexios.’ See also the Gamergate controversy.
5 Nelson (2018); Kain (2018); IGN (2018).
6 Chapman (2012).
7 I follow the call for further research into player experiences made by Chapman, Foka & Westin (2017): 365. For how Classical Reception scholarship tends to prioritise how (post)classical societies have generated meaning by receiving and adapting Classical materials, see Willis (2017): 2-3 and Hopkins (2014): 7. The same is broadly true in scholarship on historical fiction, although there are exceptions, e.g., Beavers (2020b) and Bergold (2019). I have not encountered any scholarship on unprompted receptions of new media in the manner of Gray (2010).
8 King (2016).
9 King (2014).
10 Chapman (2012). See also Chapman, Foka & Westin (2017): 365; Lowe (2009): 80 notes that these attributes ‘can be identified as a major factor in the proliferation of classically-themed computer games.’
12 Near (2013); Sherman (1997).
13 King (2018); Kain (2018); Murnane (2018). See also most ACO discussion boards.
14 (1980): 135
15 Kim (2018); Kain (2018); Murnane (2018). See also most ACO discussion boards.
16 Kim (2018); Kain (2018); Murnane (2018).
17 This follows calls for female characters to be dressed in more ‘realistic’ armour (e.g., the Women Fighters in Reasonable Armour tumblr).
22 (2018).
23 (2018).
24 This tallies with surveys conducted by Kreider (2010).
26 (2013).
27 (2020).
28 See also Near (2013): 263-264, who suggests that ‘it is not the presence of women (or men) in box art per se that affects sales, but the presence of female characters alone (without male characters) that reduces sales.’
29 Gray 2010: 41; I follow Gray in seeing ‘text’ as the entire multimedia storyworld.
Kassandra’s ‘Amazon Armor’ references Wonder Woman, while Alexios’ ‘Armor of Achilles’ echoes Brad Pitt’s outfit in the film Troy.

This was the case with the ending of Mass Effect 3: Clarkson (2012).

For a discussion of how games go about achieving this, see Bogost (2008): 136, see also Cooper and Short (2012): 11 on how historical fiction has challenged the representation of women in history.

For the lived experience of ancient women, see James & Dillon (2012).

Beavers (2020).


Cooper and Short (2012): 15.


Murnane (2018). See also Maria (2018) and the ‘Alexios or Kassandra?’ discussion on Steam.