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Research Article

Teaching Greek mythology through a scenario-based game

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Abstract

In this article, we showcase the pilot scenario of *The Trojan War*, an educational self-directed game that combines text inspired by ancient Greek (as well as Roman) literature with graphics based on the 'Geometric style', an authentic Greek style of painting contemporary with the composition of the Homeric epics. Our game uses interactive scenarios to support active learning strategies of students interested in Classical Studies in both tertiary and secondary education. Players can take on the role of key characters, making choices that can prevent, start, or stop the Trojan War, as well as determine their own personal outcomes. The learners are thus presented with the opportunity to explore alternative pathways to rewrite the history of the War. In the process, they can apply their subject knowledge and develop their intellectual and critical skills. They also become familiar with a distinctive and expressive early Greek artistic style, the so-called Geometric. Rather than focusing on winning, the game aims to give students the opportunity to engage with important ideas and values of ancient Greek culture by exploring multiple perspectives on the topic. It also provides a valuable lesson on the potentially wide-ranging consequences of individual choices, which is a core element of responsible citizenship.

Keywords: Trojan War, Homer, Geometric style, scenario-based game, active learning

Introduction

A first-year course on Greek mythology at Massey University, New Zealand, co-taught by the first two authors of this paper, examines myth through both literature and art. Combining these two areas helps students acquire a deeper understanding of both, and this also exposes them to the interdisciplinary nature of Classical Studies.

To make our teaching more engaging and interactive, we collaborated to create an educational game (Politopoulos *et al.*, 2019), *The Trojan War*[1] (Figure 1), that combines text and graphics from ancient Greek sources and models.

We set two main aims for the game. Firstly, on the conceptual level, we sought to make students aware of the importance of individual choices and their potentially far-reaching consequences. The traditional mythic background of capricious gods and implacable fate serves to underscore the constraints imposed on individual choice and freedom of action by our social, cultural, political, natural, and cosmic environment. Thus, the essential 'moral' of our game (if there is one) can be summed up with the well-known 'Serenity Prayer': 'Grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, courage to change the things I can, and the wisdom to know the difference.'

Secondly, on the visual level, we sought to familiarise students with a striking and distinctive early Greek style of vase painting and transport them back to the mindset of an eighth-century-BCE Greek artist who created narrative scenes.

Since neither of us is very tech-savvy when it comes to digital technology or gaming, we partnered with Kevan Loke, who is a senior learning technologist and designer with expertise in gamification. Our collaboration has been very successful, with Jonathan contributing the textual, narrative element, and Gina and Kevan creating and crafting the graphics.

In a nutshell, our game invites students to take on the persona of a key character from Trojan War mythology and make pivotal decisions at critical junctures in his or her story. Depending on the choices made, players can either arrive at the 'canonical' (and usually rather grim) outcome prescribed by the Greek mythological tradition or else shape an entirely different outcome, both for their chosen character and for the Greeks and Trojans as a whole. Therefore, a significant takeaway from the game is that every decision in life has consequences.

Game mechanics

This self-directed game is a cross between a role-playing game and a visual novel because of the importance of narrative. Players work their way through four scenarios in eight different roles, as in the old 'choose-your-own-adventure' novels. The scenarios are: 'Lovers' (featuring Paris and Helen); 'Kings' (Priam and Agamemnon); 'Warriors' (Achilles and Hector); and 'Survivors' (Odysseus and Penelope).

In the first scenario, 'Lovers', which we have completed as our pilot project, the player can select the role of either Prince Paris of Troy, the Casanova of the ancient world, or Queen Helen of Sparta, the legendary beauty and wife of Menelaus whose abduction by Paris sparked the Trojan War. Both Paris and Helen will be making choices that can prevent, start, or stop the War, and also determine
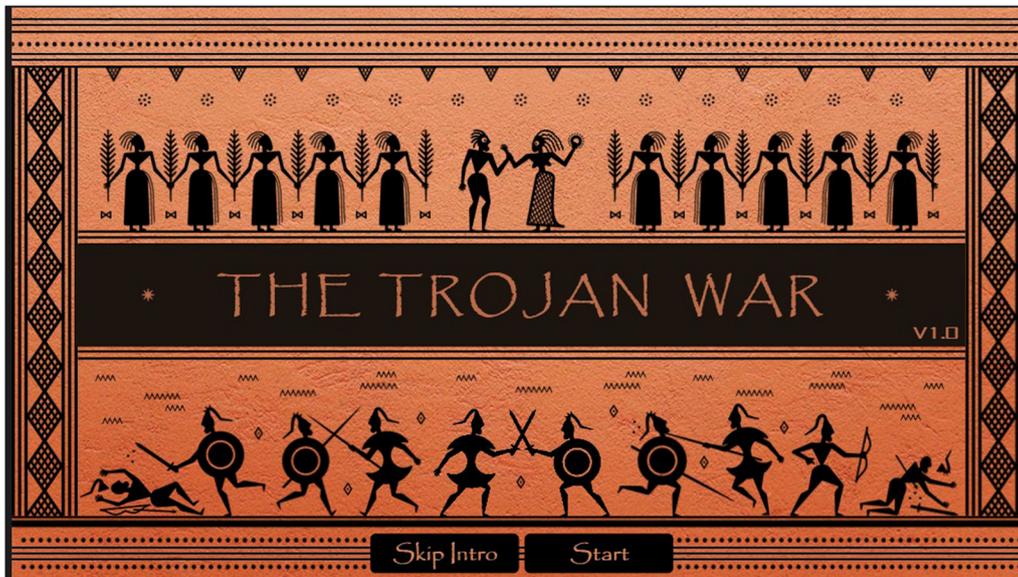
Figure 1. Opening page of The Trojan War game.

their own personal outcomes. The students are thus presented with the opportunity to explore alternative pathways to rewrite the legend of the Trojan War.

At critical moments, players come across decision points where they are given a limited number of options from which to select a narrative direction for the game. For example, in the scene of the divine beauty contest (Figure 2), the player is prompted to pick one of the three goddesses or none of them, choices which, in turn, lead to different possible outcomes, all but one of them diverging from the canonical ancient version. At another point, Paris may choose to refrain from abducting Helen and to leave Sparta without her, in which case the Trojan War is averted. Two possible personal outcomes await Paris if he chooses this path: a clear conscience and conventional married life or a lifetime of regret.

Some options allow Helen to rise above her largely passive role in the ancient literary tradition, by providing her with the opportunity and agency to define her own fate. For example, she may decide not to marry any of her suitors and remain 'single and fabulous' for the rest of her life, ultimately preventing the Trojan War. Helen's act of independence and self-reliance inspires Greek women to follow her example, ultimately bringing the Greek patriarchy to an end. Or else it may cause a war against Sparta rather than Troy (Figure 3)!

A map icon at the bottom of the screen allows players to check their location, jump to a specific scene, or go back to a decision point and try an alternative path (Figure 4). As they progress and explore more scenes, additional nodes become available on the map.

Although some of these alternative pathways diverge sharply from the established version of the story, the Greek mythological tradition was itself very flexible and adaptable, with several variants surviving in both ancient literary and visual sources (for example, on the key question of whether Helen went to Troy at all, or whether she spent the war's duration in Egypt). This flexibility gave us a licence to experiment and create new narratives, just like Homeric bards who adapted the stories of the Trojan War.
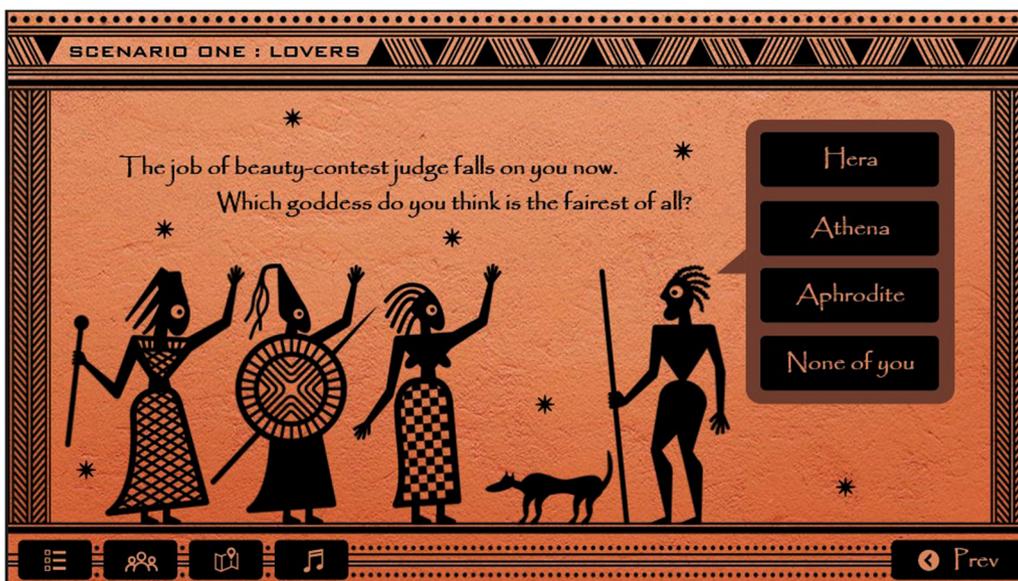

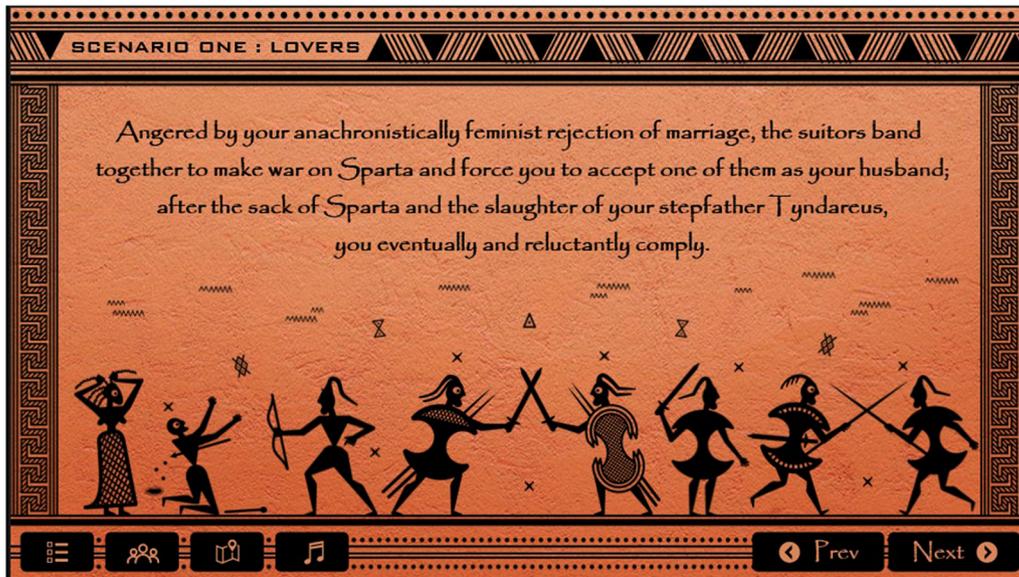**Figure 2.** The divine beauty contest.

Figure 3. The indignant suitors wage war against Sparta.

The players can, of course, choose to follow the same route known from mythology, in which case they will end up with the established, canonical result of the sack of Troy; still, in the process, they will have reflected on the 'roads not taken' and gained a deeper understanding of the factors that may have shaped the decision-making of the protagonists (Morley, 2019).

The storyline and various options are informed by evidence from ancient literary sources, primarily the Homeric and other epic poems but also material from later Greek and Roman authors. They also reflect the socio-political context of early Greece.[2]

Some situations, which are generated by our imagination and depart from ancient sources, are designed to highlight the often sharp contrast in customs and values between ancient and modern societies. For example, our option for Helen to refuse all her suitors and remain unmarried would be considered entirely blameless (and indeed unremarkable) in any society of the modern Western world. But in ancient Greece (and Rome), apart from a handful of religious exceptions and such legendary aberrations as the Amazons, the rejection of marriage and voluntary celibacy were not merely frowned upon as a life choice for women but were essentially unthinkable.

We have also built in a few simple quizzes to test students' knowledge; these need to be answered correctly before one can proceed along a path. Quick validation of the correct answer reinforces understanding and recollection of characters and events.

The text is mainly written in the second person so that students can better experience the narrative world from that character's point of view. The inclusion of the character's internal thought process in 'bubble' form (Figure 5) facilitates immersion into the role. Finally, three evocative music tracks by lyre composer Michael Levy accompany the game, with the option to have them turned off.

Game development process

We approached the game design from both a scholarly and creative perspective. By using a multilinear narrative structure
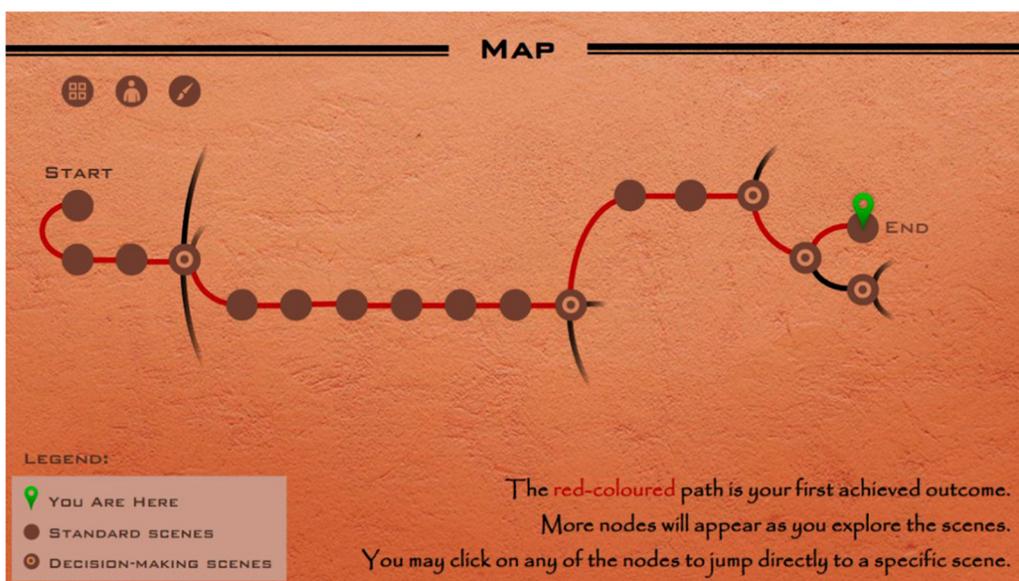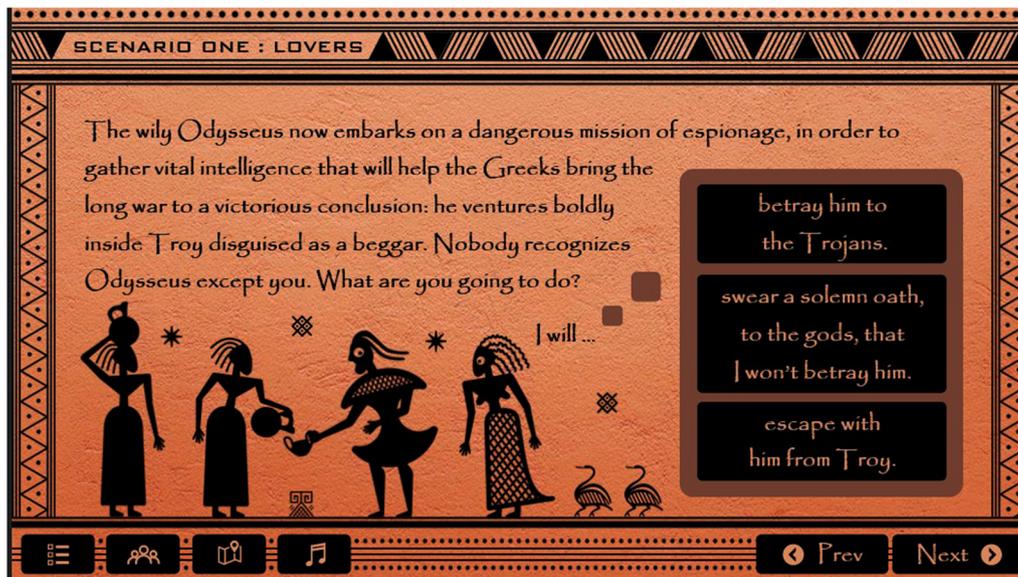

Figure 4. Branching map view.

Figure 5. Scene with Helen's inner thoughts in 'bubble' form.

(Boom *et al.*, 2020) we concentrate more on why the story unfolds in a certain way, and how specific endings are reached. The decision points, player agency, and consequences of the choices are thus the focus of the game.[3]

In the design process, we used Twine, an 'open source tool for telling interactive, non-linear stories' (https://twinery.org) to create an interactive and playable visual storyboard for review and testing purposes.[4] We thus created maps of the entire scenarios and decision-making opportunities where the learner's choices ultimately affect the outcome. Upon confirmation of the design, Articulate Storyline was used to develop the interactive and non-linear game with a customised graphical user interface. This allows us to publish our game for a Learning Management System (LMS), supporting reporting and tracking. The result is a user-friendly and attractive tool for engaged learning.

One of our main aims was to make the game as authentic and visually informative as possible by representing the characters and scenes following the conventions of the so-called Geometric style of vase painting, ca. 900–700 BCE (Figure 6); we relied mostly on

Figure 6. Krater in the Geometric style, ca. 750–735 BCE. Metropolitan Museum of Art 14.130.14 (photo: public domain). https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/248904.

the style developed during the eighth century, and thus more or less contemporary with the composition of Homer's epics. In that way, students would become familiar with a distinctive early Greek artistic style which has not been used in other games inspired by the Classical world.[5]

The striking and relatively uniform Geometric style (Langdon, 2008, pp. 1–18) marks the revival of the Greek pictorial tradition that emerged after the end of the Mycenaean period. Narrative scenes are generally placed in horizontal bands and are characterised by repetition, order, and symmetry (hence the conventional name of the style). Figural elements are nicely integrated with mostly rectilinear abstract motifs (e.g., meanders, chequerboards, triangles, crosses, zigzags) that fill the background. Human and animal forms have a stylised and formulaic character and are shown largely as dark silhouettes. Minimal overlapping is used in the composition to ensure clarity; thus, chariot wheels, horse necks and legs, and bed legs are placed side by side.

Each part of the human body is represented in its most characteristic view: the head in profile (later showing an eye), the upper body from the front (shown as a triangle with a wasp waist), and the buttocks and legs in profile again, thus combining two different viewpoints. Women are differentiated from men through skirts, breasts, hair, or a combination thereof. Children are distinguished from adults only through their smaller size.

Whether Geometric scenes referred to specific epic and mythical stories or depicted real-life happenings (even if imbued with a generalised heroising atmosphere) is a matter of scholarly debate (Hurwit, 2011; Langdon, 1998). Most scenes remain ambiguous, thus allowing for multivalent symbolism. Our baseline assumption in using this style for our Trojan War game is that Geometric paintings could also depict myths.

Wherever possible, our motifs and figures were modelled on existing ancient ones. If we lacked models, we exercised creativity to construct new images not encountered in Geometric painting, but always following the style of the period. For example, we created Zeus' lightning bolt based on a series of V shapes (Figure 7) and a ram after a bronze figurine of this period. In some cases, we have included examples of ancient Geometric images that served as inspiration for our creations. This allows students to view some of our models first-hand.
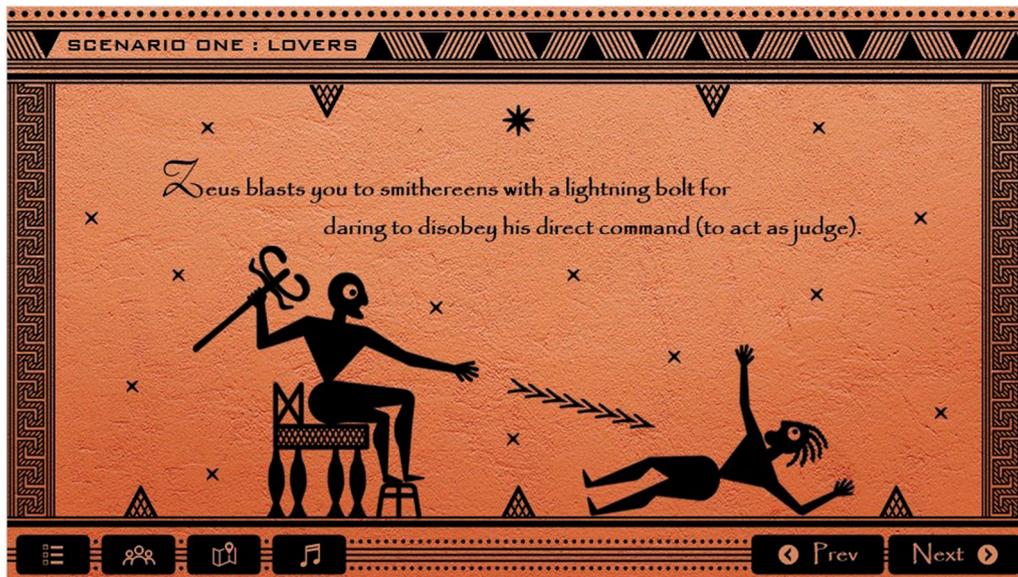
Figure 7. Zeus throwing a lightning bolt at Paris.

A list of the main characters is provided in each scenario. We established our own conventions regarding physical attributes and social and cultural elements (such as clothing, hairstyle, and weaponry) and applied them consistently. So, unlike anonymous characters, named individuals feature an eye and have personalised outfits and equipment, such as shields or decorated skirts (Figure 8). We gave more emphasis to the two most alluring females (Helen and Aphrodite) by adding breasts (a feature of some Geometric females, with or without a skirt). Despite these variances, the unity in design, so characteristic of the Geometric style, is maintained.

To help distinguish between the characters in our storyline, we differentiated the Greek and Trojan warriors by the shape of their helmets and especially by their shields: the Trojans hold round shields, while the Greeks have shields shaped like an hourglass (or an 'apple-core'). Both shield types were used by Geometric vase painters. In this instance, however, we have deviated slightly from the Geometric style, since, while the ancient style does include some individualised details in certain figures (such as hair, armour, and skirts), it is unclear if these were applied in a consistent or meaningful manner (whereas modern computer games rely on such graphic details to distinguish between different characters).

In composing our scenes, we abided by the Geometric lack of modern realistic perspective, according to which the painters show not what they see from one angle but everything they know is there. So, the file of dancers in Figure 9 is supposed to represent a circle dance, as in the 3D rendering shown alongside it; and the bodies of the killed warriors in Figure 10 are not stacked on top of each other but are shown as if looking from above. This is an early way of suggesting perspective, while at the same time making sure all figures are clearly visible in the silhouette rendering.

In accordance with the Geometric style that does not include specific indications or signs of space, the setting is only implied. The background abstract motifs are based on authentic examples and appear decorative, though sometimes, perhaps like some
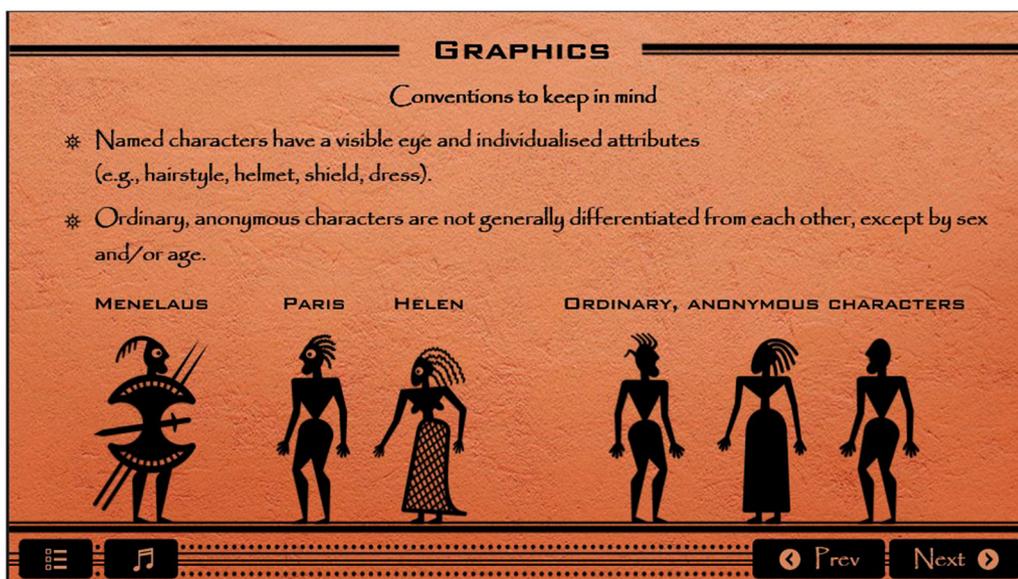

Figure 8. Ordinary vs. named characters.

Figure 9. Dance scene in 2D and 3D rendering.

ancient examples, they help establish real-world context for narrative events: for example, parallel zigzag lines suggest an aquatic environment like the waves of the sea (Figure 11).

In other scenes, we designed animals to contribute subtly to the atmosphere and narrative: the dog's head and tail differ during a happy encounter and a sad departure; and the lion about to attack a deer, modelled on a Geometric example, fits neatly in a violent scene (Figure 12).

Those very familiar with Greek art and culture would be able to recognise subtle references, like the 'hand on the wrist' gesture, a well-established convention in Greek art denoting marriage or sexual union (Figure 11); and the sword drop during Menelaus and Helen's encounter in Troy (Figure 13) is based on later vase paintings, thus creating a slight anachronism.

Therefore, in our game, the graphics constitute a visual language on its own terms rather than being simply illustrations of narrative content. They invite players to linger, closely examine the images,

and reflect on how each scene is composed, what conventions have been used, and to what effect. This may motivate students to delve deeper into the visual aspect of Classical Studies.

Challenges and lessons learned

Creating this project was a very enjoyable experience, particularly when it came to designing the graphics. For the first scenario, we generated over 100 scenes, some of which were playfully animated to enhance the game's appeal.[6] But we also encountered some difficulties when trying to compose scenes within the limitations and conventions of the Geometric style.

As there are no ancient models for several of the scenes we wanted to depict, creating entirely new scenes, such as the one featuring Paris and Helen in the Underworld, was challenging, though at the same time stimulating (see Figure 14). In order to create a dark and menacing atmosphere, we combined various
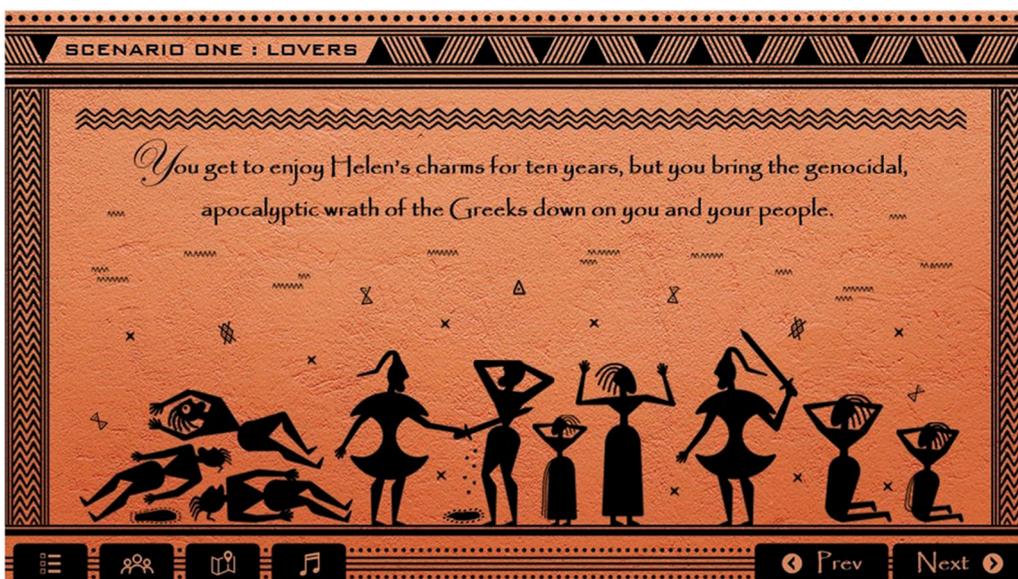

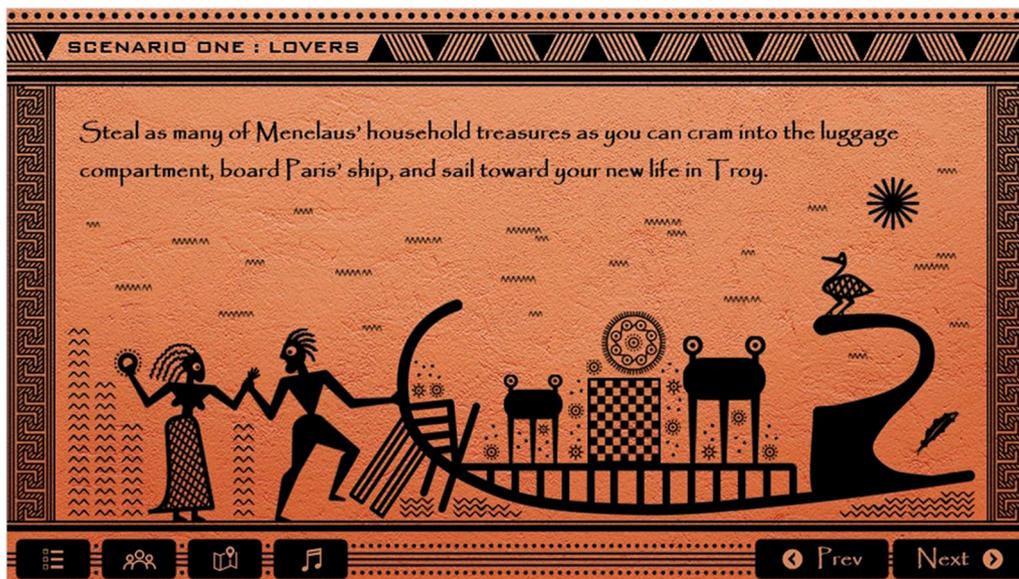**Figure 10.** Dead bodies shown as if viewed from above.

Figure 11. Zigzags suggesting sea waves.

elements from unrelated ancient scenes (such as snakes, scorpions, and biers). Additionally, we crafted a ferocious double-headed Cerberus out of images of dogs and lions.[7]

As we created our scenes, we strove to grasp the Geometric artist's mindset in order to convert 3D compositions into 2D effectively and without utilising modern methods of perspective. Still, it was challenging to portray scenes like Paris and Helen in bed without relying on overlapping.

As an experiment, we also created a 3D version of Paris and had it printed (Figure 15). It was very interesting to see that the figurine ended up looking very similar in shape to surviving figurines of the Geometric period. In short, this project has provided us with fresh perspectives on Geometric art.

In our game design, we also had to take modern sensitivities into account. For instance, we debated whether, for the sake of historical accuracy and authenticity, we should include the ancient motif of the swastika among our background motifs, since it often appears in Geometric vase paintings; but we decided that this might

prove too controversial, especially for high-school students unfamiliar with ancient Greek art motifs.

But did we perhaps overreact? In addition to its obvious, unsavoury modern connotations, the swastika is a very ancient and widespread symbol of prosperity and good fortune, occurring in various cultures around the world. Were we right to 'cancel' the swastika? Should this ancient, multivalent symbol be regarded as permanently taboo and off limits, merely because it was misappropriated during a brief – albeit extremely bloody and catastrophic – period of the 20th century? In short, what is more important: cultural sensitivity or historical authenticity?

Pedagogical aims and learning objectives

Our aim was to make the game both enjoyable and educational. So, while *The Trojan War* is playful and visually stimulating, providing a window to early Greek art, it mainly aims to encourage students to critically engage with the past in a different way (cf. Cameron,
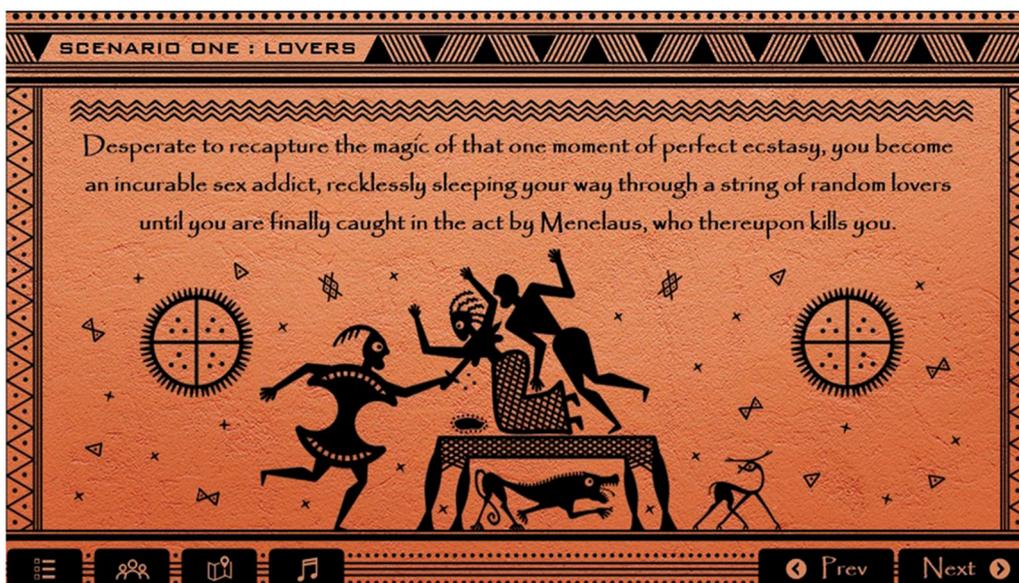

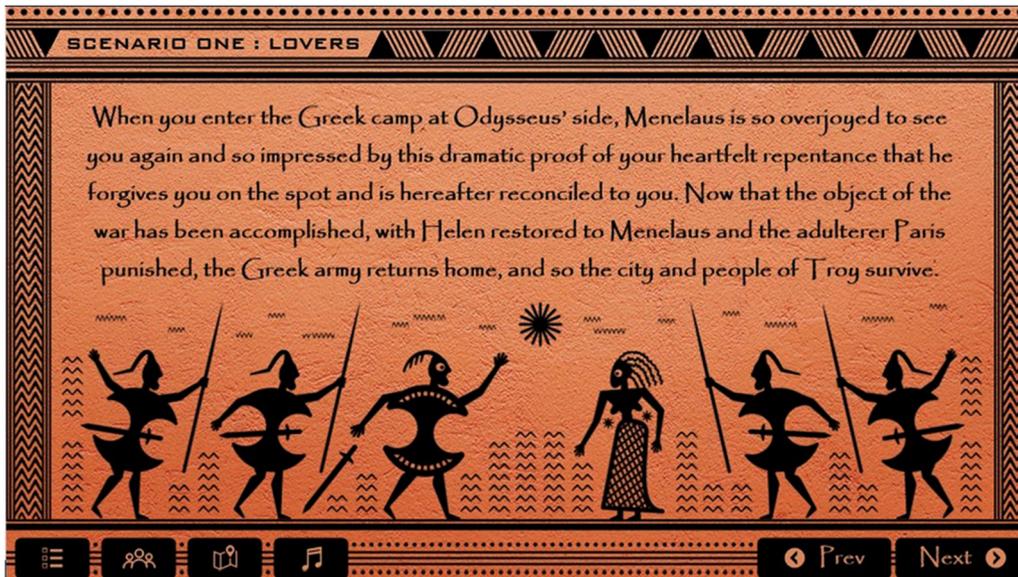**Figure 12.** Lion about to attack a deer in a scene of violence.

Figure 13. Menelaus drops his sword on seeing Helen's beauty.

2022). Thus, thinking and reflection are part of the mechanics. The game was designed to be intentionally slow to allow students to consider different choices and reflect on the motivations, actions, and possible consequences before each decision.

They can see that what did happen need not have happened, because several factors, primarily individual agency, could have affected the course of the story. They may encounter similar dilemmas as the characters in the story, but also additional ones if their choices steer them towards counterfactual directions (i.e., something contrary to the canonical version of events) and alternative endings (Morley, 2019).

So, rather than winning, the game aims to give students the opportunity to engage with key ancient Greek ideas and values that are also of relevance to modern social issues, by exploring multiple perspectives on the topic; but also, it aims to teach them an important life lesson: that even simple decisions can have far-reaching consequences (for good or ill) for an individual, for her/his loved ones, and for his/her community.

Using the game as a teaching tool

The Trojan War game was designed to support active learning strategies of tertiary students taking the Greek Mythology, Trojan War, and Greek Art and Society courses at Massey University, but also senior high school students studying or interested in Classical Studies anywhere. However, teachers should be aware that the game (like most ancient sources for Greek mythology) includes some violent content and sexually explicit language that may not be appropriate for younger students or students from conservative cultural or family backgrounds. They should thus make sure to play the whole game before using it with their students.

The game can act as a teaching tool to introduce students to the characters (human and divine) and the story of the Trojan War. It can be played by individuals or pairs (or the class group as a whole) and then can be used as a basis for discussion on the issues involved in each decision. For example, in the episode involving the
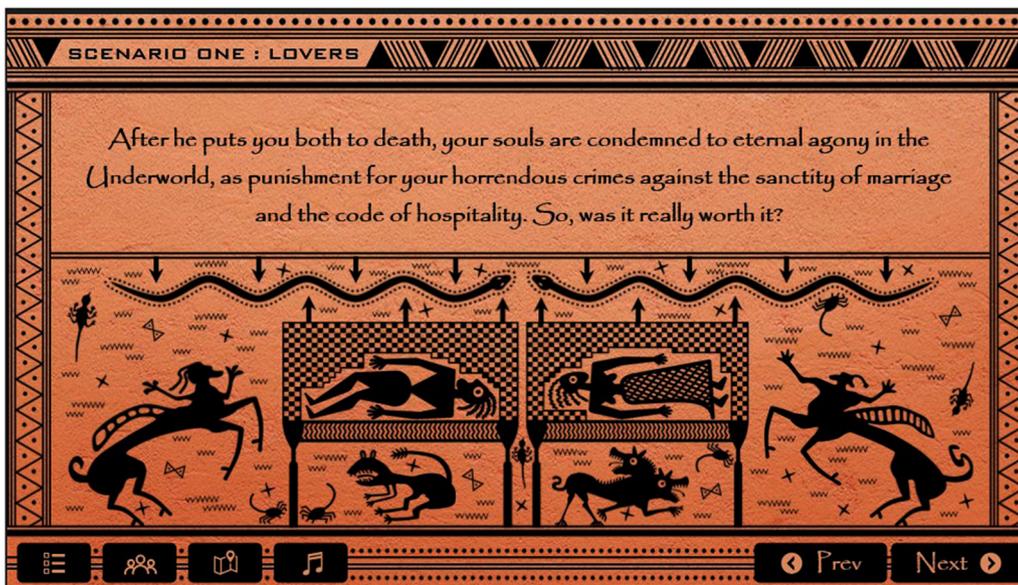

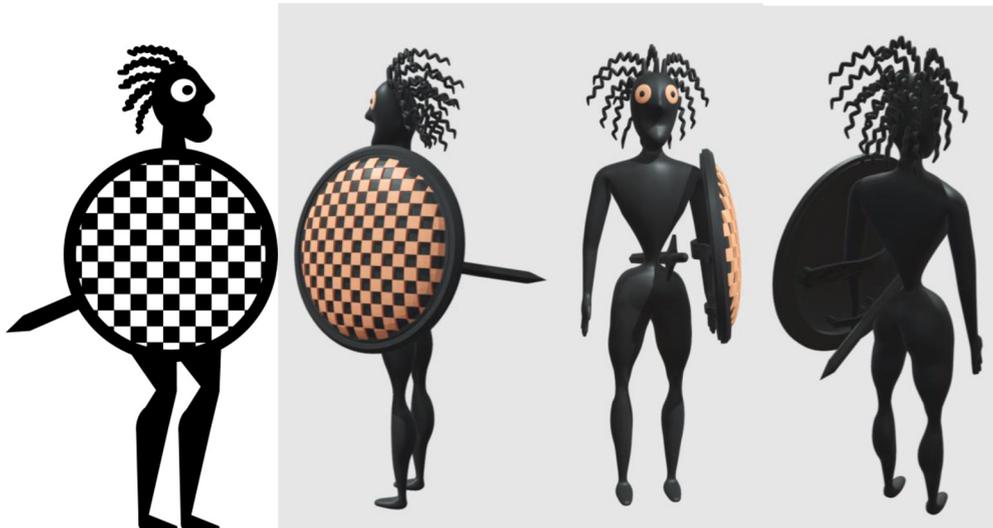**Figure 14.** Paris and Helen in the Underworld.

Figure 15. Paris in 2D and 3D print.

abduction of Helen, students can discuss the highly topical issue of sexual consent.

A reflection piece assignment could also be set to enhance the player experience, but mainly to achieve the project's learning goals: how plausible each scenario or outcome is; what the assumptions behind the decision-making process are; what analogies there may be with issues of today, etc.

For an art-historical approach, students can analyse the conventions used in depicting certain scenes and the messages conveyed by poses, gestures, and background elements. Additionally, at the end of each pathway, students can exercise their creativity by designing their own scenes in the Geometric style. This has been trialled in the Greek Art and Society course as an extra-credit exercise. Students were instructed to familiarise themselves with the game and then design a scene from any phase of the Trojan War. They had the option of drawing it on paper or (if they possessed the necessary skills) digitally. It was important

for them to adhere to the conventions of the Geometric style and craft a suitable text to complement the image. In that way, they would incorporate learning content in the design process and consider the challenges of expressing a narrative through still visuals.

Figure 16 shows the drawing of a mature student who also commented: 'I had lots of fun with this – even got my two teenagers interested in the geometric period!' The comment by another student who submitted a drawing suggests that she has gained a heightened appreciation of the skill involved in creating scenes on ancient vases: 'The process of the drawing (as opposed to just writing) the scenario, really helped me to appreciate the artists themselves. Though this seems to be a rather simplistic art style, it presents its own challenges.'

We are planning to develop another exercise for our second-year course on the 'Trojan War', which is focused on the ancient Greek and Roman literary sources for the legend. For this exercise,
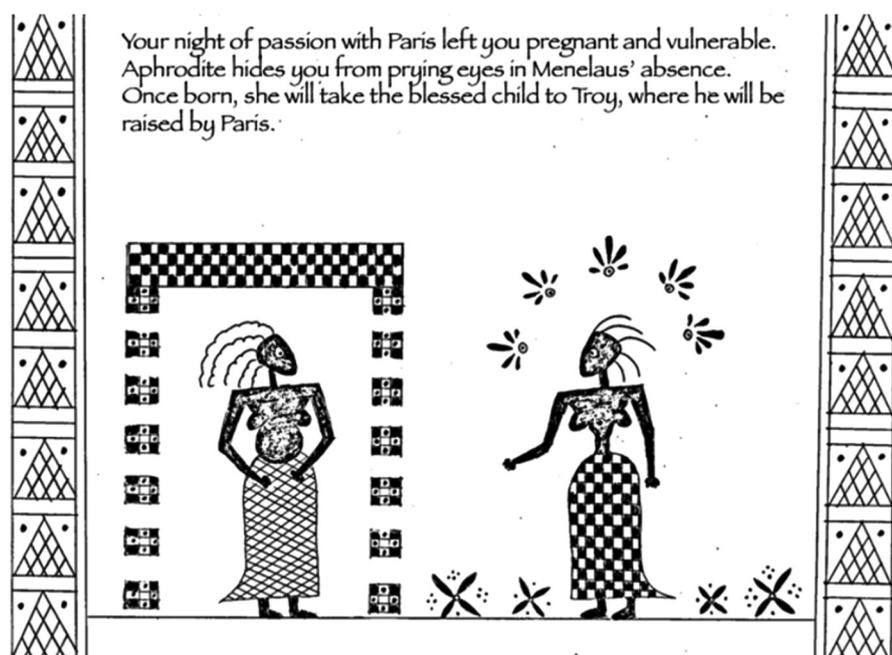

Figure 16. Student drawing based on *The Trojan War* game.

students will be instructed to design a decision-point scenario for the character of either Dido or Aeneas, along the lines suggested by our *Trojan War* game. The scenario is to be based closely on the content of Books 1–4 of Virgil's *Aeneid* (one of the assigned course texts), as supplemented and enriched with other classical literary sources, the fraught history of ancient Rome and Carthage, the wider social and cultural context, etc.

We will also be assigning, as an essay topic for our introductory 'Greek Mythology' course, the option for students to design a 'choose your own adventure' scenario for the character of Oedipus, likewise on the lines suggested by our *Trojan War* game. Oedipus was selected for this purpose both because his story is relatively simple and self-contained, and also because it starkly illustrates the fundamental issues of human choice and free will vs. determinism that we explore in our game.

Feedback and future opportunities

Our educational resource has received very positive feedback from both teachers and students in tertiary and secondary education. They have found the content to be both engaging and informative, with the graphics being a particular highlight. The concept of an alternate timeline was well-received, and players were keen to go back and try alternative paths. As we had hoped, curiosity motivated them to explore the whole range of potential storylines. However, a few students missed the competitive element of a traditional game, so we are planning to make future scenarios more goal-based by assigning different scores to different outcomes, to enable students to compete both against themselves (in pursuit of a higher score) and against each other; the option for a one-on-one contest between players will be especially suitable for our projected second and third scenarios, since Priam is obviously in direct conflict with Agamemnon, as is Achilles with Hector.

Conclusion

Our aim in developing *The Trojan War* was to design a game that blends fun and education, providing students with an interactive experience of the ancient world.[8] Text and graphics, grounded in the social context of early Greece, are designed to appeal to contemporary students. The carefully constructed scenes encourage creative engagement rather than simple observation and communicate the skill of paying close attention to visual sources.

The multiple-branching and interactive storyline allows players to participate in the story by making choices and applying their subject knowledge and critical-thinking skills. The experience of following their own path creates more interest in the subject and gives students multiple perspectives on the topic. It encourages them to explore different counterfactual paths that may alter the course of events as known from the canonical versions. It thus provides a useful lesson in the potentially wide-ranging consequences of individual choices, thereby helping students become responsible global citizens.

Our game also builds on the long and rich tradition, from classical antiquity onwards, of using the Trojan War story as a springboard for profound reflection on the nature of happiness versus unhappiness and winning versus losing. For example, in Euripides' *Trojan Women*, the Greeks believe that they have decisively 'won' the War and are thereby entitled to treat (or mistreat) the vanquished Trojans however they like; but the tragedy's opening scene makes it clear that, unbeknownst to the Greeks, they have grievously offended the goddess Athena with their sacrilegious abuse of one Trojan captive (the princess Cassandra), and that they are going to 'lose' just as thoroughly as their Trojan adversaries, via the disastrous sea storm arranged by Athena to blight their homeward voyage. Our first scenario is thus designed to pose the basic question: can Paris be said to 'win' the game if he gets to enjoy Helen's charms (at least for a while), but thereby condemns his own people to extinction?

Therefore, although *The Trojan War* is not yet explicitly set up in a straightforward win-or-lose format, it encourages each individual player to consider what exactly would constitute a happy ending for herself or himself: glory, wealth, status, sexual fulfilment, family life, the welfare of one's community, or world peace. But it also imparts an important life lesson: that even simple decisions can have far-reaching consequences, for good or ill.

Historical games like *The Trojan War* showcase the educational potential of technology in teaching Classical Studies and communicate the relevance of Classics in our digital age (Clare, 2021). By engaging with the ancient world in original, creative, and unconventional ways, students can deepen their experience and understanding of the past beyond the confines of traditional classroom learning.

Notes

1 https://tiny.one/trojanwar or https://360.articulate.com/review/content/ead460c3-9534-41bc-99ba-520f04f0f803/review.

2 On games reflecting the historical and cultural context of a society, see Cameron (2022).

3 A similar approach was taken by Copplestone (2017, p. 93) in designing the videogame *Buried*.

4 Cf. the Twine-based adventure, *The Melian Dilemma* game (Morley, 2019), in which the player can choose a side in Thucydides' 'Melian Dialogue'. That game, however, contains only text. See also Boom *et al.* (2020).

5 The Geometric style has been used in a short animation of the *Panoply Vase Animation Project* (https://www.panoply.org.uk/sappho): Nevin (2019).

6 On the beautifully animated scenes of the *Panoply Vase Animation Project*, and their benefits for studying Classics, see Nevin (2015*a* and 2015*b*).

7 Although most ancient sources (both literary and visual) represented Cerberus as triple-headed, Attic vase painters, for some unknown reason, depicted him with only two heads, and it is their model that we have mostly followed with the Geometric-style graphics for our game.

8 On games that provide playful and fun experiences of the past, see Rollinger (2020); Politopoulos and Mol (2021). On fun, see Sharp and Thomas (2019).

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