

Video games now rival films as a form of mass entertainment. In 2004 video game sales topped \$10 billion, and the development costs of the most elaborate new games exceed \$100 million. Some of the more popular of the current crop of video games focus on classical antiquity, and the experiences that the generation of students now entering high school and college have had playing such games is enormously important in shaping their view of ancient Greece and Rome. The study of films about classical antiquity has blossomed in the past two decades, but video games that draw on the same subject matter remain largely unexamined. My goal in this talk is to begin a scholarly dialogue on this important topic.

This talk will consist of three parts. It will begin with brief introductory comments that provide some sense of the surprising scale and complexity of the video game industry and that outline the three major categories of games: strategy games, role-playing games, and first-person shooters. There are no successful first-person shooters set in the ancient world, but some of the most popular strategy and role-playing games are based directly on classical antiquity.

The second part of the talk will describe—and demonstrate—the most popular relevant strategy game (Rome Total War) and role-playing game (Titanquest). In Rome Total War players accumulate resources and fight both fictional and historical battles from the time of the Roman Republic. The game allows players to adopt the personae of famous generals such as Julius Caesar and to fight against enemies such as the Carthaginians and the Numidians. Detailed historical information is provided on-screen about each battle, and advanced graphics reproduce with great exactitude the actual topography of the battle sites. In Titanquest the player begins by designing a character that is then sent out on a series of adventures. Most of these adventures are based on classical mythology and are set in Sparta and Egypt. The main character fulfills tasks that include slaying centaurs, satyrs, and minotaurs. In order to complete the game, the character must slay Typhon and ascend Mt. Olympus to receive Zeus' thanks.

The final part of the talk will discuss the picture of classical antiquity that emerges from playing these games and will suggest ways in which these games might be used for pedagogical purposes. For example, Rome Total War could be an effective tool for teaching details of Roman military practice, such as the composition and employment of the maniple, and for illustrating the challenges faced by Roman generals at specific battles.