

'REALITY WORLDS' COLLIDE: FILM AND VIDEOGAMES AS PEDAGOGICAL TOOLS FOR THE CLASSICS

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Since the early eighties, the personal computer has come to form an integral part of most aspects of our existence. In Hollywood this is no different. Indeed, the influence of the computer is so powerful that it is rare for an action-adventure film to be able to call itself a 'blockbuster' unless it is released with some sort of videogame tie-in following closely in its wake, as the case of James Cameron's *Avatar* (2010) suggests. It is the relationship between film and videogame and their combined strengths as a teaching tool that are the concerns of this article. The analysis therefore centres on two examples of film and videogame tie-in: *Clash of the Titans* and *Percy Jackson & the Olympians: The lightning thief*, both 2010 releases. The investigation targets this film / videogame complex through the use of a new concept, the 'reality world', to be defined in the course of the article that better allows an assessment of the relevance and utility of films and their videogame tie-ins as pedagogical tools for the teaching and study of the discipline of Classics.

Introduction

The argument at hand is not concerned with the comparative analysis of different styles of representation. University courses the world over exploring the relationship between classical antiquity and the cinema already teach by what Christesen & Machado (2010:109) refer to as the 'what is *not* there' approach, meaning that students analyse history and cinema typically by comparing the elements that a chosen filmic representation omits from the known factual history of a period. This discussion instead examines the interface between a film and its videogame tie-in as a possible and very new pedagogical tool.¹ For the purpose of this analysis of the pedagogical possibilities inherent in the convergence of the film and videogame tie-in, we have devised the term 'reality worlds', a term that speaks to the recreation of worlds, communities, and societies that rely on historically exact particulars to support or contextualise fictional stories. This re-representation of worlds relies on historically accurate details to authenticate fictions, and serves

¹ The phenomenon of the videogame tie-in that is released concurrently with a big budget blockbuster is a relatively new one.

to aid the audience in suspending its disbelief of the fictional narrative situated within this re-created world. From the well researched minutiae of simple day-to-day living environs, to the more complex cultural and religious strata of society, this construction grounds even the most fantastical of tales in a 'reality world', or put another way, it offers a phenomenological realism that provides an inherent logic and cohesion giving credibility to the most far-fetched of tales and epics.

This approach does not seek to critique the historical accuracy of these two respective mediums, but rather the manner in which they create 'reality worlds', for it is these 'reality worlds' with which the 'viewer' will engage. Searle Kochberg, who coined the term 'viewer', defined it as 'the viewer-cum-user' (2007:51). Simply put, the interconnectivity of twenty-first century multimedia has fused the viewer of a film or DVD with the user of the computer or videogame. The steady advance of the internet and social networking media has then in turn added a third dimension to this individual so that he / she not only watches a film, but 'blogs' about it, and even purchases the videogame based on the film in order to expand his / her experience of the 'reality world' that the film first introduced them to. This investigation makes use of two case studies — *Percy Jackson & the Olympians: The lightning thief* and *Clash of the Titans* — selected to exemplify the 'reality worlds' being assessed. They are also examples of the 'viewer' phenomenon because they were released concurrently with videogame tie-ins, and are therefore ideal for elucidating the employment of the film and videogame tie-in as a new pedagogical tool for teaching of the Classics in the twenty-first century.

As early as 1908, film critics were touting the capacity of the new cinematic medium to animate the past (Tredell 2002:15, cited in Rosenstone 2006:11). This has resonance in the twenty-first century for both the mediums of film and videogames because both allow for the reconstruction of a particular view of the past, 'a vanished world' (Rosenstone 2006:2) that can no longer be interacted with. This ability, which is only amplified by the convergence of film and videogame tie-in, is the chief concern of this article. The article's primary thesis therefore, is founded on a belief in the relative importance of the interaction between a film and its associated videogame, a pairing that, in the particular instance of the selected case studies, makes the Classics of interest to, and more easily accessible to new audiences. This study is thus comprised of three broad sections: the discussion of the two filmic case studies, followed by the description of their videogame counterparts, and lastly the theoretical argument.

The films

Jeffrey Richards writes in his book *Hollywood's ancient worlds*:

Few film genres have been so critically despised and disparaged by film critics as the Ancient World epic. Serious, whole-hearted appreciations of such films in the press have been rare. Ridicule, impatience and disgust tend to permeate the reviews ... Rarely has there been such an extreme disjuncture between critics and the public as there has been over the Ancient World epic. For by comparison with the critical dismissal of so many of these films, the public have flocked to see them in their millions (2008:54-55).

Following Richards' comment, the two filmic case studies in question received poor critical reviews but were enjoyed by their fans. What follows is a brief synopsis of each of the two films for purposes of clarification:

Percy Jackson & the Olympians: The lightning thief, henceforth *Percy Jackson*, was released in 2010 (Fig. 1). The exposition begins with Zeus informing his brother Poseidon that his lightning bolt has been stolen. He accuses Percy Jackson, the son of Poseidon, of stealing it, and threatens Poseidon with war, unless it is returned to him within fourteen days.² Because of this, Percy is placed in grave danger, with Hades, amongst others, also wanting to take ownership of the thunderbolt.



Fig. 1: *Percy Jackson & the Olympians: The lightning thief*.

² A war between the Olympian deities would have disastrous repercussions for both the human and divine realms.

Percy's best friend and protector, Grover, a satyr masquerading as a cripple, leads him to Camp Half-Blood, where the minotaur kidnaps Percy's mother for Hades. The truth is then revealed to Percy — he is a demi-god.

He sets out to rescue his mother from Hades. In the process, Percy discovers his supernatural powers, finds Zeus' thunderbolt, and returns it to him. He also meets his biological father and learns that it was Zeus' divine edict that originally separated them. The *dénouement* has Percy ironically returning to Camp Half-Blood to begin his training as a demi-god in earnest, pointing to the filming of a now imminent sequel.

Clash of the Titans, henceforth *Clash*, also released in 2010 (*Fig. 2*), is a remake of the 'cult' film of the same name, made in 1981. The exposition begins with mortals beginning to question the rule of the gods. In an act of open rebellion against the gods, soldiers destroy a monumental statue of Zeus. Hades takes the opportunity to appear, obliterating the soldiers, and the adopted family of Perseus in the process. Hades' primary goal is to trick and overthrow Zeus, at whose behest he unleashes his creation, the Kraken, on the town of Argos, while at the same time empowering himself through the fear that it generates.



Fig. 2: Clash of the Titans

Perseus sets out on a quest to destroy Hades, thereby avenging the death of his family, and comes to discover that he is the son of Zeus. He chooses to shun his biological father and his assistance, but still defeats Hades' Kraken with Medusas' decapitated head, banishing Hades back to the Underworld. The film is typical of the fantasy genre and is thus replete with spectacular sword fights, majestic mythological creatures, and elements of magic and the supernatural. The

dénouement shows Hades' defeat and Perseus choosing to live amongst mortals. *Clash* was criticised by reviewers and film-goers alike for the ineffective add-on of 3D effects in post-production. However, it was an unqualified box-office success. Two sequels have already been written with the second instalment, *Wrath of the Titans*, already entering the post-production stage. In summary then, both films are historically and mythologically inaccurate, and given to a number of creative liberties, with the only constants being the iconic symbols, which serve to make the *mythoi* identifiable and recognisable.

Film and videogames are very different mediums, but they do share striking similarities as well, especially in terms of audio-visuals. These include camera angles and movements, optical effects, editing, and *mise-en-scène*. In videogames of the horror genre, for example, filmic sound conventions are used to heighten emotion and suspense. Many games make use of the 'backstory' which is based on detailed and elaborate fictional environments, and is usually depicted utilising typically cinematic conventions. Videogames are generally accepted as a new form of storytelling, and although some games rely on non-linear narratives, they do, nonetheless, appropriate elements from the conventions of filmic narrative as well. Other overlapping features between the two mediums are found within the extraneous elements as well, and range from operational concerns such as pre- and post-production, to the use of release dates and marketing. Ultimately, the fact that these two mediums share similar conventions in terms of narrative, content, composition, and aesthetics, and that often even famous actors make the crossover between the two, choosing to 'act' in videogames,³ makes them ideal for discussion as pedagogical tools (Roux-Girard, cited in Perron & Wolf 2009:349-350).

In illustrating the exponential growth in popularity and accessibility of cinematic media, Searle Kochberg notes that from 1997 to 2001 the ownership of DVD players in the United States increased from 350 000 to over 30 million units (2007:51). Today, DVD interactive features, such as the inclusion of multiple story-lines, and featurettes including commentaries by directors, actors, and artists, have given birth to the 'viewer', discussed earlier. This synergy was foreseen as early as 1989 in the buy-out of Columbia Pictures entertainment by the Sony Corporation of Japan. Today, Sony cleverly uses Columbia Pictures to exhibit and showcase their newest technologies such as high-definition television, *Blu-Ray* DVDs, and interactive multimedia videogames. From this moment on studio profiling of audience habits became extremely influential in determining the types of films that are made. Proof of this is in the new demographic that has recently (2006-2007) been identified, and collectively termed the 'Midas formula films' by

³ Martin Sheen, for example, not only plays the character of 'the Illusive Man' in the game *Mass effect 2*, but his likeness was used as the basis for the look of the character as well.

Edward Jay Epstein: films that are children orientated with a teenage hero, that follow a fairy-tale or fantasy plot, that make use of 3D animation and are released with an age restriction of no higher than PG-13. The reason for this specific formula is that blockbusters are made for the most frequent film-goer: 12 – 24 year olds. These films also feature videogame tie-ins, reflecting the enormous consumer power of the teenage audience (Epstein 2005:236-238). Watson (2007:119) coined the term ‘intermedia’ to describe this recently identified concept of blockbuster movie and videogame tie-in. As a specific example of this, Henry Jenkins (2006:95) wrote, ‘*The Matrix* is entertainment for the age of media convergence, integrating multiple texts to create a narrative so large that it cannot be contained within a single medium’. What this means is that *The Matrix* trilogy had tie-in videogames that provided essential information for the different film plots, and that those who played the games came to understand the plot a little differently to those who did not. Another example arises from the 2010 release, *Prince of Persia: The sands of time*, a film based on a videogame of the same name that was produced some seven years earlier. The film borrows heavily from the game, except where the basic plot is concerned. A graphic novel, *Prince of Persia: Before the sandstorm*, preceded the release of the film and acted as a prequel. In addition, a second videogame was developed, entitled *Prince of Persia: The forgotten sands*, for simultaneous release with the 2010 film. However, the game’s story is unrelated to the film’s, and is instead an ‘interquel’, taking place between the first two videogames of the trilogy. This synergistic relationship results in story worlds and environs that shift from platform to platform, creating multimedia epics, with the audiences’ interactions and expectations changing accordingly, with ‘viewers’ who have played the tie-in games coming to understand the stories differently to those who have not.

Returning to the case studies, while these films are neither historically nor mythologically accurate, they should instead be seen to provide representations of imagined ‘reality worlds’. *Clash* presents a vivid impression of life lived, of a past cosmology, of cultural and religious assumptions. This version of antiquity is but one interpretation among many, possessing no one definitive or absolute meaning — it is perceptive insight alone, rather than proffering an absolute and unattainable ‘truth’. These films can be conceived of as two parallel imaginative narratives, combining ancient mythical realities with modern fictions. Similarly, *Percy Jackson* provides the audience with a modern schoolboy hero, likewise mingling a mythical reality with a contemporary present. The film introduces traditional iconic mythological episodes and characters, alongside the reworking of these very mythological narratives, all of which supports the Hollywood impact aesthetic or spectacle aesthetic, encapsulating the tendency to dramatise and romanticise. Despite historical inaccuracies, films can still be used as pedagogical tools because

of the 'reality worlds' that they depict as the foundation to these heavily dramatised mythological events. 'Viewers' can critique these inaccurate mythological narratives through comparative analysis — juxtaposing recorded history with filmic representation — but can also critique these sources in terms of their themes and ideologies, alongside their re-presentation of ancient physical realities, and even ancient sexuality. They are glimpses into the ancient past, something realised as early as 1908 when a French film critic proclaimed rather prophetically that not only did film have the ability to reproduce the present, but also 'to animate the past, to reconstruct the great events of history through the performance of the actor and the evocation of atmosphere and milieu' (Tredell 2002:15, cited in Rosenstone 2006:11). However, as value-laden products, films and videogames are not only to be seen as pedagogical tools. Given the media saturation of twenty-first century society, it is imperative that 'viewers' are made aware that no media artefact is to be accepted at face-value. All such cultural artefacts should be critically interrogated and engaged with. Now the focus of the discussion turns to a second cultural artefact, the videogame.

The videogames

As stated previously, cinema and videogames share an experiential component that cannot be denied, an element of involvement and participation that draws the 'viewer' into the action more than any mere textbook is able to. The fantasy and ancient world epics are definitely in the ascendant, and while the majority of critics tend to disparage the 'sword and sandals movie', their popularity amongst film-goers remains uncontested. The 'reality worlds' that are created in these epics are a key part of this discussion, for as will soon be illustrated, the creation of unique experiential worlds is an important way in which both film and videogames may be deployed in order to teach students about that which can no longer be seen or touched.

Both J R R Tolkien and C S Lewis (Williams 2006) share the opinion that fantasy is a necessary part of the human condition, for as Tolkien (1983:16) writes, 'A dragon is no idle fancy'. Gary Gygax, the inventor of *Dungeons and dragons*, concurs, and furthermore argues that fantasy empowers us as human beings. As he states of fantasy games:

The average person gets a call to glory and becomes a hero and undergoes change. In the real world, children, especially, have no power; they must answer to everyone, they don't direct their own lives, but in this game, they become super powerful and affect everything (Gygax, cited in Dovey & Kennedy 2006:75).

It is this notion of empowering students through offering them the choice of how and what they wish to learn, that becomes attainable through our particular synthesis of film and videogame.

As background we would like to acquaint you with current representations of the ancient world in videogames. The following examples are drawn from the genre of strategy games, because these games already have an acknowledged educational potential, both in terms of the content the games provide (see below) and the skills they teach players to master (diplomacy, logistics, etc). Strategy gaming is however a well-worn area of Game Studies research and is furthermore not important to the previously stated objective of the utilisation of film and videogame tie-ins as a new pedagogical tool. Two well-known titles — *Civilization*, now in its fifth incarnation, and *Empire Earth* (which has seen three editions of its own) — present what is in essence digital historiography. In both of these games, the ancient world is a set time period through which the player develops his or her civilization. Some aspects of what might be termed the Graeco-Roman experience, are included — for example, units resembling the phalanx and the trireme — while others are not. Another game entitled *Age of mythology*, represents various mytho-historical situations, and allows players to pursue victory through the use of the Greek, Norse, and Egyptian civilizations, each of which has its own unique soldiers, buildings, and heroes. Finally, in striving for a slightly more realistic representation of the Roman world, the game *Rome: Total war* attempts to bring the warfare of the Roman Empire vividly to life, allowing players not only to recreate specific historical battles like those at Carrhae and the Teutoburg Forest, but to play a ‘campaign’ mode as well that offers the chance to rule the entire Roman world. Unfortunately, as is often the case, certain liberties were taken with historical accuracy, which led a concerned group of ancient history enthusiasts to create a modified version of the game called *Rome: Total realism*, which concentrates more heavily on the specific historic details of ancient strategy and combat (Simanovsky 2005).

The two case studies in question — *Percy Jackson & the Olympians: The lightning thief* and *Clash of the Titans* — are emblematic of twenty-first century attempts to revivify long dead myths. Each story approaches this task in a different way and from a distinct perspective because of its target market. This is reflected in both the platforms for which each videogame was manufactured and in their cinematic audiences as well. The 10-and-up demographic for which the *Percy Jackson* videogame was created saw that the game was released on the handheld *Nintendo DS* system. This is a platform whose major advantage is portability,

something that is seen as important in its largely teenage market.⁴ The graphics provided by the *DS* are relatively unsophisticated, given that its size and novelty are the key aspects emphasised (See *Fig. 3*). As one reviewer also noted, *Percy Jackson* is ‘a quick, pick-up-and-go kind of game’ (Woodham 2010).



Fig. 3: Screenshot from Percy Jackson & the Olympians: The lightning thief videogame

For the most part, critics have described the *Percy Jackson* game as fairly entertaining (Moehnke 2010; Splechta 2010). The game itself is turn-based, with the player using the character of Percy. Along the way he / she collects a group of allies and characters from the film. Several points are important for this analysis: firstly, the game, in large part, mirrors the events of the film, and so the two mediums can be seen to interactively overlap and reinforce one another. Secondly, the videogame for *Percy Jackson* is directed at a particular pre-existing affinity group, namely the fan-base created by the film and books, as it appears to have been based on both the film and book of the same name. Thirdly the game has some educational merit of its own, given the fact that all dialogue in-game appears

⁴ It is also made obvious that the *DS* is aimed at the 10 – 24 year old niche, given that the majority of product advertisements depict users in that age bracket.

as text to be read by the young player. In addition to the appearance of various Greek mythological characters in the course of the videogame, there are also *drachmas*, Greek coins, for the player to collect as rewards, and in order to accomplish certain special team-based manoeuvres the player needs to trace ancient Greek letters on the pad with the *DS*'s stylus.

In stark contrast, both the film and videogame of *Clash of the Titans* are aimed at the upper end of the 10 – 24 year old age group. The *Clash* videogame was released on both of the major gaming platforms — the *Playstation 3* or *PS3*, and *Xbox 360*. Here, graphics and gameplay are far more advanced and clearly directed at a somewhat more mature audience, as is revealed in some of the film's more graphic imagery. The *Clash* videogame differs from *Percy Jackson*, in that in the trade it is described as a 'hack-and-slash' action game by comparison. A critic sums up the meaning of this appellation with the following comment, 'A rich tapestry of myth is pushed aside to make room for repetitious bloodletting ...' (Chiappini 2010). The game is not as brief and linear as *Percy Jackson*, but is nonetheless still limited in its own way. It is based largely around the events of the film, although in places the plotline is somewhat lacking — the character of Calibos (see below, *Fig. 4*), while introduced early in the film as an enemy of Zeus, who allies with Hades, receives no such backstory in the game until very late, at which time the harried player finally understands why Calibos has been pursuing him / her. Certain events are altered to differentiate the game's story from the film's (also in an attempt at lengthening the game) but this only serves to distort the relationships between the protagonists.



Fig. 4: Perseus and Calibos in the Clash of the Titans videogame.

Several reviewers note, that, while the game had a rich store of mythological material to draw on in creating a detailed story-line, the game's creators instead chose to produce yet another derivative 'movie' game in an attempt to capitalise on the success of the companion film. The mythological material that is included in the game remains faithful to the film's plot and is thus fairly accurately depicted.

The three theses for an 'intermedia' pedagogy

Now that the two case studies and their respective mediums have been presented, it is possible to begin with the theoretical exegesis of the 'intermedia' phenomenon which is loosely based on the work of videogame theorist James Paul Gee (2003) and his 36 generic principles for the use of videogames as tools for educationalists:

Thesis one: Critical engagement

Audiences should not be considered passive, because they actively participate in the decoding of any given text (Hall 1973). Therefore, film should be seen as more than mere entertainment. 'Viewers' learn both content and practical skills through their 'intermedia' interactions, although the latter is mainly derived from playing videogames.

These skills can include heightened reflexes and an understanding of cause-and-effect resulting from decision making.⁵ The student's critical faculties are thus constantly involved in the learning process and, importantly, the student decides how the learning takes place and at what pace.

Ultimately, engaging with these ancient 'reality worlds' (see *Fig. 5* below) allows 'viewers' not only to form their own hypotheses but to reflect upon different socio-cultural circumstances as well.

⁵ Recent games like *The Witcher* (and its sequel) are touted for their unique approach to moralistic conundrums and decision making. In these games a decision can have an unforeseen impact that occurs may hours after the decision was originally made, thus lending serious weight to the player's interactions with the game environment.



Fig. 5: An image of the interior of the palace of Argos as shown in Clash of the Titans. Attention to historical detail helps to suspend disbelief at an imagined world. This is made all the more apparent with the inclusion of the cinematic apparatus which serves to elucidate that this is a recreated world.

Thesis two: Personal and group identities

This manifestation of the ‘intermedia’ approach, as revealed in the relationship between a film and its videogame tie-in, teaches ‘viewers’ about different cultures and world-views, but in a non-threatening environment. It is the student that actively creates this meaning through interaction. By doing this, they can then reflect on or critique their own cultural values and norms without feeling threatened by these other unfamiliar ‘reality worlds’. For instance, this perspective could teach ‘viewers’ that differences of religion or world-view do not necessarily have to prevent individuals from joining together to pursue a shared goal. An example of this thesis is evident in the film *Clash*, in which Perseus allies with the mysterious and magical Genie (see *Fig. 6*, below), an inhuman race, much despised and feared, in order to defeat their common enemy, Hades. The representation of historical events *must* be expressed in forms congenial to a modern or postmodern world and to ‘intellectual systems consonant’ to our own eras (Rosenstone 2006:3). *Percy Jackson* is an example of this — the weaving of a mythical past and its mythological characters, into a contemporary present, with contemporary themes and concerns manifesting themselves, such as Percy’s marginalisation at high

school because of his dyslexia and his Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder or ADHD. These learning disabilities have been ingeniously woven into the story as a reversal of his powers, with the dyslexia allowing him to read Ancient Greek and his ADHD explained away as his dextrous fighting skills.⁶



Fig. 6: Perseus' inhuman ally from the film Clash of the Titans.

There is also the general identification of the characters as heroes and as underdogs. This allows individuals from different religious and cultural world-views to bond over their identification with these larger-than-life characters, and over their love for Ancient world epics and their tie-ins by joining fan-clubs. They are able to share their understandings and interpretations with one another without fear of ridicule. This is a transcendental form of identification that does not threaten their ideals, values, or beliefs. Social networking sites like *Facebook* and *Myspace*, as well as blogging and tweeting, all serve to unite 'viewers' over their passion for the films and videogames, sharing insights, trivia, and factual information. Even the definitive film site *imdb* contributes to the intertextual learning experience of 'viewers' with *Q & A* and trivia sections.

⁶ While these disabilities have no doubt existed for centuries, it is only in the last twenty years that serious medical attention has been focused on them. These are terms that the majority of western teenagers would now be familiar with.

Thesis three: Textual mediation

Meaning becomes embodied in the experience that the particular ‘viewer’ has of the film or videogame texts. Thus specific concepts are attached to particular memories and interactions that the ‘viewer’ has, through the use of a multitude of modes of expression — from the simplest single image, to sound, colour, and even action. As shown in the earlier example of students with learning disabilities, this varied form of expression facilitates the learning of students who otherwise cannot cope with the mono-modal textual forms of traditional learning institutions.

Postmodernist Frederic Jameson (1981:102) defined history as ‘that which hurts’. Extrapolating on this, ancient history is not only a representation or reconstruction of physical injury, as is seen in the filmic reconstruction of more recent Vietnam or Holocaust history, but of psychological injury as well. Through hurts, and by extension, pleasures, it provides ‘historical insight’ (Davis 2000:108, 119 cited in Rosenstone 2006:28), a truly embodied experience. For example, *Clash* portrays both physical and psychological ‘hurt’ through its representations of betrayal, revenge, romantic love, abandonment, and Oedipal conflicts. In this instance the hero, Perseus, seeks vengeance on Hades for the death of his adoptive parents. Initially, he also shuns his biological father, Zeus, and the value system that he upholds, and at the end of his quest he chooses to live among mortals rather than taking his rightful place on Olympus. In *Percy Jackson*, there is similarly a marginalised teenager, whose narrative also includes themes of abandonment and Oedipal conflict, ultimately relating a not so typical coming-of-age story.

History is taught through the use of emotions and mediated texts.⁷ Not only can ‘intermedia’ be said to exist through the interactive and intertextual features found in *Blu-Ray* or *imdb* (as already mentioned), but it comes into being through a mythologising extra-textual publicity as well. What this means is that the publicity generated by famous, well-established actors, further mythologises the iconic characters that they play. For instance, in *Clash*, Ralph Fiennes acts as Hades, and Liam Neeson as Zeus (*Fig. 7*), while in *Percy Jackson*, the ‘James Bond’ (*Fig. 8*), Pierce Brosnan, plays the centaur Chiron (*Fig. 9*). These portrayals serve to perpetuate the mythological creatures that they depict, embedding the images into popular culture and keeping their epic names and tales alive in the contemporary imagination, albeit occasionally somewhat inaccurately.

⁷ In ancient history, the ‘recorded’ speeches of famous generals and politicians are case in point.



Fig. 7: Liam Neeson as 'Zeus' in Clash of the Titans.

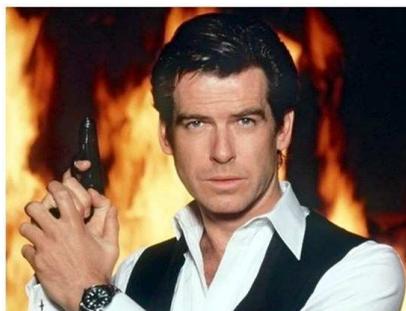


Fig. 8: Pierce Brosnan as 'James Bond'.



Fig. 9: Pierce Brosnan as the centaur 'Chiron' in Percy Jackson & the Olympians: The lightning thief.

Conclusion

In summation, cinema and its synergised multimedia products are not meant to provide literal truths, because they are in fact poetic and metaphoric. Instead, they offer a challenge and a commentary to the more traditional forms of discourse. According to Robert Rosenstone (2006:12) visual media is considered to be the 'chief conveyor of public history of our time'. Woodrow Wilson, President of the United States in 1915, stated after viewing the film *Birth of a nation* that: 'It's like writing history with lightning' (cited in Rosenstone 2006:13).⁸ Taking the quote out of context, but keeping in mind Hollywood's penchant for the impact and aesthetic spectacle, it can be said that it is this explosive and dramatic element that best characterises the power of both the cinematic and videogame mediums. Yet, through this construction, this imaginative creation, it allows one to glimpse an ancient 'reality world'.

The two case studies included in this article are certainly not perfect examples of the synthesis that is possible when applying a film and its videogame tie-in to pedagogical activity in the Classics. Both games were rejected by critics as mere attempts to latch onto the media 'hype' that accompanied the two blockbuster films. However, they do still have redeeming qualities, *Percy Jackson* most of all. While the *Clash* videogame is indeed what is known in the trade as a 'button basher' — a game in which little thought is needed (*Fig. 10*) — *Percy Jackson* (*Fig. 11*) offers a continuation into contemporary existence of iconic associations with the ancient Greek world, associations that provide pedagogical insight and stimulate both deeper learning and a deeper connection with the subject matter on the part of the student. It is also a slower and more carefully considered type of game that appeals to young fans of the film, and more importantly, connects to Rick Riordan's *Percy Jackson* book series as well, pointing young enthusiasts to the act of reading should they want to know more. This is only a step away from investigating these ancient characters in a basic mythology book, or through *Google*. After all, this process of discovery is what learning is all about.

⁸ The film dramatises the assassination of Abraham Lincoln.



Fig. 10: A screenshot from the Clash of the Titans videogame.



Fig. 11: A screenshot from the Percy Jackson & the Olympians: The lightning thief videogame. These images highlight the difference in graphics and sophistication between the two videogames.

Lastly, a word from semiotician Roland Barthes (1957), who argued that cultural artefacts, such as film (which should, for the purposes of this argument, also include videogames and other multimedia), have a mythic function, in that they try to explain or provide a means of understanding the culture that we exist in. These cultural artefacts operate to produce meaning. In all, this necessitates that the ancient world is itself mythologised through these mediums in an effort to understand the present. Film and videogames can therefore serve as the perfect pedagogical tools for the exposition of both Classical and contemporary 'reality worlds'. These modern cultural artefacts fulfil this very purpose by forcing students to question the past through their understanding of the present, and in this way, they perpetuate the past, or rather, a version of a past. This reciprocity therefore not only reinforces the conception and understanding of the present, but of past 'reality worlds' as well.

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