

Representation of Ancient Warfare in Modern Video Games

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Paul Waring
School of Arts, Histories and Cultures

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Abstract

The portrayal of ancient warfare, particularly the army of the Later Roman Republic, in modern video games has drawn a significant amount of interest from the general public, yet this is a subject which has been generally ignored in the academic community. This dissertation identifies several aspects of ancient warfare discussed in the extant ancient sources, and compares their representation in the ancient world with that of modern video games, with the aim of determining to what extent video games present a true portrayal of the subject of ancient warfare. Major observations include the fact that whilst some areas of ancient warfare are accurately represented in video games, other areas are ignored entirely, and potential reasons, such as the need for a game to be entertaining as well as accurate, are given for why this may be the case. The study concludes with the suggestion that this subject should not simply be dismissed by academics, and presents a number of avenues for future research which may provide new insights into our understanding of ancient warfare.

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Preface

The subject of this dissertation represents a combination of my two main research interests of computer science, in which I obtained my first degree, and ancient history, in which I have recently finished reading for a Masters degree. Whilst these two areas may seem distinct, there are a significant number of areas in which they overlap, and the representation of ancient warfare in video games is just one of them. I have chosen to examine this particular area because it appears to have been largely overlooked by the academic community and I was unable to find any existing articles which covered this subject.

For translations of the ancient sources in this dissertation, I have relied primarily on the relevant and most recent Loeb or Penguin Classic edition. Full details of each translation can be found in the bibliography. Where abbreviations of ancient sources are used I have followed the style of the *Oxford Classical Dictionary*. When referring to sources, I have used Arabic numerals in preference to Roman numerals for book, chapter and section numbers.

Paul Waring

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Introduction

In this dissertation I will be examining how ancient warfare is represented in the modern video games which use this subject area as a setting for game players to immerse themselves in. I will begin by providing some background information detailing the current state of affairs in this area of research, highlighting some of the areas which I believe have been neglected by the wider academic community. I will also be discussing the importance of the subject and providing a justification as to why it should be considered to be an area which needs to be investigated more thoroughly than it has been in the past.

After demonstrating the importance of the subject and the current state of affairs, I will briefly describe the limitations which I will be placing on my study into the subject, in order to confine it to a manageable size. This will involve focusing on a particular time period within ancient history, which would otherwise cover over a thousand years — possibly longer depending on how one defines the term. Setting these limitations will also involve homing in on one or two games in particular, though many of the conclusions reached will apply to video games in general.

Having explained the limitations on this study, I will conclude my introduction by providing definitions of the two key terms contained within the title of this dissertation, i.e. ‘ancient warfare’ and ‘modern video games’. I believe that a definition of these two terms is essential because they can have a wide range of meanings, particularly ‘ancient warfare’, so it is necessary to remove any ambiguity as to what is meant when these terms are used in the text.

I will then move on to provide an evaluation of the ancient sources which I believe are the most relevant to the subject of ancient warfare, and particularly to the period which I will be focusing on. As well as examining how relevant

these sources are, I will also be discussing the extent to which we can rely on them as an accurate account of events — in particular whether the author of the source in question had any experience of the events which they were writing about, and to what extent they may have been deliberately misrepresenting the facts in order to forward their own personal agenda. I will also comment briefly on ancient sources in general, and the extent to which we can rely upon them for accurate information.

Having presented what I hope is a comprehensive introduction to the subject and the sources involved, I will move on to examine the representation of warfare in our ancient sources, as I believe it is necessary to outline how warfare was perceived at the time before moving on to evaluate how accurately it is represented in video games. I will be examining a number of different aspects of warfare, and for each one providing an analysis of how it was viewed at the time, followed by an evaluation of how well the topic in question is represented in video games.

After examining the various aspects of ancient warfare, I will move on to evaluate possible reasons why the developers of video games may have chosen to represent these areas, accurately or not, in the way they have. I will also examine whether these representations pose problems for future studies of ancient warfare, and whether they can shed any new light on the subject.

Finally, I will end with a conclusion which will bring together all the areas discussed in the previous chapters and evaluate whether video games provide an accurate representation of ancient warfare, and whether it matters if they do or not. I will also suggest potential avenues for future research into this subject, in the hope that fellow scholars will be able to build on my efforts.

Current state of affairs

There is already a significant corpus of secondary literature which examines the reception of warfare in modern video games, with a number of academics currently pursuing further work in the field, and this appears to be an area of research which is in rude health. This can be seen in the wide variety of books (e.g. Halter (2006)) and articles which have been published recently on this subject.

However, the current state of affairs in the field of the representation of *ancient* warfare in video games is limited. Whilst there has been a recent increase in the number of scholars investigating the representation of warfare in video

games, which appears to have established itself as an area which it is now acceptable to research as a serious academic, the current literature has a tendency to concentrate almost exclusively on modern warfare, particularly within the period of the 20th and 21st centuries. Furthermore, current research appears to focus primarily on the representation of the modern armed forces of the United States of America. Since the majority of games development companies are based in the USA, and this geographical region is also one of the largest consumers of video games, this bias is perhaps understandable to an extent. However, this concentration of research in one particular area has led to the representation of *ancient* warfare being almost entirely overlooked.

Importance of the subject

There are several reasons why I would suggest that the subject of the representation of ancient warfare in modern video games is an important topic for research. The first is that such research will hopefully increase our understanding of the effects of modern technology, particularly video games, on the reception of ancient warfare. With millions of copies of games being sold worldwide each year, there is clearly a need for an examination of how well this medium represents the area of history on which it is supposedly based.

Furthermore, these video games, which are sometimes dismissed as frivolous devices by academics, are already being used in serious studies of ancient warfare because of the potential benefits that they offer over conventional methods of teaching. For example, the *History Channel*, which has won several awards for its programmes, has used the *Rome: Total War* video game, which I will be examining in this study, to simulate pitched battles which would otherwise be too expensive, difficult or dangerous to re-enact.¹ The BBC have used the same game for a similar purpose in their *Time Commanders* series. Whilst video games are by no means a substitute for traditional methods of learning, there are clearly some circumstances in which they can be a useful aid, and as such I would suggest that they warrant a greater degree of attention than they have received so far.

Finally, as I have already touched upon, the subject of the representation of ancient warfare in modern video games has, until recently, been overlooked by the academic community. Whilst the fact that a particular area of research has been

¹Burkholder (2007, p.515)

neglected does not automatically make it a useful field to study — some areas are deliberately overlooked for good reasons such as lack of evidence or perceived value — I would suggest that this is not the case for the subject under discussion here.

Limitations on this study

In order to confine this study to a manageable size and ensure its completion within the given time frame, I have intentionally placed some limitations on the areas which I will be examining. First of all, whilst I believe it would be useful and of interest to analyse a wide variety of armed forces from different civilisations and cultures, I have restricted this study to the examination of the Roman army, for several reasons. Firstly, the Roman army is probably the best documented out of all the ancient fighting forces for which we have literary sources, and I would suggest that more secondary literature is devoted to this topic than any other army in ancient history. This is an important consideration, as I will be comparing and contrasting the representation of warfare in the ancient sources with that of modern video games, and having a large corpus of literary material to work with will certainly help with this task. Secondly, most video games covering the topic of ancient warfare include a representation of elements of the Roman army, and there are also several games devoted solely to this particular fighting force. Finally, the Roman army is probably the best known of all the ancient armies in the eyes of the general public, and I believe this will be important as video games are usually aimed at a wider audience than the relatively small number of academics whose specialist fields cover the Roman army.

In addition to concentrating on the Roman army, I will also be restricting the time period on which this study will focus, as any research into the Roman army in general could potentially cover a period of over a thousand years, during which time, as one might reasonably expect, a great number of changes took place in the military systems of Rome. The period which I have chosen to focus upon is the later Roman Republic — more specifically from the First Punic War to the beginning of the reign of Augustus (264 BC to 27 BC), though I may on occasion refer to events either side of this time period if they are relevant to the point under discussion and the date does not materially affect the event (e.g. the effect of hunger on the ability of troops to fight). There are three reasons behind my

decision to focus on the Roman army in this particular period of history. Firstly, the later Roman Republic is probably one of our best documented areas of Roman history and, as discussed previously with regards to the Roman army, having a significant amount of material available to us is always useful when investigating a particular area of history. Secondly, this period of time was one of the most active for the army, as Rome was both defending her interests in Italy and expanding further afield, not to mention the role of the army in the numerous civil strifes during the first century BC. This is in contrast to the army of the later Roman Empire, which was more concerned with controlling and protecting Rome's existing territories than expanding her influence further afield. Finally, this time period appears to be the one which is best represented in video games — one reason I would suggest for this perhaps being the case is that this area of Roman history contains many of the characters and events whom non-specialists will have heard of, particularly Julius Caesar.

The final limitation which I will be placing on this study is on the specific video games which I will be examining in order to evaluate the extent to which they accurately represent the topic of ancient warfare upon which they claim to be based. Although there are many video games which place the player in the setting of ancient warfare, I have decided to take specific examples from the game *Rome: Total War*, as this particular title aims for a higher standard of accuracy in its representation than is generally the case. However, I will also be making observations which will apply to most video games which are based on the subject of ancient warfare.

Definitions

Before embarking on a detailed discussion of the representation of ancient warfare in modern video games, we must first define what we mean by the terms 'ancient warfare' and 'modern video games'.

The term 'ancient warfare' in itself can have a broad range of meanings, with its exact definition dependent upon the context in which it is used and the viewpoint of the writer. As I have already discussed, the time period which I will be examining is that of the later Roman Republic, so that should dispense with any ambiguity over the precise meaning of the word 'ancient'. However, that still leaves us wanting for a definition of 'warfare'. This word can mean any

number of things, depending on who one asks and the scope in which it is used. At one extreme, there exists what is perhaps the definition which first comes to mind of most people when the word ‘warfare’ is mentioned, i.e. that warfare is restricted to the battles which occur when two opposing armies meet in the field, possibly also encompassing the events shortly before and after the conflict, with the primary focus on combat. Heading towards the other end of the spectrum, warfare can be broadened out to include all areas which have an effect on conflicts or which are affected by them, such as the economy and society. I will be aiming to use a definition which is somewhere between these two extremes, concentrating primarily on the army and its engagements but also giving a significant amount of space to an analysis of the role of logistics, politics and economics. However, I will not be including areas such as the social impacts of war within my definition of ‘warfare’ because, whilst such areas provide interesting topics for investigation, I believe that to do so would cast the net too wide for the purposes of this study, and would risk too great a deviation from the topic of ancient warfare.

With regards to ‘modern video games’, I will be using this term to refer to computer games based on the subject of ancient warfare, and restricting it to those games published from 2001 onwards.

The Ancient Sources

In this chapter I will be taking a close look at some of the more important sources for the period of history under examination, as well as commenting briefly on other sources which may be of use to this study.

Livy

Livy's *History of Rome* tracks the history of the city from its founding (usually considered to be 753 BC) to the time of Augustus. Although Livy does not focus entirely on military campaigns, the extant books contain large amounts of material about the Roman army, including battle reports and descriptions of some of the equipment used by troops.¹ Livy also mentions other aspects related to the army, such as the problems of keeping soldiers fed and warm whilst fighting a campaign.² However, despite the usefulness of his work, Livy is not without his critics, and I will briefly look at some of these potential problems here.

First and foremost, Livy is often criticised for being a storyteller rather than a good historian,³ but I would suggest that this does not necessarily reduce his standing as one of our sources for the period of the Later Roman Republic. If Livy was composing his works as something which he intended to be read by a reasonably wide audience, as opposed to being a military treatise which would only be of interest to soldiers, then his narrative perhaps represents the general perception of the army better than accounts aimed at military commanders, and so may be of more use when engaging on a comparison between ancient and

¹E.g. Livy 26.4 on the introduction of light infantry into the army.

²Livy 21.54-55

³'When all else failed, Livy's aim was to write good stories.' (Montagu 2006, p.22)

modern representations of warfare.

Livy's lack of military experience is also criticised by many commentators, who claim that his ignorance causes him to report facts incorrectly.⁴ However, I feel these criticisms are somewhat unjustified, for several reasons. Firstly, Livy's writings cover several centuries, and it simply would not be possible, even with a significant amount of military experience, to write a first hand account of such a long time period. Secondly, as I shall explain further when examining Polybius as a source, having military experience does not necessarily mean that an author produces a more accurate or precise account of events. In some ways this lack of experience can even be an advantage, in that it allows Livy to look at events with a complete detachment, as he has no personal connections to what he is describing.

Livy is also sometimes pulled up as being an author 'who held no political appointment',⁵ as if this somehow a disadvantage. However, I would suggest that this is not the case, in fact quite the opposite. The one criticism which is often levelled at the authors of our ancient sources is that they are twisting the facts, or sometimes even omitting them altogether, in order to present themselves in a better light and in some way either boost their own political standing or reduce that of their opponents. Livy, however, having been in no such position as a result of his lack of political appointments, can be expected to be largely free of personal bias in his works, although he may on occasion be accused of patriotism. Overall, however, despite the many criticisms of his work (some justified, others not), I would suggest that Livy is still an acceptable, and indeed important, source for this area of history.

Polybius

Polybius is generally considered to be one of our best sources for the army of the Later Roman Republic, and particularly the events of the three Punic Wars.

⁴'Because of his ignorance of the areas described, and of the methods of warfare used, he is guilty of geographical errors and factual mistakes on military matters.' (Walsh 1961, p.138); 'The account of the tunnelling operations is vivid and precise, as he visualizes the scene, but inaccurate, because he [Livy] lacked technical knowledge.' (McDonald 1957, p.161). No doubt had Polybius been a contemporary of Livy, he would have levelled similar criticisms at him. However, Tarn (1931, p.186) suggests that Livy is 'usually more accurate than almost anybody over naval details.'

⁵Walsh (1961, p.138)

He provides us with a detailed account of the Roman military system,⁶ including descriptions of the various type of soldiers, how they are equipped and the numbers of each type which were usually contained within a legion which was at full strength.

One of the reasons why Polybius is often considered to be a useful source is because he actually had some personal experience of the military.⁷ Polybius himself puts great emphasis on this, and criticises other historians, especially Timaeus,⁸ for failing to have personal experience and instead spending all their time researching records in the library.⁹ Polybius also places a significant amount of trust in the obtaining of campaign accounts from men who served in the army, which he claims to be of great importance, and again criticises Timaeus for alleging failing to do this.¹⁰ However, as Daly argues, persuasively so in my opinion,¹¹ Polybius's experience of battles may not have been as extensive as the ancient author would like us to believe.¹² Furthermore, using accounts from soldiers, as Polybius claimed to have done, is often fraught with difficulties, as most troops will be unaware of what is happening beyond their area of the battlefield, especially when fighting in low light conditions,¹³ and may be prone to elaborating, deliberately or in good faith, the events which occurred.¹⁴ However, despite these potential difficulties, Polybius is still a valuable source for this period of history.

⁶Polybius 6.19-42

⁷'Polybius was both experienced and passionately interested in military matters'. (Rawson 1971, p.13)

⁸Polybius 12.27a-28a

⁹'Personal investigation, on the other hand, demands much greater exertion and expense, but it is of prime importance and makes the greatest contribution of all to history.' (Polybius 12.27a)

¹⁰'He has quite neglected the duty of making first-hand enquiries, which is the historian's most important duty.' (Polybius 12.4c)

¹¹Daly (2002, pp.18-20)

¹²'It seems, however, that Polybius' military experience was rather limited, as a cursory examination of his career makes clear.' (Daly 2002, p.18)

¹³'In daylight those who take part in an action have a clearer idea of it [than those fighting in the dark], though even they cannot see everything, and in fact *no one knows much more than what is going on around himself*.' (Thucydides 7.44.1) (emphasis mine)

¹⁴'Military operations always gave rise to descriptive elaboration in terms of time, place, plans, actions and results.' (McDonald 1957, p.161)

Caesar

Caesar's commentaries on the Gallic and Civil Wars are 'the only [extant] ancient historical works written by a major military leader, and the only accounts any such commander has left of his own campaign.'¹⁵ These commentaries, which took the form of reports dispatched to the Senate detailing Caesar's progress in his campaigns, give us a unique insight into how the Roman army mounted a full scale campaign over a prolonged period of time.¹⁶ As commander of the army, Caesar was ideally placed to observe and report on all issues affecting its ability to campaign effectively, from the morale of troops to the logistics of keeping an army supplied with necessities such as weapons and food, often for months or even years at a time. This is especially true of Caesar more than most generals,¹⁷ as he was given extended commands of five years or more, as opposed to the one year which was usually the case, and so he had time to experience problems and opportunities which other generals may never have come across due to their short term in command.

However, regardless of how informative they might be, when examining Caesar's reports we must be aware of the audience and purpose for which they were written, i.e. to keep the Senate informed of Caesar's progress. Caesar would therefore be careful to ensure that these documents displayed him in the best possible light,¹⁸ exaggerating his victories and omitting any failures where possible (e.g. the lack of any active mutiny during the Gallic Wars¹⁹) for several reasons. First of all, the Senate was the body which had granted Caesar the provinces in Gaul to begin with, and in theory they could have replaced him with another commander had they deemed his progress to be unsatisfactory²⁰ — or alternatively if they felt he was perhaps becoming a little too successful and

¹⁵Dawson (1996, p.128)

¹⁶'Caesar's account provides the most valuable narrative we could have of the Roman army on campaign'. (Keppie 1998, p.96)

¹⁷'No other author could appreciate better than Caesar the importance of food supply or could possess such first hand knowledge.' (Erdkamp 1998, p.6)

¹⁸'Caesar's *Gallic War* was a political document, designed to show the author himself up in a good light.' (Montagu 2000, p.32)

¹⁹As far as I can ascertain, there appears to be no mention of insubordination amongst Caesar's troops in *B Gall.*, yet I find it hard to believe that his men did not once question his authority over a period of nine years, especially given how disobedient Roman troops could be — a fact which I will return to later in this text.

²⁰'It also rests with the Senate to decide whether a general can execute all his plans and designs, since it has the right either to send out another general when the former's term of office has expired, or to retain him in command for another year.' (Polybius 6.15)

might pose a threat to their ability to wield power in Rome.²¹ Caesar would also be hoping that these reports would help to see off any criticisms of his progress by his enemies in Rome, as the best time to attack a man's reputation is when he is not present to defend himself. Finally, these reports would undoubtedly make their way beyond the confines of the Senate, and as an astute politician Caesar would no doubt be looking to increase his standing amongst the ordinary people as well as with the upper classes.²² Given this evident personal bias, which often manifests itself in the exaggeration of a victory or excuses for a defeat, care must be taken when interpreting these sources.

On the other hand, Caesar's bias when writing his reports can act as a double-edged sword, in that when we come across a description of an event which reflects badly on Caesar, we can be reasonably confident that it actually occurred, if not exactly as recorded, because he would be unlikely to invent such an incident. For example, Caesar generally does not mention instances of insubordination within his army,²³ as such incidents would not reflect well on his ability to command loyalty from his men, so when we do come across such reports²⁴ we can generally assume them to have a significant basis in truth. Furthermore, personal bias can only go so far, and even the most lucid of writers will be unable to completely cover up the consequences of a disastrous decision.

Other sources

Although the three sources of Livy, Polybius and Caesar provide us with a great deal of useful information about the army of the Later Roman Republic, they are not the only sources for this period of history. Appian's descriptions of the Punic and Civil Wars are particularly useful, although as with any ancient source, care must be taken when using them. Plutarch also provides the occasional piece of useful information when writing about military commanders of the time, although to what extent his sources include texts which we have available to us anyway

²¹'The instructed experience of the Senate was ready to be critical of any commander who tried to do too much too quickly.' (Adcock 1970, p.85)

²²'Caesar was writing for immediate public support, as well as for future historians.' (Keppie 1998, p.96)

²³'Caesar, though he does relate some of the devices by which he maintained his hold upon his troops, naturally tells little of any active mutiny.' (Messer 1920, p.172)

²⁴For example, at *B Civ.* 1.72, we hear of troops initially refusing to fight because of a disagreement with one of his decisions.

(e.g. Caesar *B Civ.* and *B Gall.*) is not always easy to ascertain.

Finally, in addition to the ancient sources, I will also be drawing upon modern scholarship when examining some of the broader issues surrounding ancient warfare.

Representation by Ancient Authors

Before we can examine the representation of any ancient subject, including warfare, in a modern context, we must first start by asking the question ‘How did ancient authors view this subject?’ Only once we have a detailed understanding of how the subject of ancient warfare was represented originally can we draw a comparison with its alternative representation in video games. In order to achieve this, I will be taking several aspects of warfare and examining each one, first to see how it was represented by ancient authors, and then to compare this representation with its portrayal in video games.

Warfare and religion

There is little doubt that religion dominated all aspects of life for many ancient cultures and civilisations, and warfare was no exception — particularly at Rome.¹ Religion covered many aspects of warfare, including the loyalty of soldiers,² and it could be seen to be a tactical advantage to be seen to have the gods on your side in a battle.³ Even the laws related to war were, if Cicero is to be believed, governed by religion,⁴ and the religious calendar of the Romans was geared to war.⁵

¹‘Connections between war and religion, strong in all ancient societies, were nowhere stronger than at Rome’. (Dawson 1996, p.114)

²‘Religion sanctified the soldier’s loyalty. He had sworn to obey his general and not to desert the standards.’ (Brunt 1962, p.77)

³‘The desire to have the gods on your side in warfare was doubtless always in some sense a military tactic.’ (Goodman & Holladay 1986, p.152)

⁴‘As for war, humane laws touching it are drawn up in the fetial code of the Roman People under all the guarantees of religion’. (Cicero, *De Officiis* 1.11.36)

⁵Goodman & Holladay (1986, p.160)

As well as being an important part of warfare in general, the observance of religious rites could also play a significant role in deciding how and when a battle was fought, sometimes even causing a campaign to stop or a battle to be called off as a result.⁶ This affected the Romans less than other cultures, however, and on occasion gave them the opportunity to attack their enemies at a time of religious observance or superstitious significance, using this weakness to their advantage, and the course of a campaign or battle was affected as a result. One attested example of this is when Vespasian defeated a Jewish army in AD 70, by attacking them on a holy day.⁷ Caesar is also reported to have beaten an army of Germans in 58 BC by attacking them when the moon was waning — an omen under which the Germans were uncomfortable fighting under for superstitious reasons.⁸ Interestingly, however, there appears to be ‘no certain evidence that the observance of religious scruples ever acted to Rome’s detriment’⁹, though the fact that no such events appear to be explicitly mentioned in our sources does not mean that they never occurred.

Despite the obvious importance of religion in warfare — even if the Romans did conveniently observe rituals in such a way that it rarely affected their ability to wage war — this area is largely overlooked in video games. Although the topic of religion is usually present in some way, shape or form, in almost all cases it is seen as a method of appeasing the civilian population rather than anything to do with warfare, and religion rarely has any effect on battles, despite several of our ancient sources citing occasions on which the observance of religious rites affected the course of a campaign.

⁶‘Campaigns might be brought to a temporary halt because of a festival or a day unfavourable for military action.’ (Gilliver 1999, p.94)

⁷‘The deified Vespasian Augustus attacked the Jews on their sabbath, a day on which it is sinful for them to do any business, and so defeated them.’ (Frontius, *Stratagems* 2.1.17)

⁸‘Caesar therefore chose that time [when the moon was waning] above all others for engaging in battle, when the enemy were embarrassed by their superstition, and so conquered them.’ (Frontius, *Stratagems* 2.1.16); ‘On inquiring from prisoners why he [Ariovistus] would not fight a general engagement, Caesar was told that the German matrons [...] had pronounced that the Germans were not destined to win if they fought before the new moon.’ (Caesar, *B Gall.* 1.50). The same incident is also mentioned by Plutarch (*Caesar* 19), though his source for this information may have been *B Gall.*

⁹Goodman & Holladay (1986, p.160)

Warfare and politics

As in most societies, politics and war were closely intertwined in the Roman Republic, with the most powerful and influential people in Rome often holding high offices in both the army and the political system.¹⁰ The primary driving force behind warfare in the Roman Republic was often the political machinations of prominent people within the Republic, even if this reason was obscured by the excuse of needing to defend Rome and its allies from foreign aggressors (which in itself could be a political reason).¹¹ Closely linked to politics is the topic of diplomacy and foreign policy. When discussing the subject of warfare in any age, ‘diplomacy’ is usually not one of the first words to be mentioned, but nevertheless diplomacy and foreign policy played their part in the wars of the ancient world.¹²

Most games focusing on ancient warfare provide at least some options for peace and diplomacy, although it is still the case that the primary objective is to eliminate everyone else, and such diplomatic options are often used simply as an opportunity to cease hostilities whilst both sides rebuild their forces. In terms of politics, both *Rome: Total War* and *Civilization III* feature a senate which can order the player to undertake certain missions and also intervene in foreign policy by forcing a peace treaty to be signed even when the player wishes to continue to wage war against a particular nation, in a similar way to the Roman Senate.

The economics of warfare

As with politics, the economy of the Roman Republic played a significant part in the process of planning military campaigns.¹³ The major impact of warfare on the economy was probably the cost of maintaining an army,¹⁴ especially given

¹⁰‘War and politics were inseparably linked at Rome, and the right to exercise power in peacetime was purchased by the obligation to provide successful leadership in war.’ (Goldsworthy 2000, p.24)

¹¹‘The conceptual status of war was therefore subordinated to political thought. Even when it was considered on its own, war was treated as a means to some political end.’ (Garlan 1975, p.18)

¹²‘Foreign policy and strategy in the larger sense are linked together.’ (Adcock 1970, p.4)

¹³‘Apart from purely military considerations, it [strategy] had to be subservient to politics and economics’. (Montagu 2006, p.24)

¹⁴‘The chief expense of the state during this period of severe warfare was for the army and navy.’ (Frank 1932, p.9). A detailed discussion of the costs of maintaining the Roman army is beyond the scope of this study, however Frank (1932) contains a useful examination of these costs and their effect on the public finances of Rome.

that, in the time period I am examining here, rarely did a year go by which did not involve at least one active campaign by the military forces of Rome. Not only did an army have to be fed, but over time the costs also increased as the state gradually took over the task of supplying weapons and equipment for the army as it changed from a civilian fighting force to a professional one in which soldiers were paid for their services.

There were also economic motivations for going to war and expanding the amount of territory under Roman control.¹⁵ Presumably warfare must have presented some benefits to the Romans, otherwise they would never have gone to war except in defence of themselves or their allies, which, despite the fact that some ancient sources would have us believe otherwise,¹⁶ cannot have been the real reason behind every conflict the Romans found themselves involved in. Apart from anything else, the cost of war had to be recouped, and no doubt plunder was also considered to be an important consideration for the leaders of the Roman state.¹⁷

A further economic consideration for going to war was that Rome, like many ancient civilisations, had an economy that was reliant to a large extent on slaves, particularly for agriculture.¹⁸ It was the right of the conqueror to enslave captives taken in war,¹⁹ with the exception of runaway slaves, who were to be returned to their former masters where possible.²⁰ Based on this, I would suggest that ensuring a supply of slaves, and the related benefit to the economy, could be seen as a motivating factor in the decision to go to war.

Another example of the effect economics had on ancient warfare can be found in the occasions when our sources mention that particular areas of the world were not brought under the control of Rome, primarily because it would not be profitable to do so, i.e. the cost of acquiring the additional territories (extra soldiers, more administration, better opportunities for corruption the further the territory was located from Rome, etc.) was greater than the material benefit which was to be gained from the process.²¹

¹⁵'Economic gain was to the Romans [...] an integral part of successful warfare and of the expansion of power.' (Harris 1985, p.56)

¹⁶'But our people by defending their allies have gained dominion over the whole world.' (Cicero, *De Re Publica* 3.23.35). A lofty excuse for the establishment of an empire, but, I would suggest, not one which can be taken seriously.

¹⁷Harris (1985, p.76)

¹⁸'Large landowners did benefit enormously from war and expansion because of the effect these had on the slave supply.' (Harris 1985, p.80)

¹⁹Westermann (1955, p.64)

²⁰Appian 12.9.61

²¹Appian *pr.* 5 and *pr.* 7 give accounts of where the Roman Empire had deliberately stopped

In their representation in video games, soldiers always cost money to recruit and, perhaps more importantly, there is usually an ongoing cost involved with keeping an army in the field. This limits the size of the army which any one faction can control, and the only way to increase this is by conquering and plundering more territories, which is, I would suggest, a reasonable representation of what was actually the case in ancient times.

The logistics of warfare

One area which is often overlooked when discussing ancient warfare, perhaps because it is perceived as being less exciting than discussing pitched battles, is the problem of logistics, i.e. how the army keeps up a steady supply of essential materials such as food, water and weapons, amongst many other things. However, the role of this subject was particularly important, as ‘the limitations posed by logistics could decide between defeat and victory.’²² Broadly speaking, there were two main ways in which an army could obtain the various supplies it needed whilst campaigning in the field. The first way would be to transport the supplies with the army, either by using some form of baggage train or forcing each individual soldier to carry his own supplies on his back. The alternative option was for the army to carry a small amount of vital supplies and obtain everything else from their surroundings, which could involve either requisitioning supplies from nearby towns/settlements, or using natural resources in the field, such as springs for water supplies.

Perhaps the most obvious, and arguably the most important, logistical challenge which had to be overcome by the Roman army was the problem of how to keep soldiers supplied with food, particularly over a prolonged campaign — a crucial issue for any army as no soldiers, ancient or modern and regardless of their devotion to duty, can fight at their best if deprived of food for days or even

expanding at particular points as to take possession of further territory would not be profitable.

²²Erdkamp (1998, p.1)

weeks.²³ Our ancient sources were well aware of the severe consequences of soldiers having to fight on empty stomachs — Polybius,²⁴ Livy²⁵ and Appian²⁶ all mention the role of hunger in reducing the effectiveness of men in battle.

Food also played another interesting role in ancient warfare, as in addition to the problem of actually supplying the army with food there was also the major issue of when soldiers could consume it. The best time was generally considered to be just before battle,²⁷ in order to ensure that the soldiers fought on a full stomach, but of course this would not always be possible and, as mentioned previously, waiting until just prior to battle before eating made it possible for an attack to be made before the enemy had time to take their meal. Even more disastrous was the possibility that an army could be caught in the middle of consuming a meal and would be unable to defend itself properly. The Roman army appear to have taken its meals within entrenched camps in order to avoid being attacked whilst eating,²⁸ but other armies were not always so cautious. There are several accounts in our sources of armies being attacked and heavily defeated whilst they were taking a meal — one such example is when Diophanes sallied out from Pergamus, which was under siege, and attacked the soldiers of Seleucus whilst they were taking their dinner. This threw the army into confusion, and we are informed that, as a result, ‘Diophanes won a most glorious victory’.²⁹ We also hear of Cornificius’ men giving way to despair and succumbing to thirst, eventually giving way completely when they were unable to take control of a much-needed water supply.³⁰

As well as food, there was also the need to keep troops supplied with sufficient

²³‘The organization of a system to supply the army with all its requirements, *most of all food*, was essential for its successful operation.’ (Goldsworthy 1996, p.287) (emphasis mine)

²⁴‘the Carthaginians grew faint, as they had not left their camp on their own initiative and had been prevented from preparing themselves [including eating] properly’. (Polybius 11.24.5-6)

²⁵Livy compares the fact that ‘hunger was added to fatigue’ (21.54.8) for the Romans, who had not eaten, to the ‘fresh and eager army’ (21.55.1) of Hannibal, whose soldiers ate breakfast before engaging in battle. In the short description of the fighting which follows, Livy brings attention to the tiredness of the Romans, caused by both hunger and the cold (the latter probably made worse by the lack of food), implying, I would suggest, that the engagement might not have been such a disaster for the Romans if they had been given the opportunity to eat beforehand — although it is possible that Livy is using this reason as an excuse for what was simply a poor display of fighting ability by the Roman troops.

²⁶‘We will make it part of our plan that hunger shall engage them before we do, so that when it is necessary to fight we shall find them weakened and exhausted.’ (Appian, *B Civ.* 4.16.118)

²⁷Livy 28.2.2; Polybius 3.71; Plutarch, *Sulla* 29.4

²⁸Polybius 3.67.2

²⁹Appian 11.5.26

³⁰Appian, *B Civ.* 5.12.114

amounts of liquid (usually water or wine) in order to avoid dehydration, and obtaining a steady supply of water was a major logistical problem.³¹ Indeed, the need for liquid was arguably greater than that for food, as it is possible to survive (though naturally not at full fitness) for several weeks without food, but most soldiers would not last more than a few days without liquids.³² Commanders in the field were acutely aware of the need for a supply of liquids, with Sulla lavishing praise upon a site for having a source of water at its foot,³³ and Caesar mentions this on at least two occasions, once restricting his advance to the distance required to obtain water,³⁴ and another time building an additional side wall to his camp in order to allow his soldiers to fetch water freely and in safety.³⁵ Denying access to water supplies was also seen as a way of forcing an enemy to surrender, either by diverting streams, as Publius Servilius did to the inhabitants of Isaura,³⁶ or by stationing men at the supply in order to prevent the enemy from collecting water, as Caesar did at Uxellodunum.³⁷

Other logistical supplies, beyond the obvious food and water, included firewood or some other form of fuel which could be used for cooking food. Frontinus warns commanders of the dangers involved in having to eat meat raw due to a lack of fuel for fires on which to cook it, citing an example of the Romans being beaten by Hannibal due to the former failing to cook cattle before consuming the meat.³⁸ Fodder to feed animals was also important and could present a major problem, especially given how heavy it was relative to other supplies.³⁹

However, despite the obvious importance of logistics, particularly the supply of food, water and fuel, this topic is largely ignored in most video games based on ancient warfare. Whilst keeping cities supplied with food is without exception a significant challenge for the player in such games, soldiers can stay out in the field as long as they wish without any ill effects. There are also no opportunities to catch enemy armies whilst they are eating, or to cut off their food supplies in an attempt to starve them into surrendering.⁴⁰

³¹Roth (1998, p.116)

³²Roth (1998, pp.35-36)

³³Plutarch, *Sulla* 16.1

³⁴*B Gall.* 4.11

³⁵*B Civ.* 3.66

³⁶Frontinus, *Stratagems* 3.7.1

³⁷*B Gall.* 8.40-3

³⁸Frontinus, *Stratagems* 2.5.13

³⁹'Fodder was certainly the largest item in terms of weight'. (Roth 1998, p.61)

⁴⁰It is usually possible to place cities under siege in such games, whereupon supplies do

Naval warfare

Whilst the majority of literature regarding ancient warfare concentrates on the role of the army in land-based engagements, we cannot look at the subject and fail to at least acknowledge the role of the sea in this area. Although most of the events for which we have literary sources involve descriptions of pitched battles between two opposing armies on land, and the concept of a Roman navy did not really come into play until the beginning of the First Punic War,⁴¹ there were several occasions where the role of the navy proved crucial in ancient warfare, including the final battle between Anthony and Octavian (soon to be Augustus) on the eve of the transition of Rome from Republic to Empire. As such, the role of the navy cannot be ignored when examining the subject of ancient warfare.

However, despite the importance of a strong navy in certain situations, the Romans by and large seem to have ignored the possibility of building and maintaining a fleet which could dominate the seas and, as Adcock suggests, treated the navy which did exist as secondary to the army,⁴² a sentiment which I would be inclined to agree with. In particular, even when the Romans did fight opposition fleets, they often attempted to board the enemy ships and turn the engagement into a land battle, a situation in which the Romans usually had the upper hand.⁴³

This reliance on conquering ‘the sea from the land rather than the land from the sea’⁴⁴ appears to be well-represented in computer games focusing on ancient warfare. In *Rome: Total War*, ships of all types have virtually no combat capacity, and are largely limited to acting as a mode of transportation for foot troops. The only aggressive behaviour which may be exhibited by ships is the blockading of the ports of enemy towns in order to disrupt their sea-based trade routes — a tactic which leaves the ships performing the blockade in a precarious position — and to ward off enemy ships which are blockading the ports of the player’s towns. Beyond these limited actions, ships are almost useless and play only a minor, become an issue, but the option to surround an enemy army and cut off its supplies is not generally available.

⁴¹‘Rome had no need of a navy until the beginning of the third century BC.’ (Montagu 2000, p.31)

⁴²‘To the Romans the army, not the navy, was the senior service’. (Adcock 1970, p.29)

⁴³‘They placed the emphasis on carrying marines, boarding enemy ships and, in effect, fighting a land battle on the sea.’ (Montagu 2000, p.31) The device, known as a ‘raven’, which was used to board enemy ships is described in Polybius 1.22. Caesar also mentions the preference towards boarding ships with troops at *B Civ* 1.58.

⁴⁴Adcock (1970, p.31)

usually logistical, role in the strategy of any commander (computer or human) in the game. This impression is reinforced by the decision of the game developers to restrict the resolution of sea battles to computer control,⁴⁵ suggesting that they are either not considered important enough to warrant the player's attention or that the experience and expertise of an army commander has little effect on the outcome of a sea battle.

However, one interesting point about naval warfare in video games is that ships are always, without exception, shown with sails. Although sails were occasionally used in the Roman navy, it was considered unusual to do so,⁴⁶ as most ships were propelled by oars, and indeed obtained their names from either the number of banks of oars or the number of men assigned to each oar — hence trireme, quinquereme etc. However, even in games where ships are actually called by these names, they are still shown to be using sails as the method of power.

Discipline and disobedience

The Roman army is often seen as a model of discipline,⁴⁷ with its men fiercely loyal to their commander and to Rome — a loyalty backed up by a harsh regime of punishments ensuring that any disobedient⁴⁸ soldiers would be both discouraged from repeating their acts of insubordination (if indeed they lived to do so) and to act as an example to any other men who might be harbouring rebellious thoughts.

However, this representation of the Roman army as a model of discipline and

⁴⁵This is in contrast to land battles, where the player can choose to either have the combat resolved automatically by the computer or personally supervise the action himself, with the latter option usually wielding better results.

⁴⁶'Therefore Antony took his sails on board, which was rarely done in naval actions.' (Tarn 1931, p.189)

⁴⁷Messer in particular comments on 'the modern tradition of unquestioning obedience on the part of the soldier' (Messer 1920, p.161) and the fact that 'unquestioning obedience on the part of the soldier towards his commanding officer [...] is pleasing to the popular fancy and is a motif welcomed by the poets and by the authors of historical novels on Roman life.' (Messer 1920, p.162)

⁴⁸In this discussion on discipline within the army, I have largely avoided using the word 'mutiny', preferring instead to opt for the more neutral term of 'disobedience' (or occasionally 'insubordination'). The reasoning for this is that the former term carries certain connotations which, depending on one's viewpoint, may not be applicable to all situations in which soldiers fail to obey their orders — in particular the word often implies negative consequences as a result of the action, and a premeditated decision by soldiers to disobey orders from their commanding officer. I have therefore reserved the term 'mutiny' for the most serious of situations involving disobedience, i.e. that in which soldiers actively turn on their commanding officers, as opposed to a mere refusal to obey orders.

obedience is inaccurate to say the least. Whilst the army must have maintained a modicum of discipline in order to fight individual battles effectively and carry out sustained campaigns across the Mediterranean, it is certainly not the case that all soldiers blindly followed orders through some form of unthinking obedience and loyalty to their commander in the field and to Rome in general. The mutterings of discontented soldiers caused problems for many commanders in the Roman army, no matter how enthusiastically discipline was enforced or how popular the commander's standing was with his men.

Broadly speaking, there are three different ways in which the direct disobedience of troops can cause problems for a military commander. First of all, there is the situation in which troops rush forward as a result of their eagerness to engage with the enemy, despite having been instructed to stand their ground until the order is given to attack, or to hold a key position regardless of how well or badly the battle is going. In many cases, this leads to the troops in question being destroyed or routed by the enemy, especially if only one or two units decide to break ranks, but occasionally it can lead to a surprise victory when soldiers decide to act on their own initiative instead of following the orders of their superior officers (or the Senate, in cases where an entire army decides to attack before receiving orders to do so). However, even in the latter case, where a positive outcome is achieved, such action should, in my opinion, be seen as a form of disobedience, and those responsible should be punished if discipline is to be maintained.⁴⁹ An example of such an incident can be seen when Fabius Rullus, the Master of the Horse, engaged in battle against the orders of the Dictator, Lucius Papirius Cursor. Although Rullus had achieved a great victory by acting on his initiative, he was threatened with execution for his disobedience.⁵⁰ Manlius exacted the same punishment upon his son for engaging in battle contrary to his orders, despite the fact that the result was a success for Rome.⁵¹

The second form of disobedience is a refusal by troops to fight when ordered, or even to flee in the face of the enemy after being instructed to stand their ground. This could occur as a result of premeditated disobedience from the soldiers concerned, or a spontaneous outbreak of panic caused by encountering an

⁴⁹Admittedly, punishing troops who have achieved a successful result by disobeying orders might be seen as an unwarranted and potentially damaging action for a commander to take, but nevertheless such lapses should not be tolerated if discipline is to be maintained.

⁵⁰Frontinus, *Stratagems* 4.1.39; Livy 8.30-1

⁵¹Frontinus, *Stratagems* 4.1.40; Sallust, *Cat.* 52; Livy 8.7

enemy with superiority in either weaponry or numbers (or both). An example of how disastrous this could be for a commander can be found in Polybius' account of the First Punic War. One of the consuls, Gnaeus Cornelius Scipio, took seventeen ships and anchored them in the harbour of the town of Lipara, with the intention of capturing it by treachery. Unfortunately for Scipio, the Carthaginians were aware of his movements and dispatched twenty ships, under the command of Boödes, a member of the Carthaginian Senate, to trap Scipio in the harbour. Upon seeing the arrival of the Carthaginians, Scipio's men abandoned their ships and fled for the shore, leaving the consul in the no doubt humiliating position of having to surrender himself and his fleet to Boödes.⁵² Mark Antony suffered a similar problem at the Battle of Actium, in which a number of his ships refused to fight, and some even defected to Octavian.⁵³ Punishment for disobeying orders in this manner could be severe — we are told that when Scipio's men refused to call off the siege of Locha after being ordered to do so, the general deprived the army of its booty and executed three of the officers (chosen by lot) who were responsible for leading the men into the rebellious action.⁵⁴

The third form of disobedience is outright mutiny, when soldiers decide, for whatever reason, to turn on their commanding officer. Despite the severity of such an action, and the consequences faced by anyone involved,⁵⁵ this was not an uncommon event, especially during some of the more turbulent times of the Republic. In 88 BC one of the consuls, Quintus Pompeius, was killed by an army led by a mutinous general.⁵⁶ A few years later, in 85 BC, the consul Lucullus Valerius Flaccus fared no better, losing his life to a mutinous junior officer,⁵⁷ and his successor, Cinna, met the same fate at the hands of rebellious troops in 84 BC.⁵⁸

In addition to the three forms of direct disobedience described above, armies in the ancient world also both suffered and benefited from the problem of soldiers deserting and either leaving a campaign altogether or joining the other side.⁵⁹

⁵²Polybius 1.21

⁵³'The matter was decided by the refusal of [part of] his [Antony's] fleet to fight'. (Tarn 1931, p.182)

⁵⁴Appian 8.3.15

⁵⁵Punishment could involve the execution of the ringleaders or the decimation of the entire unit, although the latter seems not to have been used as often as is sometimes thought.

⁵⁶Vell. Pat. 2.20

⁵⁷Appian 12.8.52

⁵⁸Vell. Pat. 2.24

⁵⁹'Desertion was always a problem in the Roman army.' (Goldsworthy 1996, p.113)

Deserters weakened the army they abandoned in two ways — most obviously they reduced the number of soldiers at the general's command, but they could also impart important information about the position, numbers and strategy of the army to the enemy commander whom they defected to. Of course, this position would be reversed for the army receiving the deserters, in that they would have their numbers bolstered by the additional soldiers, as well as potentially receiving useful intelligence about their opponents. Sometimes this problem would become so widespread that entire units could consist solely of deserters, such as the fort garrison we hear of in the Jugurthine War, which was manned entirely by Roman deserters.⁶⁰

Finally, there is another possible form of disobedience, which does not relate to the actions of soldiers whilst serving in the Roman army but instead covers a resistance to being called up for military service. This refusal to join the army can be traced back to one of the earliest attested accounts of disobedience in military matters. In 496 BC, there was civil unrest in Rome, with angry mobs pressing against the doors of the Senate House, insisting that the Senate be convened to listen to their demands. At the same time, news arrived of a Volscian army which was marching on Rome. Upon hearing this news, the people 'went about urging their friends to refuse military service',⁶¹ despite the fact that failure to sign up might have serious consequences for the security of Rome. Eventually, a volunteer army was formed and the Volscians were fought back, but the next year a similar problem occurred, and the consuls were forced to use the measure of appointing Manlius Valerius to the office of Dictator, in order to sort out the problem.⁶² This resentment to conscription continued throughout the Republic, and never ceased to be a problem for military commanders.⁶³

Even with all the different forms which disobedience can take, one might reasonably expect such insubordination to reflect a low standard of discipline, an unpopular commander, or a time of crisis, and not to be representative of the army as a whole. However, this was clearly not the case, and even the strictest and/or most popular of commanders were beset by such problems.⁶⁴ Even Caesar, whose

⁶⁰Sallust, *Jug.* 103

⁶¹Livy 2.24

⁶²Livy 2.30

⁶³'We know that the levy had been resented bitterly in the second century, and this was still true in the first.' (Brunt 1962, p.75)

⁶⁴'Mutiny was not confined to the armies of unsuccessful or of unpopular commanders, or to times of disaster and crisis.' (Messer 1920, p.168)

army is often considered to be one of the greatest ever seen,⁶⁵ was not immune to the grumbling of troops,⁶⁶ and sometimes had to resort to summary executions in order to maintain some semblance of discipline.⁶⁷

Given how many examples there are of disobedience and lack of discipline in our sources, we might reasonably expect the video game player to encounter similar challenges when commanding an army. However, it turns out that this is not the case. Whilst troops may run away from battle on occasion, this only happens after almost all of their fellow soldiers in a particular unit have been killed, and not simply from the fear of facing a superior enemy. In most other circumstances, soldiers obey orders without question, even if the command seems suicidal, which is clearly not an accurate representation of what really happened. Soldiers also do not desert the armies of the player or his opponents, and there no resistance met when troops are levied from cities under the player's control.

Having examined how warfare is represented by ancient authors, I will now move on in the next chapter to discuss some of the criticisms of the portrayal of ancient warfare in video games, and provide some potential reasons why discrepancies may appear between what our ancient sources tell us and what we encounter when we play a video game based on this subject.

⁶⁵'Caesar's army was perhaps the finest military instrument that history records'. (Messer 1920, p.172)

⁶⁶'The soldiers openly avowed to each other that, since such a chance of victory was being thrown away, they would not fight even when he wanted them to.' (Caesar, *B Civ* 1.72). Although we must treat Caesar's account of his own campaign with a degree of suspicion due to the personal bias present within it, I would suggest that we can safely assume that this particular incident did actually take place, as it is not generally in the interests of a military commander to bring attention to a lack of discipline within his own army.

⁶⁷One example of this which is mentioned in several of the ancient sources is the execution of twelve members of the Ninth Legion, including references at Appian, *B Civ.* 2.7.47; Suetonis, *Aug.* 69; Lucan 5.362-4.

Criticisms of (mis)representation

Having contrasted the representation of ancient warfare by contemporary authors with that of the developers of modern video games, one must surely wonder whether the (mis)representation of the subject by the latter group has had any effect on the reception of ancient warfare in the minds of the general public. Burkholder suggests that ‘it is not surprising that today’s general public, separated from medieval Europe by a chasm at least five centuries deep, would harbor false perceptions about warfare of the period’,¹ but is this actually the case? In order to answer this question, I will look at some of the criticisms which are often levelled at video games, and the reasons why they may have come about, before reaching a conclusion on the extent to which games are an accurate representation of ancient warfare.

One of the major criticisms of video games which deal with the subject of ancient warfare is that they miss out ‘realistic’ challenges which any military commander would normally have to deal with. For example, whilst soldiers will leave your army if you are unable to pay them, there is no concept of having to keep your troops fed and supplied with other essentials, despite the clear importance of this in ancient warfare. However, I would suggest that the reason for this is similar to that described by Myers for another game, i.e. that the real-world scenario is modified in order to meet the pragmatic needs of the player, which is to produce a game which is enjoyable to engage with.²

Continuing on this topic, the challenge of keeping discipline is also almost completely absent from video games focusing on ancient warfare. Whilst civilians

¹Burkholder (2007, p.507) Whilst Burkholder is primarily addressing the subject of medieval warfare, I believe that many of his points are sufficiently general to extend to warfare of any historical period, including the Later Roman Republic.

²Myers (2003, p.4)

within the player's settlements may express their dissatisfaction through civil disobedience or even outright revolt, one can always rely on the unquestioning obedience and loyalty of the army to ensure that it is business as usual in terms of waging war. Soldiers will invariably obey orders which they are given, unless they have sustained so many casualties that they are forced to flee from the battlefield. As with logistics, I would suggest that this misrepresentation is implemented deliberately in order to make games playable, at the expense of an accurate representation of ancient warfare. In addition to this, there is the fact that, whilst popular generals still suffered breakdowns in discipline, an appreciable amount of loyalty and obedience in soldiers came as a direct result of the prestige and charisma associated with their commanding officer. Although a game can offer the player a significant amount of control over tactics and strategy, it would be difficult to represent the charisma of the individual player in the game itself, so it is perhaps fair that this element is left out of video games.

One factor which stands out in almost all video games based on the topic of ancient warfare is the fact that, even when options are included which are not directly related to combat, such as diplomacy and the ability to make peace with other civilisations/factions, the clear message from the game is that you must eliminate all of your opponents in order to win. Chen aptly describes conquest as 'basically the perennial video game objective of killing everyone else',³ an observation which I agree with, and I would suggest that such a sentiment is reflected in the vast majority of video games based on and around ancient warfare. Even games such as *Civilization III*, which purports to offer a range of ways in which to emerge victorious and win the game, are geared towards conquest as the overall objective.⁴

This focus on world domination is often criticised as unrealistic, given that no civilisation in history has been able to subjugate the entire world to its will. Even the Roman Empire failed to conquer the whole of the known world at the time, let alone those areas whose existence it was not even aware of. Indeed, it would appear from our sources that the Romans deliberately stopped their expansion of empire at certain points, including natural boundaries such as the Rhine and Danube rivers,⁵ and areas which were not considered to be of significant material

³Chen (2003, p.96)

⁴In *Civilization III*, there are six possible ways to win the game, the main two of which are conquest (take over or destroy every city in the world) and domination (control a sufficient proportion of the world such that no other player presents a threat).

⁵In Europe two rivers, the Rhine and the Danube, for the most part bound the Roman

benefit to the Empire.⁶

However, I would offer the alternative possibility that the ideal of world conquest in these games reflects the mindset of the Later Roman Republic and Early Empire, where total domination of the known world was seen as both possible and desirable. Virgil tells us how the Romans were, from the very beginning, destined to rule the world,⁷ and Augustus proudly proclaims how he pushed forward the boundaries of empire in order to subjugate other races to the might of Rome.⁸ Both of these sources may be criticised — and fairly so, in my opinion — as imperialistic propaganda, as Virgil wrote in praise of Augustus and would be careful to say the ‘right’ things, and Augustus himself as emperor clearly had a vested interest in promoting the expansion of empire and highlighting his personal role in its successes.⁹ Even Cicero, self-proclaimed saviour of the Republic,¹⁰ considered it the duty of those ‘whose office it is to look after the interests of the state’ to use ‘whatever means they can, in peace or in war, to advance the state in power, in territory, and in revenues.’¹¹ However, I would suggest that these texts would have reflected the general mood of the Roman people at the time, even if their claims of world domination would never actually be achieved. Therefore, it could be the case that video games based on ancient warfare are aiming to represent this view that conquest of the entire world was Rome’s destiny, as opposed to attempting a simulation of what turned out to be an unsuccessful bid for world domination.

In a similar vein to the overall aim of destroying all of your opponents, most games also regard an individual battle as being completed once the majority of

empire.’ (Appian *pr.* 4)

⁶‘Possessing the best part of the earth and sea they [the emperors] have, on the whole, aimed to preserve their empire by the exercise of prudence, rather than to extend their sway indefinitely over poverty-stricken and profitless tribes of barbarians’ (Appian *pr.* 7); ‘Crossing the Northern ocean to Britain, which is an island greater than a large continent, they have taken possession of the better and larger part, not caring for the remainder. Indeed, the part they do hold is not very profitable to them.’ (Appian *pr.* 5)

⁷‘The walls he [Romulus] builds will be the walls of Mars and he shall give his own name to his people, the Romans. On them I impose no limits on time or place. I have given them an empire that will know no end.’ (*Aeneid* 1.276-279)

⁸‘I extended the boundaries of all the provinces which were bordered by races not yet subject to our empire.’ (*Res Gestae* 26)

⁹‘The Emperor Augustus had no objection to magnifying his military achievements when he could no longer be contradicted’. (Tarn 1931, p.183)

¹⁰‘Was I, who had once been the saviour of the republic, now to gain for myself the name of its destroyer?’ (Cicero, *Pro Cnaeo Plancio* 36.89)

¹¹*De Officiis* 2.24.85

soldiers on one side have been killed. How many casualties are required for victory depends on the individual game,¹² but the general emphasis is on attempting to wipe out the enemy rather than just defeating them, despite it being unusual for one side to completely annihilate the other in real warfare.

Furthermore, many of the claims that video games misrepresent ancient warfare are related to elements which are missed out entirely (e.g. the religious aspects of ancient warfare), as opposed to mistakes in the material which is presented to the player. I would suggest that these are two independent issues which should be examined separately and not confused with one another. A decision to exclude a particular aspect of ancient warfare — for example the absence of religious rites in *Rome: Total War* — is less of a misrepresentation than arming Roman infantrymen with longswords instead of the *gladius*. If relevant information is missing from a form of representation,¹³ we should not jump to the conclusion that such information does not exist, though some people may still choose to do so. Indeed, it is extremely dangerous to assume something did not occur simply because we have no evidence to prove that it did. On the other hand, if we are given false representations, as opposed to a lack of information, then we may find ourselves coming away with a false impression of the subject of ancient warfare.

Continuing on this theme, it would be grossly unfair to claim that video games are misrepresenting the subject of ancient warfare simply because they neglect to include some areas which are generally considered to be important. Keppie (1998) makes little reference to the role of economics or religion (two rather important topics within the broad subject area) in Roman warfare, yet he is not, as far as I am aware, condemned for such an omission, and rightly so. No medium can possibly hope to cover all aspects of a subject — especially one as broad and complex as ancient warfare — and video games should therefore not be criticised for leaving out certain topics. Indeed, I would suggest that in most cases it would be preferable to leave out a topic altogether if justice cannot be done to its presentation, instead of hastily adding a few inaccurate references as an afterthought.

Furthermore, the fact remains that we do not know for certain what ancient warfare was actually like. In contrast to modern warfare, where huge amounts

¹²In *Civilization III*, a battle concludes with the total destruction of one side, whereas in *Rome: Total War* it is possible for some troops to escape to fight another day

¹³This could be any form of representation, including books and films as well as video games.

of documentary evidence exists and we have living sources who can verify the accuracy of such information, with ancient warfare we are dependent on fragments of literary evidence which we must carefully piece together in an attempt to reconstruct a coherent overall picture. Even when complete texts exist, it is often the case that a large area, either in length of time or breadth of topic, is only served by one or two authors, whom we must trust to be unbiased or factor in the possibility of them distorting (intentionally or not) the truth when we examine their writings.

If, therefore, we cannot be sure ourselves of how ancient warfare actually took place, we cannot criticise video games too harshly for appearing to be unrepresentative of the ‘facts’, especially in certain areas where our sources are weak. Some parts of these games may differ substantially from the generally accepted interpretations of the sources, but this does not automatically mean that we can dismiss them as frivolous devices useful for whiling away a few hours of boredom and thus condemn them as having no academic value whatsoever. There is also some evidence that developers have actually familiarised themselves with the ancient sources when creating games, for example in *Rome: Total War* the in-game descriptions of the various unit types are clearly based on the descriptions given in Livy and Polybius, though regrettably the developers have neglected to cite their sources, and even on the occasions where they do quote directly from an ancient text within the game they will give the name of the author but provide no indication of the book, chapter and section number.

Finally, when looking at video games, we have to take into account the fact that they are primarily a method of entertainment, aimed at a mass market audience, and the developers of the games are more interested in selling enough copies to recoup the costs of creating them than satisfying the pedantic desires of academics who are looking for an accurate representation of their area of research. Most of the criticisms levelled at video games based on ancient warfare occur, I would suggest, not because of a deliberate design to misinform players of the realities of ancient warfare, but because of the commercial circumstances in which they are made, and we must take this into account when evaluating their accuracy.

Conclusions and future research

Having examined some of the criticisms which are often levelled at video games for their alleged inaccuracies in representing ancient warfare, I would suggest that for video game developers the pressure to make a game which sells is greater than the pressure to make one which is technically accurate,¹ and that this is responsible for many of the differences between games and our ancient sources. Having said this, I believe that video games are still a useful tool for research — in fact they are particularly interesting because the developers of such games are working under the opposite pressure of the author of an academic text, who is expected to produce something which is accurate but will probably not sell hundreds of thousands of copies. Furthermore, is the way in which video game developers alter their product in order to appeal to a mass market audience really any different to Caesar’s manipulation of the events of the Civil War, with the goal of widening the appeal of his ‘product’ — i.e. himself? I would suggest not.

Overall, I would suggest that the representation of ancient warfare in modern video games depends on whether one is prepared to accept that some modifications are necessary in order to create a product which appeals to a wide audience. If we ignore this consideration, then I would suggest that video games are not an accurate representation of ancient warfare, as they leave out too many factors which are extremely important to warfare, particularly areas such as logistics and discipline. However, if we do take into account the fact that some areas need to be omitted or changed in order to produce something which has mass market

¹Although these two areas are not necessarily mutually exclusive, as it is possible to make a game which offers a fairly accurate representation of ancient warfare and yet is commercially successful, I would suggest that where there is a conflict between the two pressures, the commercial one will always win.

appeal, then I would suggest that video games in general offer a good representation of ancient warfare, particularly in the case of *Rome: Total War*, in which the developers do appear to have gone to a significant amount of effort to ensure as accurate a representation as possible, within the commercial constraints in which they have to work.

Finally, we come to the question of whether it matters or not if video games give an accurate representation of ancient warfare, and whether these games are helpful to the subject. With regards to whether the accuracy of representations matter, although it is preferable that such games do not grossly distort the facts, I would suggest that most people are capable of distinguishing between a game and actual history. Furthermore, if someone is already knowledgeable about the subject of ancient warfare, they will probably not be led astray by a video game's (mis)representation, and if they do not know much about ancient warfare already then receiving a small amount of inaccurate information is hardly a crushing blow to the study of the subject as a whole. In fact, I would suggest that these games may ignite an interest in the subject of ancient warfare, and actually encourage people to go out and learn more about this area of history, which can only serve to strengthen it. Overall, therefore, I believe that video games, despite some inaccuracies, offer more to the subject than they take away from it, and as such should not be dismissed but instead embraced as a useful tool, alongside other more traditional devices, for helping to increase our understanding of the subject of ancient warfare as a whole.

Avenues for future research

Whilst I hope that this study has provided a broad evaluation of the representation of ancient warfare in modern video games, there are several areas which were not possible to examine due to constraints of both time and space, which could present interesting avenues for further research in this field. Perhaps the most obvious extension of this study would be to broaden the period of history which is under examination, stretching out to include the Roman Empire as well as the Republic. This would also allow for a comparative study to see whether all periods of Roman warfare are represented with the same degree of accuracy in video games, or if certain time periods are more accurately portrayed than others, and if so what reasons might there be to explain such a discrepancy.

Another potentially interesting avenue for future research would be an evaluation of how well the armed forces of the Ancient Greeks are represented in video games. This could be particularly interesting, given how different the Greek system of warfare was to that of the Romans, and the fact that the Greek states were never really properly united with one another in the way that Rome was with the rest of Italy, albeit a unity achieved largely through military force. Such a study could also open up another avenue of research in allowing for a comparison between the representation of Roman warfare with the representation of Greek warfare in video games, which might lead to some interesting conclusions as to how the two systems are viewed differently (or not as the case may be) in forms of representation which are intended to appeal to a wide audience.

These avenues for future research are, in my opinion, just the tip of the iceberg in the area of the representation of ancient warfare in modern video games, and I hope that this study, though necessarily constrained for reasons of time and space, has provided an initial stepping stone for further work on this important subject.

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