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Battling the Gods

An Interview with the Creators of "Apotheon" (2015): Jesse McGibney (Creative Director), Maciej Paprocki (Classical Scholar), Marios Aristopoulos (Composer) in: thersites 7 (2018), 11-29.

Introduction

In 2015, Alientrap Games, a small, independent game studio based in To-ronto, released the video game *Apotheon* for Windows/PC, Mac OS X, Linux, and PlayStation 4. *Apotheon* is a visually striking side-scrolling ac-tion-adventure game, in which the player takes on the role of an ancient Greek hero fighting against Olympian deities.[1] As Nikandreos, his mission is to wrest divine powers from the Gods, in the process becoming a deity himself. The game has received generally favourable reviews and holds an aggregated Metacritic score of 78/100.[2] Reviews have lauded the game for its 'old school' appeal, being a classic scrolling action title in a time that almost exclusively focuses on 3D action games in the *God of War* vein.[3] While reviews of the game were not universally favourable, with some crit-icising the game's inventory system and combat modes,[4] the distinctive graphics, inspired by Greek vase paintings, and soundtrack have garnered widespread applause, and reviewers praise the game's "stunning look and feel"[5], stating that playing *Apotheon* "is like being an archaeologist explor-ing and unearthing the mysteries of an unknown world. [...] Like the ochre-stained walls of an Athenian temple circa 500 BC, *Apotheon*'s characters are little more than black silhouettes."[6]

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[1] http://www.alientrap.com/presskit/sheet.php?p=apotheon (accessed 18.09.2018).

[2] https://www.metacritic.com/game/pc/apotheon (accessed 18.09.2018).

[3] The *God of War* game series is for the most part also set in a Greek mytho-logical context and consists of 8 games across a variety of platforms, from the original *God of War* in 2005 (SCE Santa Monica Studio / Sony Computer En-tertainment, Playstation 2/3/Vita) to the latest entry, confusingly also titled simply *God of War*, released in 2018 (SIE Santa Monica Studio / Sony Inter-active Entertainment, Playstation 4).

[4] Lee, Patrick „Apotheon's clunky action ruins a pleasant journey through Greek myth." AV Games, 2015: https://games.avclub.com/apotheon-s-clunky-action-ruins-a-pleasant-journey-throu-1798276649; Carlson, A. "Re-view: Apotheon." Hardcore Gamer, 2015: https://www.hard-coregamer.com/2015/02/05/review-apotheon/133336/ (accessed 18.09.2018).

[5] Sullivan, M. "Apotheon Review." IGN, 2015: https://www.ign.com/arti-cles/2015/02/05/apotheon-review (accessed 18.09.2018).

[6] Starkey, D. "What's a god to a non-believer?" Gamespot, 2015: https://www.gamespot.com/reviews/apotheon-review/1900-6416025 (ac-cessed 18.09.2018).

Apotheon's striking individuality in visuals and narrative is the result of a close collaboration between the studio and independent agents. Alientrap Games creative director **Jesse McGibney** graduated with a Bachelor's degree in Applied Arts in Illustration from Sheridan College, Toronto, and, according to himself, has been making art "since he could hold a pencil". He has also been involved in the making of video games in one way or another since he was a teenager. In 2009, he co-founded the studio with his business partner and lead programmer, Lee Vermeulen. Alientrap Games has since released several successful video games on diverse platforms (PC, Playstation, XBOX, virtual reality), but is now perhaps best known for *Apotheon.* As creative director, McGibney was directly responsible for the title's unique visual style.

Reviewers have also lauded the equally distinct soundtrack created by Greek multimedia composer, sound designer and professor of electronic music at the Guildhall School of Music & Drama **Marios Aristopoulos**, who, according to one reviewer, managed to capture "both the ear and the game's unique qualities without succumbing to the usual tropes."[7] The soundtrack was featured in a number of 'Best Video Game Soundtracks of 2015' lists and has received widespread acclaim.[8] Aristopoulos' work on *Apotheon* also provided the basis for his own doctoral thesis submitted to the Department of Music at City, University of London.[9]

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[7]   Amin, Tayyab et al. "The 15 Best Video Game Soundtracks of 2015." *FACT*. N.p., 2015. Web. 17 Dec. 2016: http://www.factmag.com/2015/12/13/best-videogame-soundtracks/11/ (accessed 18.09.2018).

[8]   Banas, Graham. "Feature: The Best Playstation Soundtracks of 2015." *Push Square* 2016: http://www.pushsquare.com/news/2015/12/feature_the_best_playstation_soundtracks_of_2015 (accessed 18.09.2018); "Top 10 Indie Video Game Soundtracks Of 2015" *Indie Game Reviewer* 2016: http://indiegamereviewer.com/top-10-indie-game-soundtracks-of-2015/ (accessed 18.09.2018); "The 15 Best Videogame Soundtracks Of 2015." *Paste Magazine* 2016: https://www.pastemagazine.com/articles/2015/12/the-15-best-videogame-soundtracks-of-2015.html?a=1 (accessed 18.09.2018).

[9]   Aristopoulous, M., A portfolio of recombinant compositions for the videogame Apotheon, PhD thesis, City, University of London, 2017; available online under http://openaccess.city.ac.uk/19298. For more information on Aristopoulos' work, which includes other videogame soundtracks as well as more 'traditional' composings, see www.marios-aristopoulos.com.

Others have appreciated the vast amount of learning and information available within the game itself: "There are numerous stone steles sprinkled throughout the immortal realm of Olympus, with enjoyable quotes from ancient writers explaining the character and purpose of each Olympian."[10] As historical and mythological consultant for the *Apotheon* project, **Maciej Paprocki**, a postdoctoral fellow in the Distant Worlds Graduate School (Münchner Zentrum für Antike Welten) at the Ludwig-Maximilians-Universität in Munich and co-ordinator of the junior research group "Organisation of memory and forgetting", has provided the necessary expertise from the point of view of a classicist and was influential in crafting the game's unusual (from the point of view of both Gamers and Classicists) storyline.

All three of them have agreed to provide answers to a written questionnaire and thus to furnish readers with a behind-the-scenes look at the creation of *Apotheon*. Their answers have been slightly edited for language and clarity.

Fig. 1: Nikandreos (centre, with shield) battling a Cyclops (r.) with a statue of Zeus (l.) in the background

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[10]   Sullivan, M. "Apotheon Review." IGN, 2015: https://www.ign.com/articles/2015/02/05/apotheon-review (accessed 18.09.2018).

Interview

[thr] Could you tell us in a few sentences what *Apotheon* is about, what the name means, what the storyline is and what makes it such a unique gaming experience?

Maciej Paprocki (MP): In the words of GILLES ROY, "[i]f I had to explain 'Apotheon' to someone who doesn't play video games, I'd say this: 'imagine the figures of ancient Greek vase art, come to life...'".[11] *Apotheon* is a 2D hack-and-slash game with platformer elements. The game's art style mimics the black-figure art style that is most commonly related to Greek pottery.

Jesse McGibney (JM): [As a game,] *Apotheon* is [...] set in ancient Greek mythology and uses classical black figure artwork as an inspiration for its aesthetic design. While many video games take loose inspiration from Greek mythology, *Apotheon* is unique in that it attempts to retain a stronger connection to its source material, in setting, story, and art style. In *Apotheon*, the player takes the role of the hero 'Nikandreos' and attempts to ascend Mount Olympus, confront the gods of the Greek pantheon, and ultimately stop them from abandoning the earth to a dark fate. Nikandreos takes the powers of the gods to save humanity and becomes a god himself, which is why we chose the name *Apotheon* in reference to the Greek word *apotheosis*, "to ascend to divinity".

MP: A rare word, the game's title denotes one who is exalted or elevated to a state of godhood, a transcended person. As the very name of the game suggests, your task is to ascend to godhood by defeating Greek gods. The game is set after the prophesied end of the final age of humanity, when Zeus decrees the final separation between deities and mortals so that the current generation may die out. The Olympian gods remove their divine faculties from the earth: as a result, the civilization collapses as forests and oceans become barren, springs and rivers run dry and crops fail under the sunless sky. The game story follows Nikandreos, a young Greek warrior from Dion in Macedonia. Hera, seizing her last chance to exact revenge on Zeus for his marital infidelity, decides to topple Zeus by a mortal proxy and manip-

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[11]   Roy, G., 'Apotheon: The Action Hero at the Heart of the Greek Myth', *Play the Past*, 18.02.2015, http://www.playthepast.org/?p=5104 (accessed 18.09.2018).

ulates Nikandreos into fighting gods, ostensibly so he may win iconic attributes of office from gods, absorb shares of power (Greek: *timai*) held within, and restore the dying nature. Raised to Olympus, Nikandreos wrestles or wins attributes of Apollo, Artemis, Demeter, Ares, Poseidon, and Athena. Furthermore, the player may decide to guide him to collect the items of four remaining Olympian gods (that is, Aphrodite's girdle, Dionysos' *kantharos* cup, Hermes' sandals, and Hephaistos' hammer). During his quest, Nikandreos learns that Zeus's edict has deeply divided the divine society, with many deities (including Helios, Thetis, Persephone, and Daphne) clandestinely opposing Zeus' decree. At the beginning of the third act, Nikandreos learns that his efforts were largely in vain, with humans perishing from hands of gods before he could save them. Ever shadowing his footsteps, Hera directs Nikandreos' anger against Zeus. She immortalizes and imbues the hero with her own power so that he may become powerful enough to challenge the king of the gods. Left weakened, Hera is soon imprisoned by Zeus, who has uncovered her treasonous plotting. The game's narrative ends with a deicidal coup d'état: the hero challenges Zeus for his thunderbolt, defeats him in a heated battle and uses his powers to recreate humanity. Praised by critics, *Apotheon* delivers a unique combination of story and style: its art, music, writing and narrative all reinforce one another and create a captivating sense of verisimilitude that lures players into the colorful world of Greek myths.

[thr] How did you develop this idea? How did you get to know each other and what was the motivation to bring Maciej on board as consultant?

JM: *Apotheon* was actually conceived as a much different game. It was originally set in a science fiction universe, with our own invented mythology roughly inspired by Greek stories – basically Mount Olympus in space. As more ideas were developed, we realized that the actual myths were far more interesting than anything we were coming up with and pivoted to setting the game in ancient Greece. The choice to style the artwork after Greek pottery actually came fairly late. Once we knew we were doing a game about ancient Greek myths, it seemed obvious to use the artwork that was most closely associated with those stories.

MP: I first heard about *Apotheon* in 2012 and I was absolutely amazed by the art style and the outline of the story. I'm a scholar researching ancient Greek myths: fascinated by these narratives, I often wondered about the fragile balance of power between the gods and what would happen if it was somehow disturbed. The game seemed to explore the very same ideas and I couldn't help but be thrilled at the prospect of playing it.

JM: As development continued, I was doing a lot of research to learn as much as I could about both the art style and the myths surrounding them, but it became quickly clear that I was never going to do the source material justice on my own.

MP: In April 2013, I wrote the designer team (Jesse McGibney and Lee Vermeulen), praising their idea and asking whether they would like to get any feedback about the story. A couple of days later, Jesse wrote back. He found it awesome to hear such enthusiasm for what they were trying to do and offered to bring me onboard. My task was to ensure that *Apotheon* stayed as true to the Greek myth as possible and consult the game narrative. In time, I was also given a chance to co-design some characters and co-write certain dialogues.

JM: Maciej had contacted us with an interest in helping out with the project, and we could instantly see where his academic strength and knowledge could benefit us as a consultant. We needed someone who could provide us with accurate information about characters, storylines, locations and themes to flesh out the game world and give *Apotheon* a real sense of authenticity and respect to its inspirations.

[thr] *There is a plethora of crucial and well-known characters in Greek myth. Why did you chose to create a new one? Why name him „Nikandreos"?*

JM: As *Apotheon* wasn't an adaptation of a particular Greek myth, but our own story set in Greek mythology, we felt we also needed to create our own protagonist. Pre-existing Greek heroes already have their own stories, and those weren't the story that we were trying to tell. The player character Nikandreos isn't really a character in his own right, but more of a player cipher. A blank slate for the player to place themselves. He never talks, and his actions are simply the player's actions. This allows the player to step

into the game world without needing any pre-existing knowledge on who Nikandreos is. Nikandreos is the player.

Fig. 2: Nikandreos (r.) fighting the cyclops Brontes; screenshot from the official *Apotheon* trailer

MP: One of our key objectives from the start was to stay as faithful to the Greek myths as possible. When I began working for *Alientrap Games*, Jesse McGibney proposed that, for the sake of intrigue and greater artistic freedom, *Apotheon*'s story should unfold in a hypothetical post-apocalyptic and post-mythological timeframe, long after the Trojan war. In other words, *Apotheon*'s story would be a sequel to surviving narratives within Greek myth. This post-mythological setting gave us more leeway in terms of narrative development: it remains an unexplored period within the Greek mythic history, a relatively empty canvas onto which we could paint our vision of what happened next. Hence the decision to create our own character, Nikandreos: through his eyes players can experience the storyworld as simultaneously old and new, familiar and wondrous. The majority of players have had some exposure to Greek myth and know something about Greek gods, but at the same time they often remain unaware of the finer details: Nikandreos could grow and learn with them, as they meet the gods and learn about their pasts and motivations. Were we to choose a well-known character from Greek myth, we would be limited by their biography, solely filling in the gaps left by previous creators. As for Nikandreos' name,

Jesse chose a name that would reflect the hero's ultimate destiny: the victory of the man and the twilight of the gods. In standard Ancient Greek, Nikandros denotes "victory of a man", from the Greek elements νίκη (*nike*) "victory" and ἀνήρ (*aner*) "man" (genitive ἀνδρός, *andros*). I never asked him why he included the extra 'e'; I like to think that it made the character unique, in line with his destiny.

JM: We chose the name [because] it seemed to fit with both the narrative of humanity triumphing over the gods, and the faceless nature of the character himself.

[thr] What about female players, though? Was there any conscious thought process about including/excluding female avatars, as, for instance, in the newly-released *Assassin's Creed: Odyssey*?

JM: In the early stages of development, we thought about] including a player choice between male and female protagonists. We opted to focus on just the male character mostly due to writing and voice-recording limitations. Many characters refer to Nikandreos by his pronouns, and we deemed it beyond our scope to write and record dialogue variants for the game's large cast. In retrospect, I wish we'd tried harder to find a solution to that obstacle as I think it would have made for a better game overall.

MP: Since the game is very strongly influenced by the divine succession myth, we focused on father-son relationships within the myth, with Nikandreos as stand-in for Zeus' son and his eventual successor. However, it was very important to me to include female voices; in-game, you get to hear several goddesses' perspectives on unfolding events, with many of them angry at Zeus for his past transgressions. We included Demeter's sadness at being robbed of her daughter, Hera's anger, Daphne's disgust at Apollo's raping ways, Athena's calm acceptance of the twilight of the gods... All these stories resound within the narrative.

[thr] Why did you settle on Greek mythology (as opposed to, e.g., Egyptian)?

MP: I do not know what Lee and Jesse's original motivation was, but I am very happy they chose to engage with Greek mythology! I am a lover of all myths and legends, but I firmly believe that the Greek myths distinguish themselves through their richness and interconnectedness: almost every character, be it god or mortal, features in at least several works that reveal

his or her strengths, limitations, fears and wants. The depth and breadth of the material translates into captivating psychological verisimilitude: just pit one mythological character against another and watch sparks fly.

JM: Greek mythology has a particular connection with the western world, and its influences have permeated more of our culture than arguably any other. Books, movies and many other video games have drawn inspiration from the vast library of Greek myths, either directly or indirectly. Additionally, most people in the west are at least passingly familiar with the stories and characters. It was this connection that resonated with us and led us to settle on Greek mythology. Despite its influences, it's still quite rare to find modern media trying to emulate the myths or art style so closely, and we saw a niche where our small team could make something unique in the gaming world.

[thr] Are you following classical models in telling your story? Or using academic theories as to the composition of Greek epics and mythology?

MP: I'd say both were equally important. Jesse and Lee started with very intuitive understanding of Greek myth. Having read much introductory material, they had already been well versed in the basics of Greek culture, with Jesse paying particular attention to Greek pottery painting in order to adapt it for the game's art style. In terms of story, we started with a glimmer of an idea: Jesse suggested that we could elaborate upon the myth of the five generations of man, which is outlined in Hesiod's *Works and Days* (110-201). According to Hesiod, humanity has passed through five stages of development (golden, silver, bronze, heroic and iron generation), becoming crueller and unrulier as the epochs went by. Hesiod prophesied that at the height of the Iron generation, humans will no longer feel shame or indignation at wrongdoing; babies will be born with grey hair and the gods will have completely forsaken humanity. This sounded like a perfect apocalyptic moment to begin spinning our yarn—and so we did.

JM: Storytelling in video games has always been a little tricky in comparison to more traditional media. Early in development we definitely researched academic approaches such as Campbell's Hero's Journey[12] and

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[12]   Campbell, J., The Hero with a Thousand Faces, Princeton 1949.

other breakdowns of mythological stories to see if we could apply their lessons. But because of player agency in video games, it's often very difficult to use classical storytelling structures that follow a linear path. In *Apotheon*, the player has free reign to travel around Mount Olympus, interacting with different characters and progressing through the story in whatever direction they feel like. There are sections of the game where we can bottleneck the player into set events to deliver important narrative beats, but on a whole the story has to be allowed to play out in a nonlinear fashion. We based most of our story structuring on other contemporary examples in the game industry, as they were more helpful to solve the specifics problems associated with the medium.

MP: I provided the academic component: Jesse wrote me asking for input about planned areas, quests or characters and I tried my best to embed them within the Greek mythic storyworld. It was very important to me to have an explanation for everything that happens in-game, even if the players won't know about it: in this manner I could ensure the game world had internal consistency and did not challenge any of the core values of Greek myth. One example is that the game stresses the notion of Nikandreos having to collect *timai* of all Olympians before attacking Zeus; in its essence, this narrative choice alludes to a passage from the *Iliad* (8.18-32) in which Zeus brags that even if all Olympians were to simultaneously pit their not inconsiderable powers against him, they would not subdue him. Athena cowers in response and asserts that Zeus' might is "unyielding", *ouk epieikton* (8.32), while conniving Hera pointedly notes that it is merely 'not easily mastered", *ouk alapadnon* (8.463): Hera's barbed remark is the spark that sets the story of *Apotheon* in motion.

[thr] What is the (ancient) basis for the distinctive look of Apotheon?

JM: Apotheon's aesthetic design is inspired by early black figure pottery art, and its striking use of geometric patterns, contrasting colours, and stylized dark figures on a light background. Early in development, we were also researching the later red figure art style (inverted light figures on a dark background) but deemed it too difficult for players to parse what was happening on screen. The decision to use classical pottery art in a game seemed like an obvious choice in retrospect. Many 2D games are about characters moving through a flat environment, jumping, running, and fighting with other characters. The flat art style of Greek pottery transitions into this type

of gameplay perfectly. It's easy to imagine the characters on a Greek amphora coming to life and doing battle. As with the narrative elements of *Apotheon*, we also had to make some artistic compromises to better the gameplay. Where Greek pottery is almost universally black and terracotta coloured, we opted to splash in a few more colour palettes for diversity as well as add some spot colours to characters or items to help draw the player's eye to important points. Greek pottery also focuses primarily on characters, and rarely depicts environments or locations (aside from maybe the occasional tree or column). To create the locations of *Apotheon*, I had to pull in a lot of reference material from other sources and take some artistic liberties to make the backgrounds fit within the style of the game.

[thr] What do you think would be an ancient pottery painter's or artist's reaction to what you do to/with their work? How important is 'authenticity' in your adaptation of both classical mythology and classical art?

MP: I have—and I think they'd be part intrigued, part amused! It is crucial to stress that there was no central religious or poetic authority that ensured new myth versions fit well with older ones. Simply put, Greek mythology did not know the concept of 'canon' as we understand it: some tales were more popular and other ones less so, but all belonged to the broad narrative world. In fact, we know that ancient writers were fairly flexible in their approach to myth: they gleefully appropriated, collated and adjusted previous version to their needs. Different authors prioritized different characters and motifs and, eventually, introduced elements that may contradict the already established continuity. Far from undermining the myth's integrity, this polyphony can actually enhance the myth's allure and verisimilitude, provided the creators ensure that novel elements do not violate the laws of mythical reality. In that respect, story worlds resemble fanfiction: fan-created works can accommodate unorthodox ideas and narratives, as long as its canon/fanon (the set of core values the fan community has tacitly agreed upon) is respected. This flexibility is often underemphasised in modern works: we see the 'source material' as canonical and everything that deviates from it is seen as suspect. It definitely was not so in antiquity.
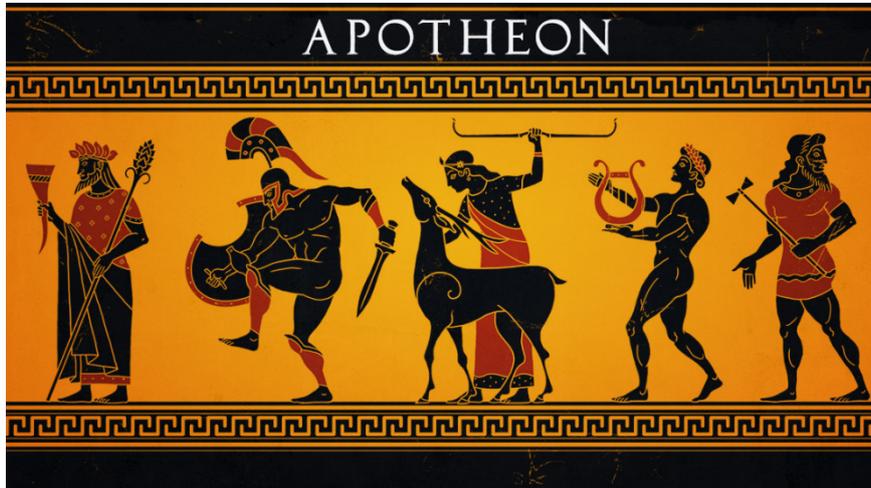
Fig. 3: *Apotheon* cover art, from the official game press kit

JM: It's my understanding that Greek pottery art was commonplace and widespread in the ancient world, enjoyed by everyone and created by many artists of all skill levels. In effect it was ancient pop art, depicting the popular characters and stories of the time. I'd like to think that *Apotheon* is a continuation of that mentality. The familiar myths of Greek mythology have certainly influenced my life and I hope that I've been able to share those influences with other people through the accessible medium of video games. Accurate representation was always an important aspect of *Apotheon's* development. Wherever possible, we tried to contextualize every character, location, and item to Greek mythology or history. I didn't want to fabricate entirely new content just to fill out the game, and this is where Maciej was especially useful in providing suggestions and guidance. The overall narrative of *Apotheon* isn't specifically based on any one Greek story, but tries to take a wider look at the entire mythology, bringing together recognizable elements from many sources. The themes of *Apotheon*'s story were inspired by recurring themes found in the source material: the strained relationships between humans and gods, humanity trying to take control of its own destiny, either through hubris or divine assistance. However, I wouldn't call any of the narratives in *Apotheon* 'adaptations', as that was never the goal. They're more like cameos or allusions that help support the gameplay and

its main storyline. As much as authenticity was important to us, many compromises had to be made in favour of game design, budget, or time. I won't pretend that *Apotheon* is an accurate representation of actual Greek mythology, because at the end of the day it's really just a video game about poking people with spears.

[thr] Tell us about the music of *Apotheon*.[13] What influences are at play here?

JM: It was important for us that *Apotheon*'s music fit the tone and setting of the source material as much as possible. We contacted Marios Aristopoulos, a Greek native based in London to create the excellent soundtrack using period appropriate instrumentals. He even went so far as to travel to Greece to work with a choir for more authentic vocals. We were very happy with how the musical score came together, and it was certainly one of the selling points of the game.

Marios Aristopoulos: My intention with the soundtrack of *Apotheon* was to compose music that was inspired by the musical theory information that exists from the Classical and Hellenistic periods of Greece but without attempting to recreate fully historically accurate compositions. Using a musical language that is over 2500 years old with alternate tunings performed on reconstructed replica instruments could conceivably fail to communicate the intended emotional meaning to a contemporary gaming audience that is used to a musical vocabulary based on epic Hollywood movies. However, there are many elements from ancient Greek music that have deeply influenced the music of the game. Ancient Greek music was fundamentally vocal, a fact that is mirrored in the soundtrack with various choral and soloist combinations singing either vocalizations or Ancient Greek text written by myself. According to the work of M.L. West, ancient Greek music often

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[13]   The soundtrack of Apotheon consists of 14 linear and 15 recombinant compositions with a total running time of approximately 90 minutes. Detailed information about each piece, the development of the recombinant engine, as well as extracts of the notated score can be found in Aristopoulos' PhD thesis (see above, n.9). The entire soundtrack is available for free on YouTube: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tPUImyNf64w&list=PLUlxGSeIx8osPzR4J_j8jSueqbGRsQh9M (accessed 18.09.2018).

featured complex and varied use of irregular meter, a component that is explored extensively in the soundtrack with frequent time signatures of 5/8 and 7/8. The themes are loosely based on concepts from the highly complex treatise *On Harmonics* of the ancient Greek theoretician Aristoxenus. The melodies frequently use stepwise motion with chromaticism and various non-diatonic scales (half step whole step octatonic scale, double harmonic scale, and dominant Phrygian mode).

Apart from ancient Greek influences, the soundtrack was also inspired by a large number of former games and films that incorporated themes from antiquity. Some of them include the vocals of Lisa Gerard on the film *Gladiator*, Jeff van Dyck's use of duduk and ethereal vocals on *Rome: Total War*, and Knut Aventroup's masterful orchestrations in *Age of Conan: Hyborian Adventures*.

One of the most unique features of the soundtrack was the creation of a custom-made recombinant music engine in collaboration with the programmer Lee Vermeulen that generates different variations of the soundtrack every time the game is played. This was developed in order to avoid the continuous linear looping and extensive repetition that is often found in game music and replace it with unique musical variations in key areas of the game in which players might spend large amounts of time (e.g., The Village of Dion). The music in these areas is dynamically recombined both horizontally and vertically using weighted probabilities that are altered according to the development of the narrative and the actions of the player. This idea was inspired by the aleatoric techniques found in 18th century musical dice games allegedly created by Mozart. Similar experiments can be found in early video games such as *Ballblazer*, *Times of Lore* and *Legend of Zelda: Ocarina of Time* but the concept has been taken much further with *Apotheon*.

[thr] *What reactions to „Apotheon" have you encountered, both from within the gaming and academic communities?*

JM: *Apotheon* received very positive reactions from the gaming community, receiving high critical reviews from players and journalists. We launched simultaneously on both PC's Steam platform, and Playstation 4, where it was available for free to Playstation Plus subscribers for its first month. This gave the game a much wider distribution than we might have

had otherwise and increased overall sales across all platforms. Many reviewers praised the game's unique art and music styles and faithful depiction of Greek mythology. We have also received interest from the academic world, museums and educational magazines keen on hearing our perspective as game developers and the story behind making *Apotheon*. I know that Maciej has had far more interaction with academia and how it relates to *Apotheon*, so I'm sure he can shed more light on this than I can.

MP: I've experienced a gamut of reactions, the majority of them very encouraging. Players enjoyed the game as a whole, thanks to positive early reactions from Youtube's Let's Play community. We had some feedback from myth fans who were very happy to play a game so deeply steeped in Greek mythology; however, most players apparently had little to no exposure to Greek lore beyond their school years. What drew them in was the vase-based graphic style: the appreciation of the mythological backstory was a by-product, but a very welcome one. From what I've seen, Classics scholars enjoyed *Apotheon* as well and praised the game's immersion in the Greek mythic storyworld; however, few of them had heard about the game and the majority had to be specifically told about it. It seems to me that *Apotheon* is a sleeper hit within the academic community: only now, more than three years after it was published, academics start to discover its existence. Interestingly, some players found certain elements in the game controversial: for example, the need to kill the Greek gods in *Apotheon* went against the audience's preconceptions about Greek mythology. Some players expressed their bewilderment on Steam forums and wrote posts asking how in-game deicide is possible. Others took a more personal approach: during a conference in London, I met a member of a neo-pagan worship circle who bluntly told me that she and her fellow worshippers found in-game deicides sacrilegious and unnecessarily gory.

[thr] What would you answer to academics accusing you of commercialising ancient culture?

JM: I haven't heard of anyone accusing us of such a thing, but I think I would understand that position even though I disagree with it. Our work on *Apotheon* hasn't damaged or degraded any of the original source material (certainly not any more than the millennia of civilization that preceded us). Just because something is ancient doesn't mean it should be isolated from

society and exempt from new interpretations. I think we've brought attention to Greek mythology to people who might not otherwise have been exposed to it. I believe that's ultimately a good thing.

MP: I've never met an academic who would see the game this way, the reactions I've encountered so far range from enthusiasm to benevolent indifference. Should I hear such an accusation, I'd probably say that, from the very beginning of its existence, Greek myth has been adapted to new media and contexts to keep it alive: its enduring popularity testifies that it was a successful strategy. In fact, I believe that myths demand to be adapted: they live in our imaginations because they subtly shift from retelling to retelling to accommodate divergent perspectives, clashing voices, changing circumstances. Every scholar has a different reason for researching their favourite themes. For me, developing *Apotheon* was a wonderful opportunity to demonstrate, in the words of Liv Mariah Yarrow, how much "[t]hese texts, these images, these histories, these landscapes, [...] resonate with me!"[14] A revisionist commentary on Greek gods and their lives, our game constitutes a modern tribute to the Greek myth and its awesome ability to fire and stretch imaginations of both the ancients and the twenty-first century creators.

[thr] *Do you see any possibility of using Apotheon in a didactic context?*

JM: Related to the previous answer, I think *Apotheon* has educational merits in that it may expose people to Greek mythology in an accessible medium. While those people might not be as comfortable with a textbook or other academic sources, playing through a video game might lead to further learning. I'm not claiming that *Apotheon* itself should be viewed as an educational source, but more as a gateway to generate interest in the subject matter. From a personal perspective, I had a similar experience with my own passion for World War II history. In my youth I played a lot of video games focusing on WWII. Even though most of them were wildly inaccurate in their depiction of actual history, they prompted me to go out and do actual research on legitimate sources. This, in turn, made the games more interesting to me, as I could contextualize them better. I hope that someone

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[14]   Yarrow, L. M., 'Dear Neville', *Liv Mariah Yarrow: Adventures in my Head.* 19.05.2018, http://livyarrow.org/2018/05/19/dear-neville/ (accessed 18.09.2018).

who plays *Apotheon* has a similar reaction to the game and its relationship with mythology and art.

MP: I definitely would like to use *Apotheon* in a didactic context related to Greek myth and classical reception. After all, it deals with the manner in which early Greek poets and creators imagined their gods, a foundation topic for classicists, ancient historians and archaeologists. Focusing on *Apotheon* could allow one to teach a class with an innovative, problem-based approach: for instance, students could work as a team to inductively reverse-engineer why Greek gods function as three-dimensional and engaging narrative characters, learning about their powers, limitations, fears and wants. This highly practical and engaging perspective would foster the skills of abductive reasoning and give students a working understanding of the nature of myth-making itself. Other possibilities are analysing *Apotheon* as a multimedial transformative adaptation of other works: it could be useful when discussing concepts such as the nature of canon or the author-work relationship.

[thr] What's next?

JM: *Apotheon* was released February 3rd of 2015, and we've been hard at work since then. In 2017 we released a game called *Cryptark*, as well as continued development on our VR creation platform *Modbox*. Currently we are working on two new games: a 3D sequel to *Cryptark* entitled *Gunhead*, and a fairytale adventure game named *Wytchwood*. I'm acting as the director of *Wytchwood*, which is set in a fantasy world inspired by European folklore and artistically styled after animation films and children's picture books. I'm continuing to enjoy finding inspiration in different sources that I might not otherwise look at and sharing them in the games we make.

MP: I am currently writing a monograph on a family of gods I dubbed 'the Hyperionides'. Descendants of Titans Hyperion and Theia, the group includes such characters as Selene (the Moon), Eos (the Dawn), Helios (the Sun) and his children (witches: Kirke and Pasiphaë, kings: Aeëtes and Perses) and grandchildren (such as Medea, Ariadne and Phaedra). Fascinating offshoots of the early Greek mythical imagination, the Hyperionides balance precariously between the gods and mortals, becoming embroiled in exploits of Heracles, Jason, Theseus, Hippolytus and Odysseus. I'd love to work on a video game that involves these or other characters from Greek

mythology. In the meantime, I've just began working for a Polish game development studio (*Small Abandoned Pixel Studio*): I and my Egyptologist friend were hired to advise the developer on *Hard Ancient Life*, a spiritual successor to city-builder games like *Pharaoh* (1999) or *Immortal Cities: Children of the Nile* (2005).[15]

MA: I am currently working on developing a recombinant opera for the Alternative Stage of the Greek National Opera in Athens, music for the surrealist 3D animation film *Chromosomes*, and the development of a music based educational iOS game entitled *Revenge of the Blind Samurai: An Ear Training Adventure*.

[thr] Thank you.

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[15]   http://www.hardancientlife.com (accessed 28.10.2018).