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Mythological Comedy through Incongruity in *Immortals Fenyx Rising*: Humor and Playfulness in Antiquity Games

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Abstract

While academic research into the reception of classical antiquity in video games is between fifteen and twenty years old at this point, and despite the age-old dictum that games are meant to be entertaining, little attention has so far gone to elements of lightheartedness, playfulness, or humor in games with ancient settings. This article performs a qualitative game analysis of Greek mythology-inspired comedy in *Immortals Fenyx Rising* (Ubisoft Quebec, 2020). We concentrate on the game's depiction of the Greek gods, and, drawing on the incongruity theory of comedy, argue that the game elicits humor by offering unconventional characterizations of these characters that deconstruct and subvert the highbrow nature often ascribed to Classics, as well as by overtly criticizing the gods for their flaws and immoral deeds. Additionally, we trace articulations of mythology and comedy in ancient Greek literature, and recognize Lucian's *Dialogues of the Gods* (second century CE) as a text with similar textual structures, depictions of divine characters and attitudes towards the ancient myths. This article offers a first step towards identifying playful languages of comedy and levity in antiquity games, as well as towards uncovering different modalities of mythology reception across a wider corpus of games presenting Greco-Roman mythology.

Keywords: *Immortals Fenyx Rising*; comedy; mythology; Lucian; Dialogues of the Gods; incongruity; classical reception

Introduction

Scholarship on the "reception" of the ancient world -- i.e., how ancient civilizations have been "received" in subsequent time periods (Hardwick, 2003) -- in video games is between fifteen and twenty years old, and currently thriving: the 2020s have already seen the publication of two edited volumes (Rollinger, 2020; Draycott & Cook, 2022), and one monograph (Clare, 2021). So far, the field has focused on diverse issues ranging from the (audio)visual recreation of the past (e.g., André & Lécole-Solnychkine, 2013) to the simulation of history (e.g., Flegler, 2020), representations of demographic groups (e.g., Draycott & Cook, 2022), games and education (e.g., Reinhard, 2012), scholarly involvement in game production (e.g., Paprocki, 2020), game audiences (e.g., Hatlen, 2012) and more.

While comparatively much attention has -- rightly -- gone to elements of violence or brutality in such games (e.g., Chidwick, 2022; Serrano Lozano, 2020), their more lighthearted or amusing aspects have largely been left unexplored in these investigations. The entertainment of experiencing the ancient world via games was identified early on in these studies: Gardner (2007), for instance, remarked that "[a]ll the games discussed in [his] paper are a great deal of fun to play" (p. 270). However, despite certain exceptions -- such as research on historical games and education (e.g., McCall, 2023) or empirical studies into hedonic and eudaimonic experiences of

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games set in antiquity (e.g., Bowman et al., 2024; Daneels et al., 2021; Vandewalle et al., 2023) -- the interest in this topic has somewhat eroded as the field evolved. A similar situation exists in archaeology, where aspects of fun are understudied as well (Politopoulos et al., 2023).

In this article, we want to explore the lighter side of these antiquity games -- i.e., games set in any historical ancient civilization, or a "mythic story world" (Johnston, 2018) based on stories from these cultures -- as we consider this to be an important element of classical reception in the medium. To do so, we perform a case study analysis of one particular game, *Immortals Fenyx Rising* (Ubisoft Quebec, 2020; '*IFR*' hereafter), with regard to its elements of comedy and humor. Our focus lies with how the game depicts or characterizes the Greek gods in humorous ways, and how such portrayals can be compared to ancient comedic treatments. Our broader goal with this singular study is to uncover so far relatively undiscussed languages of comedy or humor in antiquity games, which constitutes a distinct mode of engagement with the past alongside other, more serious or dramatic attitudes. Our exploration of comedy and mythology in *IFR* not only introduces new discussions to the study of classical reception in games, but also elucidates how contemporary receptions of antiquity can operate through mechanisms and processes analogous to those at work in the ancient texts themselves. This analysis demonstrates the continuity of interpretative strategies, highlighting the enduring relevance of classical narrative structures in modern media.

First, we describe the theoretical frameworks of our analysis, focusing on games and comedy, as well as on traditions of humor in mythological writing in Greco-Roman antiquity. We employ the term "(Greco-Roman) mythology" as it is generally used in classical reception studies, referring to the collective (yet occasionally contradictory) body of stories -- often featuring supernatural characters such as gods, heroes, and monsters -- told and retold in ancient Greece and Rome and left to us in textual, material, and oral evidence. Subsequently, we examine *IFR*'s striking similarities with ancient comedic myth retellings, and specifically establish the *Dialogues of the Gods* (henceforth "*Dialogues*") by Lucian of Samosata from the second century CE as a text with similar structures, depictions of divine characters, and attitudes towards the ancient myths. This pairing, we argue, offers a comparable experience of mythology via convergence (and not by direct allusion or inspiration), commenting on the processes of reception and reassembly of classical motifs. Finally, our discussion provides a first step towards identifying humor more broadly in antiquity games, and uncovering different modalities of mythology reception across a wider corpus of mythological video games.

Comedy and Video Games

Following Hookham & Meany (2015), we consider "humor" as a quality or capacity of a certain situation to elicit laughter (or amusement, since "not all humor leads to actual laughter"; Dormann & Biddle, 2009, p. 806). We conceptualize "comedy" as a designed situation or frame in which humor is offered, such as "stand-up comedy," "ancient comedy," and so on. In the context of *IFR*, we can say that this game is a *comedic* text, containing *humor*, which may, but does not necessarily have to, result in laughter or amusement when experienced by an audience.

Academia has broadly distinguished three main theories of humor (Bonello Rutter Giappone et al., 2022; Dormann & Biddle, 2009; Dormann & Boutet, 2013; Dormann, 2014; Grönroos, 2013; Hookham & Meany, 2015; Meyer, 2000; Morreall, 2009; Palmer, 1994; Smuts, n.d.). The *relief theory* conceptualizes laughter or humor as a response to tense situations, involving a release of built-up energy (e.g., through "comic relief" characters; Dormann, 2014, p. 82). The *superiority theory* revolves around laughing with (the misfortunes of) others from a position perceived superior to the one laughed at. Final, and most important for our purposes, is the *incongruity theory*, which claims that humor depends on articulations perceived as incompatible,

unexpected situations, or deviations from what is considered normal or usual. Morreall (2009) notes how incongruity "violates our normal mental patterns and normal expectations" (p. 11), with Van de Mosselaer (2022) further emphasizing the "unexpectedness and suddenness" of such "comic contradiction[s]" (p. 36). The incongruity theory also encompasses puns or verbal gags (Dormann & Biddle, 2009; Dormann, 2014), whose humor can be explained through their employment of words in unexpected ways. There is a long tradition of thinkers conceptualizing humor through incongruity, including Aristotle's *Rhetoric*, Immanuel Kant, or Søren Kierkegaard (Morreall, 2009; Palmer, 1994; Van de Mosselaer, 2022). While incongruity theory has not gone uncriticized (e.g., Kulka, 2007; Latta, 1999; Smuts n.d.), it remains a useful concept to explain humor: Morreall (2009) notes that incongruity still proves the "most dominant theory of humor in philosophy and psychology" (p. 10).

Game studies has also studied comedy in games, and how it is realized in ways specific to the medium. With early work by Claire Dormann, one of the most prolific authors on the subject (Grönroos, 2013), and especially since the publication of *Video Games and Comedy* by Bonello Rutter Giappone et al. (2022), the field can now build on solid theoretical foundations for further studies on humor in games. If anything like a "genre" of comedy games could be said to exist (Kallio & Masoodian, 2018), it might refer more generally to games that engage in the "[s]ubversion of game design conventions," which "is a common way of surprising players and creating incongruity" (Bonello Rutter Giappone et al., 2022, p. 18). Indeed, even a cursory glance at games with the "Comedy" tag on Steam reveals that many are games with deliberately clunky mechanics such as difficult or unpredictable movement and physics (e.g., *Goat Simulator*; Coffee Stain Studios, 2014), games with non-realist aesthetics (e.g., *Plants vs. Zombies*; PopCap Games, 2009), or games that allow players to behave comically with others (e.g., *Quiplash*; Jackbox Games, 2015). This list is not intended as a conclusive definition of "comedy games," but mainly as an indication of seemingly common elements (see Bonello Rutter Giappone et al., 2022; Dormann, 2014; Kallio & Masoodian, 2018).

The three theories of humor have also been applied to games, most extensively by Dormann & Biddle (2009). Other typologies have also been proposed, such as Cook's (2012) division between "humor-through-storytelling" (humor inscribed into the narrative by the developer), "humor-through-mechanics" (where players make humor themselves using the game rules comically), or "unintentional comedy" (e.g., game glitches eliciting laughter due to their unexpected breaking of the game state). Similarly, Dormann (2014, pp. 83-84) distinguishes between "game-to-player" comedy (scripted humor written by designers), "player-to-player" humor (players spontaneously creating humor together), and "player-to-game" humor (humor emerging through gameplay). While we recognize that games offer fruitful environments to discuss not only the authorial communication of humor, but also the playful enactment of it, our article will focus mainly on Cook's (2012) "humor-through-storytelling," or Dormann's (2014) "game-to-player" comedy, which Grönroos (2013) argues is most common in the adventure genre format, which our case study adopts. We describe additional approaches for the study of *IFR*'s humor below.

Comedy and Mythology

In relation to *IFR*'s comedic engagement with Greek mythology, it is important to note that the earliest surviving works of ancient Greek literature already depicted gods and heroes as flawed characters (at times, august and noble, at times, despicable and preposterous) in potentially humoristic contexts, with such irreverent portrayals already criticized by Xenophanes of Colophon (ca. 570-ca. 478 BCE; Lesher, 2001). Ancient Greek divinities, depicted as simultaneously sublime and scheming, engage in amorous entanglements, domestic quarrels, and familial competitions (Branham, 1989; Konstantakos, 2014b). Homer -- or at least the archaic community of storytellers whose protean oral compositions were eventually written down in a single form and attributed to "Homer" -- skillfully employs Greek deities to

generate comedic moments in both the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* (ca. eighth century BCE). Ever attempting to upstage one another, Homeric gods easily dissolve into peals of laughter, with "over twenty references to divine laughter/similes in Homer (alongside more than a dozen references in the *Homeric Hymns* and two in Hesiod)" (Halliwell, 2017, p. 39). Divine mirth arises equally from general merriment and spite. In the *Iliad*, the gods guffaw at Hephaestus's ungainly attempt at serving nectar (1.595-600), a scene that recognizes the "choreographed incongruity in the protocols of divine feasting" (Halliwell, 2017, p. 43). In the *Odyssey*, the Olympians bellow with laughter when ogling Ares and Aphrodite (*Odyssey* 8.321-342), caught and immobilized in Hephaestus's invisible netting during their extramarital tryst (Brown, 1989; Konstantakos, 2014b). The onlookers marvel how the disabled blacksmith god unbelievably constrained Ares, one of the swiftest deities. Incongruity also lies at the heart of the *Homeric Hymn to Hermes*, with much of the hymn's humor coming from Hermes, who, despite being a newborn, manages to steal his brother Apollo's cattle and earn his place in Olympus while exhibiting impertinent childish behavior (Capra & Nobili, 2019; Clay, 2006; Konstantakos, 2014b).

The gods and their humorous misdeeds remained popular in Greek literature beyond the Homeric corpus, with examples in prose, lyric, and drama. Amusing depictions of Greek deities appear in Aesopic fables (frequently featuring Zeus, Hermes and Prometheus), epigrams (Kanellou, 2019), and iambic poetry, known for its crass language and themes (Boedeker, 2016; Capra & Nobili, 2019). However, the genre that most frequently embroiled ancient Greek deities in humorous exploits is Athenian comedy, traditionally subdivided into Old (fifth century BCE), Middle (ca. 400-340 BCE), and New Comedy (323-ca. 260 BCE). Old Comedy, with Aristophanes as its best-known playwright, took the gods out of their familiar, timeless environments found in epic, lyric, and tragic poetry, and instead placed them within newly constructed narratives, shaped by contemporary aspirations and concerns of the typical fifth-century Athenian citizens who served as its main characters (Branham, 1989). In turn, Middle Comedy departed from the contemporary and political themes that characterized Old Comedy; instead, its focus shifted towards "mythological burlesque" or "travesty" (Konstantakos, 2014b, p. 161), with plays employing stock characters to parody various myths -- often especially derisive of Zeus -- excerpted from epic and tragic works, in particular those that already included humorous themes (Nesselrath, 1990; 1995). Mythological drama declined after Middle Comedy (Konstantakos, 2014b; Nesselrath, 1990), as New Comedy -- epitomized in the work of Menander -- focused more on replaying quotidian scenes through the continued use of stock characters: lechers, braggarts, pining lovers and clever slaves.

Several centuries later, Lucian of Samosata (ca. 125--after 180 CE), a prolific and wildly popular satirist and rhetorician, gave renewed impetus to mythological humor in ancient Greek literature by penning a number of satirical dialogues that mercilessly mocked conventional tales about the deities (Marsh, 1998), including works such as *Dialogues of the Gods*, *Zeus Catechized*, *Zeus Rants*, or *The Parliament of the Gods*. Writing in the second century CE, Lucian drew wholeheartedly from the Greek literary tradition, crafting collections of parodistic mythological vignettes that depicted the gods as laughably feeble and absurdly susceptible to all frailties of human emotions (Branham, 1989; Maciver, 2017; MacLeod, 1961; Strolonga, 2016). A skilled imitator, Lucian aligns his satires with the mythological burlesque of Middle Comedy, recasting mythic archetypes of gods as comedic stock characters typical of Middle and New Comedy and speaking in a quotidian, colloquial style (Branham, 1989). Our following analysis focuses on Lucian's *Dialogues of the Gods,* a collection of 25 dialogues (usually with two interlocutors) that have gods engage in everyday chatter and gossip. We consider salient parallels between the *Dialogues* and *IFR*, showcasing how pitting one work against another teases out illuminating parallels and convergences in humorous portrayals of incongruity in ancient Greek divine characters.

Scholarship has identified specific divine characters who seemingly appear more readily in comedic treatments than others, and could be considered as having a certain inherent potential for humor and comedic engagements with mythology. The Middle Comedy burlesques, for example, often focused on the infidelities of Zeus (Nesselrath, 1990; 1995; Rosen, 1995): as Marsh (1998) observes, Zeus's escapades were an attractive subject already at the time of Homer, and continued to command attention in Lucian's day. In the *Dialogues*, Zeus's affairs are mentioned throughout (*Dialogues* 7, 9, 12, 13, 14, 18, 20, 22, 23), and become the explicit subject in four of them (5, 6, 8, 10) [1]. The humor of these representations, depending on a distinctly human characterization of an otherwise mighty, powerful god, arises from incongruity (Branham, 1989; Green, 2014; Konstantakos, 2002; 2014a; Marsh, 1998): lordly Zeus is depicted as "inept and embarrassed" (Anderson, 2003, p. 239), and no more impervious to base vices and desires than mortals.

A second mythic character with a seemingly inherent comedic potential is Hermes, the messenger of the gods. Moodie (2019) describes how Greek comedy often depicted Hermes similarly to its stereotypical low-born stock characters. In Lucian's *Dialogues*, Hermes appears just as often as Zeus and more often than any other character, totaling ten appearances across all 25 texts. Hermes's humor most likely stems from his already "incongruous multiplicity of roles" (Branham, 1989, p. 148): a god, a messenger, a musician, a protector of thieves, the guide of deceased souls to the Underworld, and more. Beta (2019) noted that Hermes's "special relationship with mortals" (p. 98) framed him as a character with whom creative liberties could be taken, and that due to Hermes's great presence in everyday Athenian life (materialized through so-called "herms," or Hermes-headed stone markers that, according to Thucydides, were ubiquitous in Athens; Thuc. 6.27), his comedic portrayals would not have felt inappropriate.

Finally, the character of Hephaestus has also been discussed in relation to comedy. Hall (2018) showed how Hephaestus's lameness, for which he was hated by his mother, Hera, was tied to comedic effect, for example through jokes at his expense about his disability, or creating "his own comic spectacles" (p. 388) through his technological skills. Similar to Zeus and Hermes, it was Hephaestus's "human characteristics" that turned him into the "laughing stock of other gods" (Rinon, 2006, pp. 18-19). A suffering god, Hephaestus stands out sharply among the divine community of Olympus due to his physical disability and clumsiness, traits mercilessly derided by other Olympians.

Building on the insights above, we conceptualize such mythological comedy as reliant on a comedic subversion thriving predominantly on incongruity between (traditionally) mythological motifs or characters. In a similar vein, Branham (1989) notes that "the topics that [the Roman rhetorician] Quintilian (3.7.7-9) prescribes for encomia of the gods (greatness, power, inventions, deeds, parents and progeny) are precisely those most susceptible to comic subversion through the imputation of mortal foibles" (p. 137), and indeed, we will see that in *IFR*, too, it is very often the features of (divine) epic, grandeur and fame that are challenged. This is not to say that the relief or superiority theories have no place in our conceptualization of these kinds of comedy, but for the purpose of this article, we employ incongruity as our primary framework.

Immortals Fenyx Rising

Immortals Fenyx Rising revolves around Fenyx, a Greek farmer, shield bearer and storyteller who is shipwrecked on the Golden Isle, a mythical island where several of the Greek gods reside. Fenyx, who is playable both male and female (but canonically female; Díaz Granda, 2021; Santos, 2022) discovers the island in ruins, and soon learns that the ancient monster Typhon has returned after his defeat by Zeus, described by Hesiod in the *Theogony* (868). Some gods fled Typhon's attack (consistently with ancient sources; e.g., Ovid, *Metamorphoses* 5.321-324), while others (Ares, Aphrodite, Hephaestus and Athena) stayed behind to fight. The gods were

unsuccessful, however, as Typhon mutated them into a form that would not prove a threat to his power: Ares was changed into a chicken, Aphrodite into a tree, Hephaestus into an automaton, and Athena into a child. Additionally, they were all robbed of their so-called "essences" (Ares's pride, Aphrodite's passion, Hephaestus's suffering, Athena's judgment), draining their power. It is Fenyx's task to retrieve the essences, and help defeat Typhon. Crucially, while the player actualizes the story of Fenyx in real time, the narrative is at the same time told through voice-over by Zeus and Prometheus: witnessing Typhon's return, Zeus called Prometheus, blessed with the power of foresight, for aid, and both settle on a wager. If Prometheus convinces Zeus that the mortals can provide help in the fight against Typhon, Zeus will release him from his eternal punishment. It is then that Prometheus starts telling the story of Fenyx, which the player now actualizes. Through their voice-over dialogues -- a potential source of humor and levity in games (Grönroos, 2013) -- Zeus and Prometheus engage in an ongoing "comic banter" (Dormann & Boutet, 2013, p. 11; see Ralph in Ubisoft Quebec, 2021d), commenting not only on Fenyx's adventures but also on Greek mythology *sensu lato*. *IFR*'s screenwriters have described how Zeus and Prometheus serve as *IFR*'s own Statler and Waldorf (*The Muppet Show*; Henson et al., 1974-1975), providing commentary from the balcony of Prometheus's mountain (Ralph in Ubisoft Quebec, 2021d).

IFR was described by its designers as "the most epic family comedy ever" (Yohalem in Ubisoft Quebec, 2021d), based on the complex family dynamics that Greek mythology already offered. The development team describes the game as whimsical and funny, features considered typical of the Ubisoft Quebec studio ("la sauce Québec"; Dansereau in Ubisoft Quebec, 2021a). In turn, reviewers consistently recognized *IFR*'s humor (e.g., Shea, 2020; Sowah, 2020; Vazquez, 2020) and evaluated it either positively, as entertaining and original, or more negatively, as corny. The palpable element of humor in the game makes it a highly relevant case study for the current analysis.

Game Analysis

With regards to transparency (Daneels et al., 2022), *IFR*'s main story and all additional quests and Myth Challenges were completed on PlayStation 5, totaling 36.5h of gameplay as female Fenyx. The game was completed once before as male Fenyx by the first author, ensuring prior familiarity with the game, its quests, and characters.

Before we discuss the game's story, it is worth commenting on its style and aesthetics. Based on several shared characteristics, game journalism (e.g., Halliday, 2021; Madsen, 2020) consistently compared *IFR* to *The Legend of Zelda: Breath of the Wild* (Nintendo EPD, 2017; hereafter, "*BotW*"). The similarities are indeed striking (Díaz Granda, 2021): both games present lush, yet ruined worlds; both feature protagonists who are physically unconventional heroes, described and visualized as tiny; both incorporate gliding as a core method of world traversal; both include stamina meters as an obstacle for in-game actions (e.g., climbing); and both contain vantage points from which nearby regions can be scouted (*IFR*'s god statues; *BotW*'s Sheikah Towers). More importantly, both games deviate from visually realist aspirations (especially compared to *Assassin's Creed Odyssey*, released in 2018 by the same studio that developed *IFR*), and instead adopt a more fantastical aesthetic inspired by Studio Ghibli productions and characterized by hyperbolic visual elements, stylized renderings, and cartoonish representations (Dansereau in Ubisoft Quebec, 2021b; Pugh, 2018; Tucker, 2021), which may facilitate humor by "condition[ing] the audience to get into a humorous mood" (Kallio & Masoodian, 2018, p. 4; see also Abbott, 2010; Grönroos, 2013; Hookham & Meany, 2015). *IFR*'s is by all means a lighthearted reality, one not to be taken too seriously.

Specifically, we argue that *IFR* "laughs" with mythology and its characters similarly to ancient antecedents. The game thrives on involving the gods in comic scenarios not unlike those in Homer or Middle Comedy, abounding in (references to) familial disputes and romantic affairs. Yet, we propose that Lucian's *Dialogues of the Gods*

offers more elaborate parallels with the game, especially with regards to its characters, characterizations, humor, and textual structures, to the point where we may consider both texts to offer a similar experience or modality of mythology (and its reception). Here, we recall Lucian's relatively late date of writing, in the second century CE: both Lucian and Ubisoft Quebec operate *after* the "great" literary treatments of mythology (e.g., Homer, Greek tragedy, Ovid), and work in positions where they can play with these traditions in front of an audience assumed to possess at least some knowledge of the mythic stories.

Indeed, although we cannot demonstrate that the game designers read or knew of Lucian's text, they have, perhaps by convergence, shaped their narrative in a manner that uncannily mirrors Lucian's treatment of his material. Notably, Zeus and Prometheus's voice-over conversation finds a near-direct parallel in one specific dialogue: Lucian, *Dialogue* 5. We have already described how the game includes a wager between the two characters, with Prometheus's freedom as one of the stakes. In Lucian's dialogue, Prometheus also asks Zeus for his freedom, in exchange for information: he advises Zeus not to make love to Thetis as he has foreseen that any child from this union would dethrone the god just like Zeus ended the reign of his father, Kronos (a prophecy already hinted at in the *Iliad* but fully verbalized in Aeschylus's *Prometheus Bound*; Paprocki, 2023a; Slatkin, 1991). Both scenarios negotiate the possibility of Prometheus's release, with the latter offering his foresight in return. The parallel between Lucian and *IFR* grows even clearer at the end of the game, when it is revealed that Fenyx *is* the child of Zeus and Thetis, although she does not overthrow him as Lucian's Prometheus predicted. Different from the god-kill-god circle of violence foundational to Hesiod and other epics, *IFR* proposes a new paradigm of divine behavior based on forgiveness and redemption -- one incomprehensible to Typhon, who operates entirely within the ancient tradition of violent divine retribution. Similarly, Lucian's post-mythological vision depicts gods as a community that, despite their obvious (and tangibly humorous) tensions, manages to coexist as one family under Zeus's mostly benevolent rule.

Additionally, we see that *IFR* employs the comic characters described above (Zeus, Hermes, Hephaestus) in a manner reminiscent of ancient comedy, particularly echoing Lucian's approach. Zeus, far from being a distant deity, takes center stage, engaging in ongoing repartee with Prometheus and serving as a co-narrator for the game's mythological narratives. This dynamic interplay becomes the wellspring from which much of the game's humor flows. Hermes, presented as quick, funny, and witty, is the first mythological character that Fenyx encounters, and serves as her mentor into the current conflict, in line with his ancient characterization as a messenger and guide. Hephaestus, finally, is one of the four main gods, and often the butt of jokes related to either his disability, ugliness, or the love triangle between Hephaestus, Aphrodite (his wife), and Ares (her paramour). For example, when Prometheus describes Hephaestus as the god of the forge, Zeus cannot stop laughing at his appearance:

> You know that's all - all the play he's getting. Because - you know. All of him. In the looks department. Because he's - (LAUGHS)

In what follows, we will concretize and discuss specific similarities between Lucian's *Dialogues* and *IFR*. Both (1) depict the gods as a squabbling family who (2) appear in a series of mythical vignettes that (3) allude extensively to mythical narratives. The gods themselves are (4) presented as imperfect characters with moral foibles and anxieties, with (5) Zeus directly criticized for his patriarchal chauvinism. Finally, (6) the divine misadventures are rendered in a decidedly informal language. The elements that follow are not necessarily exclusive to either Lucian or *IFR*, but nevertheless important elements of both, therefore warranting comparison.

    1. *Gods as a squabbling, gossiping family*:

Lucian's *Dialogues* focus on the Greek gods as a divine family, yet within that family, the relationships are often dysfunctional or

antagonistic (Strolonga, 2016): the gods threaten each other (*Dialogue* 1), fight (*Dialogue* 8), quarrel (*Dialogue* 15) and more. Lucian also makes frequent references to off-screen characters, such as Dionysus and Apollo who are laughing with Priapus in *Dialogue* 3, which creates a verisimilitude of a wider mythological backdrop. *IFR* works similarly: the ongoing god-on-god abuse constitutes a core element of the story, and facilitates the game's critique of the gods, which we explore further below. Due to the relatively low number of (non-monstrous) mythological characters, the game, not unlike Lucian, frequently refers to off-screen characters such as Hera or Apollo. Gossiping about the other gods -- for instance, Persephone's clothing choices -- is even the foremost reason why Hermes wants Fenyx to restore Aphrodite to her earlier self.

2. *Myths as series of vignettes*:

As noted by Marsh (1998), Anderson (2003) and Strolonga (2016), every *Dialogue* presents a vignette-like isolated narrative: *Dialogue* 1 involves Ares and Hermes, *Dialogue* 8 has Zeus and Hera, and so on, without any overarching plotline between dialogues. If we conceptualize Greek myth as a flexible (and transmedial) storyworld (Johnston, 2018), then these vignettes often fill in gaps between better-known episodes (see Branham, 1989): *Dialogue* 17 has Hermes and Apollo discuss Hephaestus's forthcoming trap against the adulterers Ares and Aphrodite, whereas *Dialogue* 21 (with the same characters) is set right after it. *IFR* employs a rather similar textual structure, where different mythic episodes are dispersed throughout the narrative architecture (Jenkins, 2004) of the game world, in puzzles, voice-over dialogues, story beats, and more. The region of Aphrodite, for example, contains references to Adonis, the Lemnian women, Narcissus, Eros and Psyche, among others. In both works, myths are isolated vignettes within a broader, structured whole, with jokes made within the limits of the narrated episode.

3. *Pseudo-encyclopedic references to, and commentary on, mythological episodes*:

Both texts extensively reference Greek myths. In *Dialogue* 6, for example, Zeus is angry with Eros for having forced him to change into a satyr, bull, golden rain, a swan, and an eagle in his extramarital pursuits, thereby respectively referencing Zeus's affairs with Antiope, Europa, Danae, Leda and Ganymede. Lucian's compilation of Zeus's amours showcases his conversance with earlier material, as well as a learned mindset to allude to and play with these narratives. With regards to *IFR*, Vandewalle (2024) has shown how the game can be thought of as a museum-like experience of mythology based on its collection (or "mashup"; Cole, 2022), selection, and subsequent presentation of different mythological stories and characters.

Intriguingly, characters embedded in Lucian's satirical retellings often comment on the myths, displaying an irreverent detachment and meta-awareness. In *Dialogue* 25, for example, Apollo doubts whether Castor and Pollux' decision to share immortality between them really was the most efficient way to stay together. Likewise, when Fenyx approaches the Argo in *IFR*, Prometheus relates the story as follows:

Ah, the Argo, the legendary ship named after its builder, Argus. Athena inspired its magnificent design.

To which Zeus replies:

Athena really wastes a lot of her wisdom on these mortals, doesn't she?

This interaction embeds the myth of the Argonauts within the game's story collection, yet also comments on it as part of the narrators' comic banter. This narrative style effects a critical (though playful) distance from the source material, foregrounding implausible, absurd, or odd elements for comic effect.

4. *Gods as human(ized) characters, with fears, vulnerabilities, and concerns*:

According to Aristotle (*Poetics*, 1448a), comedy presents characters that are "worse" (i.e., more lowly) than us, the audience. In mythological comedy, this often implies "strip[ping] the gods [...] of

their heavenly majesty and mak[ing] them look low and base (so as to render them a laughing stock)" (Nesselrath, 1995, p. 10). We have already seen above how gods were molded into comic stereotypes in ancient mythological comedies, and how such texts endow the gods with very human sensibilities, seen by some as incongruous with their divine status. In *Dialogue* 4, Hermes asks his mother if there is any god in heaven more miserable than him, since he is overburdened with tasks and severely sleep-deprived. Likewise, in *Dialogues* 16 and 17, Apollo laments his romantic misfortunes (e.g., Daphne, Hyacinthus). Branham (1989) underscores that Lucian's attribution of these human emotions to the gods feeds into their incongruous, and by extension, humoristic characterizations: the comedy depends on the perceivable yet unexpected contradiction between majestic, powerful figures beleaguered with decidedly human, everyday concerns and feelings.

IFR screenwriter Alissa Ralph explains that one of the core mantras for the game developers was "Be funny, but be true, be human" (Ralph in Ubisoft Quebec, 2021d). As we explore further below, this contrasts starkly with more "epic" games (Clare, 2021) like, for example, the *God of War* series (2005-), where gods are generally presented as "huge figures" (Ralph in Ubisoft Quebec, 2021d). Ralph explains that the basic divine characteristic in *IFR* is that they are humanized, grounded, and brought "down to our level" (*ibid.*). We see this clearly in the gods' individual metamorphoses and the robbing of their essences: one by one, the gods are revealed as unsure how to best deal with their current, powerless situation. Athena, for instance, has lost the judgment that made her the goddess of wisdom. She becomes tempted by the enemy, and even attempts to kill Fenyx and make her a servant of Typhon. Fenyx convinces her otherwise, upon which Athena bursts into tears, and says "I… I don't know what to do! I haven't known a thing since he changed me!" Here, we see an otherwise divinely powerful character struggling with newfound limitations and weaknesses, features more characteristic of mortals than gods. Humor is particularly manifest in Ares's metamorphosis: the otherwise mighty god of war now clucks uncontrollably, and many jokes are made at his chicken form's expense. Like the other gods, *IFR*'s Ares is sad, vulnerable, and struggles to adapt to a life where he is not near-all-powerful. Fothergill & Flick (2017) have described the irony inherent in associations between chickens and the supernatural, as well as the humor often deriving from chicken representations in games. In this case, Ares's transformation serves to humoristically subvert his originally powerful, war-like nature, as well as to upend traditional masculine norms associated with it.

    5. *Zeus as patriarch, and object of criticism*:

We have seen above how Lucian and *IFR* both focus on the gods as a (squabbling) family. At the top of that family stands Zeus, transformed into an object of criticism because of his abuse, self-indulgence, and infidelity. In *Dialogue* 1, Ares expresses his displeasure with Zeus's threats towards the other gods. Hermes, however, asks Ares to stop out of fear for retribution. In *Dialogue* 8, Hera chides her husband for constantly going down to Earth and taking various forms to commit adultery. In *Dialogue* 6, Zeus says to Eros that he not only wants to partake in extramarital affairs, but that he also does not want to go through a lot of trouble doing so; not only aware of being an adulterer, Zeus aspires to be a lazy one as well. Following the discussions above, we see how such texts incongruously superimpose Zeus the lazy lecher and Zeus the mighty king of the gods for comedic purpose.

The same holds very much true for *IFR*'s Zeus, whose problematic ways of ruling and parenting are highlighted consistently. The game opens with a monologue by Typhon, criticizing the gods' -- and Zeus's *par excellence* -- unchecked immoral behavior, and dispelling the illusion that these characters should be revered or looked up to. The gods all reminisce about the abuse they suffered from Zeus, with the latter unable to see his mistakes or defend himself. Aphrodite, for example, recalls how Zeus always judged her for being "too much work" or "too much trouble," to which Zeus rejoins "I never meant it like that!" and fails to empathize or apologize for his actions. Following Dormann & Boutet (2013), *IFR*'s Zeus can be classified as a "comic

sociopath," or "a character that lacks moral judgment and is without sensitivity to the emotions of others, but is designed in a humouristic way" (p. 8). Eventually, each storyline leads to a more serious moment where Zeus realizes his mistakes (Díaz Granda, 2021): he recognizes that he married Aphrodite off to Hephaestus without considering her own feelings; that he was too reproachful of Ares; that his misdeeds towards Hephaestus only hurt him, instead of making him stronger; and that he should have trusted Athena to make her own judgments, without claiming to know better. This all culminates in one scene where the gods convey how Zeus has harmed them:

> Ares: Psh. All I ever got was empty promises.
>
> Hephaestus: At least you didn't get thrown off a mountain.
>
> Aphrodite: You think that's bad? Zeus forced me to marry YOU.
>
> Athena: None of you want to be his favorite. Trust me. Zeus's only trying to make up for the fact that he murdered my mother.
>
> Zeus (voice-over): They're… They're all right. I'm a terrible father.
>
> Prometheus (voice-over): Finally! We have a winner!

After this scene, Zeus's otherwise humoristic delivery becomes considerably sadder, and the myths that are focused on are told more pessimistically than before (Vandewalle, 2024). However, the game's does not end with mere critique; it actively aims towards the rehabilitation of the gods. At the end of the game, Fenyx works to ensure that the dysfunctional Olympian family becomes more hospitable, and makes Zeus apologize for his past misdeeds. While these critical episodes are not necessarily humoristic *per se*, they indicate how comedy can facilitate such critique. The humanization of the gods not only attributes human emotions and feelings to the gods, but also human flaws (Konstantakos, 2014b), which facilitates subsequent critical episodes.

     6. *Informal language*:

Branham (1989) describes how Lucian's "gods express themselves in the vernacular tonalities of conversational prose, the traditional mode of mere mortals" (p. 140). Indeed, Lucian's Greek is rather informal, with the gods cracking jokes or gossiping about non-present characters. The same applies to *IFR*, where the gods' register veers away from expectations of refinement and becomes somewhat common. For example, when Fenyx climbs the statue of Hermes at the beginning of the game, Prometheus describes her actions as follows:

> Besieged by challenge, totally alone, this young hero
> was determined to save her fellow soldiers and brother -

But before Prometheus can finish his sentence, Zeus interjects:

> Boring. Can we skip this part?

Zeus's comment quite literally interrupts the more dramatic tone adopted by Prometheus and, through his speech, characterizes him as impatient and uncaring. Intertwined with and contributing to the game's more vernacular tone are various references to popular culture or contemporary society. Ares, for example, wants to track down his lost war trumpet via "Amazon," referring simultaneously to both the ancient warriors of myth and the multinational technology company. In doing so, *IFR* falls into a pattern of anachronism that Konstantakos (2014b) finds in Middle Comedy, whereby "mythical characters gossip about celebrities and affairs of contemporary Athens as though they were themselves ordinary fourth-century folk" (p. 167). Here, humor arises when characters, usually perceived as stuck perennially in the past, incongruously show modern traits, sensibilities, and interests, or an awareness of modern culture.

These six features constitute what we believe are the clearest parallels between the treatment of the gods by Lucian and *IFR*, in terms of

both works' textual structure and specific characterizations. These parallels lead us to argue that both texts create similar mythology experiences while being read or played. They involve incongruous subversions of divine power and, in the case of *IFR*, challenge games embedded more directly in what Clare (2021) calls the "epic game tradition," or a type of antiquity game, "wherein central tenets of the epic film tradition are borrowed and altered to fit the interactive process" (p. 57). In the more comedic *IFR*, these characterizations are consciously overturned: *IFR*'s Zeus is not (primarily or exclusively) the powerful god of epic, but reconceptualized as, at least partially, an idiot unaware of his mistakes (and, as we see below, explicitly criticized for them). It is crucial to note that whether *IFR* deliberately drew inspiration from Lucian's *Dialogues* remains largely irrelevant for our analysis. The crux of our argument lies in the fact that both the ancient text and the modern game utilize comparable narrative strategies and devices. This parallelism underscores how the inherent structure of mythological content -- its characters, motifs, and storylines -- can give rise to enduring patterns in the comedic retelling of these narratives across different eras.

Central within this conceptualization is a language of playfulness that shapes the entire experience. *IFR* not only subverts more or less conventional epic characterizations of these gods, but also the dramatic *gravitas* usually associated with classical antiquity, or the field of Classics more broadly. For centuries (and still today), the study of the ancient world has been perceived as high-brow, authoritative (Silk et al., 2014/2017), or even elitist (Perale, 2023), presided over by the learned and privileged in positions of power (Bracke, 2023). As such, classical antiquity has acquired a rather serious image in contemporary society, which we see upended in *IFR* through comedy: as Marsh (1998) notes, "[m]ocking traditional authority is part of the liberating impulse of comedy" (p. 77). Additionally, Lowe (2021) argued that such practices of playfulness should be actively embraced if the discipline of Classics is to move with the times.

Discussion: Humor in Antiquity Games

Finally, we discuss our article's broader relevance within the wider corpus of antiquity games. *IFR* was noteworthy for studying humor in antiquity games, but our analysis is representative of other game receptions of antiquity, too. Antiquity games are often infused with humor, which is used "like seasoning to add flavor to the end result" (Kallio & Masoodian, 2018, p. 3). The multiplayer online battle arena game *Smite* (Titan Forge Games, 2014) contains various humorous voice lines ("Jokes") that players may activate during matches. Hera, for instance, proclaims "My servants are yelling 'Yas queen!' to each of my requests. I don't know why, but it has grown on me," while Nike, referring to the sneaker brand she eponymously inspired, asks "Everyone keeps telling me to 'just do it'. Do what?!" Like Ares's Amazon tracking, these jokes draw on the incongruity of anachronism. We also find comedic anachronism in *Herc's Adventures* (Big Ape Productions & LucasArts, 1997), in which players embark on a quest to save Persephone from Hades, who is revealed to be controlled by Martians. The player's character -- the Greek hero Herc (sic), Atlanta (sic), or Jason -- can breathe fire through the consumption of chili peppers, fight with a futuristic ray gun, and, like the protagonist of *Hades* (Supergiant Games, 2020), eat Greek gyros in order to heal. The game *Oedipus Dating Sim* (Wholetone Games, 2018) arguably thrives on its unexpectedness, as it transports its titular player-character to modern-day Las Vegas, where players romance women from mythology (the three Moirai, the Sphinx, or Jocasta, Oedipus's mother). As a final example, we can point to *Okhlos: Omega* (Coffee Powered Machine, 2016), in which players play as ancient thinkers and control initially calm mobs of civilians, who then attack the Greek gods in incongruously chaotic ways. We see that these cases, like *IFR*, subvert the expected *gravitas* of the ancient world, and infuse this realm of otherwise highly serious activity with a distinct playfulness, potentially -- but not exclusively -- facilitated through the inherent entertainment capabilities and playful expectations of the video game medium.

Our article also provides a first step towards uncovering different modalities of mythology reception in games. Within historical game studies, scholars have explored how different genres of historical games retell different types of history (McCall, 2020) or inform players about history in different ways (Houghton, 2016). For example, the "realist" (Chapman, 2016, pp. 61-69) *Assassin's Creed* series (2007-) could be compared to social history, through its focus on humans and lived experience (Casey, 2021; Gilbert, 2019; Guesdon, 2018; Vandewalle et al., 2023). Conversely, the "conceptual" (Chapman, 2016, pp. 69-79) *Sid Meier's Civilization* series (1991-) is interested more in "great person" history, empire-building (Lowe, 2009), conquest narratives, and resource management. In much the same way, we could distinguish different genres of mythology in antiquity games, that each emphasize certain modalities of characterization: scholars have already drawn links between the *God of War* series (2005-) and ancient tragedy (Clare, 2021; Furtwängler, 2012), between *Assassin's Creed Odyssey* and mythological rationalization or skepticism (Dagios, 2020; Ford, 2022), or between *Apotheon* (Alientrap, 2015) and Hesiodic epic (Paprocki, 2020). Paprocki (2023b) posits that in the retelling of mythic narratives, authors can simultaneously tap into multiple pre-existing character portrayals. The receiving creators endow characters with a spectrum of traits (at times, mutually incompatible across different receptions), drawing from what he terms a "conceptual scaffolding or matrix" (p. 434). The resulting character configuration may align more closely with one genre than others, depending on how these traits are balanced and emphasized. Comedy could be considered as one of these modalities, with *IFR* as a main example. Comedy's use of mythical conceptual matrices appears antithetical to the epic modality in that it relies on subversion while lowering narrative tension: characters thought as grand and powerful become laughable and weak, but their misadventures have no grave consequences. None of these associations should be thought of as strict or exclusive, yet instead conceptualized as gravitational forces that pull the (game-)text in the direction of specific generic frameworks, without necessarily losing all attachment to others: for example, while we considered *IFR*'s characters and textual organization in light of its similarities to ancient comedy, its action-packed, spectacular, hero-versus-monster gameplay is still highly reminiscent of more epic modes of engagement with the past, similarly to how the game was described as "the most *epic* family comedy ever" (Yohalem in Ubisoft Quebec, 2021d; our emphasis).

Future Directions

Our article primarily relied on the frameworks of incongruity theory and "humor-through-storytelling" (Cook, 2012). In this section, we address the limitations of this approach, and provide avenues for further research through the employment of different theoretical concepts. First, we believe that *IFR* could also be studied from the perspective of "humor-through-mechanics" (Cook, 2012) -- or gameplay more broadly -- where attention could be drawn to the potentially parodic antithesis between playing as the unexpected, tiny hero Fenyx, versus more traditional (and, often, hegemonically male) video game heroes such as *God of War*'s Kratos or *Assassin's Creed Odyssey*'s Alexios. The studio has argued that *IFR*'s stylized animations deliver a sense of "funniness" in the game (Viitaniemi in Ubisoft Quebec, 2021c) which -- different from the realism of *Assassin's Creed Odyssey* -- could contribute to a comic or caricaturist gameplay experience. To be sure, this is by no means to claim that Fenyx becomes a laughable hero, but rather that the game takes a more playful and diverse approach to the concept of heroism, different from more usual, standardized game heroes -- as does *The Legend of Zelda* (Pugh, 2018), to which we saw *IFR* was indebted. As Grönroos (2013) writes: "comedic game characters are likely to be more diverse than the macho space marines of a multitude of action games" (p. 41), which we see clearly with Fenyx. Additionally, since the game allows for the customization of Fenyx's appearance, players could certainly create character models that are comical in nature (Dormann & Boutet, 2013; Dormann, 2014; Grönroos, 2013), the extent of which would need to be studied through audience research.

Next, we believe that *IFR* can also be studied through the relief and superiority theories of humor. Dormann & Biddle (2009) argue that out of the three theories of humor, relief is the hardest to apply to games. Nevertheless, instances of relief could be identified in the tonal difference between *IFR*'s serious setting (Typhon's return, threatening the entire cosmic order) and Zeus's flippant persona (a comic relief character), adopted trying to counter Typhon's threat. A similar disparity in tone is already detectable in the Homeric oeuvre, with serious settings and themes interspersed with humorous episodes (Vermeule, 1981). Likewise, the game's approach to otherwise tense moments of gameplay could also be explained through humor-as-relief: one of *IFR*'s first boss fights pits Fenyx against a Cyclops named Mikros the Adorable, in a rather amusing scene that defuses tensions often present in boss encounters (Švelch, 2023). In turn, superiority theory, which according to Dormann & Biddle (2009) is most applicable in analyses of "player-player interaction" (p. 807), could afford one with interpretive purchase while investigating the relationship between Fenyx's rising character arc, which focuses on finding her own strength, and the game's lowly, base characterizations of the gods -- characters who, in the spirit of Aristotle's quote above, are presented as "worse" and thus, ridiculous. Superiority is also especially apparent in the gods' interactions with Hephaestus, who, perceived as inferior because of his disability, is ridiculed by his divine family.

Conclusion

This article has investigated mythological comedy in *Immortals Fenyx Rising*, one of the more high-profile mythological video games in recent years. Through incongruity theory, we have shown how the game provides deliberately subversive characterizations of its divine characters, where the spectacular majesty so characteristic of them in other games makes way for humanized character design, and how these comedic portrayals are linked to critiques of the gods' character flaws. We have drawn attention to comedic precedents in ancient Greek literature, most extensively Lucian's *Dialogues of the Gods*, which, we argue, offers a comparable modality or experience of mythology retelling. In doing so, this article not only takes the first step towards uncovering variances in such modalities of mythology reception in video games, but also uncovers practices of playfulness within such games, which upend the traditional seriousness or *gravitas* attached to Classics. Above all, we hope to have paved the way for further analyses on more lighthearted and amusing elements of classical reception in video games, which have traditionally escaped scholarly attention, but might ultimately be crucial elements drawing audiences to these media in the first place.

Endnotes

[1] We use the numbering by MacLeod (1961).

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