

require abandoning historical method. What changed was where the difficulty was placed. Instead of making students spend unnecessary effort deciphering the structure of the task, the activity attempted to concentrate difficulty where a university History course ought to place it: in asking good questions, evaluating evidence and constructing defensible interpretations.

For teachers of Antiquity, that may be the guide's most productive lesson. Students do not need to attend university simply to receive information that exists elsewhere. They may have good reason to participate when teaching gives them opportunities to interrogate evidence, compare interpretations, expose uncertainty, revise their reasoning and receive feedback while there is still time to use it. Generative AI makes that distinction more urgent rather than less so. When plausible information and polished prose are increasingly abundant, the value of university teaching lies more clearly in what students learn to do with information, evidence, technologies and one another. Olmos and Márquez begin with absenteeism, but the larger question raised by their guide is more fundamental: what, in 2026, do we believe a university class is actually for?

Carlos Heredia Chimeno
Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona

AI & Antiquity: Journal of Teaching and Technology in Ancient Studies
Volume 2, Issue 2, 2026, pp. 102–106.
ISSN: 3081–4553

Learning Antiquity or Feeling Antiquity? A Review of Marvin Rees, *Entstehung, Angebot und bildungsrelevante Lerneffekte des Digitalen Spiels ›Discovery Tour: Ancient Greece‹*

Rees, Marvin. 2026. *Entstehung, Angebot und bildungsrelevante Lerneffekte des Digitalen Spiels ›Discovery Tour: Ancient Greece‹*. Traces. Public History and Heritage Studies 3. Berlin/Boston: De Gruyter Oldenbourg. 289 pp. ISBN 978-3-11-162505-8.

Historical video games invite an apparently simple educational expectation. If students can walk through a reconstruction of Athens, visit Delphi or listen to Leonidas describe Thermopylae, they should be able to learn about ancient Greece in ways unavailable through a textbook or lecture. Ubisoft's *Discovery Tour: Ancient Greece* (2019), developed from *Assassin's Creed Odyssey* (2018), seems almost designed to test this proposition.

Marvin Rees's *Entstehung, Angebot und bildungsrelevante Lerneffekte des Digitalen Spiels ›Discovery Tour: Ancient Greece‹* does precisely that, but its importance lies in refusing to reduce the question to whether the game is historically "accurate". Rees reconstructs the production of the *Discovery Tour*, analyses the historical representation it offers and, most importantly, tests empirically what participants actually learn from it. The study therefore separates three propositions often collapsed in discussions of historical games: a digital environment can contain substantial historical information; it can create a persuasive sensation of encountering the past; and it can produce measurable historical learning. These things are related, but they are not the same.

This distinction gives the book an unusually effective structure. Rees examines

how the *Discovery Tour* emerged from the *Assassin's Creed* franchise, what kind of past it constructs, and what happens when learners encounter that construction (pp. 7–8). The first part reconstructs Ubisoft's development of the franchise and the educational mode (pp. 33–72); the second analyses *Discovery Tour: Ancient Greece* through Adam Chapman's categories of simulation style, time, space, narrative and affordances (pp. 73–130); and the third tests its learning effects empirically (pp. 131–216).

This combination is the book's greatest methodological strength. Historical Game Studies has produced sophisticated analyses of how games represent the past, but the inference from representation to reception remains dangerous. Identifying a historical idea encoded in a game does not demonstrate that players notice it, understand it or assign it the significance scholars do. Rees places production, representation and reception within the same study, making it harder to assume that historical intention automatically becomes historical experience.

The discussion of authenticity is particularly productive. Rees distinguishes historical accuracy from the ability to generate a convincing *feeling* of the past and notes that players often judge historical environments by comparison not with archaeological evidence but with other popular representations (pp. 18–21). Drawing on Christian Rollinger and Dunstan Lowe, he emphasises that games may tell us less about ancient societies than about contemporary expectations of them: details can be factually wrong while still “feeling” right because they belong to an established visual vocabulary of antiquity (pp. 19–20).

This converges with a problem I have encountered repeatedly in work on games and popular antiquity. I have become less interested in asking simply whether a representation is “accurate” than in asking what kind of past a medium makes operational or emotionally legible. In *World of Warcraft*, archaeology becomes a system of recoverable fragments and rewards; in *Age of Empires II: Definitive Edition – Chronicles: Battle for Greece*, Athenian *phoros* becomes a playable resource while

preserving selected relationships between extraction and resistance. Games often reconstruct not antiquity itself, but the cultural memory of what antiquity is supposed to feel like. Rees's book provides unusually concrete evidence for taking that distinction seriously.

The production history makes the point clearly. Rees documents the tension between historians recruited by Ubisoft and the requirements of commercial game development. Historical accuracy matters, but playability and emotional narrative retain priority; one formulation cited in the book reduces the hierarchy to “Fun always wins!” (p. 63). Researchers provide evidence and expert texts, but developers retain final control, while educational materials are shortened to suit the rhythm of the experience (pp. 63–67). The *Discovery Tour* therefore does not escape the logic of the entertainment franchise from which it emerged.

The analysis of the virtual Greek world shows particularly well how historical accuracy and affective credibility diverge. *Discovery Tour* offers an environment of striking visual density: monuments occupy recognisable locations, NPCs perform everyday activities, musicians produce a diegetic soundscape and Greek speech sustains the impression of a living ancient world (pp. 96–99). Yet Rees repeatedly demonstrates that this *reality effect* depends as much upon expectation as reconstruction. Leonidas can guide players through a world nominally situated in 431 BCE, decades after his death, while fictional and historical characters coexist without necessarily disrupting immersion (pp. 98–100).

One example is especially revealing. Buildings and monuments were sometimes deliberately enlarged so that they would appear more “epic” or reproduce for modern players an emotional impact imagined for ancient observers. Rees discusses the Athena Promachos, whose scale was substantially increased so that it would dominate the Athenian landscape (p. 107). The objective was not exact reconstruction but affective equivalence. The game effectively asks what must be changed about the past so that modern players can feel what designers imagine the past should have felt like.

Generative AI makes the same phenomenon easier to recognise. Ask an image model for “ancient Rome” and it may produce monumental colonnades, immaculate marble and dramatic sunlight immediately legible as Roman. The result can be convincing while corresponding less to the heterogeneous and archaeologically uncertain city of antiquity than to a visual tradition accumulated through painting, cinema, television and games. The viewer encounters not Rome itself but a cultural imaginary of Rome.

The same distinction applies to *Discovery Tour*. Its power does not depend solely upon the amount of correct archaeological information it contains, but upon a negotiation between evidence and what twenty-first-century players already expect ancient Greece to look like. Particularly valuable are moments when Ubisoft challenges that expectation, such as the use of architectural and sculptural polychromy, where historically informed difference becomes educational precisely because it initially looks “wrong” to modern eyes (pp. 105–107).

At other points, however, the cultural imaginary dominates. Mythological material is embedded directly into the historical environment: the Argo, the palace of Odysseus and mythic creatures coexist with historical sites and personalities. Rees regards this as more problematic in an explicitly educational product because the distinction between mythical and historical material is not always sufficiently visible (pp. 109–110). Likewise, the Artemision bronze is multiplied and identified as Poseidon across several sanctuaries, converting an uncertain and unique archaeological object into a repeated element of environmental storytelling (p. 108).

These examples matter pedagogically not only because students might learn a false fact. They reveal how digital environments naturalise interpretations through presence. A text can qualify an identification with “possibly”; an object repeatedly placed in a three-dimensional environment simply appears to be there. Spatial confidence can therefore exceed evidential confidence.

The game’s temporal structure creates a similar tension. *Discovery Tour* appears to offer movement through 431 BCE in real time, yet its inhabitants perform endlessly recurring routines and events do not develop. Rees compares this to an animated museum diorama: apparently living activities are actually loops (pp. 100–102). The guided tours simultaneously range across centuries and are narrated retrospectively from a modern perspective. The illusion of time travel therefore coexists with an explanatory apparatus capable of moving from the Bronze Age to the Peloponnesian War and beyond (pp. 103–104). The issue is not whether the representation is simply right or wrong, but what grammar it uses to make antiquity intelligible.

Rees’s empirical section then presents the book’s most important challenge to easy claims about game-based historical learning. Ninety-four participants aged sixteen to twenty-one encountered closely matched Thermopylae content in one of three forms: by playing the *Discovery Tour*, reading an illustrated transcript, or watching a recording of the tour (pp. 162–176). Across all groups, learning clearly occurred. Mean scores increased from 38.7 to 58.51 per cent, and 81 of the 94 participants improved between pre- and post-test (pp. 177–179). Material derived from the *Discovery Tour* can therefore transmit historical knowledge even without teacher mediation.

But interactivity itself produced no clear advantage. The group that played the tour did not significantly outperform the group reading the illustrated transcript, nor was play superior to watching the recording. Indeed, the video group produced the strongest descriptive results, with a mean post-test score of 63.88 per cent compared with 55.59 for text and 54.82 for play (pp. 180–188). The game-versus-text effect was effectively zero, while the game-versus-video comparison pointed towards an advantage for video, although Rees rightly remains cautious about sample size and statistical limitations (pp. 184–189).

This is the book’s most valuable finding because it prevents us from treating interactivity itself as pedagogy. Rees argues

that the Thermopylae tour contains a strong framing narrative but relatively little meaningful historical ludonarrative. Players have few opportunities to affect events, solve historically significant problems or exercise the kinds of agency that distinguish games from linear media. Consequently, playing offers little detectable advantage over watching (pp. 201–205). In his final synthesis, players become closer to asynchronous tourists than historical actors: they may choose the order and quantity of information but cannot alter the narrative or exercise historically meaningful agency (pp. 219–221).

This conclusion also resonates with Alexander Vandewalle and Richard Cole's active-play study of Classics students playing *Assassin's Creed Odyssey*. Their decisions were shaped by ludic, prosthetic, narrative and referential interests rather than by historical considerations alone. History mattered, but it did not automatically organise play. A scholar may identify a rich historical structure while a player chooses an option because it produces better equipment, fits an imagined avatar or advances a preferred narrative. Encoded historical meaning and experienced historical significance are therefore different objects of study.

For teaching, the conclusion is not that historical games have failed. Rather, Rees provides a strong argument against using them as self-justifying educational technologies. Earlier classroom research discussed in the book reached a compatible conclusion: Karsenti and Parent found that effective uses of *Assassin's Creed* embedded game imagery and footage within source criticism and comparison with other representations, without necessarily requiring students to play the game themselves (pp. 26–27). The educational question is therefore not *Did students play a historical game?* but *What intellectual operation were they asked to perform with it?*

This is where *Discovery Tour* may become more valuable when treated critically rather than deferentially. Students can compare its coloured Acropolis with modern assumptions about white marble; investigate why Leonidas guides a tour set after his death; distinguish mythic from historical

spaces; compare the virtual Athena with archaeological reconstruction; or identify moments when uncertainty has been transformed into environmental certainty. Such activities use the game not as a virtual textbook but as a historical representation requiring criticism.

The same principle applies to generative AI. A synthetic reconstruction becomes educationally useful when students are asked why it looks convincing, what visual traditions it reproduces, what evidence it suppresses and what alternative pasts it makes difficult to imagine. In both cases, inaccuracies and compromises can become objects of historical reasoning rather than simply flaws to be corrected.

Rees is appropriately cautious about the limits of his experiment. The study tests one particularly coherent tour, Thermopylae, rather than all thirty tours and roughly ten hours of material (pp. 159–160). The playing group was also substantially smaller because hardware, installation and Ubisoft Connect created practical barriers; nine participants abandoned installation altogether (pp. 201–203, 212–214). Most importantly, Rees recognises that measurable acquisition of declarative knowledge is not equivalent to historical problem-solving, multiperspectivity or interpretative competence. The *Discovery Tour* can transmit knowledge independently, but more demanding forms of historical thinking still require contextualisation and guidance (pp. 212, 222–223).

That distinction makes the book particularly valuable for *AI & Antiquity*. Digital historical environments are becoming more convincing just as generative systems are making persuasive synthetic pasts increasingly easy to produce. The educational challenge is therefore shifting away from access. Students do not lack representations of antiquity; they inhabit an excess of them. The task is to teach them to distinguish evidence from plausibility, reconstruction from reception, historical uncertainty from synthetic confidence, and the ancient past from the cultural imagery through which that past has become familiar.

Rees ultimately gives us strong reasons to resist both technological enthusiasm and technological dismissal. *Discovery Tour*:

Ancient Greece contains substantial historical knowledge, produces measurable learning and constructs one of the most elaborate popular environments of ancient Greece yet created. But none of this demonstrates that playing itself causes the learning, nor that the antiquity experienced by players is simply the antiquity reconstructed by historians.

Sometimes history recedes behind gameplay; sometimes the game recedes behind information; and sometimes what remains most powerful is the immediate recognition that tells us, before any evidence has been examined, that this *feels ancient*. Rees's achievement is to disentangle these effects. A historical game may contain the past, make us feel the past and help us learn about the past. The pedagogical mistake is to assume that these are three ways of saying the same thing.

Carlos Heredia Chimeno
Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona