

Choose Your Own Counterfactual: the Melian Dialogue as Text-Based

Adventure

The Melian Dialogue – the archetypal triumph of might over right – seems at first glance to be the polar opposite of any sort of game, both because of its serious subject matter but above all because of the crushing inevitability of its outcome: the Melians can't win, the Athenians can't lose. My argument in this chapter is that we can nevertheless turn this classic episode into a game – within the genre of interactive fiction or 'choose your own adventure' – as a means of drawing out the counterfactual possibilities that are inherent in Thucydides' account and multiplied by our own distance from the past. Turning an apparently linear narrative into a series of meaningful choices, into a text that requires the reader to interact with it and confront uncertainty, opens up possibilities of reinterpretation and questioning our understanding of the dynamic of events and the constraints under which decisions are taken in a way that only games – properly handled – can achieve. Far from being mere entertainment, ancient historical games, like counterfactual analyses, are essential for historical understanding.¹

1. "Parlour-Games with Might-Have-Beens"

The fundamental problem with attempts at incorporating historical games into historical research, as opposed to studying them as examples of the popular reception of the past, is often identified as the danger of anachronism: of creating confusion between the historical and the unhistorical by discussing things that did not and/or could not really happen. 'If a battle proceeds differently in a role-playing scenario than it did in actuality – which is almost inevitable – students are not learning history.'² The fact that a game which did not include the possibility of

¹ I am extremely grateful to Christian Rollinger both for the invitation to contribute to this volume and for his enormously helpful editorial comments; to Seth Honnor at Kaleider (<https://kaleider.com>), who first suggested turning the Melian Dialogue into a game; and to Shawn Graham and Jeremiah McCall for advice in developing it.

² Robison 2013: 578.

different outcomes would lose most if not all of its attractions as a game is precisely the point; we are presented with a choice between unhistorical pleasure and historical understanding. It is striking, if on reflection unsurprising, how far such critiques of games for their counterfactual nature mirror critiques of counterfactual histories – the explicit analysis of alternative possibilities in historical events and developments – for their resemblance to games. ‘History is a record of what people did, not what they failed to do,’ argued E.H. Carr in his still-influential account of *What Is History?* ‘One can always play a parlour-game with the might-have-beens of history. But they have nothing...to do with history’.³ History has been conventionally understood as the study of the actual, or at least an attempt at getting as close as possible to the actual through the analysis of the surviving evidence; there can be no evidence of things which did not happen, so on what basis can counterfactual accounts be evaluated, other than their qualities as fiction?⁴ Of course one can play with such ideas, but a game – especially a parlour-game – is by definition trivial and irrelevant to true intellectual activity; a matter of mere entertainment.

It has to be admitted that many attempts at writing counterfactual histories – like many historical video games – are indeed superficial and often rather silly when considered from the perspective of academic historiography. Their primary purpose is indeed entertainment, and as a result they focus on familiar figures and events, presented in traditional if not mythologised forms; their underlying understanding of historical events is thoroughly conventional, focused on military and political narratives, on short-term events rather than longer-term structures, and on the decisive roles of a small number of World-Historical Individuals.⁵ But superficiality and

³ Carr 1987: 127.

⁴ Evans 2014.

⁵ Black 1998; Brodersen 2000. For a continuing emphasis on individual agency and contingency see e.g. Ferguson 1997, despite its claim to defend counterfactual history as a serious intellectual exercise. In the context of classical antiquity, an obvious example is the focus on Thermopylae as crucial ‘might have been’ in the development of Western Civilisation, and its inevitable inclusion in the new *Assassin’s Creed: Odyssey* game (2018).

conventionality are not intrinsic to the exercise: there is now a range of examples of counterfactual approaches in economic and social history, focusing on the historical role of longer-term structures and processes – exploring the consequences of the Black Death for medieval European economy and society, for example, or the economic impact of railroads in the United States in the nineteenth century – and of studies of individual decision-making at critical moments that emphasise the constraints under which such decisions were taken rather than presenting everything in terms of unbounded individual agency.⁶ In the same way that not every video game is a crude first-player-shooter (or spear-thruster), not every counterfactual history is a simple “what if Caesar hadn’t crossed the Rubicon?”

The strongest argument in defence of counterfactual approaches, however, is that they simply cannot be avoided in *any* discussion of historical causation.⁷ Any statement about why things happened as they did implies that they would have happened differently if the decisive factor had been absent, just as any statement about the consequences of a decision implies that things would have turned out differently if that decision had gone the other way.⁸ It is simply a question of whether a given historical account discusses these counterfactual possibilities explicitly, so that they can be properly evaluated, or leaves them implicit, with the risk that the events then appear to have been necessary or inevitable. Any proper explanation of a historical phenomenon needs also to account for negatives – that is, why other possible outcomes did not in fact occur – rather than implying or assuming that a given cause or set of circumstances can only ever have one specified outcome.⁹

Explicit counterfactuals – the acknowledgement and evaluation of such possibilities, if not a fully-developed counterfactual narrative – are therefore the best way for historians to avoid

⁶ See e.g. Fogel 1964; Hawthorn 1991; Tetlock & Belkin 1996.

⁷ Hawthorn 1991; Sunstein 2016.

⁸ Cf. de Landa 2000, offering a critique of ‘linear’ histories.

⁹ Tucker 2016: 335.

falling into teleology and other ahistorical errors, assuming that what did in fact happen was by definition the most likely if not the only possible outcome.¹⁰ Counterfactual thinking emphasises the potential openness of the past, and focus attention on questions of necessity and contingency. Historical events are always over-determined, with multiple causes; how else can we determine the significance of different conditions except by reference to the possibility of alternative outcomes?¹¹ We gain a proper understanding of what happened by setting it against what might have happened instead, in order to consider properly the structures and conditions that shaped historical outcomes.

A defence of counterfactual history as the legitimate if not essential study of what did not happen is also always potentially a defence of the usefulness of games in understanding historical developments. Insofar as history is seen not as the reconstruction of a fixed past and the memorisation of pre-determined facts about it, but as the exploration of the underlying structures and processes and the past existence of different possibilities, then there must be scope for different ways of exploring the range of possible alternative outcomes and the conditions under which they might have occurred. Just as it is not possible for a historian to escape counterfactuals and their implication entirely and still produce a credible analysis of past events, but only to decide how (and how explicitly) counterfactuals should be acknowledged and employed, so the question is not whether it is possible to engage with the past through popular culture, including games, but what kind of engagement is pursued.¹²

It is not of course the case that all games are equally useful, just as this is not true of all counterfactual exercises; in either case, many extant examples suffer from entertainment bias and drastic over-simplification, because they have not been designed with any thought for serious

¹⁰ Kaye 2010; Ben-Menahem 2016.

¹¹ Tucker 1999.

¹² Elliott & Kapell 2014: 9; Chapman 2016.

historical analysis.¹³ Counterfactual histories and games alike inevitably take for granted certain underlying principles, even as they explicitly open up possibilities in other areas; they may privilege individuals over structures, or certain historical processes (exogenous technological change, for example) over others, in determining the range and nature of possible alternative outcomes and player choice. As Robison observes, one can learn to play historical simulation games quite well without requiring or acquiring much if any knowledge of real history, if one focuses on the underlying principles of the game design; one might see different social-scientific theories as playing the same role in historical counterfactuals.¹⁴ Christian Rollinger's analysis of the city-building simulation *Caesar* reveals how the underlying simulative processes, derived from late twentieth-century urban studies and crude Reaganomics, favour strategies that are utterly alien to historical experience; one might compare this to the persistent habit in studies of Roman cities of assuming them to be centres of trade and industry – the difference being that such assumptions are easier to identify and critique in an academic article, but baked into the fabric of the game.¹⁵ It's vital to analyse counterfactual accounts and games alike critically, seeking to identify their underlying assumptions and explanatory models – and recognising how far academic historians have the expertise, experience and instincts to do this for the former rather more commonly than the latter.¹⁶ It's also worth, where possible, relying on a range of examples which can be compared and contrasted with one another, rather than relying on a single version.

Bringing together counterfactual histories and historical games offers not only a parallel defence of these traditionally marginalised or derided activities, but the possibility of mutual support. On the one hand, the more the designers of a game aim for historical verisimilitude or plausibility rather than simple entertainment value, the more attention they (and anyone seeking

¹³ McCall 2012: 16-17.

¹⁴ Robison 2013: 578; Tetlock & Belkin 1996.

¹⁵ Rollinger 2015. On approaches to Roman urbanization, Morley 2011.

¹⁶ Uricchio 2005: 535; Cicchino 2015.

to analyse the game) need to pay to counterfactual questions – the range of different possibilities available to historical actors within a given context, the conditions governing key decisions and turning points and so forth – since they are seeking both to open up the range of possible outcomes beyond what actually happened, and to limit these to the more plausible (or at least to take account of their relative plausibility in constructing the game mechanics). On the other hand, and more importantly for historical purposes, games can offer an essential resource for exploring these counterfactual possibilities. As Jeremiah McCall has noted, one problem with conventional historical representation – video as well as text – is that it can present only one choice and one line of consequent development at a time, as a fixed sequence; even if the alternative possibilities are emphasised, there is still a bias towards the course of events that is actually shown to transpire.¹⁷ This is true even if that course of events is actually a counterfactual alternative to what ‘really happened’: the majority of counterfactual histories offer only a single alternative scenario, deriving from a single decisive moment or decision, ignoring the fact that there will be more such moments subsequently, endlessly multiplying the counterfactual possibilities – indeed, this is the most significant practical criticism of existing attempts at writing counterfactual histories, as it is of attempts at predicting the future on the basis of the evidence of the past.¹⁸

Games, however, can generate a range of different counterfactual possibilities, which can be followed over an extended succession of choices and potential divergences rather than necessarily focusing on a single turning point – and of course most games are intended to be played multiple times, with the expectation of varying outcomes on each occasion.¹⁹ Interactivity lies at the heart of the experience: games are not just to be looked at or memorised, but played,

¹⁷ McCall 2012: 13.

¹⁸ Cf. Morley 2017.

¹⁹ McCall 2016: 525.

introducing an element of co-creation between game designer and player.²⁰ This may be a matter of decision-making within the existing parameters of the game (that is, accepting the designer's overall conception of the workings of the world and their implementation of this conception in the game design), or, more ambitiously, of 'modding' the game in order to modify that conception and its inbuilt assumptions, allowing the exploration of counterfactuals that the designer had not envisaged, and perhaps revealing the underlying biases of the basic game.²¹ In either case, this offers a basis for considering the differences between the outcome(s) of the game and existing interpretations of the past, prompting players 'to articulate and explore their counterfactual imaginary', as Apperley puts it.²² This can be useful even if the simulation mechanism is crude or anachronistic; analysing divergences between the game and any plausible historical reality offers a critical perspective both on the designers' assumptions (which are likely to mirror wider assumptions about e.g. the dynamics of empires or the nature of urbanisation) and on the conditions which limited such developments in reality.²³ 'History in the Rankean sense of "wie es eigentlich gewesen ist" ["how it really was"] is subverted by an insistence on history as a multivalent process subject to many different possibilities, interpretations, and outcomes.'²⁴ This is still more the case when the game is designed explicitly for the purpose of exploring counterfactuals, either for pursuing the consequences of alternative lines of

²⁰ Elliott & Kapell 2014: 2.

²¹ Cf. Graham 2014. Apperley 2014: 193-4 on modifying *Europa Universalis II* to allow the Incas the possibility of successfully resisting the Spanish invaders, which was not an option in the original game.

²² 2014: 190.

²³ The obvious exceptions are FPS games with carefully constructed gameplay and narrowly defined missions, where the counterfactual possibilities are deliberately limited and essentially trivial.

²⁴ Uricchio 2005: 328; cf. Elliott & Kapell (2014: 7), on the way that games undermine teleology.

development or simply for opening up uncertainty and recognising the existence of contingency and uncertainty.²⁵

2. Thucydidean Counterfactuals

Thucydides is often represented as the originator and exemplar of the conception of the historian's task as showing 'how things really were', either as an end in itself or as a basis for understanding later events and predicting future developments.²⁶ Different traditions of reading Thucydides' work tend to converge on this idea: 19th-century historicist interpretations of him as a modern critical scientific historian, emphasising the careful evaluation of evidence in order to establish the truth of events; 20th-century social-scientific interpretations of his real project being the identification of covering laws and the normative principles of human behaviour, so that different events reveal the inherent predictability of decisions and events (for example, the idea of the 'Thucydides Trap' that made war between Athens and Sparta inevitable); finally, literary readings, especially those that see his work in 'tragic' terms, that identify the different elements of his narrative construction that present the fate of Athens as inevitable. There are disagreements both within and between these different traditions, for example about how far coherence and predictability are attributes of historical reality as well as of Thucydides' account of it, but there is consensus that the account focused on the reconstruction of a single concrete set of events, as they occurred. Thucydides' work is seen as the epitome of history as an account of *what actually happened*, explicitly contrasted (by himself and by his readers) with the myths, misconceptions and other false notions of the past held by those who have not properly enquired into the truth of things.²⁷

²⁵ This echoes the distinction between 'inferential' and 'analytical' counterfactuals offered by Tordoff (2014: 111).

²⁶ On interpretations of Thucydides as a model historian see generally Morley 2014.

²⁷ Cf. 1.22.

This Thucydides could be assumed to share the views of historians like Carr when it comes to counterfactual history, deriding it as something written for short-term entertainment rather than as a possession for ever. However, there is an alternative tradition, developed by scholars focused on understanding the literary aspects of the work, of reading Thucydides precisely in terms of his use of counterfactuals.²⁸ These in fact appear in his work in a variety of forms. Individuals speakers within his account regularly make counterfactual statements, predicting the possible consequences of different actions or of inaction, or pointing to how things might have turned out differently.²⁹ One might of course attribute this to Thucydides' accurate reporting of what was actually said by these speakers, rather than implying that he himself was concerned with such speculation; however, most modern readings of the speeches see them as primarily Thucydidean, aimed at least in part at raising questions and prompting reflection in the minds of his readers, given their enjoyment of the benefits of hindsight.³⁰ In any case, there are also counterfactual statements offered in the voice of the author, emphasising the existence of alternative possibilities. Sometimes these statements simply identify the role of chance and contingency in events ("If the wind had risen... the Plataeans would not have escaped"; 2.77.5), but sometimes they explore alternate timelines in more depth, as in 8.96.4-5, considering how the entire Athenian empire might have fallen in 411/10 if only the Peloponnesians had acted more boldly in the aftermath of the revolt of Euboea.

There is only a limited number of such explicit counterfactuals (Tordoff counts twelve), but this is enough to establish Thucydides' interest in such questions – very likely, in response to wider debates about 'what might have been' in the immediate aftermath of Athens' defeat.³¹ That surely offers grounds for considering the counterfactuals offered by speakers, and those that are

²⁸ Dover 1988; Flory 1988; Rood 1998; Tordoff 2014.

²⁹ Tordoff 2014: 106 gives a list of relevant passages.

³⁰ Flory 1988: 43.

³¹ Tordoff 2014: 110 on explicit counterfactuals; 116-21 on counterfactual debates in Athens.

implicit in other parts of the account, as being likewise part of his design. For example, Thucydides famously identified the Spartans' fear of a rising Athens as the 'truest cause' of the war (however exactly that phrase is translated and interpreted; 1.23.6), but it is clear that this fear was not in itself *sufficient* to provoke war, or at least not at that specific moment; the narrative presents both the underlying dynamics of Greek historical development charted earlier in the book, and the subsequent exchanges between Corcyreans, Corinthians, Athenians and Spartans, as playing their part in the complex, multi-layered causes of the outbreak of hostilities.³² What would have happened if the Athenians had chosen not to ally with the Corcyreans – merely the postponement of an inevitable conflict that would have played out in the same way, or a quite different set of events? Similarly, the unexpected death of Pericles in the plague is clearly marked as an unexpected, unpredictable turning point, creating the 'might have been' possibility that he could have kept Athenian over-ambition in check and maintained his defensive strategy rather than embarking on ultimately disastrous overseas aggression; in this light, the entire work has been read as a reflection on the counterfactual of Pericles' survival.³³ Every battle narrative, where decisive moments and the role of chance are highlighted, and every set-piece rhetorical confrontation where the possibility of the decision going the other way is canvassed through the persuasiveness of the arguments of the speaker who in the end loses the debate, serve to prompt Thucydides' readers to acknowledge that what actually happened was not the only possibility, and not even necessarily the most likely.

This clearly offers modern readers scope for modelling the different counterfactuals that are presented explicitly and implicitly in the work, whether as a means of exploring the course of the war itself (taking Thucydides' version as a more or less reliable account of events) or as a means of examining the historian's own conception (or a combination of the two), and whether

³² See generally Jaffe 2017.

³³ Will 2000.

through focusing on individual decisions and turning-points or through simulations of the entire period of history. Strategy games – for example, a video game like *Hegemony Gold: Wars of Ancient Greece* or a more traditional board game like *Pericles: the Peloponnesian Wars* – can certainly play a role in such analysis. War between Athens and Sparta is taken to be inevitable – or there would be no game – but its timing, let alone its course and its outcome, are clearly left open according to the decisions of the players, the role of chance and other features of game mechanics. Athens may not attack Syracuse, for example, or it may despatch the Sicilian expedition and succeed; or, even if the end result is the same, the conditions and constraints that led the Athenians to that decision may be highlighted more clearly. But we can also use this approach to explore events in Thucydides’ account where no other outcome seemed likely or even possible, to consider what would have needed to be different for it not to have occurred; that is, to explore the negative hypothesis.³⁴

On the face of it, the Melian Dialogue appears to be the section of Thucydides’ history least susceptible to counterfactual readings. Certainly that is the tradition of how it has been read, especially by the realist and neorealist schools of International Relations theory, taking the Athenian perspective (international anarchy and the rule of the stronger) as a straightforward description of reality or at least as a statement of Thucydides’ own view of the world.³⁵ Given the imbalance of power between the Athenians and the Melians, and the intransigence of both sides, an outcome where the former allowed the latter to remain neutral or the latter decided to surrender their sovereignty after all seems scarcely plausible. Further, even if a different result can be envisaged, it would be trivial in terms of the overall course of the war; this episode was by no means a decisive turning-point, but rather an opportunity for Thucydides to have the Athenians display the character and attitude that will shortly lead them into the disastrous

³⁴ Tucker 2016.

³⁵ Morley forthcoming.

decision to attack Syracuse. In terms of the traditional understanding of counterfactual questions, as opportunities to reflect on what might have been, this seems a non-starter.

However, as with other pairs of speeches in his account, Thucydides' chosen form in the Melian Dialogue highlights counterfactual possibilities: not the fairly trivial question of what would have happened if the Athenians or the Melians had changed their stance, but rather prompting the reader to consider the conditions, if any, under which either side might have chosen to do so. Insofar as the outcome was more or less inevitable, *why* was this the case? This question is especially significant if we seek to read the passage not solely as a historical account, telling us about specific past events, but in more general political terms – both to consider it as an exercise in political analysis, but also, as I've been aiming to do as part of a wider project in public engagement, to use it as a means of engaging students with issues of power, justice and negotiation. Should we understand the dogmatic positions of each side as the product of their situation (a serious power imbalance tending to generate similar attitudes in those involved), or of their innate characters, or of their chosen values, or of external constraints on their freedom of action – or a combination of different motives? How far might there be greater scope for a different outcome if some of the contextual detail is played down – if, for example, the Athenian role is played by someone with a more modern set of assumptions and values? Developing the Melian Dialogue as a game offered me the opportunity to explore two distinct sets of issues with wider implications, which are relevant to different potential audiences: the conditions under which military and diplomatic decision-making took place in ancient Greece, emphasising the differences between some ancient and modern attitudes, and the dynamics of power and weakness more generally.

3. The Melian Games

This is not in fact the first time that the gaming element of the Melian Dialogue has been recognised, nor is mine the first attempt at making it into a playable game. The significance of

the passage for the early development of game theory (discussed by pioneers in the field like John van Neumann and Thomas Schelling) led the economist (and later Greek Finance Minister) Yanis Varoufakis to build a ‘Prisoner’s Dilemma’ style game around it, in order to test theoretical predictions.³⁶ Each player, R and C, chooses a strategy (1-3) for the round; Figure 1 shows the resulting payoffs for each of them. Rationally, it makes no sense for either player to deploy the ‘co-operative’ strategy (C3/R3), since even if one wishes to aim for the co-operative outcome, there is the risk that the other player anticipates this and maximises their payoff by choosing a more aggressive strategy. The experiment did, however, show a tendency for C players to choose cooperation, while R players became increasingly likely to prefer aggression. The game is structured so that R has a clear advantage overall; Varoufakis’ argument is that, as in the Melian Dialogue, the weaker player will seek a cooperative argument (pleading with the Athenians for clemency) even where this is not the most logical approach.

	C1	C2	C3
R1	5, 0	-1, -1	10, -1
R2	-1, -1	0, 5	-1, -2
R3	-1, 10	-2, -1	6, 6

Figure 1: the first version of the ‘Melian Dilemma’ game in Varoufakis 1997: 89

My game is intended to engage to a much greater degree with the content of ‘Thucydides’ account, the details of the historical situation and of the arguments put forward by the two sides, rather than the underlying structure; it is still concerned with the dynamics and constraints of a situation of substantial power imbalance, and how strategies and attitudes are affected by playing one side or the other, but these are explored through a specific example rather than fully abstracted. The aim, in other words, is to prompt players to engage with ‘Thucydides’ depiction

³⁶ Morley 2015.

of events, while at the same time opening up (and highlighting) the counterfactual possibilities that are only implicit in his text and bringing to the foreground aspects of the historical context that he took largely or entirely for granted. While Thucydides' original readers certainly interpreted the Melian Dialogue with a degree of hindsight, in the light of the Sicilian Expedition and the eventual defeat of Athens, we moderns unavoidably encounter it also through awareness of how much has changed, especially in terms of values and humanitarian attitudes, between then and now, and how the Dialogue has been interpreted as a justification for 'realist' power untrammelled by scruples or ethics.

The idea of providing a limited degree of agency and choice within a relatively detailed depiction of an imagined, text-based world immediately brought to mind the model of the 'choose your own adventure' game. For someone of my vintage, this means the *Fighting Fantasy* books and the home computer versions of programmes like *Colossal Cave Adventure*, both seeking to replicate the experience of role-playing games for a single player.³⁷

For the Melian Dialogue, however, without any need to create a 'character' by generating attributes for strength, dexterity etc. or for making use of those attributes in determining the outcomes of combat or other uncertain situations in the course of the game, a still simpler model is possible: the interactive juvenile fictions produced in the 1970s by Tracker Books and Edward Packard.³⁸ These offer the reader a first- or second-person narrative, normally involving a journey or an exploration, regularly interrupted by the need to choose between limited options (normally just two) by turning to different pages to continue the story from that fork in the 'decision tree'.

³⁷ On the pre-history of such games, see Barton 2008; Peterson 2014: 607-27; Winnerling 2017; Pearson 2017. The first *Fighting Fantasy* book was Jackson & Livingstone 1982.

³⁸ Peterson 2014: 613-6.

The Melian Dialogue represents the ‘exploration’ of a process of negotiation, following different lines of argument and responding to the actions of the other side rather than venturing into a maze of twisty little passages and encountering monsters, but the underlying structure, focused on the decision tree (the way that one decision determines the next step) and on the constraints on action (there are only limited options available in any such negotiation), is perfectly suited to the form of the interactive text. There is again a precedent for developing such games with a didactic purpose: Dan Davies’ 2012 blogpost puts the reader in the position of “a junior member of the One World government”, tasked with producing a plan to solve the Greek debt crisis with the help of an adviser.³⁹ Davies’ express purpose is to demonstrate the unpopular (especially in left-wing circles) case that those involved in such planning were “conscientious international civil servants working in unimaginably difficult political constraints in an economic context that was irreparably broken before they got there”; the game successfully conveys the impression that “the whole issue is a twisty turny maze which at times seems to consist of nothing but false moves”, in most cases leaving players “with a strong feeling of having been bamboozled into something they didn’t really want to do”. The response of certain players was to object to both some of the constraints and some of the consequences, suggesting that the appearance of choice was an illusion as the outcomes were fixed according to Davies’ theoretical preferences, but there was general agreement that the activity of playing through the sequence of decisions – even via the clumsy mechanism of scrolling up and down to different numbered sections – was useful in identifying key issues and above all constraints.

³⁹ Davies 2012. See also the extensive discussion in the comments.

The year is 416 BCE. It is fifteen years since the great war between Athens and Sparta, the superpowers of ancient Greece, began. The two sides rarely confront one another directly; instead, each of them tries to extend its influence in regions of strategic importance, in the hope that, when the moment comes, they will have a decisive advantage. The strength of Sparta lies in its army; Athens is above all a naval power, controlling most of the islands of the Aegean Sea in an ‘alliance’ that looks to most people more like an empire.

The small island of Melos in the Cyclades, halfway between Athens and Crete, was originally a Spartan colony, and so had refused to join the Athenian alliance. Officially the Melians remain neutral, but in recent years their leaders have sided openly with Sparta. Now the Athenians have sent an expedition of 38 ships and 2,000 troops to demand the island's unconditional surrender.

You are Cleomedes, son of Lycomedes, one of the commanders of this expedition; together with Tisias, son of Tisimachus, you have been ordered by the Athenian people to seize control of Melos by any means necessary.

Continue

Figure 2: The opening of the Athenian version of *The Melian Game*

The development of a free software tool called *Twine* by Chris Klimas (original version 2009) has made it exceptionally straightforward to create such hypertext ‘adventures’, which are also easier to play than the old paper-based versions or Davies’ single text.⁴⁰ You simply add ‘passages’ to the story map, which allows clear visualisation of the developing decision tree (or in this case the two decision trees, one for the Athenians and one for the Melians; see figure 3); for each passage,

⁴⁰ <https://twinery.org/>.

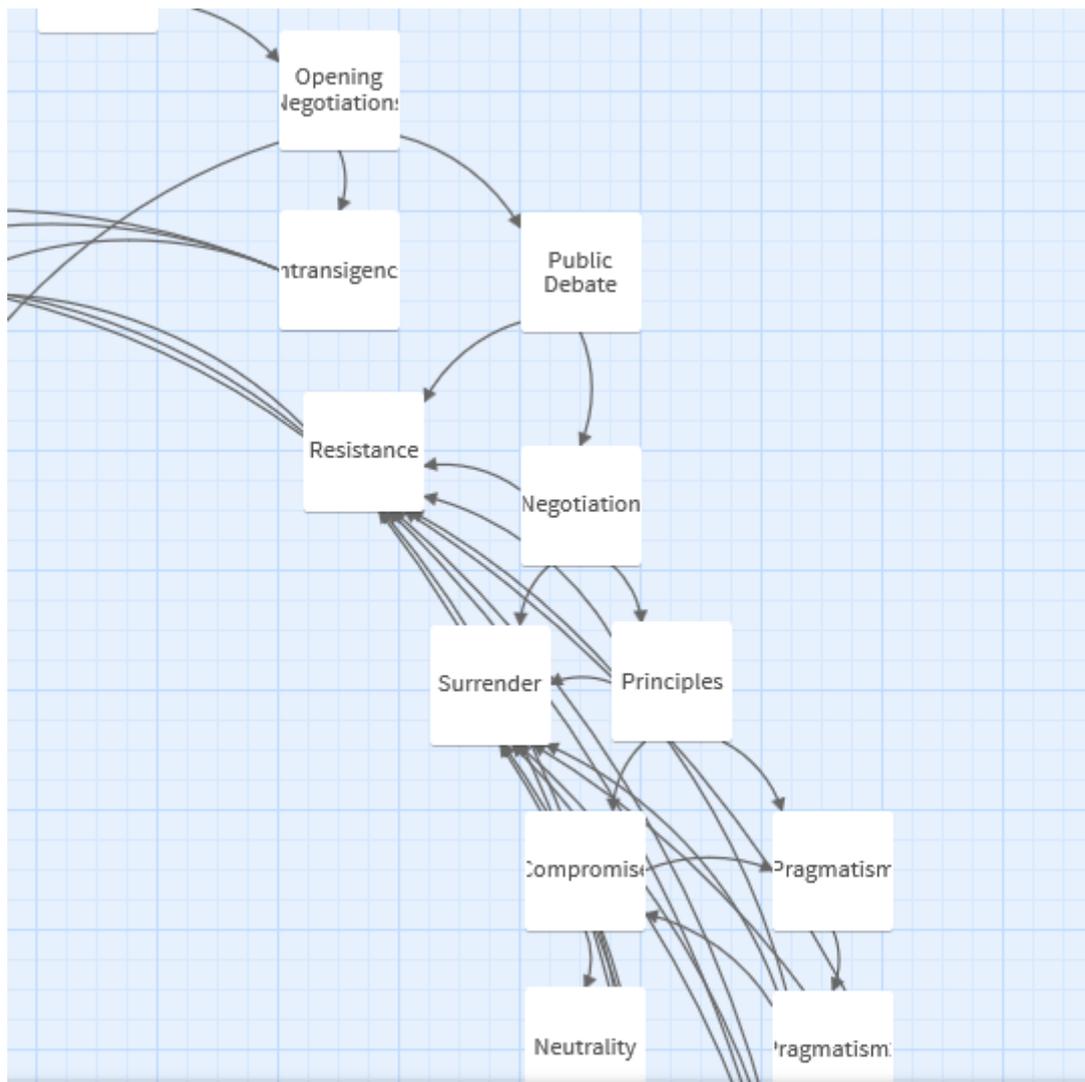
you write text in a simple editor and mark it up to create links between different passages, which readers viewing it through a web browser (a completed story/game can be saved as an .html file) see as hyperlinks for choices, taking them down different counterfactual paths (see figure 4).⁴¹

With such a simple and easy-to-use tool, the greatest effort can be focused on the design of the game, both to enhance the player experience and, most importantly, to ensure that it supports the didactic aims of the project. We can distinguish between the underlying structure of the game – the decision tree, the range of player options and the implied constraints – and the textual elements. For the purposes of exploring counterfactual questions, the former are more significant; in *The Melian Dilemma*, the text is taken from an adaptation of Thucydides' original, intended to convey the essence of the arguments and rhetoric, and the thinking behind them, while being clear and accessible.⁴² One possible use of the game is as a basis for discussion of the arguments being presented, to evaluate the assumptions behind them and their likely effect and plausibility; within a group (e.g. of school students), either the game can be played by individuals or pairs and then discussed afterwards, or each decision can be debated within the group as a whole.⁴³ It is also possible, though this has yet to be tested by gathering data about how the game is played by a statistically significant number of people, that the form of the arguments might indeed be found to influence a player's decisions.

⁴¹ See McCall 2018, including links to his *Path of Honors* Twine game, and Coyne 2017.

⁴² First published as Morley 2016.

⁴³ See Morley 2019.



Athenian version

Figure 3: part of the Twine decision tree for the Athenian version

The following principles underpinned the design of the game, with the aim of balancing historical plausibility against the twin goals of considering counterfactuals and exploring the significance of those counterfactuals, including contrasts between ancient and modern assumptions.

1. Choices and possibilities. In its original/authentic form, the Melian Dialogue consists of a series of arguments for clemency from the Melians, and the responses from the Athenians turning them down; eventually the Athenians issue an ultimatum, and the Melians decide to fight rather than surrender. Each of these represents a potential counterfactual moment, when the

Athenians could conceivably have decided to spare Melos, or the Melians could have decided to save themselves by surrendering. There are three other moments of decision, which are not so clearly marked in Thucydides: when the Athenians first arrive, and offer the Melians the chance to surrender rather than opening hostilities immediately; when the Melians request, and the Athenians agree, that the negotiation should take place in private rather than before the assembly; and the point at which the Athenians get tired of listening and bring the negotiations to a close. As should be clear from the introductory passage quoted above, there is not an option of avoiding confrontation altogether.

The Melian speaker wants to return to questions of principle. "How can it be just as good for us to be your slaves as for you to be our masters?"

Tisias responds: "If you surrender, you save yourselves from disaster. We benefit by saving ourselves the trouble of having to destroy you."

"And why can't we remain neutral, friends rather than enemies, but allied to neither side?"

How do you answer?

[[Because your hatred is evidence of our power, especially in the eyes of our subjects.

Don't you have any better arguments?->Gods2]]

(either: "[[Because if we fail to destroy you, others will think that we are weak. Time to decide.->Surrender]]", "[[Because if we fail to destroy you, others will think that we are weak. Time to decide.->Resistance]]")

[[That's a fair point. Sparta will lose an ally, without us having to expend time and effort in besieging your city. Let's discuss this further.->Compromise2]]

Figure 4: marked-up text within Twine. The text within double square brackets shows what the player will see as their options (“Because your hatred is evidence of our power...”) and the passage they will be taken to if they click on that choice. Other commands can be included within round brackets: “either” means there is an equal chance of getting one of the two possibilities – but of course the player does not know that there was ever an alternative.

As in any game, a crucial principle is that ‘core gameplay must offer defensible explanations of historical causes and assumptions’.⁴⁴ Players have very restricted choices – for

⁴⁴ McCall 2014: 233.

much of the time, the Athenians simply have to decide between accepting the Melians' request, allowing them to carry on talking and insisting that they make a decision – but that reflects the situation; given the norms of ancient Greek diplomacy and the treatment of ambassadors and representatives, the option of solving the deadlock by killing or imprisoning the Melian leaders is not available. The Melians are constrained by the power of the Athenians and their own weakness; the Athenians are constrained by Greek values and – as becomes evident if certain choices are made, but is already implied in the introduction – by the expectations of the Athenian assembly.

The final point to be noted with respect to the choices on offer is that the game is not wholly deterministic; at certain points, the same decision may lead to different outcomes (determined by chance), so that someone could play the game in exactly the same way several times and not always arrive at the same outcome. The prime example is that, if the Athenians do address the Melian assembly, the chances of success in persuading them to surrender improve if they are not too hasty in demanding a decision.

2. Outcomes. There is no specified goal, either for Athenians or Melians. Obviously the former are not expected to leave without having reduced the Melians one way or another, but it is left open whether or not it is preferable to do this peacefully, or whether failing to persuade Melos to surrender should be considered a failure. Obviously the ideal result for the Melians would be the preservation of their lives and freedom, but the chances of them succeeding in this are, as Thucydides' account indicates, vanishingly small; the main choice is rather between two different forms of defeat, surrendering to Athens or being slaughtered in the name of independence. Arguably, both sides are explorations of different ways to lose; the game is intended to prompt reflection on this choice, and on the constraints that set the rules of the game: the power and ruthlessness of Athens (and of its *demos*, even if a player might be more inclined to be merciful), the low probability that the gods, the Spartans or hope will prove to be reliable allies, the wider context of the war.

3. Strategies. Normally, players choose strategies on the basis of what seems most likely to achieve their goal. In the absence of pre-determined goals, the choice of strategy is more open; indeed, the relationship between strategies and goals may be less unidirectional. It is certainly possible for a player to decide a goal for themselves and seek to achieve it as effectively as they can; but it is also possible for them to decide on a strategy and explore its consequences instead. Playing either side in a ‘historically authentic’ manner – the Athenians as aggressive and arrogant, the Melians as defiant and delusional – rapidly leads in most cases to the historically ‘correct’ result of war and destruction; playing either side with a more modern perspective – deciding to prioritise peace and reason, for example – doesn’t guarantee a good outcome for anyone, but it opens up a wider range of possibilities, and hence material for reflection, both as to why such options may not always be available, and as to why they may nevertheless fail.

4. Conclusion

As in Davies’ gamified version of the Greek economic crisis – another situation where the strong confronted the weak and both sides found themselves severely constrained by external circumstances – the likely response of many players to *The Melian Dilemma* will be frustration; what sort of game offers no hope of winning, other than by becoming an imperialist Athenian? (Of course, in plenty of video games aggressive imperialism is taken for granted as the only available strategy). But thinking through the sources of that frustration is precisely the point: to identify the constraints (some of them self-imposed) on the original historical actors, to recognise the constraints inherent in any such situation of unequal power, and to become aware of the differences in attitudes and assumptions between ourselves and those who actually find themselves facing such decisions, ancient or modern. Ideally, the game is not to be played as an end in itself, but as a starting-point for wider discussion; and the next stage of its development will be to add contextual material, to support those who do simply stumble across it in making best use of the opportunity.

Developing historical events and processes as interactive texts demands little or no technical skill, but it requires us to clarify and model our thoughts and assumptions: to identify the significant counterfactual moments, the critical decisions and outcomes, and the structures and constraints that determine what options should be available to a player.⁴⁵ We can use this to develop games as tools to help teach students and others, introducing them to debates about causation or process; but there is also obvious potential for getting students themselves to develop Twine-based games as a form of analysis of events or structures, identifying the turning-points themselves and weighing up the different possibilities. This isn't suitable for every topic or every student – there is the 'creepy treehouse' problem noted by Graham and other academics who have attempted to incorporate digital resources into their pedagogy, namely that students may be suspicious of 'institutional' spaces and activities that mimic pre-existing digital environments and activities.⁴⁶ But there is great potential for illuminating some critical historical questions through this combination of two forms of the 'unhistorical', games and counterfactuals.

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⁴⁵ Kee 2014: 4.

⁴⁶ Graham 2014.

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