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THE MELIAN DILEMMA: REMAKING THUCYDIDES: FIRST RESPONSE

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Maria Fragoulaki

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Maria Fragoulaki is Lecturer in Ancient Greek History at Cardiff University.

(FragoulakiM@cardiff.ac.uk) ORCID ID: 0000-0003-2192-5785.

This piece is a response to Neville Morley's The Melian Dilemma: Remaking Thucydides.

 **Ambiguity, innovation,
and (political)
education for the**

'many'

The 'Melian Dilemma' is an innovative and ambitious experiment in producing an online interactive game based on the 'Melian Dialogue', one of the most well-known, read and discussed debates in Thucydides' History of the Peloponnesian War, in and outside classics. Instead of being an exchange of longer speeches, as is the case with all other debates in Thucydides, this debate is shaped as a dialogue, that is, a chain of shorter exchanges between the representatives of each city who take part in the debate, Athens and Melos. So being a unique occurrence in terms of its form, the Melian Dialogue is an experiment and an innovation by Thucydides himself. As Neville Morley (NM) points out, Thucydides' 'willingness to experiment ... surely gives us license to experiment ourselves' (Introduction § 6).

The Dialogue presents many challenges: there is a high degree of ambiguity and abstraction and a detached and intellectual tenor in the exchanges of the interlocutors. These features are typical of philosophical and sympotic contexts, rather than interstate negotiations in the context of a life-threatening military operation against a whole community, as is the case of the Athenian aggression against the Melians. It is the text's resistance to straightforward or 'easy' comprehension that creates the Thucydides' paradox, as NM notes. Despite its complexity, the text has a universal dimension too, outside its historical here-

and-now (the Peloponnesian War in fifth-century BCE Greece). The temptation for politicians, commentators, thinkers and groups of all historical periods to extract useful political lessons of general value out of this Dialogue has been irresistible. The price of this process is often an oversimplification which ignores the details (NM, Introduction §2), reducing the Dialogue's (and Thucydides' at large) subtle argumentation and historical thinking to 'universalising principles or maxims that are assumed to explain things in simple terms' (NM, Introduction, §3): a sort of Procrustean bed which 'severs' the text as regards not only its historical context and specificity, but also its intellectual and argumentative subtlety.

For example, does the Dialogue teach us that the powerful must win and the powerless must fall? A possible answer is 'Yes', since the Athenians do conquer the island after all. This is indeed the expected outcome, in the light of the Athenians' own imperialistic rhetoric in the Dialogue. Yet the Athenian rhetoric exposes the fears and weaknesses of an imperialistic power too, the very factors that provide room for negotiation. As for the Melian rhetoric, it is not the sort of thing that powerless people say to the powerful, in order to save their lives. As hinted above, the Melians are implausibly composed and 'academic', and their words reveal not only the weaknesses, but also the strengths and sources of confidence and mental stamina of those who do not possess the military power.

Although the Melians are subjugated by the Athenians in the end, their subjugation proves a problematic and long-term operation. As Thucydides writes in his own voice (that is, outside the Dialogue), it happens after a prolonged siege and only after treason among the Melians. He also says that the Athenian assault, which takes place in the context of the Melian Dialogue, is not the first time the Athenians have tried to conquer the Melians. These qualitative features put the Melians' mental and moral strengths in perspective, and complicate the schema 'powerful Athenians vs. powerless Melians'. Things become even more complicated when one considers that Thucydides must have deliberately downplayed Melos' resources (Kallet 2001), in order to create the 'powerless Melians' that fitted his historical lesson. So a degree of unpredictability regarding the outcome of this confrontation is inscribed within the historical situation itself (that is, the fifth-century power relations).

The 'Melian Dilemma' is a modern creative remaking of Thucydides' Melian Dialogue in the shape of an online game to be used as 'a resource for enhancing political literacy and understanding' (NM, Introduction §3). The game format entails shortening of the text and elimination of some of its complexities. The links in the section 'Using the Game' provide useful context, also showing that the 'Melian Dilemma' is part of a wider and long-term engagement with Thucydides' use in modern educational contexts. The online video '[Might and Right](#)' illustrates the

remaking of the text involved and the pedagogic value of role playing.

The player is invited to actively participate in decision-making and counterfactual thinking, by exploring lines of argument and potential outcomes. The game animates discussion, review and choice among alternatives that can be tried and re-tried/re-played. The possibility itself of replaying and negotiating history is empowering and constructive and a major gain in educational contexts. Presently the number of alternative options out of which the players can choose is restricted, but there is clear potential for more elaborate applications (see also below). The game is an exercise in problem-solving and strategic foresight, core values of effective policy in many areas beyond International Relations (e.g. citizenship, employability etc.) Strategic foresight features prominently in Thucydides as key to good political leadership ('pronoia' in Greek).

The game will be particularly, but not solely, useful and welcome in teaching environments, especially in classrooms. Reader-response theory and in particular the concept of 'interpretive communities', closely connected with Stanley Fish (1980), can be illuminating in this connection. Reader-response theory shifted the focus from the text as a fixed entity to the reader and their experience in structuring meaning through the process of reading-receiving the text (Tompkins 1980). The group discussion that the game generates in a classroom is an

excellent exercise of collective negotiation of meaning and interpretation in the face of ambiguity and unpredictability. Although its context is that of IR, the game enhances the transferrable skill of democratic literacy too, since it enacts a context of individual and collective participation, responsibility, and decision-making.

Games related to the classical antiquity (online and more conventional card or board ones) is a burgeoning global market today. As someone who teaches ancient Greek history, literature, and language in higher education in the UK, I can easily imagine the 'Melian Dilemma' animating discussion and promoting teamwork in the classroom. Pedagogical literature stresses the centrality of experience, experimentation and active roles and techniques, game being one such technique, in a holistic and dialectic approach to learning and teaching (Kolb 2015). By transferring and negotiating authority from – and between – teacher and students, the game promotes a more interactive, inclusive, and dynamic model of learning and teaching. These are big questions and desiderata in education today, especially in classics and the humanities.

Part of the game's political education and message is the creative connection between education and the outside world: The role of the 'involved student' interacts, in a transferrable manner, with the role of the 'involved citizen' with mutual benefits for each role. Through the game format, the 'Melian Dilemma' makes Thucydides a

popular and accessible source of knowledge, widening the base of those who have access to a 'difficult' classical text, at times perceived as socially exclusive and elitist. A collateral benefit of the game is the realisation that 'Melian Dialogues' are played in different social and interpersonal contexts: living rooms, bedrooms, offices, and teaching classrooms themselves (of ancient history and other disciplines). Thus the 'Melian Dilemma' provides the potential to teach power relations and negotiation of hierarchies outside politics, connecting a lesson of politics and war with real-life experience.

Target groups, pleasure, and the way forward

Since the game is primarily intended to be a tool of political literacy and education, it is important to identify more precisely 'Who will be educated and benefit from the "Melian Dilemma"'. The question of target group(s) is an important one, since the very notion of Thucydides' 'difficulty' is relative and applicable only to some environments. In the light of Fish's (1980) interpretive communities, mentioned above, difficulty/ease and ambiguity/stability of meaning depend on time, place and audience. If classicists need dictionaries and commentaries to illuminate linguistic, stylistic, and historical problems of Thucydides' text, political or social scientists read in it basically a story of war between

two superpowers; it might be a pretty long read but rather easy to understand in its broad lines and comparative potential (e.g. Sahlins 2004).

Different students/players of 'The Melian Dilemma' have different needs and interests and are likely to receive different lessons. More reflection on the question of different audiences, potential aims and outcomes of the game would produce adaptations, refinements and variants, which would in turn generate more refined and diverse discussions of the problems involved with the students. For example: in the game's present version 'the gods' is a term that stands as a comprehensive signifier of moral considerations and arguments. An elaboration of the 'gods' category would include variants such as 'justice', 'loyalty', 'shamefulness', 'honour', kinship' or 'morality', which would sharpen the focus of discussion and raise awareness of inter-related epistemological fields involved, such as the social history and literature of ancient Greece, Ethics and IR, social science etc.

Such an elaboration relates to the question of digital technology and a software that could produce a game of increased unpredictability, open-endedness, and pleasure. I would like to imagine a version with more options of diplomatic negotiation and compromise. Contingency is another parameter that could be factored into a future version of the game, stretching open-endedness even further: for example how would natural disasters/phenomena, such

as earthquakes or fires (which are recorded by Thucydides elsewhere) could have interacted with the historical outcome of the Athenian assault against Melos? This would facilitate intra-textual references and comparative discussion with other sections of Thucydides, such as the siege of Plataea. In addition to the educational benefit, a technologically more sophisticated game would probably produce a more adventurous interactive sensory environment (potentially a 3-D video game), which would enhance pleasure. The 'Melian Dilemma' provides an innovative tool to access the lessons of a challenging and fundamental classical text: a project with great educational-technological potential, for now and the future.

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