



Virtual Ziggurats

Orientalist Views and Playful Spaces

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And in the midst of the other is still to this day the sacred enclosure of Zeus Belus, a square of two furlongs each way, with gates of bronze. In the centre of this enclosure a solid tower has been built, of one furlong's length and breadth; a second tower rises from this, and from it yet another, till at last there are eight. The way up to them mounts spirally outside all the towers; about halfway in the ascent is a halting place, with seats for repose, where those who ascend sit down and rest. In the last tower there is a great shrine.
Herodotus, Book 1.181, translated by G. Rawlinson

With this quotation, this fifth-century BCE Greek historian provides us with a vivid description of Etemenanki, the ziggurat of Babylon. The ziggurat is one of the most enduring symbols of the ancient Near East: From paintings to movies to books to video games, versions of the stepped constructions emerge in popular culture and imagination all the way from classical Greece until today. One could even argue that the ziggurat is a transhistorical symbol (Crowther 2002); it has existed as a symbol not only produced by and related to the ancient Near East, but has transcended its original historical context and has acquired new meanings and images over time. In this article, I explore this transhistoricity of the ziggurat by examining it within western, modern, popular imagination, and particularly within the context of video games. For this, I take an art-historical approach, examining ziggurats from various games to create a ziggurat typology as portrayed in video games. In doing that, I explore how modern conceptions of the ziggurat affect and shape our understanding of the

Side-view of a ziggurat in *Civ VI*. Source: <https://steamcommunity.com/sharedfiles/filedetails/?id=954696843>.

Near East, and how this can be tied to Edward Said's concept of orientalism (see also Mol and Politopoulos in this issue). I conclude with a brief discussion on how we can reframe the ziggurat within popular culture in order to increase knowledge and awareness about the history and cultures of the ancient Near East today.

What Is a Ziggurat?

In terms of structure, ziggurats consisted of a series of platforms of descending size (fig. 1). A temple or shrine on the top-most platform could be reached by an external staircase located on one side of the construction. These massive platforms had facades of widely spaced buttresses and their core was filled with sun-dried mud-brick and rubble (McMahon 2016: 322). The origins of the ziggurat can be traced to the religious architectural traditions of the sixth-millennium BCE Ubaid period and the following Uruk period (4000–3300 BCE) in Mesopotamia. The famous Eridu temple sequence (fig. 2) provides a glimpse into how ziggurats were first realized (Oates 1960; Safar, Mustafa, and Lloyd 1981). In Eridu, a city in southern Mesopotamia, we see that a temple was initially constructed during the Early Ubaid period (5300–4500 BCE, Phase 16). This temple was at some point covered, and another temple was constructed on top of it, now sitting on top of a low platform. This platform was expanded both horizontally and vertically, with the construction of a series of temples on top of each other, until it was elaborated

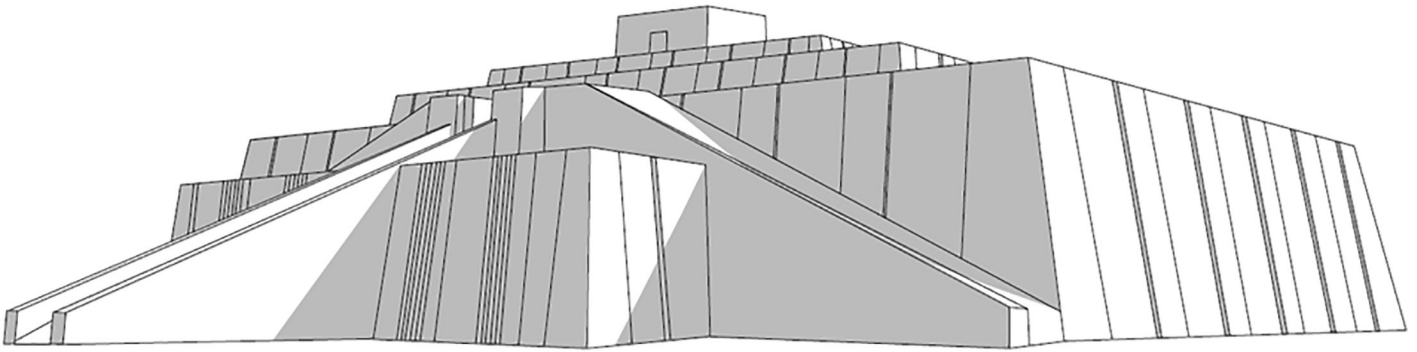


Figure 1. Schematic reconstruction of the third millennium BC ziggurat at Ur, South Iraq. Source: McMahon 2016.

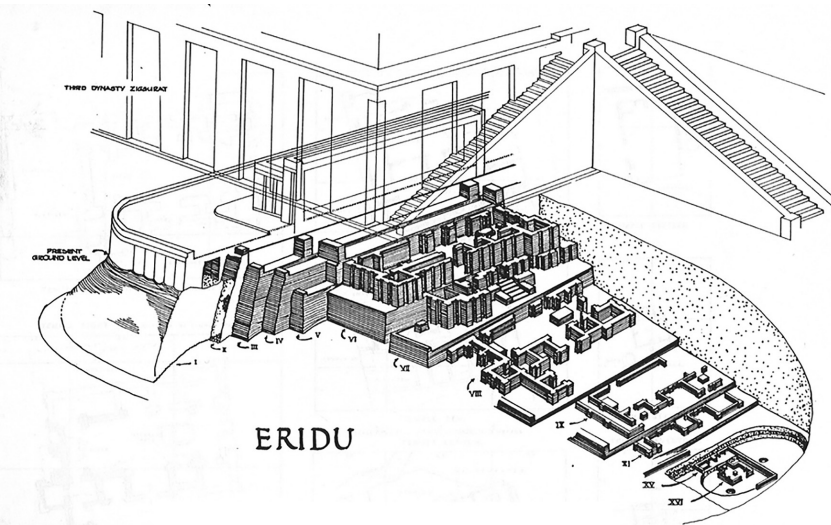


Figure 2. The temple sequence in the ancient city Eridu. Source: Heinrich and Seidl 1982.



Figure 3. The reconstructed Ur-Nammu Ziggurat at Ur today. Source: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ziggurat_of_Ur.

into a stepped construction toward the end of the third millennium BCE. The Eridu example reveals that the creation of ziggurats was the result of the conservative architectural traditions that required the location of a shrine or a temple to remain the same throughout the ages. Similar processes were repeated at several other Mesopotamian cities.

The first ziggurats that were not a product of this gradual accretion but were intentionally built in stepped formation were commissioned by the Ur III king Ur-Nammu (2112–2095 BCE) in whose reign the previously mentioned ziggurat at Eridu was built. Other ziggurat complexes during this period were constructed at the cities of Uruk and Nippur, although the most visually famous example comes from the city of Ur. The ziggurat of Ur was also commissioned by Ur-Nammu and was dedicated to the patron deity of the city, Nanna/Sin; it possibly comprised three platforms (Woolley and Moorey 1982). It was later restored by Nabonidus, the last king of the Neo-Babylonian Empire in the sixth century BCE, this time with seven platforms. Today, it can be seen in its restored state, a project that took place during the Saddam Hussein era, with its lower part corresponding to the Ur III period and the two upper parts corresponding to the Neo-Babylonian (fig. 3).

From the second millennium onward ziggurats appeared in northern Mesopotamia as well, although mostly confined within the core of Assyria. Some of the most famous examples of northern Mesopotamia come from the Assyrian capital cities (Politopoulos 2020), such as the ziggurat at Assur, dedicated to the namesake god; the ziggurat at Kalhu (Nimrud), dedicated to Ninurta; and the spiraling ziggurat at Dur-Sharrukin (Khorsabad). In a recent article, Augusta McMahon thoroughly reexamined the



Figure 4. John Martin, *Belshazzar's Feast*, 1821. The Tower of Babel and a ziggurat can be seen in the background. Source: [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Belshazzar%27s_Feast_\(Martin\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Belshazzar%27s_Feast_(Martin)).

role and function of ziggurats in the ancient Near East, concluding that they were “integrative structures,” reinforcing a Mesopotamian unity by referencing deep cultural traditions with their consistent format (McMahon 2016: 335). It is exactly this message of a shared cultural identity that made ziggurats stand out as defining symbols of Mesopotamian civilizations and influenced the perceptions of the Near East for thousands of years.

It is noteworthy, however, that after ziggurats stopped being built or used, little remained of them. Contrary to, for example, the pyramids of Egypt, which still remain visible in the landscape, ziggurats were buried or destroyed. The image of their shape remained alive only in textual sources, such as the aforementioned quotation by Herodotus as well as the Bible. This reimagining of the ziggurat through texts created a different view and significance to these major structure. This change is examined in the following section, discussing how the architectural aspects and religious message have shifted over centuries, and how they are perceived in popular media today.

Ziggurats through the Ages

The characteristic shape of ziggurats, in combination with their sheer size, has fascinated people from different cultures since antiquity. We have already seen a description of the ziggurat of Babylon by Herodotus. The Greek historian refers to Etemenanki, the ziggurat erected by Nebuchadnezzar II (605–562 BCE) and dedicated to the Babylonian god Marduk. It is unclear whether Herodotus ever visited Babylon (MacGinnis 1986), and his thorough description of the city is often considered to be second hand, but the account that relates to the ziggurat can be evaluated as broadly accurate with some inaccuracies. What is important to stress, in this case, is how Herodotus

attempts to explain to his readers the importance of this building by associating it with the worship of Zeus. This hellenization already reveals, in my opinion, a first exoticization of the ziggurat, while trying to contextualize it within Herodotus’ own cultural references.

The Etemenanki, however, is present not only in the popular imagination of ancient Greece but has also been seen as the inspiration for the tower of Babel. The biblical narrative describes a united human culture that speaks the same tongue. Upon their migration to the land of Shinar they decide to construct a tower so tall that it could reach heaven. As a punishment for their arrogance, God makes them speak in different languages, so they can no longer communicate with each other, and they scatter around the world. This story comes from Gen 11:1–9 and has been a crucial influence for our perception of ziggurats. In this story, the tower, possibly a ziggurat, is seen as an arrogant creation, a futile attempt by

humans to reach God not through belief, but through hubris.

The perception of ziggurats as spaces of arrogance against God has heavily influenced the view of the Near East in western art. A classic example is John Martin’s nineteenth-century painting of *Belshazzar’s Feast* (fig. 4). Here we see both stepped ziggurat (to the right) besides a cylindrical structure directly predicated upon Pieter Brueghel’s iconic portrayal of the *Tower of Babel*. This Renaissance painting reveals its Eurocentric, Christian disdain via its combination of the worst of pagan Rome—each platform resembling the Colosseum—alongside characteristics of later Muslim architecture (fig. 5; Orenstein 2001). In Martin’s work, we see the arrogant and sacrilegious acts of the Babylonian king Belshazzar, who supposedly used sacred vessels of the enslaved Israelites to serve wine at his banquet. The ziggurat(-like) buildings form the backdrop for this scene, themselves surrounded by dark, stormy clouds, further illustrating their association with dark powers and mysticism. This theme of the ziggurats towering above scenes of sacrilege, dressed in storm and lightning is present in more of Martin’s works, emphasizing the ideas of ziggurats as spaces of arrogance and mysticism.

As such, it can be argued that, already from antiquity, ziggurats have been associated with exoticism and gradually evolved in popular perception to be places of mysticism, chaos, and civilization in decline. This becomes particularly evident in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century paintings, and in many ways, they engulf the broader perception of the ancient Near East as a place of mysticism and cultural decadence that was popular during those periods. This conceptualization of the east through western lenses has been closely studied by Said in his influential book *Orientalism* (1979). In the book, Said argues that what is understood as “the Orient,” in this case the Near East, is actually a view of the East based on western experience, not an innate one

(Said 1979: 1). The divide that is created here, between the Occident and the Orient, is the result of the colonial and imperialistic expansion of the West toward, among other places, the Near East. Europeans were extracting industrial resources and luxury goods, claiming a right to rule (by force) as bringers of civilizations and securers of peace.

The phenomenon of orientalism, however, is not only related to political control, but rather an intention or a will to understand or in some cases control, manipulate, and incorporate, the Orient through various interests (Said 1979: 12). Said particularly highlights the French and the British (Said 1979: 255–84) as those who exerted significant influence in shaping the western image of the Orient. Among these interests are the scholarly, economic, sociological, historical, and philological, but especially the aesthetic. During the nineteenth century, for example, we have the emergence of the concept of recreational tourism, a new form of organized travel for Europeans who wanted to witness the “wonders of the Orient.” Various enterprises were developed in the West, creating booklets and other promotional material, presenting the Near East as a place of leisure and recreation, where a mostly upper-class audience could safely (with the protection of the colonial forces) visit various historical locations (Hunter 2004).

Below, I explore how this aesthetic interest of the Orient is presented in modern media and specifically in video games (but also see Chow 2012). Said recognized the need to investigate modern media as to how they intensify and reinforce stereotypes and argued that “so far as the Orient is concerned, standardization and cultural stereotyping have intensified the hold of the nineteenth-century academic and imaginative demonology of ‘the mysterious Orient’” (Said 1979: 26). Video games are chosen here as a case study because they are the currently leading entertainment medium worldwide, with tens of millions of players across all age groups spending billions of hours experiencing the past through games (Politopoulos et al. 2019: 164). As such, it is not only worthwhile, but crucial that we understand and discuss issues of historical representation in a medium that affects the perception of the past for such a large population. The choice of ziggurats is based on the fact that, as discussed above, ziggurats are powerful symbols of the Near East that have fascinated scholars and artists alike, often serving as proxies for the representation of the entire region.

Pop Ziggurats

In reviewing ziggurats in video games, I am dividing them into two categories: authentic ziggurats, which include accurate representations of ziggurats; and fantasy ziggurats, which include any other instance where a building has been termed a ziggurat. This allows for a comprehensive look at the diversity of views related to these buildings. While this list is not exhaustive, it does include all the different types of ziggurats one can encounter in video games.



Figure 5. Pieter Bruegel the Elder, *The Tower of Babel*, 1563.

Source: [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Tower_of_Babel_\(Bruegel\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Tower_of_Babel_(Bruegel)).

Authentic ziggurats are extensively used in three popular games, starting with the *Sid Meier's Civilization* series (*Civ*). *Civilization* is a grand strategy game where the player controls one civilization or culture of the world (e.g., Persians, Sumerians, but also England, Brazil), and competes on an automatically generated map against other civilizations (Mol et al. 2017). In *Civ IV* (2005) the ziggurat does not represent a temple, but rather a building that replaces the courthouse for the Sumerian civilization (fig. 6). It is a perk of the Sumerian civilization that it can be built before other cultures can build their own courthouses, and it provides bonuses in land management and agriculture. This is an interesting interpretation of the ziggurat, as temples in the ancient Near East were indeed responsible for land management, taxation, and resources distribution. The building itself has three platforms, a temple on the top, and a staircase in the front, partly covered by a domed gate. While domed architecture is a much later addition to Near Eastern architecture, the general appearance of *Civ IV's* ziggurat is broadly accurate, providing an interpretation of Ur-Nammu's ziggurat at Ur, discussed above. *Civilization V* (2010) takes a different approach: The ziggurat now replaces the temple for the Sumerian civilization in the “Wonders of the Ancient World” scenario. This time, instead of offering administrative bonuses (i.e., allowing the player more effectively to manage the civilization), it offers science and culture bonuses (i.e., bonuses that help the player to advance the civilization faster). The visual representation of the building, in the form of an avatar, shows a stepped construction

not unlike an actual ziggurat, with a domed temple at the top. Finally, *Civ VI* makes the ziggurat a unique improvement for the Sumerian civilization that once again provides science and culture bonuses (fig. 7). In the game, it is represented as a two-stepped construction surrounded by a moat, with a domed temple at the top. In *Civ*, therefore, the ziggurat is integrally tied to the concept of the Sumerian civilization, and it is portrayed with an abstract conception of a stepped construction, sprinkled with various other elements of Near Eastern architecture from different periods.

In the real-time strategy game *Age of Empires* (*AoE*, 1997) the ziggurat appears as a wonder that can be constructed by Near Eastern civilizations. In *AoE*, constructing a wonder is a requirement for victory, and as such its role is central. The wonder is termed a “Royal Ziggurat of Ur,” clearly referencing Ur-Nammu’s ziggurat at Ur (fig. 8). In the game, the ziggurat has two



Figure 6. The ziggurat in *Civ IV*.
Source: https://civilization.fandom.com/wiki/Civilization_Games_Wiki.

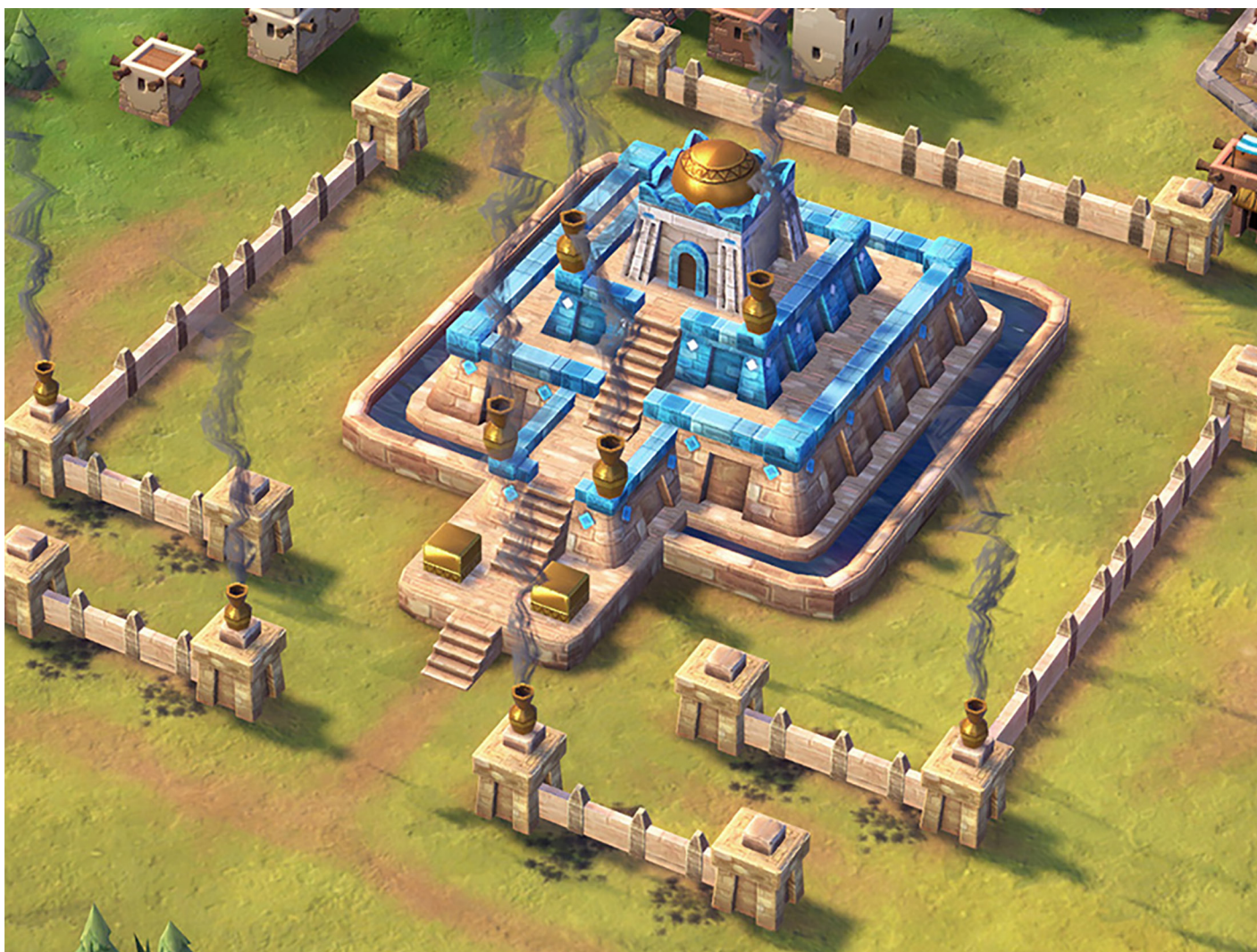


Figure 7. The ziggurat in *Civ VI*. Source: https://civilization.fandom.com/wiki/Civilization_Games_Wiki.



Figure 8. The available wonder in *Age of Empires* with the Royal Ziggurat of Ur in the top right corner. Source: [https://ageofempires.fandom.com/wiki/Wonder_\(Age_of_Empires\)](https://ageofempires.fandom.com/wiki/Wonder_(Age_of_Empires)).

platforms with a temple at the top, with once again domed elements dressed in gold. It can be constructed by the Babylonians, who indeed had ziggurats, but also by the Achaemenid Persians and the Hittites, who never constructed any ziggurats. Finally, in the recent grand strategy game *Old World* (2020), a ziggurat is one of the many buildable wonders. It belongs to the weaker wonders, though, being relatively cheap to build and providing only small bonuses. If built by a player, it provides bonuses in culture and allows for other improvements in cities to be constructed at a lower cost. Visually, it consists of three platforms with a temple at the top. In the artistic representation, which appears when the player completes the wonder, the image shows a ziggurat very similar to Ur-Nammu's at Ur, but

NETRICSA
ZIGGURAT

STRATEGY TIPS (16)

ENEMIES (18)

WEAPONS (9)

STATISTICS

Welcome to NetricSA!

Saying game. Please wait...

de Chiapas

Balenque - Valley of the Jaguar

Teotihuacan - The City of the Gods

Teotihuacan - Serpent Yards

Teotihuacan - The Pit

Ziggurat

ZIGGURAT

Sam my man! Seems like we went even further in time. Here is some brief information about this place: Ziggurat is a temple tower of the ancient Assyrians and Babylonians, having the form of a terraced pyramid. It is old, it is ancient, it is ancient and old! And it is full of traps (unfortunately).

You must find a way to exit that building... alive, of course.

My historical data tells me that there is a large open terrain around Ziggurat with some houses and a road to Persepolis, the biggest city of the old Babylonian civilization. At the end of that city lies the famous Tower of Babel - our next destination. According to the spaceship database, that is where the Babylonians hid their portal.

You will notice that we have no weapons except your basic ones. Obviously, the portal works only for living beings and some small objects. Bad luck. Whatever, there is no time to lose.

Head onwards to Persepolis!

F2 STATISTICS
F3 READ NEXT
CONTINUE

Figure 9. The ziggurat of *Serious Sam: Second Encounter* with its accompanying explanation text in the game. Source: <https://gigi.nullneuron.net/comp/images/sshd2epe/sshd2e01.png>.



Figure 10. The promo picture for the game *Ziggurat*. Source: www.microsoft.com.

each platform is fully covered with plants, making each platform a garden. No references to the hanging gardens of Babylon are intended, as they appear elsewhere in the game.

Finally, an interesting example of an authentic ziggurat comes not from a strategy game but a first-person shooter. *Serious Sam: The Second Encounter* (2002) is a game that follows mercenary Sam “Serious” Stone in his attempt to stop Mental, an extraterrestrial overlord. The game takes place at various points in history where Sam gets to travel to fight hordes of intruders. In the sixth area of the game, he visits Babylon, as he proudly exclaims upon entering the level: “Good morning Babylon.” The various areas of the game serve mostly as backdrops for the core, but it is still interesting to consider how the game perceives ziggurats. The level consists of a courtyard that contains several smaller temple-like buildings, from which one can retrieve armor, weapons, and other items required for the progression of the game. At the end of the level the player visits the actual ziggurat, a stepped building with large decorations. What is immediately noticeable is that it is a collection of various Near Eastern tropes with no real consideration for coherence (fig. 9). One can see Assyrian reliefs from Dur-Sharrukin, the symbol of the god Assur, characteristic Persian decorations such as Persian guards and floral motifs, *lamassus* the famous winged bull statues, even Pegasus makes an appearance although the mythical flying horse has nothing to do with Mesopotamian mythology. On the whole, the patchwork of Near Eastern culture will be immediately recognizable by a broader audience, creating the feel of a Near Eastern

temple; but clearly the developers were not interested in recreating an actual monument.

Concluding on the authentic ziggurats, a number of things can be observed. First, Ur-Nammu’s ziggurat of Ur is basically the blueprint for all of them. Being reconstructed, it does provide the best visual reference for any developer who wants to include a ziggurat in a game. Furthermore, authentic ziggurats seem to appear predominantly in strategy games, which may derive from the fact that there are not that many games attempting to reconstruct authentic environments of Sumer, Assyria, or Babylonia to begin with. Notable exception here is *Serious Sam* with its visit to a supposed Babylon. Finally, authentic ziggurats in these games provide a generic representation of an ancient Near Eastern temple. It is very much associated with culture and cultural production, and sometimes with administration and resource management.

Moving on to the second category, what is termed here as fantasy ziggurats, a clear starting point is the namesake game *Ziggurat* (2014). *Ziggurat* is a first-person shooter, dungeon-crawler game (fig. 10). This means that the player has a first-person perspective and has to make his way through a series of dungeons. Each dungeon is procedurally generated, so one will never play the same level twice. Despite what the name implies, the “ziggurat” of the game looks like a stereotypical medieval castle dungeon. The surrounding environment is made of huge blocks of stones, with the occasional open space and gothic architectural elements. The player fights imaginative enemies with magic and

sword and, all in all, nothing reminds you of the Near East but the name. The concept of a ziggurat in the game is one of a place of horror and magic, where the player has to battle her way through monsters and traps.

Another famous ziggurat can be found in the strategy game *Warcraft III*, also appearing as a structure in the following massive multiplayer online role-playing game *World of Warcraft*. In *Warcraft III*, the ziggurat is a building that the Undead use to increase their population, something like a “house.” In *World of Warcraft*, the building appears at various Undead cities and settings and is integral to the identity of the Undead. They often use it as a living space or as a place of experiments. In terms of appearance, one can only describe it by showing it (fig. 11). It is a pyramid-like structure with an entrance on one side, an opening on the top, and a large gem floating at the top. This gem is also used as a static weapon in *Warcraft III*. Its association with the Undead suggests that ziggurats are buildings related to dark magic and mysticism.

There is one other namesake game, *ZiGGURAT* (2012), which is a retro-style arcade shooter for mobile phones. Here, one plays as the “last human on earth,” being stationary on top of a stepped pyramid—the ziggurat—and fighting off enemies that are attacking from all directions by shooting them with lasers (fig. 12). While the game has been praised for its minimalist approach, there is no other information provided regarding why there is a ziggurat in the game, or how the player ended up being the last human on earth, so it is difficult to assess the representation of the building. The choice seems to be stylistic, as the shape of the ziggurat is beneficial to the gameplay. Be that as it may, the ziggurat is once again associated with monsters and struggle.

A final example comes from the reboot of *Tomb Raider* (2013). The last level of the game is called the Chasm Ziggurat and it is the last part of a series of chasm levels of the game (fig. 13). The broader setting of these levels fits a Far East aesthetic, with *onis* and other Japanese-style enemies. Besides the name, there is no other connection with the ziggurats of the Near East. However, the difficulty of the level and the culmination of the story at the top of the chasm ziggurat speaks of a place of fear and struggle: a place that ultimately needs to be overcome, tamed, and conquered in order for the player to succeed.



Figure 11. A ziggurat in *World of Warcraft*. Source: <https://wow.gamepedia.com/Ziggurat>.



Figure 12. A screenshot from the mobile game *ZiGGURAT*. Source: [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ziggurat_\(video_game\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ziggurat_(video_game)).

Conceptualizing the Virtual Ziggurat

In order to conceptualize the virtual ziggurat, we can draw some broader conclusions. Ziggurats in games are:

- Any stepped structure
e.g., *ZiGGURAT*
- A generic representation of any Near Eastern temple
e.g., *Age of Empires*, *Serious Sam*
- A place of mystery and/or chaos
e.g., *Tomb Raider*, *Ziggurat*, *Serious Sam*

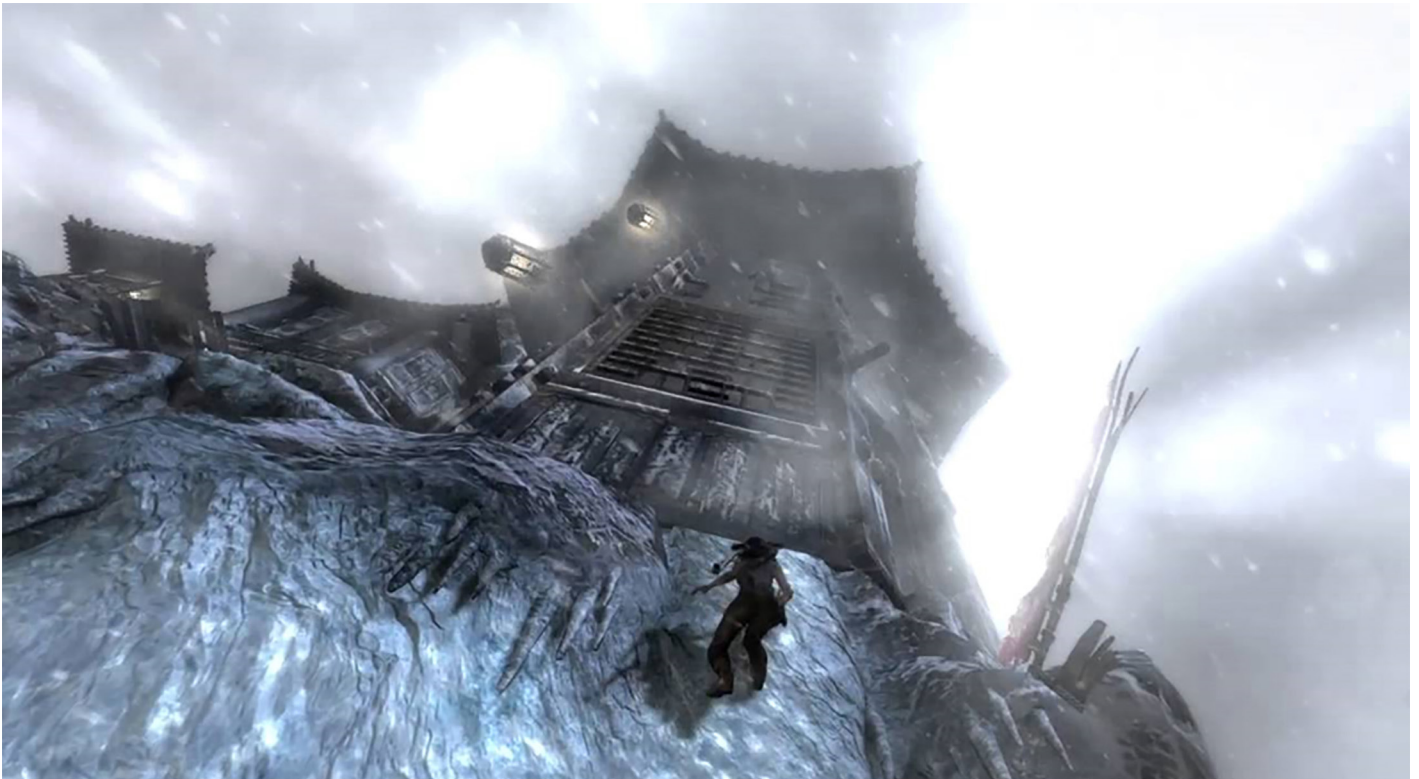


Figure 13. Screenshot from the Chasm Ziggurat level in *Tomb Raider*. Source: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=36SSyq56G-c>.

As becomes evident from this wide diversity of virtual ziggurats, this is not a discussion about authenticity. Rather, it is a discussion about perception: How does popular culture perceive the ziggurat? In that sense, the ziggurat encapsulates our conception of the ancient Near East. When we think of Mesopotamia or Mesopotamian temples, we visualize ziggurats. Strategy games have illustrated this point, using ziggurats as the main religious building of Mesopotamian civilizations, and even connecting it to a redistributive economy. However, ziggurats are not only temples, but in popular culture they also represent the exotic and the mystic, a place that is sacred but also potentially cursed and threatening: A symbol of chaos and decadence. This view of ziggurats, unfortunately, coincides with what Said conceptualized as orientalism (Said 1979). In his foundational text for postcolonial studies, Said defines orientalism as a western style for dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient (Said 1979: 1). This style can have many facets and take many forms, but ultimately it comes down to a western subject objectifying and “repurposing” the Orient. Especially relevant here, Said emphasizes the role of visualization and exteriority as crucial for describing orientalism (Said 1979: 20–21). In that sense, orientalism is about representation, not of the Orient itself, but of the Orient *as conceived and presented* by an external (existentially and morally) author for external viewers. This representation often takes the form of symbols that encompass the whole of the Orient.

This is very much the case for the virtual ziggurat as well, an example of western creative developers projecting their own concepts over an indigenous, oriental symbol. As discussed

above, ziggurats are so integrated into defining Near Eastern culture that it can be argued that we use them as a proxy for describing any ancient Near Eastern culture in general. They take the role of the symbol that encompasses the whole of the Orient. As such, the ziggurat, as a place of mysticism and exoticism, acts as an intermediary for suggesting that ancient Near Eastern cultures were also exotic, decadent, and mystic. Through ziggurats, the Near East in all its diversity becomes an “other” that western viewers see as being utterly distinct from themselves.

The virtual ziggurat, however, is more powerful than its predecessors in art and literature. Due to the nature of video games, the ziggurat is no longer a static image, like in paintings, or simply a description as presented in historical or literary accounts. The virtual ziggurat is a space which the player gets to experience first-hand, from its building investment (in strategy games) to its inner layout and spaces. The orientalist message is then expanded further than simply the visual and becomes experiential, creating yet another, more powerful layer where orientalist tropes are being constructed. The ziggurat is not only the dark building surrounded by stormy clouds, as in the paintings of Martin, but a lived space (even if digital), which shapes the impression of the player further. The colonial view of the East that manifested itself in actuality in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries with the western powers’ intervention and looting of Near Eastern countries and was expanded through aesthetic media remains alive in western popular media allowing orientalism to reproduce.

This is not to argue that every developer acts or creates within an orientalist agenda. Said himself makes that distinction when

it came to literature, scholarship, history, and other forms of academic or artistic production. He argues that while imperialism bears upon (orientalist) cultural production, it does not necessarily mean that such cultural production should be demeaned. On the contrary, the point is to investigate the interplay between cultural production and the mechanics of empire at play that affect this production (Said 1979: 14–15). While in the case studies presented here ziggurats are often influenced by orientalist stereotypes, there are cases where developers chose ziggurats as a way to celebrate a given culture rather than to create a caricature. The developers of *Old World*, for example, have often discussed how they are using art for the purposes of celebration of culture (Johnson 2020) and to showcase how various renderings of the past can be used as a positive force in the gaming world.

Reframing the Virtual Ziggurat

Decolonizing the past is not an easy task. However, video games do offer great opportunities for new representations of the past, stepping away from colonial stereotypes (Lammes and de Smale 2018). *Assassin's Creed: Origins* is a great example of how ancient Egypt can be reintroduced to the public away from the stereotypical view of Egypt in popular culture. Through careful and respectful design choices, it is possible to create games that represent past societies in a thoughtful way, and that are educationally valuable (see Martino in this issue). Unfortunately, the ancient Near East has not yet had the opportunity to appear in such a video game (a city-builder game called *Sumerians* is under development while this paper is being written but has not been released yet). However, this special issue clearly shows that the potential for a new, postorientalist view of the Near East in games is there. McMahon reframed the ziggurat in archaeological research. I suggest that the next reframing of the ziggurat needs to take place in popular culture, to help reshape our understanding of the ancient Near East.

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