

# An Alternative Virtual Odyssey

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## 1. Introduction

For over 25 years, Athenian painter Stefanos Zannis has been painting Homer's Odyssey but with a twist: delving into verses of the original poem who many would find obscure. This ancient poem has always been a quintessential symbol of the journey of life that we all go through, complete with the monsters we face and the longing for a spiritual home, or end-goal, symbolised by Odysseus island home, Ithaca.

We take inspiration from Stefanos's work on this epic poem to create an 'alternative virtual Odyssey' in multimedia form, an artistic reinterpretation of the poem that throws light on unheroic but important and emotionally loaded aspects of this journey. This virtual Odyssey takes place in a navigable virtual gallery of Stefanos's works which are projected on multimedia sculptures created with the Timaeus art studio [1]. Sculptures are customized with media including images, videos, music, and narration, can be hollow and translucent, illuminated, and navigated either externally or internally. These become curved spaces or 'worlds' where projected episodes of the Odyssey can be experienced in three dimensions. Timaeus is thus a medium for creating spaces appropriate for experiencing the elements of this alternative Odyssey. Apart from Stefanos's paintings, we integrate relevant poetry by Greek poets Konstantinos Cavafy and Alexandros Vanargiotis.

In section 2, we give some background on the original epic. In section 3 we discuss the inspiration for this work in the art of Zannis and the poetry of Cavafy and Vanargiotis. In section 4, we present the architecture and progress of this alternative virtual Odyssey and finally, in section 5 we draw conclusions and outline future work.

## 2. Odyssey

Composed around 800 BC, Homer's Odyssey is a corner stone of Western literature. It takes the form of an epic poem telling the story of Odysseus in his quest to return home, the island of Ithaca, after the Trojan War. The poem describes a ten-year long trip, in which Odysseus encounters the fury of Gods while he battles with mythical creatures and monsters. It also narrates events back home in Ithaca where a group of suitors are competing for the affections of Penelope, Odysseus's

wife, and the throne of Ithaca. The Odyssey is an epic, a long narrative poem written in an elevated style dealing with the feats and struggles of a great hero. The poem was most likely written to be recited with musical accompaniment [2], and it has wonderful musicality in its expression. Odysseus is brave, strong but most importantly rational and intelligent. The epic celebrates these virtues in the context of heroic action but also throws plenty of light on human weaknesses and failings addressing a range of universal themes related to human nature which are still relevant.

There is a groundbreaking narrative structure beginning *in medias res*, i.e. in the middle. The poem does not start in Troy but 10 years after the beginning of Odysseus's trip, focusing first on Telemachus's attempts to stave off the suitors who plot to assassinate him. Odysseus first appears in the fifth rhapsody (book) in the middle of his trip in the island of Calypso, a beautiful nymph who wants to make Odysseus immortal and keep him with her [3]. Odysseus has spent seven years with Calypso but at this point the Gods have decided to free him. Reluctantly, Calypso sends Odysseus on his way on a small raft which god Poseidon shipwrecks on Phaeacia, a place of hospitable people who welcome Odysseus and encourage him to tell his adventures. His narrative contains the most intriguing part of the epic. Among other fascinating episodes, Odysseus talks about his encounter with people who lack memory as a result of eating lotus fruits; the Cyclops, a race of uncivilized, brutal, one-eyed giants; the cannibalistic Laestrygonians, the beautiful and cruel sorceress Circe, the Sirens, and an attack by a six-headed monster named Scylla. Odysseus leaves Phaeacia, and ultimately lands in Ithaca where he proves his identity to his compatriots, then slaughters the suitors, and is finally reunited with his family and throne.

### 3. Interpretations and Inspiration

The influence of this poem in art and literature has been immense: over time people have created their own interpretations or stories that have references to the epic. A prominent example is James Joyce's *Ulysses* [4] (Latin for Odysseus), a novel about an anti-hero in Dublin written in stream of consciousness and widely accepted as a masterpiece of modern literature. In this paper, we are concerned with reflections by Greek painter Stefanos Zannis and poets Konstantinos Cavafy and Alexandros Varargiotis.

#### 3.1 Ithaca by Konstantinos Cavafy

In the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, Greek poet Konstantinos Cavafy wrote a great poem called 'Ithaca'. The poem is inspired by the literary trip of Odysseus, but is a metaphor about the journey of life. A fine translation by Edmund Keeley and Philip Sherrard [5] follows.

As you set out for Ithaca  
hope the voyage is a long one,  
full of adventure, full of discovery.  
Laestrygonians and Cyclops,  
angry Poseidon — don't be afraid of them:  
you'll never find things like that on your way  
as long as you keep your thoughts raised high,  
as long as a rare excitement  
stirs your spirit and your body.  
Laestrygonians and Cyclops,  
wild Poseidon — you won't encounter them

unless you bring them along inside your soul,  
unless your soul sets them up in front of you.  
Hope the voyage is a long one.  
May there be many a summer morning when,  
with what pleasure, what joy,  
you come into harbours seen for the first time;  
may you stop at Phoenician trading stations  
to buy fine things,  
mother of pearl and coral, amber and ebony,  
sensual perfume of every kind —  
as many sensual perfumes as you can;  
and may you visit many Egyptian cities  
to gather stores of knowledge from their scholars.  
Keep Ithaca always in your mind.  
Arriving there is what you are destined for.  
But do not hurry the journey at all.  
Better if it lasts for years,  
so you are old by the time you reach the island,  
wealthy with all you have gained on the way,  
not expecting Ithaca to make you rich.  
Ithaca gave you the marvellous journey.  
Without her you would not have set out.  
She has nothing left to give you now.  
And if you find her poor, Ithaca won't have fooled you.  
Wise as you will have become, so full of experience,  
you will have understood by then what these Ithacas mean.

In wonderful language and with seductive metaphors, the poem talks about life as a personal journey through a world of discovery. This journey is not only physical through space; it takes place in our home and hometown where our relationships with people and our roles in the family and society are formed, and evolve with time. The poem suggests that this metaphorical journey is more important than the destination. Indeed, there will be little to know about the self without exploring the world. How else do we enrich our memories, experiences and improve our judgement if not by escaping the prison of what we have been taught in order to understand other lives, cultures and history? Cavafy writes that the wild dangers that Odysseus encountered, the “Laestrygonians and Cyclops, the wild Poseidon — you won't encounter them, unless you bring them along inside your soul, unless your soul sets them up in front of you”. In similar spirit about the journey of life, Montaigne [6] wrote that “Travelling through the world produces a marvellous clarity in our judgment. This great world is a mirror where we must see ourselves in order to know ourselves”. This journey does not happen only when we take a plane, it also happens in books, in the vast resources of the internet, in our mind and in our ordinary life. Cavafy takes inspiration from the ancient epic to give us a great personal, but also political, poem in an age when ideas of nationalism, isolationism, and religious fundamentalism are on the rise.

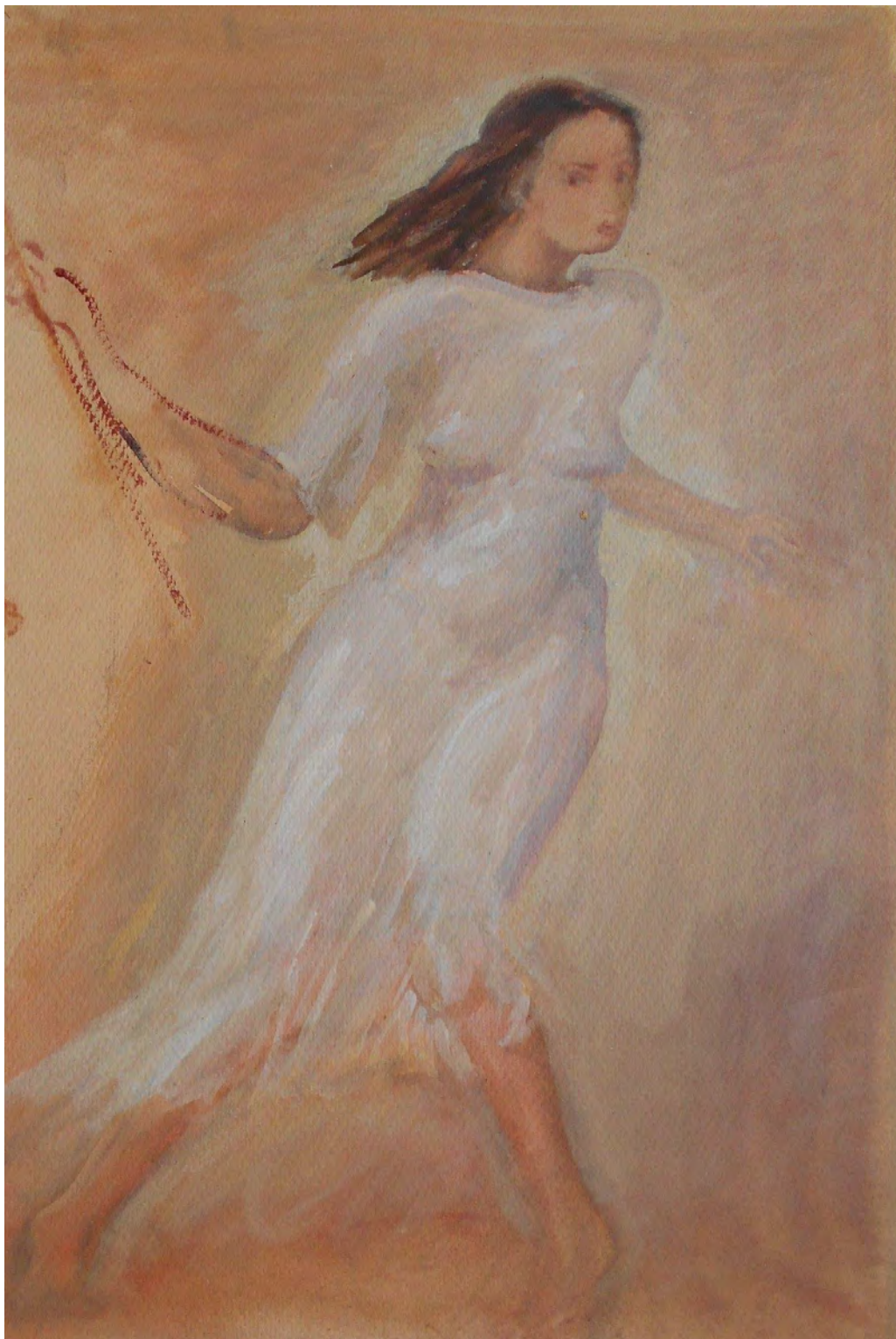
### 3.2 Circe by Stefanos Zannis

In Greek mythology, Circe is a bad and dangerous woman, goddess of magic, an enchantress and sorceress [7]. When Odysseus visits her island of Aeaea, she transforms his crew into pigs and she forces Odysseus to live with her. In Western literary tradition, Circe is mostly depicted as the archetype of the predatory female who is a big threat to men and masculinity. Stefanos Zannis

who has been painting a much quieter alternative gives us a different and less neurotic view of Circe. In the painting below, Stefanos shows a charming view of the sorceress weaving a fine red fabric in her loom. There is something endearing and attractive in observing a person work with calm, devotion and fine skill on something that they love doing. The painting shows another side of Circe which might explain better why Odysseus stayed and fathered two of her children. Perhaps the hero was not coerced by the sorceress; perhaps he was rather charmed by her character, her talent, her elegance, and her devotion to her artful work. Perhaps human relations are much more subtle than a desire for control. Stefanos takes an unheroic view of the Odyssey, one which makes it much closer to a journey of life that we all experience. His paintings are charming and emotional, mastering colour and shape with a fine impressionist touch. In his painting of Circe, he employs a wonderful palette of complementary colours and his atmosphere is stunning and reminiscent of the Lace maker by Caspar Netscher [8].



Like all of us, Circe has many aspects in her personality. In the next page, another painting by Stefanos shows a beautiful, elegant and dynamic Circe in motion.



### 3.3 Circe by Alexandros Vanargiotis

Alexandros Vanargiotis is a contemporary Greek poet who produces verses of unique sensitivity and beauty. His poetry is often inspired by themes of classical Greece and is reminiscent of Cavafy: poems unfold softly with a simplicity and harmony in expression but moving towards a meaning/concept that has motivated them and which they sharply embody and convey. Alexandros is a gentle poet of the everyday and ordinary; below, an example of how he writes about the inevitable disappointments and disillusionments of life.

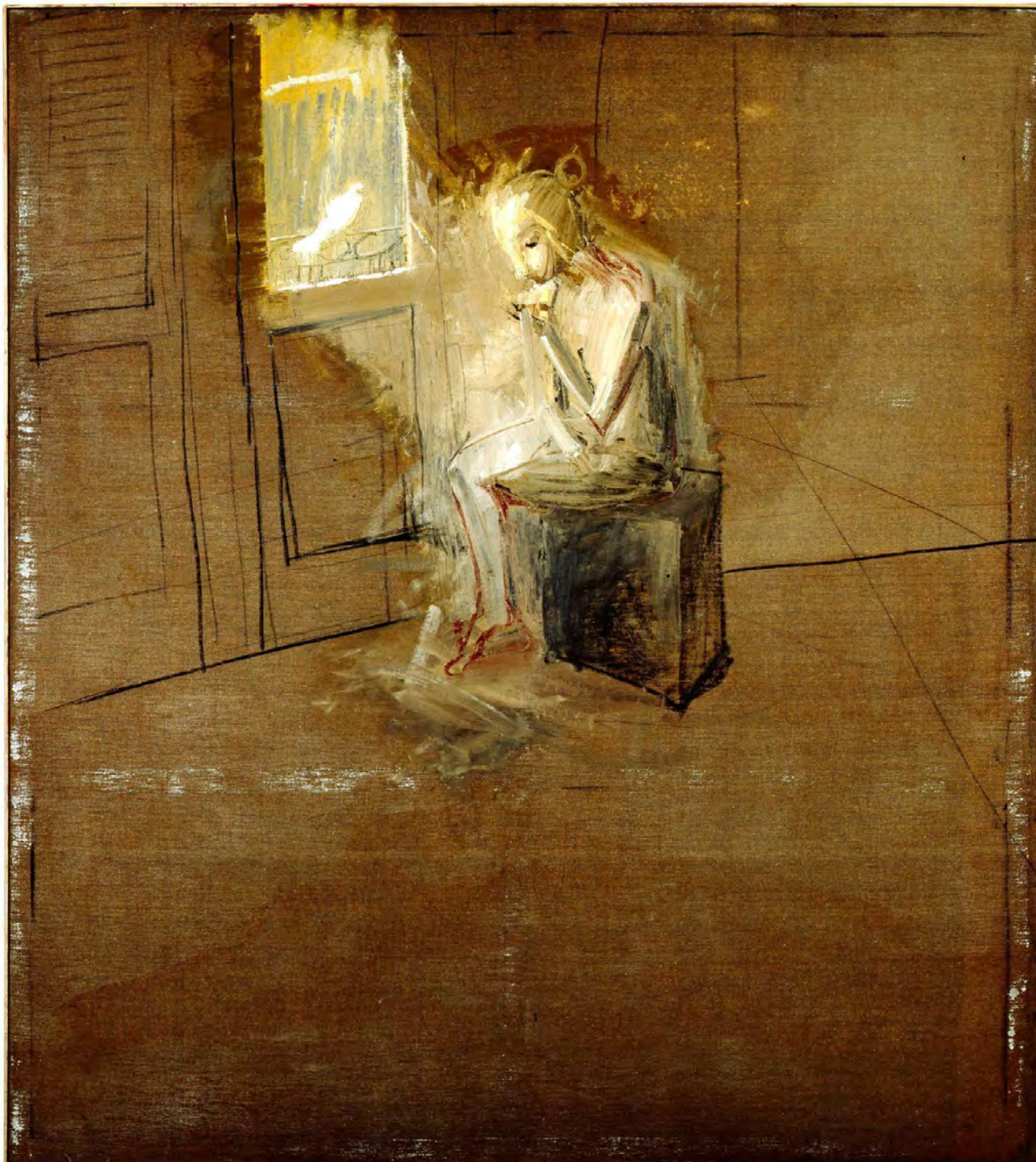
As a young man I tackled the big issues  
trying to interpret the world.  
Now, naked and empty,  
in order to understand the sea  
I look at water paddles.  
For the rocks,  
I stroke pebbles.  
For meadows,  
I converse with flowers.  
For the forest,  
I listen through the night  
to the sound of the lonely trees in a fertile field  
Before dawn,  
I hear the forgotten stars on the horizon speaking of heaven.  
And for people ...  
Ah, for people,  
it is a long time now that I wander,  
In my own wilderness.

Such poetic thoughts could belong to a modern Odysseus. The poem suggests that, in our youth, the world seems full of prospects and hope, and susceptible to positive change in which our potential agency is overestimated. As we grow up, disappointments pile up, hopes are dashed, and it dawns on us that humanity is fundamentally flawed. Some people like Alexandros learn to sublimate this feeling of disappointment into an appreciation of the joy of small things: pebbles, flowers, trees, dim stars in the skies. Instead of blaming others for their failures, they look into themselves, into these unexamined internal spaces for an insight to the human psyche and the condition of humanity as a whole. Like Stefanos with his paintings, Alexandros has written poems with an alternative take on themes from the Odyssey. A translation of "I met Circe once" follows. There is no sorceress in Alexandros's poem but a tormented soul that if someone could see, they would love:

Like others, I met her too.  
She had the reputation of a witch.  
If you approached her,  
you would lose your mind.  
She was naked and beautiful,  
her eyes were enormous,  
two shiny mirrors.  
When you woke up next to her,  
they would reflect your face.  
Don't ask me; I won't say  
whether I saw a pig in them or a rabbit.  
I'm still shaking, though.  
I heard she married  
someone who, they say,  
drunk the potion of Love  
before meeting her.  
And instead of being reflected in her eyes,  
he saw behind them  
a soul, tormented.

### 3.4 The Corpus of Stefanos Zannis on the Odyssey

Stefanos Zannis started working on the Odyssey in 1992 as a student of the School of Fine Arts in the University of Athens. In 2007 he conceived of a grand visualisation of the 24 rhapsodies of the Odyssey in an equal number of large-scale bound books, where each book would include paintings, drawings and original text in calligraphy. Since then, this project has become a constantly evolving work in progress. Stefanos has been focusing on subtle 'unheroic' episodes and verses of the original poem who many would find secondary or obscure. One such episode depicts Goddess Athena appearing in a dream of the Phaeacian princess Nausica (1998) [9].



People familiar with the Dutch Grandmaster Johannes Vermeer may find this painting reminiscent of the Letter Reader (1663) [10]. There are conceptual similarities in the scene, the treatment of light and the overall dignified and serene ambience. Stefanos's painting is less representational and more impressionistic in style. However, it is also charming and emotional, providing a unique and original interpretation of the relevant Homeric verses in the spirit of Vermeer. The latter was not only a master of light and atmosphere, but made a radical departure from religious, military and mythological themes and started painting ordinary life showing beauty and elegance in it [11]. His famous paintings depict a maid pouring a glass of milk, a young woman thoughtfully reading a letter under the light of a window and a mysterious and anonymous girl with a pearl earring. Like Vermeer who gave value, prestige and dignity to ordinary life, Stefanos is showing the beauty of ordinary and often bypassed moments within the great epic.

In another episode of his journey, Odysseus travelled through the Ocean river to the land of the Cimmerians, where, according to Homer, people are covered by clouds and fog, the sun never casts her rays on them, never travels towards the starry skies and never returns to earth; this is a land where the unfortunate mortals live perpetually under gloomy grey skies. Stefanos imagined a strange and wonderful Cimmerian land in a painting entitled "There is always a passageway through the land of fog".





The Cimmerian land is shown in a stunning composition of a dreamy, fantasy landscape emerging from the surfaces of a room, perhaps the bedroom of an imaginative child. This work is reminiscent of landscapes by Turner in its atmosphere with vague forms of people, trees and buildings gently emerging out of a hazy background. The painting includes masterfully crafted elements of surrealism in the wonderful use of colour in texturing and creating the complex elevation of the landscape, the fine perspective of this strange room and land, the weird and elegant figures and details, the window with its light grey clouds, the beautiful diffusion of light, the slice of water melon that looks like a boat, and the toy plane hovering above the landscape. This is a wonderful composition and would deserve a place next to one of the Turners in the British National Gallery or between a Manet and a Dali in a museum of modern art.

Another painting of Stefanos depicts a key dramatic moment in Odyssey just before a major disaster unfolds. At a certain point in the trip, the God of winds, Aeolus, gives Odysseus a bag that safely contains storm winds, leaving only a gentle west wind to take him home to Ithaca. Odysseus doesn't tell his crew and steers the ship by himself for days. In the crucial moment, though, he falls asleep, and his men who see Ithaca on the horizon decide to open the sack. They expect to find a hidden treasure, but as they open the bag, the storm winds rage out and blow the ship away, undoing all their efforts.

Stefanos paints this in a gentle but dramatic manner the moment before the bag is opened. Dark and ominous clouds gather from the four points of the horizon and cover the Mediterranean sky leaving only a small patch of turquoise blue from which rays of sun enter the picture. They illuminate the clouds from above and create gentle light effects on the land and seascape below. A few of the clouds are similar in colour and texture to the rocky island below, looking like “rocks of the sky”, and cast their dark shadows on Ithaca.



The marble temples and civic buildings of Odysseus's hometown appear graciously on a hill by the port, vague but glimmering with silver light from above. The sea is just about to become stormy, and one can almost feel the energy gathering in the waters.

In Greek, "opening the sack of Aeolus" means "opening a can of worms" and the episode speaks volumes about humanity. Like Odysseus's crew, humanity sets big collective goals, which we manage to undermine because of greed or lack of trust in each other. We also suffer from inadequate communication. Odysseus did not communicate well, so his crew were unaware of the risks. We could imagine how many troubles could be avoided if people just communicated better their knowledge, feelings and thoughts, instead of waiting to be mind-read.

It would be impossible to discuss all Stefanos's work on the Odyssey here as it includes over 100 paintings and drawings and it goes beyond this medium. The picture below depicts a sand sculpture of beautiful Helen of Troy.



The sculpture is accompanied by the following evocative text.

Telemachus now knew about Helen,  
for the sake of whom his dad, Odysseus, went to war.  
They had harsh words for her in his town.  
But Telemachus had finished high school now;  
he had grown up.  
He spent time on the beach sculpting Helen in the sand;  
creating and destroying her feminine form,  
creating and destroying her again.  
She was an elusive form this Helen, so hard-to-reach.

What a beautiful and original thought on a story that has been told thousands of times! The sculpture was done one summer, and the waves took it like time takes everything else. In a recent trip to Athens, we had the pleasure to see one of the rhapsodies that Stefanos captured in an art book. It is not often that someone so talented, passionate and persistent reinterprets so beautifully and originally one of the classics of Greek literature. Stefanos's work became the main inspiration for this alternative virtual Odyssey.

#### 4. The Virtual Odyssey

The goal of the project was to realise a virtual environment where the creative presentation and synthesis of various alternative artistic and literary projects, in this case those inspired by the Odyssey, could be achieved. To facilitate this, we have created a virtual art gallery that currently hosts works that combine the paintings of Zannis, and the poems of Cavafy and Vanargiotis. This gallery is an interesting space that offers artistic possibilities and sensibilities for the presentation and exploration of these works. It is configured as an open and potentially infinite seascape that is dotted with "islands" of three-dimensional sculptures inspired by these art works. We gave this virtual gallery a symbolic haiku [12] in Greek.

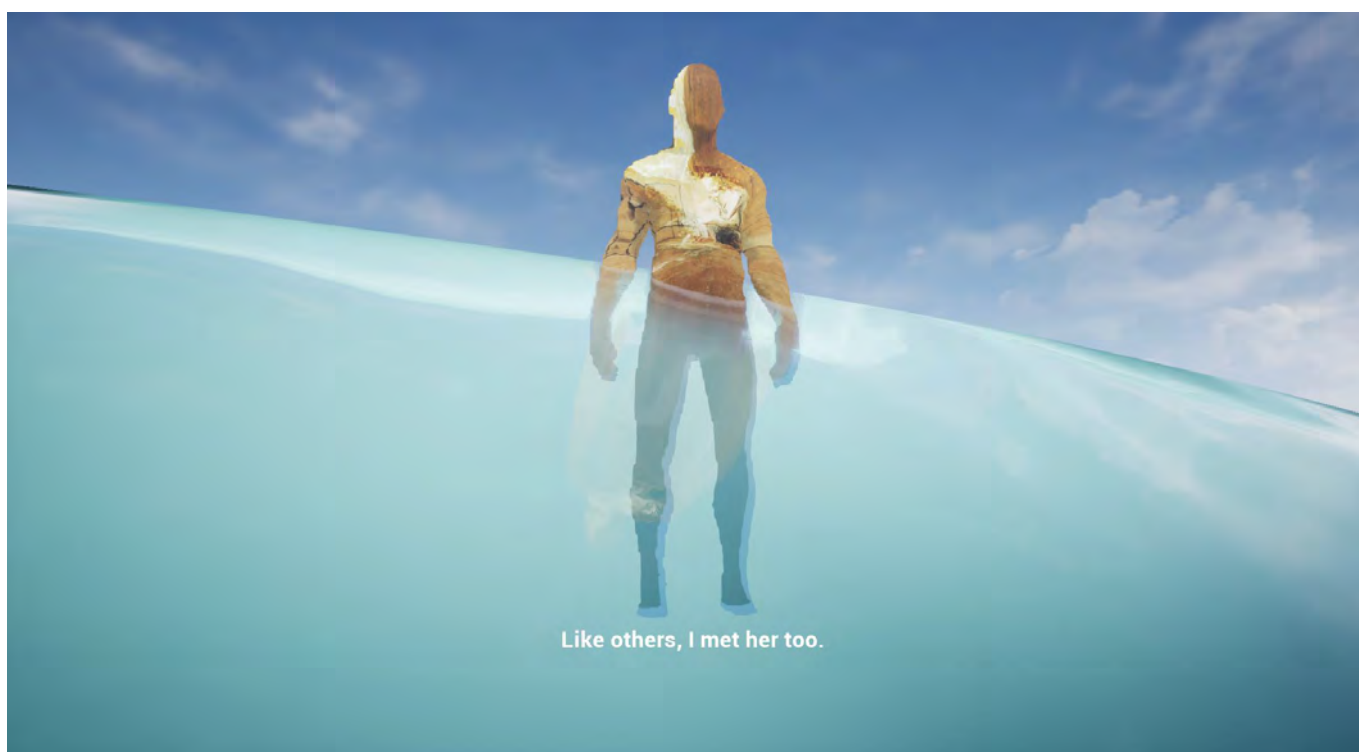
Έτσι είναι, Οδυσσέα,  
ήταν πάντα εσύ και η Πηνελόπη,  
μόνο.

(So it is, Odysseus, it was always you and Penelope, solely)

The haiku is dedicated to Odysseus and Penelope and others like them with disconnected lives; people who have memories together and apart, experiences of arguments and play, hesitations and decisions, virtues and failings, hopes and disillusionments. Such lives, even when they are lived in parallel and in isolation, can be deeply connected and subconsciously projected onto each other.

The virtual navigation of the gallery resembles a poetic, spiritual trip where the visitor can experience the feelings left by the sea in the soul of someone who discovers that, through a journey, they can achieve a richer understanding of life. The audio-visual sculptures were designed with the resources provided by Timaeus, a virtual art studio that has been inspired by Plato's homonymous work, especially the Platonic geometrical cosmogony. The sculptures can contain audios, films, pictures and texts and be continuously displayed and played; sculptures can be hollow and translucent, illuminated, or navigated either externally or internally by the visitors. We have populated the sculptures with displays of paintings by Stefanos and readings of poems

by the two Greek poets we discussed. The pictures below show instances of sculptures within this virtual space:



The software that implements Timaeus and renders the gallery draws heavily from tools provided by the Unreal game engine, over which a layer of software has been added to enable custom use by artists that wish to make creative digital compositions of their works. In this particular case, we have also incorporated a path-finding algorithm that can forge a path through the virtual seascape of Odyssey. The algorithm exploits weights assigned to sculptures which form a graph upon which

the symbolic distance between Odysseus and Penelope can be continually established and minimised by the algorithm.

## Conclusions

Zannis's monumental work on the Odyssey and poems by Cavafy and Vanargiotis have inspired the creation of a virtual gallery where poetic journeys through compositions of these artworks can be experienced. We hope that such journeys will provoke sensual feelings akin to those experienced when minds are meandering through verses, music, paintings, sounds, landscapes, and the sea. The computing infrastructure that we have developed to achieve this virtual Odyssey is reusable and gives the possibility of more general design of spaces. It could, in the future, be used for creative exhibition of other works of literature and art in synthetic, multimedia, and immersive new forms.

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