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DH History Project: Assassin’s Creed as a Pedagogical Tool

The Assassin Ezio Auditore runs through the streets of Renaissance Florence, thwarting the sinister plots of Templar Rodrigo Borgia and his son Caesare with Ezio’s allies Niccolo Machiavelli and Leonardo da Vinci. Meanwhile, pirate Edward Kenway sails the Caribbean seas, fighting against hegemonic Spanish Templars and encountering familiar friends such as Edward Thatch, James Kid, and Benjamin Hornigold. In Revolutionary France, Arno Dorian parkours through the streets, attempting to combat the Templar forces behind the Revolution who strive to maintain order through control. Victorian England sees Jacob and Evie Frye navigate the streets of London, taking back the boroughs from the Templars while assisting such characters as Karl Marx and Charles Darwin. In the present, Desmond Miles lays in the Animus, living the experiences of his ancestors through their very DNA, in hopes of recovering items necessary to defeat Desmond’s contemporary Templar enemies at Abstergo Industries. This is the world of the *Assassin’s Creed* franchise, the space in which historical landscapes become embodied places and facts and dates are transformed into playable narratives.

The game developer Ubisoft began the franchise in 2007 with *Assassins Creed*, set in the Levant in the midst of the Third Crusade. The premise was simple: two oppositional orders—the Assassins and the Templars—vied for supremacy, one representing free will and agency, the latter organizing itself around principles of control. As the game illustrates, throughout the millennia, these groups engaged in a secret war, shaping historical events from Ancient Egypt to the present.[[1]](#footnote-1) Believing the past held important data and information, including artifacts like the Piece of Eden linked to Armageddon, the Assassins developed a mechanism to experience the past and relive the memories of ancestors through a machine known as the Animus. Relying upon the DNA of these earlier Assassins and their present-day successors, the Order navigates the past through the use of historical memory and the creed that “nothing is true and everything is permitted,” striving to ensure the freedom of humanity to direct itself.

Since 2007, Ubisoft has released ten main *Assassin’s Creed* games alongside several supplementary and diversifying games. Drawing upon a group of interdisciplinary scholars, including historians, art historians, archeologists, and experts in various classic and modern languages, as well as game designers, Ubisoft prides itself on its reimaginations of historical environments and narratives.[[2]](#footnote-2) In addition to involving people from multiple disciplines, the company also is dedicated to creating a culturally diverse and inclusive team, asserting this underpinning character of the franchise at the beginning of each game, which opens with a statement: “inspired by historical events and characters. This work of fiction was designed, developed, and produced by a multicultural team of various religious faiths and beliefs.”[[3]](#footnote-3) While this has proven important throughout the duration of the series, this diversity of belief and culture was especially important during the first game, featuring the Assassin Altair, himself an Arab-Muslim, as an intermediary player within the Islamic and Christian conflict. While the historical Assassins of the Third Crusade had been the subject of significant Orientalism since the early modern period, either romanticized or demonized by the West for their actions, Ubisoft attempted to provide a more neutral figure in Altair. This decision and portrayal by the company was especially subversive at the time, specifically after the events of 9/11 which had largely linked Islam with terrorism and fundamentalism in Western culture.[[4]](#footnote-4)

After the first installment of the franchise, Ubisoft transitioned to Renaissance Florence with the Assassin Ezio Auditore. Within these games—*Assassin’s Creed II, Assassin’s Creed: Brotherhood, Assassin’s Creed: Revelations—*players can experience fifteenth and sixteenth century Italy, constructing historical memory through the experience of the historical events embodied by fictionalized characters yet directed by the players. This, however, does not mean players have free reign; they are held within the confines of the memory, becoming “desynchronized” if they veer too far from the memory. Although this could be critiqued for providing the player with too much autonomy and allowing her to embrace the fictionalized nature of the game and its subsequent historical inaccuracies, one could argue that this teaches the player much about history and the historical discipline.[[5]](#footnote-5) History does not equate to the past. It is a construction of the past by those of the present given the evidence available. History is therefore not neutral but rather reflects the biases and culture of whoever produces it. It is a memory of something long past yet retrievable as a construction or reproduction or something created. *Assassin’s Creed* is an example of this cultural memory. Regardless of its supposed historical inaccuracies, the game represents a reimagination of the past—an assertion of history by the culture creating and enjoying the games. The franchise thus simultaneously educates scholars on how to understand their contemporary world while also teaching players about historical environments, narrative, memory, and historiography.

*Assassin’s Creed: Freedom Cry*, a supplement to *Assassin’s Creed: Black Flag,* represents this phenomenon well. Users play as Adewale, an Assassin and former slave who endeavors throughout the game to free the enslaved throughout the Caribbean. This black protagonist provides a space to explore uses of the past by challenging hegemonic narratives with the new presentations of cultural history. *Freedom Cry* provides a space to subvert traditional narratives by empowering typically marginalized groups and providing them with agency.[[6]](#footnote-6) Although not necessarily factual, the game represents a way to empower these subordinate groups of standard historical narratives and provide them with a space in the player’s contemporary cultural memory to exercise an agency that they never fully possessed.

*Assassin’s Creed*, moreover, is not the only video game that has gained popularity in the classroom. Increasingly games have been seen as pedagogical tools to engage the learners of the twenty-first century. This movement is known as gamification. The definition of these games is very broad, as it focuses on the key characteristics of being immersive, interactive, and goal-oriented. Nevertheless, the use of “video” games is becoming increasingly popular. For example, Tracy Fullerton at University of Southern California has developed Walden, an immersive and playable 3D experience of Henry Thoreau’s project at Walden Pond. The game has won several awards, including the Games for Change 2017, Most Significant Impact Awards, and Game of the Year.[[7]](#footnote-7) Similarly, Jesse Schell at Carnegie Mellon University has developed several educational virtual experiences, including Disney’s Toontown Online. Notable is Schell Game’s *Lexica*—a role playing game (RPG) which allows students to interact with characters from literary classics in order to inspire interest in these works outside of the game. Essentially, the game is focused on meeting students where they are through the use of a RPG to excite them about these important works of literature.[[8]](#footnote-8) This is a similar approach to *Assassin’s Creed’s* use of historical actors such as Leonardo da Vinci, Napoleon Bonaparte, and Karl Marx, introducing students to historical actors in a fictionalized way in order to spark interest about these characters for future educational pursuits.

It could be argued, however, that games like *Walden* and *Lexica* represent “serious games” designed by scholars for educational use unlike commercial video games like *Assassin’s Creed.* Moreover, *Assassin’s Creed* introduces issues over violence, sexuality and adult language making its use in the classroom, especially the high school classroom, controversial. To combat this critique, Ubisoft released a version of *Freedom Cry* in which the blood and gore can be switched off. Additionally, the company released a version of *Assassin’s Creed*: *Origins* set in Ancient Egypt as a playable walkthrough to experience the reimagined landscape of the period including the Pyramids.[[9]](#footnote-9) While Ubisoft continues to work on this issue for secondary school students, *Assassin’s Creed* has proven a useful tool in university classrooms. For example, Nicolas Trépanier designed a course around *Assassin’s Creed* for the University of Mississippi, combining playing the game with scholarly articles to understand the period.[[10]](#footnote-10) Trépanier dealt with historical inaccuracy by the methods discussed in this paper, thinking about historical memory and narrative. Therefore, while commercial games like *Assassin’s Creed* remain contested tools for educational use, they are increasingly being seen by both teachers and Ubisoft as a way to experience the past and think about history in our 21st century context.

Ultimately, through a Digital Humanities lens, video games such as *Assassin’s Creed,* can be seen as pedagogical tools to think about the humanities in new and innovative ways. Through these games, players are not only travelling to different times and spaces otherwise inaccessible, but are also immersed in the memory of the past simultaneously crafting and experiencing the narrative of history through their actions and decisions. This franchise is more than just sword and gunplay, stealth and combat, and Templars and Assassins; it’s an instrument to both teach and learn about the past by engaging students with what they find entertaining and making it advertently and inadvertently an educational experience.

1. “Assassin's Creed Series.” Ubisoft.com. Ubisoft. Accessed February 3, 2020. https://www.ubisoft.com/en-us/game/assassins-creed/. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Reinhard, Andrew. “Consulting for Ubisoft on Assassin's Creed: Odyssey.” Archaeogaming, June 12, 2019. https://archaeogaming.com/2019/04/19/consulting-for-ubisoft-on-assassins-creed-odyssey/. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Benjamin Beil, Gundolf S. Freyermuth, Hanns Christian Schmidt, *Playing Utopia: Futures in Digital Games* (Transcript Verlag, 2019) 158. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Mirt Komel, “Orientialism in Assassin’s Creed: Self-Orientalizing the Assassins from Forerunners of Modern Terrorism into Occidentalized Heroes,” *Teorija* (2012). [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. see Lakshmi Menon, “History Firsthand: Memory, The Player, and the Video Game Narrative in Assassin’s Creed Games,” *Rupkatha Journal on Interdisciplinary Studies in the Humanities*, vol. VII no. 1 (2015). see also Christopher Leffler, “Memory Games: History, Memory, and Anachronism in the Paris of *Assassin’s Creed Unity*,” *Contemporary French Civilization*, vol. 44 no. 1 (2019). [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Emil Lundenai Hammar, Counter-hegemonic commemorative play: marginalized pasts and the politics of memory in the digital game *Assassin’s Creed: Freedom Cry, The Journal of Theory and Practice*, vol. 21 no. 3 (2017). [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. “Projects.” Tracy Fullerton, game design. Accessed February 3, 2020. https://www.tracyfullerton.com/projects#/walden/. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. “The World of Lexica.” Schell Games. Accessed February 3, 2020. https://www.schellgames.com/games/the-world-of-lexica. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Porter, Justin. “Assassin's Creed Has a New Mission: Working in the Classroom.” The New York Times. The New York Times, May 16, 2018. https://www.nytimes.com/2018/05/16/arts/assassins-creed-origins-education.html. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. “The Assassin's Perspective: Teaching History with Video Games: Perspectives on History: AHA.” The Assassin's Perspective: Teaching History with Video Games | Perspectives on History | AHA. Accessed February 3, 2020. https://www.historians.org/publications-and-directories/perspectives-on-history/may-2014/the-assassins-perspective. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)