

DEVELOPMENT OF HISTORICAL REPRESENTATION IN VIDEO GAMES:
HISTORY IN *ASSASSIN'S CREED I-III*, 2007-2012

by

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Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of Master of Arts

at

Dalhousie University
Halifax, Nova Scotia,
April 2025

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ABSTRACT

History-based video games represent an important avenue for historians to analyze how values of the present can impact video games' portrayals of the past. Operating as sites of commemoration, historical representation in video games is simultaneously a reflection of the heritage values of the imagined player (intended audience), the team behind the game's development, and the game's "present." Using *Assassin's Creed I-III* (2007-2012) as a focal point, this thesis examines the internal dialogue (in-game content) and external dialogue (online debates, reviews, and accolades) of the Desmond narrative arc to demonstrate the effects of each game's external dialogue on subsequent games in the *Assassin's Creed* series. This pattern demonstrated a clear "call and response" discourse taking place between Ubisoft's development team and their consumers. Beginning with the original *Assassin's Creed* (2007), Ubisoft's stated goal was to encourage players to think critically about the history they consume. However, player feedback quickly demonstrated to the development team that players wanted Ubisoft to focus less on historical interpretation or context and instead place greater emphasis on "accurate" details. As a result, each subsequent game in the Desmond narrative arc gradually prioritized engaging with the minutiae of "accuracy," eventually resulting in a portrayal of the American Revolution (*Assassin's Creed III*, 2012) that – despite purporting an alternative view of this era – ended up reinforcing dominant historical narratives.

LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS USED

<i>AC</i>	<i>Assassin's Creed</i>
<i>ACII</i>	<i>Assassin's Creed II</i>
<i>ACIII</i>	<i>Assassin's Creed III</i>
FPS	First Person Shooter
SBOE	State Board of Education
NAACP	National Association for the Advancement of Colored People
NAVGR	National Academy of Video Game Testers and Reviewers
<i>ICT</i>	<i>Indian Country Today</i>
<i>AbTeC</i>	<i>Aboriginal Territories in Cyberspace</i>
DLC	Downloadable Content
DEI	Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to start by extending my immense gratitude to my thesis supervisor, Dr. Jerry Bannister, for all his assistance in bringing this thesis to life. This thesis was initially inspired by a project I worked on for his Heritage Studies: Capstone course in Summer 2021 – an examination of historical representation in *Assassin's Creed III*. Jerry's support at the tail end of my undergraduate degree helped me to see the vast possibilities for research within the field of history, and from day one he has shown support for my choice of topic as I turned that small undergrad project into a 100+ page Master's thesis. His patience with me throughout my journey these last few years has been greatly appreciated, and I value his support, dedication, and guidance. His advice has helped fuel my work and pushed me to always strive to do my best.

I would also like to thank Dr. Lisa Binkley and Dr. Hilary Doda for agreeing to be part of my committee. I had the pleasure of taking numerous classes with Lisa during my undergraduate degree and have immense respect for the work that she does. In addition, although I had never worked with Dr. Hilary Doda before, I have enjoyed hearing her thoughts on my research and look forward to future discussions on later games in the *Assassin's Creed* series. Thank you both for your willingness to offer your time and expertise in the final stretch of my Master's degree.

Of course, this thesis would not have been possible without the love and support from my family and friends. Since the beginning, my parents – Jean and Don Montminy – have been my biggest cheerleaders. From listening to me read my thesis to them over the phone, to offering advice, and even to our 4 hour (or longer) “accountability phone calls,” they have supported me in so many ways throughout this process. I would also like to thank my lovely fiancé, Steve, for being by my side for the last 5 years. Steve has been there to celebrate each major accomplishment in my academic career, and our love has been such an important source of strength for me. My younger brother, Bobby, is also deserving of thanks. Whether it was jumping warthogs off ramps in *Halo* or fighting whenever one of us shot the other in *GoldenEye 007*, our mutual love of video games has brought me to where I am today – writing an MA thesis about video games.

For my Aunt Irene, Uncle Glen, and Aunt Lynn who have offered to let me practice my thesis presentation for them, for my Uncle Peter who got me involved with the Halifax Citadel NHS and fostered my love of history, and for my Aunt Lois, Uncle Dale, Aunt Anne, and Uncle Dan who have all shown support and interest in my studies – I cannot express how lucky I am to have an extended family that is so supportive of me. I also appreciate the support from my dad's side of the family, especially my Nana, as well as my in-laws. In addition, I would like to thank my biological relatives (my Grandad Gord, his wife Leona, Aunt Julie, and my sister Taylor) for so quickly welcoming me into the family. Finally, I would of course like to thank my best friend, Levi, as well as all my

other friends, who have been rocks for me these last few years (and listened to their fair share of my ramblings about *Assassin's Creed*). I cannot wait to spend more time with you all now that I will finally have some free time!

CHAPTER ONE

Introduction

Introduction

When I purchased my copy of the first *Assassin's Creed* game in 2010 at the age of 12, I eagerly went back home and put the CD in my Xbox 360. I was three years late to the game, but I watched enthralled as Desmond, a “modern day” assassin in the year 2012, was plunged into the memories of his ancestor Altaïr Ibn-La’Ahad by a fictional company called Abstergo Industries. Playing as Altaïr, I assassinated the corrupt leaders of Damascus, Acre, and Jerusalem, creeping my way ever closer to the final boss battle of the game: a confrontation with Altaïr’s mentor and leader of the Assassin Order, Al-Mualim. Drawn in by the game’s edgy storyline, I never questioned its narrative, playing it solely for the thrill of free running across the rooftops of the Holy Land during the era of the Third Crusade. Arguably, I was much too young to be playing this game, but it sparked a love of video games and their ability to create a sense of immersion rivaling that of the movies and books I had consumed up until that point. Now, at the age of 26, I have officially been playing the *Assassin's Creed* series for more than half of my life, and can appreciate what my 12-year-old self could not. I can look back at the games and recognize the questions the game presents - of accuracy versus fiction (detail versus narrative) - that I took for granted 14 years ago.

Motivated both as a fan of the series and as a historian, this thesis examines *Assassin's Creed I-III* (2007-2012) to demonstrate the tendency of conversations surrounding historical representation in video games to reflect a dichotomy of narrative/fiction versus detail/accuracy. This dichotomy typically works to privileges

reconstructive over deconstructive views of historical narratives. It also fails to problematize how players equate a game development team's attention to historical detail with accuracy – specifically perceptions of accuracy that match the expectations of players based on their preconceived ideas of the past. Central to the examination of representations of history or history-adjacent fields (e.g., archaeology) in video games is the intersection of detail and narrative. The game's narrative constitutes who the game developers and writers choose to represent, how players are meant to identify with the game's characters, and which version of history is privileged throughout the storyline. Everything else internal to the game encapsulates the details that (re)construct the world in which players operate. Details that go into a game's design - such as the musical score, voice acting, and character costuming/design, for example - set the game's tone. This convergence of detail and narrative also mirrors the specific type of learning demonstrated by video games, which locates history at the intersection of fiction (narrative) and accuracy (detail).¹ Where there exists a significant disconnect between these two factors within a game, or where each represents a different *purpose* or goal, there is the potential for what the developers seek to represent in the game to be undermined. Overlaying this dichotomy are the intentions of the game's creators and the choices made by their marketing teams, which Stephen Joyce argues are a reflection “upon the kinds of pressures – both commercial and ideological – placed on the construction of historical games.”²

¹ Ștefania Matei, “Digital cultures of commemoration: Learning and unlearning history through video games,” paper presented at *2015 20th International Conference on Control Systems and Science* (2015), 778.

² Stephen Joyce, “Authentic-Deconstructionist Games and Tragic Historiography in *Assassin's Creed III*,” *American Literature* 94, no. 1 (2022), 139.

Furthermore, as sites of commemoration for historical events, history-based video games reflect the heritage values of their imagined audience, as well as the values of their “present.” In the case of *Assassin’s Creed I-III*, there exist clear connections between contemporary events and the choices the developers made regarding the games’ portrayal of history. A rebrand of a sequel to Ubisoft’s *Prince of Persia: The Sands of Time* (2003), the development of the original *Assassin’s Creed* began in that same year as *The Sands of Time*’s release. Set in the era of the Third Crusade and providing players the ability to travel between various cities in the Holy Land, the development of *Assassin’s Creed* started during the opening months of the Iraq War and was published at the War’s height in 2007. While this may seem to be a coincidence, news outlets were quick to compare the Iraq War to the Medieval Crusades.³ Tropes of the destruction of historical records relevant to heritage and cultural identity explored through the content of the first *Assassin’s Creed* game also mirrored similar concerns over cultural preservation taking place in contemporary criticisms of the Iraq War. The United States military came under fire, for instance, for failing to secure sites of cultural significance and to protect them from looters, which was seen as a threat to Iraq’s cultural heritage.⁴

³ *ABC News* reported in 2003 that “Arab television networks have been broadcasting bloody images of the aftermath of U.S. bombing raids in Iraq, reminding many people in the Middle East of the slaughter and the violence that happened during the Middle Ages when the Roman pope sent Christian crusaders against Islam.” For more information, see: “Iraq War Raises Suspicion of New ‘Crusade,’” *ABC News*, March 31, 2003, <https://abcnews.go.com/International/story?id=79573&page=1>.

⁴ Dina Rizk Khoury, “Iraq’s Lost Cultural Heritage,” *Perspectives on History*, September 1, 2003, <https://www.historians.org/perspectives-article/iraqs-lost-cultural-heritage-september-2003/>; Jim Bittermann, “Antiquities experts: Some Looting was ‘commissioned,’” *CNN*, April 18, 2003, <https://www.cnn.com/2003/WORLD/europe/04/17/sprj.nilaw.artifacts/index.html>; “Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago to Examine the Looting of the Iraq National Museum and Mesopotamian Archaeological Sites,” The University of Chicago, accessed April 3, 2025, <https://isac.uchicago.edu/museum-exhibits/special-exhibits/oriental-institute-university-chicago-examine-looting-iraq-nation-0>.

A similar pattern also appears to exist for the remainder of the games examined within this thesis. The games in the Ezio Trilogy (2009-2011) came out during the Obama administration and overlapped with the Iraq War. Content in these games, especially that of *Assassin's Creed: Brotherhood* (see Chapter 3) featured increased political commentary critical of past (mostly Republican) government scandals. Following that, *Assassin's Creed III*, which featured one of the first playable Indigenous protagonists used in a major studio's game, was released by the Montréal-based Ubisoft development team amid the work that was being done on the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) in Canada. The TRC, which began in 2007 and whose final report was published in 2015, sought to facilitate reconciliation between the Indigenous survivors of residential schools, their families, their communities, and Canadians as a whole.⁵ When development began on *Assassin's Creed III* in 2010, the development team initially decided upon a half-Indigenous (specifically Kanien'kehá:ka) protagonist to tell the story of the American Revolution as they felt this would provide a more nuanced depiction of this historical period. However, after one year of development, the team eventually reached out to cultural consultants from the Kahnawake nation outside of Montréal to incorporate their heritage into the game.⁶

Finally, in addition to the broader sociopolitical contexts surrounding the timeline of the games' development, the *Assassin's Creed* series emerges out of a larger tradition of historical representation in video games. For example, the first *Assassin's Creed* game placed the series within the realm of 'alternate history.' One of the hallmarks of the

⁵ "Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada," *Government of Canada*, accessed April 3, 2025, <https://www.rcaanc-cirnac.gc.ca/eng/1450124405592/1529106060525>.

⁶ Alex Calvin, *The Making of Assassin's Creed: 15th Anniversary*, eds., Ian Tucker and Anastacia Ferry (Milwaukie, OR: Dark Horse Books, 2023), 99-100.

Assassin's Creed series' branding became the developers' often-stated intent to distort 'accepted' historical narratives by mirroring popular culture – such as the inclusion of conspiracy theory elements into the game's plot. However, as the series progressed, the developers' tone shifted. While still attempting to distort 'accepted' historical narratives, they simultaneously tried “as much as possible to be objective and not bend history.” This statement from Alex Hutchinson, *Assassin's Creed's* creative director, from a 2012 interview, was followed immediately by the statement: “But any time we find cracks – areas that aren't reported very much, or days that aren't documented – we try to take those spaces.”⁷ This introduction will examine the historiography surrounding historical representation in video games, as well as the *Assassin's Creed I-III* games themselves as primary source material, to situate my thesis within the larger historical conversations about 'accuracy' and 'authenticity' in the gaming industry and among the *Assassin's Creed* fanbase.

Historiography

When physicist William Higinbotham introduced his game “Tennis for Two” in October 1958, he could have had no idea of the impact video games would have on the world.⁸ Although Bertie the Brain, a four meter tall tic-tac-toe machine built in Toronto, had been crowned the world's first arcade game some eight years prior, the notion of

⁷ Ian Brown, “Are video games like Assassin's Creed rewriting history?” *The Globe and Mail*, March 2, 2013, <https://www.theglobeandmail.com/technology/are-video-games-like-assassins-creed-rewriting-history/article9237302/>.

⁸ “October 1958: Physicist Invents First Video Game,” *APS News* 17, no. 9 (2008), <https://www.aps.org/publications/apsnews/200810/physicshistory.cfm#:~:text=In%20October%201958%20C%20Physicist%20William,Brookhaven%20National%20Laboratory%20open%20house.>

video and computer games was still in its infancy.⁹ Fast forward 70 years, and video games have become ingrained in popular culture. Video games engage with a variety of genres and levels of play, both in terms of age and difficulty. Their rise to popular status, however, has not been without its trials and tribulations. Concerned parents have protested the introduction of video games into youth culture. Decades-long debates have revolved around the correlation between violent video games and normalizations of violence, leading to the possibility of higher rates of violence among youth. Many academic authors, however, have argued the value of using certain video games, particularly those containing historical settings and themes, as teaching aids in classrooms, to encourage critical thinking and media analysis.

Prior to the release of *Assassin's Creed* in 2007, much of the literature available surrounding historical representation in video games focused on problematizing notions of 'accuracy' within this medium, usually in the categories of First Person Shooter (FPS) or military simulation games and video games focusing on specific political events or historical moments. Within this literature, two of the more common forms of analysis included: a deconstruction of perceptions of historical accuracy, often in conjunction with video games as participatory forms of public history and sites of memory; and the complications and utility of ludological pedagogy, that is, bringing video games into the classroom as a teaching tool. These two themes often appear in tandem. In an article written the same year as *Assassin's Creed's* release, entitled "Strategic Simulations and Our Past: The Bias of Computer Games in the Presentation of History," Kevin Schut

⁹ Chris Bateman, "Meet Bertie the Brain, the world's first arcade game, built in Toronto," *Spacing Toronto*, August 13, 2014, <http://spacing.ca/toronto/2014/08/13/meet-bertie-brain-worlds-first-arcade-game-built-toronto/>.

argues that video games provide a whole new avenue for the public to experience and learn about history. Analyzing James Paul Gee's (2003) book, *What Video Games Have to Teach Us About Learning and Literacy*, Schut argues that Gee "puts together a persuasive case for the ability of games to make meaning situated, to help create motivated, tailored, and incremented discoveries, and to encourage social sharing of knowledge."¹⁰ There appears to be an assumption among the proponents of ludological pedagogy, however, that in order for players to actually deconstruct historical narratives in video games their experience must be mediated through guided analysis in the classroom.¹¹ Otherwise, players may fail to effectively challenge reconstructions of the past as portrayed by the games they consume.

Aaron Hess's work "'You Don't Play, You Volunteer': Narrative Public Memory Construction in *Medal of Honor: Rising Sun*" was published the same year as Schut's article. In analyzing *Rising Sun* (2003), Hess argued that the selective use of memory within the game underscored the specific ideological construction produced by the game's narrative, stressing that the game's portrayal of America's battle with Japan in WWII – which omitted America's use of nuclear weapons and stories of death by American hands – must be problematized.¹² Ultimately, Hess saw this reconstruction of WWII events as a symptom of "narrative memorializing in interactive spaces" that afforded players "an active but private (in the home) role in memory-making."¹³ Stressing

¹⁰ Kevin Schut, "Strategic Simulations and Our Past: The Bias of Computer Games in the Presentation of History," *Games and Culture* 2, no. 3 (2007), 214.

¹¹ Scott DeJong, "Video gaming can bolster classroom learning, but not without teaching support," *The Conversation*, January 17, 2023, <https://theconversation.com/video-gaming-can-bolster-classroom-learning-but-not-without-teacher-support-190483>.

¹² Aaron Hess, "'You Don't Play, You Volunteer': Narrative Public Memory Construction in *Medal of Honor: Rising Sun*," *Critical Studies in Media Communication* 24, no. 4 (2007), 347.

¹³ Hess, "*Medal of Honor: Rising Sun*," 341.

the locus of participatory memory-making as occurring within the private sphere – a gamer’s home – implies that a private conversation is taking place between game developers and players. Game developers, like those behind the *Medal of Honor* series, assume the needs of their players – in this case, argues Hess, a need for a sense of pride in America’s fight against Japan without acknowledging ‘difficult’ histories.¹⁴ Players, in turn, internalize these portrayals of historical events.

Seventeen years later, though, Darren Reid argued in their article “Video Game Development as Public History: Practical Reflections on Making a Video Game for Historical Public Engagement” that this participatory memory-making had thoroughly moved into the public sphere, with players now engaging in public historical discourse via discussion forums and social media. By sharing their interpretations of a game’s historical content, Reid argued that players are now taking on the role of public history practitioners.¹⁵ Reid also points to the fact that the video game format was “uniquely suited to fulfilling public history’s goal of sharing authority between history professionals and their publics in collaborative and co-creative ways.”¹⁶ Jeremiah McCall seconds this argument, stating in a book chapter entitled “Video Games as Participatory Public History” that, “When it comes to simulating the past with a historical game, authority is likewise shared between designers and players.”¹⁷

¹⁴ Hess, “*Medal of Honor: Rising Sun*,” 347.

¹⁵ Darren Reid, “Video Game Development as Public History: Practical Reflections on Making a Video Game for Historical Public Engagement,” *The Public Historian* 46 (2024), 81.

¹⁶ Reid, “Video Game Development,” 74.

¹⁷ Jeremiah McCall, “Video Games as Participatory Public History,” in *A Companion to Public History*, ed. David Dean (Hoboken, NJ: Wiley Blackwell, 2018), 409.

In “Digital cultures of commemoration: Learning and unlearning history through video games,” Ștefania Matei argues that games portraying past events support particular kinds of historical learning by directing the way their players interact with their fictive world.¹⁸ Video games use a variety of techniques to reconstruct fictive historical environments, including graphics, voice, text, music, and game mechanics. The latter represents the direct means through which players can interact with the world around them (e.g., press “x” on the controller to pick something up), and controls their level of success or failure when playing the game. These techniques also have an impact on what players take away from the games themselves. For example, in Kathryn Meyers Emery and Andrew Reinhard’s, “Trading Shovels for Controllers: A Brief Exploration of the Portrayal of Archaeology in Video Games,” the authors argue that game mechanics and narrative framing can create potentially dangerous misconceptions about the discipline of archaeology. Game series like *Indiana Jones* and *Tomb Raider*, in seeking to mix entertainment with representation, have been known to perpetuate the idea of archaeology as looting rather than careful excavation, as the mechanics themselves encourage players to enter tombs with grenades to access important historical artifacts.¹⁹

Attempting to mix entertainment with accurate representation can certainly have its drawbacks. As Ian Bogost notes in their book *Persuasive Games: The Expressive Power of Videogames*, historical video games “do not just offer situated meaning and embodied experiences of real and imagined worlds and relationships; they offer meaning

¹⁸ Matei, “Digital cultures of commemoration,” 778.

¹⁹ Kathryn Meyers Emery and Andrew Reinhard, “Trading Shovels for Controllers: A Brief Exploration of the Portrayal of Archaeology in Video Games,” *Public Archaeology* 14, no. 2 (2015), 140.

and experiences of *particular* worlds and *particular* relationships.”²⁰ The worlds being recreated and the relationships that the game developers chooses to include (as well as the relationship that the player develops with the content) can then impact player perceptions of that world. Making ‘accurate’ historical reconstructions subservient to the needs of entertainment can lead to claims of counterfactual representation from scholars. The widespread use of historical material in video games, however, largely serves entertainment purposes, according to David Mather who writes in “Extended Memory: Early Calculating Engines and Historical Computer Simulations” that, within the context of video games, historical accuracy becomes mutable.²¹ While the original *Tomb Raider* (1996) and *Indiana Jones: Raiders of the Lost Ark* (1982) may not represent the best-practices of the archaeological discipline, newer games are aiming for a certain standard of realism and authenticity that can meet the demands of their audiences.

As gamers emphasize the need to play in fully realized historical and geographical settings that reveal historical elements as the narrative unfolds, game developers seek to answer the call.²² Using the aforementioned techniques (e.g., game mechanics) to reconstruct environments through which history can be staged, developers and writers hope to increase engagement and perceptions of realism. As Alcindor et al. note in their piece entitled, “Heritage places as the settings for virtual playgrounds: perceived realism in videogames, as a tool for the re-localisation of physical spaces,” *digital surrogate places* – replicas of real-world sites deemed to be of heritage value and/or historic

²⁰ Ian Bogost, *Persuasive Games: The Expressive Power of Videogames* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2007), 241.

²¹ David Mather, “Extended Memory: Early Calculating Engines and Historical Computer Simulations,” *Leonardo* 39, no. 3 (2006): 236-243.

²² Emery and Reinhard, “Shovels for Controllers,” 139.

significance – are “created with an underlying assumption that a digital reproduction should be able to stand in for the real thing.”²³

This notion of ‘getting the details right’ in terms of accuracy is not something relegated solely to the reconstruction of historic places, and there is much at stake. In exploring the relationship between cultural heritage and video games, Tara Jane Coplestone demonstrates the salience of “sticking to the source material” in their piece “But that’s not accurate: the differing perceptions of accuracy in cultural-heritage videogames between creators, consumers and critics.” Coplestone’s work demonstrates that player preoccupations with accuracy extend not just to the reconstruction of physical environments, but also to storylines. While 52% of game developers interviewed by Coplestone defined accuracy as relating to physical components – buildings, documents, and artifacts – and their ability to visually render them to a known standard, players judged a game’s accuracy on its ability to match what they deemed to be acceptable and ‘factual’ source material.²⁴ Typically, this meant that the virtual environment, as well as the portrayal of historical events and figures, matched what they had read in a book. In addition, anyone insisting on accuracy largely through a reconstructionist lens were “not so much saying that accuracy is important but rather *their* version of accuracy is important.”²⁵ If a game’s attractiveness to players is based on its ability to mesh

²³ Monica Alcindor, Delton Jackson, and Patricia Alcindor-Huelva, “Heritage places as the settings for virtual playgrounds: perceived realism in videogames, as a tool for the re-localisation of physical places,” *International Journal of Heritage Studies* 28, no. 7 (2022), 866.

²⁴ Tara Jane Coplestone, “But that’s not accurate: the differing perceptions of accuracy in cultural-heritage videogames between creators, consumers and critics,” *Rethinking History* 21, no. 3 (2017), 423, 424.

²⁵ Coplestone, “But that’s not accurate,” 432, emphasis added.

entertainment with a high degree of *perceived* accuracy, then game developers must meet the expectations of their intended audiences in order to maximize sales.

In a more recent article surrounding the role collective memory plays in perceptions of accuracy in historical video games, Ștefania Matei corroborates Coplestone’s work. In the article, “The Technological Mediation of Collective Memory Through Historical Video Games,” Matei analyzes the various roles video games play, such as: “the commemoration of historical events through multiplayer interactions and collaborative recall”; “access to written testimonies of people who witnessed past events” (e.g., video games that incorporate interviews with veterans into the gameplay); providing “access to historical imaginaries”; allowing players to “gain insights into the materiality of cultural collections and archaeological artefacts”; and “allow[ing] multiple forms of remembering the past through gameplay.”²⁶ Appearing as either *cultural products* or *social practices*, Matei argues that historical video games foster an environment “through which representations of the past are created, circulated, or manipulated.”²⁷ Ultimately, Matei states, video game studies – forwarding the assertion that collective memory functioning as a representation is different from history as an authentic reality – “inevitably come to interpret history in terms of accuracy and authenticity.”²⁸ Here Matei argues that video game scholars’ analysis of historical representation in video games inevitably results in them using their own perceptions of

²⁶ Ștefania Matei, “The Technological Mediation of Collective Memory Through Historical Video Games,” *Games and Culture* (2023), DOI: 10.1177/15554120231206862.

²⁷ Matei, “Technological Mediation.”

²⁸ *Ibid.*

accuracy, based in the historical record, to either criticize or reaffirm the developers' game design.

Analyses of the *Assassin's Creed* series have focused on deconstruction and the role of memory in the games' creation. For example, Robson Scarassati Bello argues in their article, "The Problem of Memory in the Assassin's Creed Series (2007-2020)," that although the role the Animus plays in the game is an attempt to position the *Assassin's Creed* games as reconstructions of the past, the past being portrayed "is simply a collective memory of the producers who deliver an entertainment product in the form of a 'theme park.'"²⁹ Lakshmi Menon also notes in their article "History First-hand: Memory, the Player and the Video Game Narrative in the Assassin's Creed Games" that the *Assassin's Creed* series goes through great pains to reconstruct historical settings in a way that is believable, knowing that when the players logs into the game they bring with them certain ideas of that historical setting, solidified within their consciousness.³⁰ In turn, the developers cater to this expectation by peppering the games' narratives with identifiable historical figures who become part of reconstructing this 'believable' history – i.e., the sites of memory that the game uses to connect with the player.³¹

Furthermore, despite the *Assassin's Creed* series' immense attention to detail, some scholars suggest that Ubisoft's *Assassin's Creed* development team has fallen short in producing a compelling deconstruction of historical narratives. For example, in an article entitled "The Tyranny of Realism: Historical accuracy and politics of

²⁹ Robson Scarassati Bello, "The Problem of Memory in the Assassin's Creed Series (2007-2020)," *Games and Culture* (2023).

³⁰ Lakshmi Menon, "History First-hand: Memory, the Player and the Video Game Narrative in the Assassin's Creed Games," *Rupkatha Journal on Interdisciplinary Studies in Humanities* 7 (2015), 110.

³¹ Menon, "History First-hand," 110.

representation in *Assassin's Creed III*," Adrienne Shaw defines the politics of representation as adhering to three factors: how players are asked to identify with particular characters (constructed identification); how the game was produced (constructed authenticity); and the version of history portrayed in the game (constructed history).³² *Assassin's Creed III*, which follows the story of a half-Kanien'kehá:ka, half-British protagonist named Ratoohnaké:ton during the American Revolution, "feels pulled in many different directions at once when moments that are clearly rooted in a sensitive historical and cultural dialogue appear alongside others that recreate tired tropes and assumptions about who is expected to be playing the game."³³ This, Shaw argues, is the tyranny of realism. In attempting to focus too heavily on reconstructing historic events in a way that would be deemed "accurate" to their target audiences, Ubisoft fails to deconstruct the events of the American Revolution from the viewpoint of their Indigenous protagonist.

Building from Shaw's work, Stephen Joyce's "Authentic-Deconstructionist Games and Tragic Historiography in *ACIII*" argues that the game was "critically weakened by exploiting this tragic tale [of Ratoohnaké:ton and dispossession of Kanien'kehá:ka land] in the heroic epic of [America's] founding."³⁴ Both Joyce and Marco Antonio Rodriguez argue that, in choosing an Indigenous protagonist, *Assassin's Creed III* had the potential to offer players a view of the American Revolution from an alternate perspective that stands outside of the typical framework of Patriots versus

³² Adrienne Shaw, "The Tyranny of Realism: Historical accuracy and politics of representation in *Assassin's Creed III*," *Loading... The Journal of the Canadian Game Studies Association* 9, no. 14 (2015), 4.

³³ Shaw, "Tyranny of Realism," 5.

³⁴ Joyce, "Authentic-Deconstructionist Games," 133.

Loyalists, showcasing the effects of imperial advancement and exploitation.³⁵ Joyce also states, however, that any attempts to provide a compelling alternative account of the American Revolution are undermined when the developers must rely on a scrupulous adherence to facts in order to surmount consumer and scholarly critiques of narrative histories and historical fictions.³⁶

Historical video games function as sites of collective memory for both developers and players. Video game developers have altered the way they portray history in response to the needs of their consumer base (intended audience). As a result, players are afforded a certain degree of agency, with their perceptions of accuracy and authenticity impacting developers' reconstructions of the past. Arguments can be made for two forms of player agency: both external (market influence) and internal (in-game) agency. For the latter, players want to feel that they possess a certain degree of agency over the historical events in the games they are consuming – that their actions matter. It is the *perception* of agency afforded by the level of immersion in a video game that excites players. To boost this perception, players are given goals or “objectives” that they must complete in order to beat the game. Overcoming these challenges creates a sense of satisfaction and grants meaning to the player's choices. In addition, the opportunity to participate in major historical events, meet historical figures, and visit famous landmarks all work to enhance user experience. To be clear, though, in many historical video games, players do *not* possess the agency to impact the trajectory of past historical events in any meaningful way. Even games set in the alternate history genre, like those in the *Assassin's Creed*

³⁵ Joyce, “Authentic-Deconstructionist Games,” 135; Marco Antonio Rodriguez, “From the Periphery to Center Stage: The Effects and Exploitation of the Other in *Titus Andronicus* and *Assassin's Creed III*,” *The Communication Review* 17, no. 3 (2014), 246.

³⁶ Joyce, “Authentic-Deconstructionist Games,” 136.

series, do not always provide options for meaningful change. For example, if a player walks up to George Washington in *Assassin's Creed III* and kills him, the game resets to the last save point. Killing him would be considered counteractive to the goals of the game, which are for players to play out the American Revolution as the developers have decided to depict it.

Instead of exerting real agency over the actions of the player-character, or the direction of historical events in the in-game world, the main agency afforded to players exists in their ability to exert external influence on the ways video game developers choose to represent/reconstruct history. Many of the scholars analyzed in this section, including those focusing specifically on the *Assassin's Creed* series, argue that when history is mixed with entertainment, historical accuracy becomes “mutable” or “subservient” to the needs of the imagined player. Using participatory design (player feedback) and memory making (collective historical memories of both the developers and players), video game developers depict historical events, physically reconstruct environments, or portray historical figures in ways that they predict will match a player's expectations. This is why the detail/accuracy half of the dichotomy (the other half being narrative/fiction) takes up such a huge space in video game discourse and has been a major focus of video game scholarship. Even if material culture or historical recreation do not encompass the totality of what history represents, crafting a believable historical environment comes first.

This difference in priorities is also why some video game scholars and historians argue that conversations surrounding historical representation in video games should be mediated through the classroom. Examining the benefits of introducing *Assassin's Creed*

III as a teaching tool into the Québec Civics curriculum, Alex Benoit and François Furstenberg argued in, “L’univers d’*Assassin’s Creed III* et la désobéissance civile au profit de la pensée historique,”³⁷ that analyses of historical representation in video games can encourage students to consider how differing representations and perceptions of the same history can lead to vastly different conclusions.³⁸ They also sought to encourage students to question the motivations of video game developers, and to boost media literacy surrounding historical representations in video games.³⁹ Alongside calls for adding history-based video games to classroom repertoire came the implicit assumption that players are incapable of gleaning messages from the games’ content themselves. Proponents of this pedagogical shift argue that players are too caught up in debates of “accuracy” without doing any of the work to problematize their own assumptions of this term or acknowledge their own complicity in influencing the way history is portrayed in video games.

Despite the quantity of scholarly literature offering deconstructions of historical narratives and the role of memory in analyzing historical video games, Matei nevertheless argued in their 2023 article that “Relatively little attention has been paid to how historical video games are shaping collective memory in the digitally mediated world.”⁴⁰ This is not entirely without cause. If we return to our earlier discussion of the public participation of players in memory-making – specifically surrounding developers’

³⁷ English translation: “The universe of *Assassin’s Creed III* and civil disobedience in favor of historical thought.”

³⁸ Translated from the original French: Alexis Benoit and François Furstenberg, “L’univers d’*Assassin’s Creed III* et la désobéissance civile au profit de la pensée historique,” in *Les Usages Pédagogiques des Jeux Vidéo Assassin’s Creed*, eds. Marc-André Éthier and David LeFrançois (Québec City: Presses de l’Université Laval, 2023), 108.

³⁹ Benoit and Furstenberg, “L’univers d’*Assassin’s Creed III*,” 109.

⁴⁰ Matei, “Technological Mediation.”

decisions about how to portray historic events and how these reconstructions are then interpreted by players – it becomes clear that attempts by video game studies scholars to deconstruct historical reconstructions will not lead to any sort of change within the industry. Instead, motivated by profit, video game developers will continue to make choices that favor the needs and expectations of players, and players will continue to internalize these representations of history.

Primary Sources

Given the nature of my research, playing through the five games in the Desmond narrative arc – *Assassin's Creed*, *Assassin's Creed II*, *Assassin's Creed: Brotherhood*, *Assassin's Creed: Revelations*, and *Assassin's Creed III* – played a central role in the formation of my arguments. Engaging directly with the content of the games themselves was salient to placing the series within a larger trajectory of historical representation in video games. By demonstrating clear changes to how the series approached its stated attempts to deconstruct historical narratives from game to game, I was able to answer my central research question: “How has the series changed over time in response to reviews from players, critics, and scholars, and how does this impact the way that players interact with historical representation in the *Assassin's Creed* games?”

Each of the *Assassin's Creed* games examined in this thesis focus on broad periods of time while simultaneously containing the focus of the game to specific historical threads that provide the political intrigue or plotline. For example, *Assassin's Creed* (2007) is set in the period of the Third Crusade. An eventual consequence of the First Crusade (1096-1099), which Nikolas Jaspert and Phyllis Jestice argue marked “the spectacular prelude to a long series of military undertakings to defend or win back the

Holy Land,”⁴¹ the Third Crusade revolved around attempts to recapture principal harbors along the Levantine coast – specifically the Siege of Acre from 1189-1191.⁴² The game uses real factions from this Holy War between Christian and Muslim forces, such as the Saracens and the Knights Templar, and players can see the effects of the Crusade on the in-game environment. Players also frequently hear background characters talking about the ongoing war between Salahuddin (Saladin or Salah al-Din ibn Ayyub) and King Richard the Lionheart.

The games in the Ezio Trilogy (2009-2011) similarly focus on a broad period: the Renaissance. The games’ developers once again narrow down their focus to a series of events revolving around the Pazzi Conspiracy and the attempted assassination of Lorenzo de’ Medici in 1478. The plot to kill Lorenzo was part of a larger political quagmire dating back decades before the actual assassination attempt. According to Lauro Martines, the Medici had Florence in an oligarchical stranglehold, using their circle of satellite families to plant fear and resentment.⁴³ As a result, members of the Pazzi family – led by Andrea di Guglielmino de’ Pazzi, one of the richest bankers of the fifteenth century – and their co-conspirators sought to assassinate Lorenzo to snatch power away from the hands of the Medici family.⁴⁴ *Assassin’s Creed: Revelations* (2011), the final game in the Trilogy, also introduces the Byzantine-Ottoman conflict and uses the political struggle between Sultan Selim I (Sultan from 1512-1520) and his older brother Ahmet as a driving force behind the game’s plot. Although the Ottoman state absorbed the remainder of the

⁴¹ Nikolas Jaspert and Phyllis Jestice, *The Crusades* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2006), 47.

⁴² John D. Hosler, *The Siege of Acre, 1189-1191: Saladin, Richard the Lionheart, and the Battle That Decided the Third Crusade* (New Haven, Connecticut: Yale University Press, 2018), 2.

⁴³ Lauro Martines, *April Blood: Florence and the Plot Against the Medici* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), 88.

⁴⁴ Martines, *April Blood*, 112.

Byzantine Empire, making Istanbul (formerly Constantinople) its capital in 1453,⁴⁵ players playing as Ezio Auditore da Firenze find themselves fighting off the remnants of the Byzantine Empire who have allied themselves with the Templars.

Finally, *Assassin's Creed III* focuses on the period of the American Revolution. While the vast majority of playable events in the game revolve around the Revolution itself, there is an additional factor introduced through Ratohnhaké:ton's position as the main protagonist: the relationship between the Haudenosaunee, the British, and the American Colonists. Anglo-Haudenosaunee relations are often described by Western scholars (including the creators of *Assassin's Creed III*) as growing out of William Johnson's activities as Superintendent of Indian Affairs for the British between 1744 to 1774. Johnson used his experience as a former trader and long-time resident of the Mohawk Valley to establish close relations with the Haudenosaunee, particularly the Kanien'kehá:ka, and encourage them to join the British cause during the Seven Years' War.⁴⁶ However, tensions quickly rose in the wake of the war as settlers began pushing further and further into Haudenosaunee territory. During the American Revolution, the Six Nations of the Haudenosaunee found themselves split, with some fighting for the British and others siding with the Americans.⁴⁷ With the defeat of the British, many were quickly dispossessed of their land or moved to avoid encroaching American colonization. Through the use of Ratohnhaké:ton as a protagonist, Ubisoft hoped to tell this story. However, as Indigenous video game scholars argue (see Chapter 4), Ubisoft's game

⁴⁵ Albert Hourani, *A History of the Arab Peoples* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1991), 214-215.

⁴⁶ Gail D. Danvers, "Gendered Encounters: Warriors, Women, and William Johnson," *Journal of American Studies* 35, no. 2 (2001), 187-188.

⁴⁷ "The League of Nations," *Haudenosaunee Confederacy*, accessed March 25, 2025, <https://www.haudenosauneeconfederacy.com/the-league-of-nations/>.

design was ill-equipped to meaningfully engage with the blend of triumph and tragedy Ratohnhaké:ton's story necessitates: at the exact moment in which he believes he has saved his people and protected their ancestral land, he returns to find that the Kanien'kehá:ka have fled in the wake of settler incursion.

What Ubisoft seeks to do with each of its *Assassin's Creed* games is to take dominant historical narratives and, building on the historical record in plausible ways, weave in their own narrative and suggest that they are showing players history the way it truly happened. Introduced to players in the first game, and reiterated throughout the series, is the Assassin motto: "Nothing is true; everything is permitted." The maxim was pulled from the 1938 novel *Alamut* by Vladimir Bartol, and the story of the Hashashins and their origins in 1094 Syria was a direct inspiration for the original game.⁴⁸ The motto calls the assassins to recognize the subjectivity and mutability of experience. Within the context of the game, however, I propose that the motto demands that players think critically about history and call into question events and information that they have previously viewed as absolute "truths." This interpretation is given further credibility when taken in conjunction with Ubisoft's motto for the *Assassin's Creed* series – "History is our playground"⁴⁹ – and interviews with the game's writers and developers. Jeffrey Yohalem, one of the lead writers for what has ubiquitously become known as the Ezio

⁴⁸ The Hashashins were a historic and secretive faction of assassins operating out of Syria during the Middle Ages. See: Brendan Lowry, "The real-world history that inspired Assassin's Creed and its story," *Windows Central*, July 14, 2017, <https://www.windowscentral.com/real-world-history-inspired-assassins-creed>.

⁴⁹ Aris Politopoulos et al., "'History Is Our Playground': Action and Authenticity in *Assassin's Creed: Odyssey*," *Advances in Archaeological Practice* 7, no. 3 (2019), 317; Perrine Poiron, "*Assassin's Creed Origins* Discovery Tour A Behind the Scenes Experience," *Near Eastern Archaeology* 84, no. 1 (2021), 81.

Trilogy,⁵⁰ “revealed how he crafted [*Brotherhood*] into a criticism of modern government, and a way of educating American youth” by asking them to think critically about contemporary and historical political events.⁵¹ Interviews with the games’ developers, including writers and creative directors, were useful for analyzing their motivations contemporaneous with each game’s release. Interestingly, more recent reflections on the goals of the series reflect a different tone – one that is less about challenging the historical record and more about catering to player experiences in a way that fosters player interest in the past. For example, in the preface to the *Assassin’s Creed Atlas: Maps, Battlegrounds, and Architecture of the Assassin Brotherhood*, Historian and Director of Content for Ubisoft Montréal, Maxime Durand, writes: “The greatest strength of the *Assassin’s Creed* game series is not its ability to help us rediscover the past, but rather to offer incredible potential to nurture that which is most human in us: the thirst for curiosity, exploration, and freedom.”⁵²

Media analysis of video game critic reviews, as well as comments left by players on this content, also played a crucial role in my exploration of the series. Returning to Coplestone’s research, cultural-heritage practitioners examining historical video games like the *Assassin’s Creed* series had a tendency to formulate post-modern or deconstructionist approaches in their initial statements, but would quickly revert to

⁵⁰ The Ezio Trilogy is comprised of three games all focused on the life of Ezio Auditore da Firenze, including: *Assassin’s Creed II* (2009), *Assassin’s Creed: Brotherhood* (2010), and *Assassin’s Creed: Revelations* (2011).

⁵¹ *Game Rant* Staff, “‘Assassin’s Creed: Brotherhood’ Writer Explains Story’s Secret Meaning,” *Game Rant*, December 12, 2010, <https://gamerant.com/assassins-creed-brotherhood-secret-politics/>.

⁵² Guillaume Delalande, *Assassin’s Creed Atlas: Maps, Battlegrounds, and Architecture of the Assassin Brotherhood*, eds. Jean-Baptiste Roux (original French version) and Connor Leonard (English translation), trans. Zachary R. Townsend (New York: Abrams Books, 2021), 5.

reconstructionist critiques in discussions of accuracy.⁵³ They focused more on detail/accuracy of various historical reconstructions and less on a game's narrative/fiction. I argue that this can largely be attributed to conversations taking place within the external dialogue of the *Assassin's Creed* series. "External dialogue" – referred to often within this thesis – refers to any conversations taking place *external* to the content of the games themselves, including player, game critic, and academic discourse. For example, in comparison to game developers and cultural-heritage practitioners, players were shown by Coplestone to privilege "accurate" representations of history within a game's narrative *as well as* physical reconstruction of place, usually based on the player's own personal understanding of accuracy and the historical period being portrayed.

The majority of conversations taking place among *players* (or even game critics) within the gaming sphere quickly devolve into reconstructionist arguments surrounding "accuracy" or "authenticity" without stopping to ask the following questions: why certain decisions were made during the design process; what factors shape perceptions of "accuracy" and how those may differ based on each player's personal background; or why "accuracy" matters to them in the first place. The developers at Ubisoft seemed to be very aware of this lack of critical reflection among players. Quoted in *The Making of Assassin's Creed: 15th Anniversary*, Julien Laferrière, a senior producer at Ubisoft Montréal, reflected on the creation of *Assassin's Creed III*. In commenting on the challenges the choice of the American Revolution posed as a setting, Laferrière stated: "From a historical perspective, the American Revolution is probably one of the richest,

⁵³ Coplestone, "But that's not accurate," 418.

but also one of the toughest, time periods to set a game in. One of your biggest markets, the US, has been learning about this era since they started school. It's such a pivotal moment of history, and it's so heavily documented that you cannot really steer away from or invent anything. It's very, very precise."⁵⁴ There is also a noticeable shift between *Assassin's Creed* (2007) and *Assassin's Creed III* (2012) in their emphasis on historical deconstruction. Less emphasis is placed in the later games on explicit attempts to engage players in dialogue that would encourage them to rethink their views on historical accuracy, instead shifting to a reconstruction of the past that only further entrenches or legitimizes certain historical narratives possessed by the imagined player. As a result, each chapter in this thesis explores discourse within the external dialogue surrounding the Desmond narrative arc to demonstrate the power players have over the trajectory of a series.

Conclusion

Early analysis of historical video games focused heavily on deconstructing perceptions of historical accuracy, often in conjunction to video games being utilized as participatory forms of public history, and argued for the use of historical video games within the classroom to aid in historical and media analysis. Acknowledging the position occupied by players in the making of video games with historical themes, historians both cautioned and applauded developers for engaging in participatory memory-making. While video game studies scholars argued that, by directing how players interact with the in-game world, video games could offer a particular kind of historical learning, they still

⁵⁴ Calvin, *Making of Assassin's Creed*, 101.

cautioned developers against (in)advertently undermining various disciplines (e.g., archaeology). Unfortunately, as appreciation for historical fiction gradually gave way to a greater emphasis on ‘exact’ historical reproduction among gamers, the ability for game developers to insert narratives that would encourage players to question their views of history diminished. Simultaneously, “accurate” historical representation became subservient to the need to create entertaining and engaging products that met players’ needs and expectations. As a result, developers pivoted towards ensuring adequate *perceptions* of accuracy (or veneers of accuracy) within their games. The *Assassin’s Creed* games are no different. Released during this gradual shift toward “detail/accuracy” at the expense of “narrative/fiction,” the developers of *Assassin’s Creed I-III* (2007-2012) adapted their approach in response to player and game critic feedback. This thesis seeks to place the games in the Desmond narrative arc within a larger historiography of historical video games to demonstrate the influence of external dialogue as a reflection of shifting focus and trends in the gaming sphere.

CHAPTER TWO

Assassin's Creed (2007)

Introduction

In many ways, *Assassin's Creed* was a game changer that set new precedents for representations of history in video games. Previous historical video games had been criticized for their lack of realism when it came to interactions with Non-Player Characters (NPCs). For example, commenting on *Brother in Arms: Road to Hill 30* (2005), Brian Rejack stated that “the realism ends in this game – and in most other games of its kind – when it comes to human interaction,” and that “interactions with the computer-controlled characters lack a degree of interactivity that is comparable to that of the battle scenes.”⁵⁵ Despite their best efforts to create totally immersive products, players engaging with these games found their immersion broken by a lacking AI or NPC component. As a highly anticipated title – which entered its development phase in 2003 and featured a grueling media campaign of reveals gradually disseminated through developer interviews, official behind-the-scenes blog videos, and expo appearances – *Assassin's Creed* featured a “social stealth” engine that pushed the boundaries of interactive AI in the realm of console gaming.⁵⁶ Reflecting 15 years later on previous game engine’s capabilities, Jade Raymond, *Assassin's Creed*’s producer, stated that “on previous gens, if you had more than thirty AI-created characters, everything broke down.

⁵⁵ Brian Rejack, “Toward a Virtual Reenactment of History: Video Games and the Recreation of the Past,” *Rethinking History* 11, no. 3 (2007), 414, 420.

⁵⁶ Erin Bell, “E3: Hands on with Assassin’s Creed,” CBC News, July 13, 2007, <https://www.cbc.ca/technology/technology-blog/2007/07/e3-hands-on-with-assassins-creed.html>; Frank Caron, “Everything is permitted: a review of Assassin’s Creed,” *ArsTechnica*, November 23, 2007, <https://arstechnica.com/gaming/2007/11/assassins-creed-review/>; Keith Stuart, “What does the success of Assassin’s Creed mean?”, *The Guardian*, December 13, 2007, <https://www.theguardian.com/technology/gamesblog/2007/dec/13/whatdoesthesuccessofassas>.

But James [Thérien, a member of the tech team,] was like, ‘No, we’ll have crowds of two hundred people.’”⁵⁷

Furthermore, while games released prior to *Assassin’s Creed* also received praise for their immense attention to detail, praise for *Assassin’s Creed* reached a new level. The world of the Holy Land was beautifully realized and richly detailed, and players were able to explore this world with the help of Altaïr’s unparalleled acrobatics, climbing virtually any structure and racing across the rooftops of Damascus, Acre, and Jerusalem.⁵⁸ Of course, not everyone was so enthused. Chris Kohler with *Wired* wrote in an article entitled “Review: Why *Assassin’s Creed* fails,” that beyond the clever premise, unique setting, fully realized world, beautiful graphics and music, and responsive controls – admittedly a lot of compliments for a review with such a title – the gameplay itself was an “unfulfilling, generic collection of boring mini-games and barely passable sword combat.”⁵⁹ However, even those who criticized the gameplay, much like Kohler, begrudgingly recognized the virtues of the game developers’ meticulous attention to detail and worldbuilding.⁶⁰

Far from being just a visually appealing game devoid of substance, *Assassin’s Creed* resides within the realm of ‘speculative’ or ‘alternative fiction,’ allowing the

⁵⁷ Alex Calvin, *The Making of Assassin’s Creed: 15th Anniversary*, eds. Ian Tucker and Anastacia Ferry (Milwaukie, OR: Dark Horse Books, 2023), 31.

⁵⁸ Caron, “Everything is Permitted”; Chris Kohler, “Review: Why *Assassin’s Creed* Fails,” *Wired*, November 23, 2007, <https://www.wired.com/2007/11/review-why-assa/>; Kevin VanOrd, “Assassin’s Creed Review,” *GameSpot*, April 8, 2008, <https://www.gamespot.com/reviews/assassins-creed-review/1900-6188960/>; Mikel Reparaz, “Assassin’s Creed review,” *GamesRadar*, November 8, 2007, <https://www.gamesradar.com/assassins-creed-review/>; Tom Bramwell, “Assassin’s Creed: Director’s Cut Edition,” *Eurogamer*, April 2, 2008, <https://www.eurogamer.net/assassins-creed-directors-cut-edition-first-impressions>.

⁵⁹ Caron, “Everything is Permitted”; Kohler, “*Assassin’s Creed* Fails.”

⁶⁰ Bell, “E3”; Caron, “Everything is Permitted”; VanOrd, “Assassin’s Creed Review”; Stuart, “Success of *Assassin’s Creed*.”

game's developers to attempt to challenge collective narratives of the historical events and time periods portrayed within the game. According to an interview with Raymond, "By grounding a story in reality, you increase its credibility [...] At the same time, because [*Assassin's Creed's*] setting is far removed in time [...] there's plenty of freedom to take a revisionist approach, tweak[ing] people's personalities and motivations."⁶¹ The freedom to revise history, tweaking it to fit the game's narrative, is part of a larger pattern within the video game industry and often attracts players. Since, according to David Mather, these games offer players "the opportunity to replay and remake historical events," they "do not [need] to aim for precise historical accuracy but rather for a veneer of authenticity."⁶² In addition, according to Robson Scarassati Bello, alternative histories – whose "characters, dialogue, and incidents [...] are designed to convey a general sense of the past and offer metaphorical truths to comment on and challenge traditional historical discourse" – can effectively "blur the boundaries between history as knowledge and history as entertainment."⁶³ Using the Assassin motto, "Nothing is true, everything is permitted," Ubisoft seeks to ground its alternative history in a "veneer of authenticity," while simultaneously using the game's narrative to provoke players to think critically about both their in-game and real-world conceptualization of a historical event or figure. In doing so, Ubisoft's development team and its producers aim to strike at the heart of debates taking place within the public history field. In addition, its internal dialogue – specifically conversations between the game's characters – grapples with the role

⁶¹ Magy Seif El Nasr, et al., "Assassin's Creed: A Multi-Cultural Read," *Loading... The Journal of the Canadian Game Studies Association* 2, no. 3 (2008), 6, 7.

⁶² David Mather, "Extended Memory: Early Calculating Engines and Historical Computer Simulations," *Leonardo* 39, no. 3 (2006), 240.

⁶³ Robson Scarassati Bello, "The Problem of Memory in the Assassin's Creed Series (2007-2020)," *Games and Culture* (2023).

memory plays in (de)legitimizing historical narratives. Dividing the game into “Memory Blocks” and using the genetic memories of Desmond’s ancestors to access the past is a mechanism used to show history ‘as it really was,’ while simultaneously problematizing this notion.

Despite the questions *Assassin’s Creed’s* internal dialogue attempts to raise surrounding the role of memory and the legitimization of specific collective narratives within the field of history, very few academic articles can be found that focus solely on the original *Assassin’s Creed* game. Acting as a set-up for a series that would span more than a dozen games on multiple platforms, including Xbox, PlayStation, PC, and Mobile, it is only in connection to the later and more recent games that the original *Assassin’s Creed* finds itself within the academic spotlight. As such, the main concern of this chapter will be addressing the foundational work that the original *Assassin’s Creed* game provided for the rest of the series. Focus will be given to two key components that the original title introduced to the series. The first component is the use of the game’s internal dialogue to grapple with ongoing debates around: the weight given to primary sources as a form of knowledge; problematizing the way in which history is taught; and how these two components are connected both through individual and collective memory. The second component is the external dialogue the game inspires, where a dichotomy of narrative/fiction versus detail/accuracy is revealed through the reception the game received from consumers and critics. In order to examine the internal aspects of the game, this chapter provides a brief overview of the game’s story, followed by an examination of the internal dialogue within the game surrounding public history and memory. Following this examination of the game’s features, the focus of this chapter will turn outwards to

examine the external dialogue from consumers and critics as a means of examining how *Assassin's Creed* was initially perceived by its user base.

Overview of the Game's Story

Desmond Miles – 2012 AD

Players are first introduced to Desmond Miles, the main character of *Assassin's Creed I-III* and one of the core subjects of this thesis, at the beginning of the first game. The opening scenes reveal that Desmond was captured by Abstergo Industries, a front for the modern-day Knights Templar, and forcibly sent back into the memories of his ancestor, Altaïr, using a machine called the Animus. While in Abstergo's clutches, Desmond gets to know Lucy Stillman, a genetic memory researcher working with Abstergo on the Animus project. With her help, Desmond slowly begins to uncover Abstergo's motive for holding him captive: to use his genetic memories to uncover Pieces of Eden. These 'Pieces of Eden' were technology originally used by members of the 'First Civilization,' an ancient, technologically advanced civilization wiped out long ago. By gaining access to First Civilization technology, the Templars hope to bend the world to their will.

Altaïr Ibn-La'Ahad – 1191 AD

Assassin's Creed is subdivided into seven Memory Blocks, each representing both a different plot sequence in the game and a different fragment of Desmond's ancestral and present-day memories. The game, set against the backdrop of the Third Crusade and the Holy Land, follows Altaïr Ibn-La'Ahad as he seeks to redeem his honour and uncover the truth behind the Templar Order. Players are introduced to Altaïr as he leads an ill-

fated mission to stop Robert de Sablé, the eleventh Grand Master of the Knights Templar, from obtaining a Piece of Eden. However, Altaïr's hubris leads to the death and injury of the Assassins who accompanied him. Returning to Masyaf, the Assassin headquarters, Altaïr is ordered by the leader of the Assassin Order, Al-Mualim, to give up his rank and start over. Sinking back down to the lowest rank, Altaïr is tasked with assassinating nine men, each of whom are revealed to be Templars.

During the assassination of each target, players witness a speech from each of the men in which they outline their motives. While Altaïr does acknowledge the danger of his targets' shared ideology, he begins to question his own blind resolve and loyalty to Al-Mualim during the process of trying to regain his honour among the Assassins. Following his assassination of Garnier de Naplouse, for example, Altaïr says to his mentor, "Looking back, those that were supposedly his captives seemed grateful to the man. Not all of them, but enough to make me wonder."⁶⁴ The game culminates in Altaïr's discovery that he has been betrayed by Al-Mualim, who not only turned his back on the Assassin Brotherhood by siding with the Templars, but double-crossed his Templar allies as well. In the end, Altaïr kills him.

Internal Dialogue: Public History, Presentism, and the Role of Memory

Revealed within the game's internal dialogue are questions of historical narrative and the role of memory in our perceptions of public history. In a game rife with historical representation that relies heavily on Desmond's ancestral memories as a plot device, it is important to analyze the ways in which the game's characters facilitate conversations

⁶⁴ Ubisoft. *Assassin's Creed*. Ubisoft Inc. PlayStation 3/Xbox 360/Microsoft Windows. 2007.

surrounding how historical moments and figures are remembered, how we decide which sources to trust when crafting our histories, and how we can then problematize these choices. In addition, the game's writers have its characters actively engage with questions of who controls or crafts the historical narrative, challenging players to question their own assumptions about the history they consume. Connecting conversations between the game's characters with debates surrounding public history and the heritage sector, it is the goal of this section to explore how this element of the game functions to set up the Desmond meta-narrative arc that spans *Assassin's Creed I-III*. In particular, this section will focus on two in-game conversations: a conversation overheard by Altaïr between Jubair Al-Hakim and his men, which bleeds into a later conversation that Altaïr has with Jubair while assassinating him; and one between Desmond Miles and Warren Vidic outside of the Animus in Abstergo's lab.

Jubair Al-Hakim and Altaïr Ibn-La'Ahad

In Memory Block 5, Altaïr is tasked with traveling to the Middle District of Damascus to hunt and kill Jubair Al-Hakim, Salahaddin's chief scholar. Turning the other scholars against Salahaddin, Jubair orders his men to collect texts from around the city so that he can destroy them. In doing so, he plans to rid Damascus of knowledge he believes to be dangerous. Watching from a rooftop vantage point, players, through the eyes of Altaïr, are treated to a cut scene in which Jubair instructs his men to burn books belonging to the city's people. His decision, however, does not go unchallenged. Questioning their leader's orders, one of Jubair's soldiers argues that the soon-to-be-

destroyed parchments represent knowledge “put there by our ancestors for good reason.”⁶⁵ Not dissuaded by this show of defiance, Jubair counters:

Jubair: No! These bits of papers are covered in lies! They poison your minds, and so long as they exist, you cannot hope to see the world the way it truly is!

Soldier: How can you accuse these scrolls of being weapons? They are tools of learning!

Jubair: You turn to them for answers and salvation. You rely more upon them than yourselves. This makes you weak and stupid. You trust in words, drops of ink. Do you ever stop to think of who put them there? Or why? No, you simply accept their words without question and what if those words speak falsely, as they often do? This is dangerous.⁶⁶

Later, during the assassination sequence, players watch a similar conversation play out between Altaïr and Jubair. Demanding to know why Altaïr has killed him, Altaïr informs Jubair that “Men must be free to do what they believe,” and that it is not Jubair’s right to punish the citizens of Damascus for thinking what they do, even if he disagrees.⁶⁷ Jubair argues:

Jubair: Is it not ancient scrolls that inspire the Crusaders? That fill Salahaddin and his men with a sense of righteous fury? Their texts endanger others, bring death in their

⁶⁵ Ubisoft, *Assassin’s Creed*, Ubisoft Inc, PlayStation 3/Xbox 360/Microsoft Windows, 2007.

⁶⁶ Ibid.

⁶⁷ Ibid.

wake. I, too, was making a small sacrifice. It matters little now. Your deed is done, and so am I.⁶⁸

Each of these conversations with Jubair reflect debates that were taking place within the field of public history and heritage around the time of the game's initial release. Mirroring conversations taking place 20 years later, historians in the early 2000s were locked in a debate surrounding the validity of the role presentism plays in analyses of the past. In a 2001 article denouncing presentism, Graham Good writes that presentism "repudiates historicism and holds that we cannot know the truth of the past 'as it really was', and that the past never has been knowable."⁶⁹ This portrayal of presentism is directly reflected in the first conversation between Jubair and the soldier when Jubair declares that the texts he is burning poison the minds of their readers and prevent them from seeing the world "the way it truly is." Furthermore, Jubair, in attempting to destroy all the books in Damascus, claims that he is doing this because the knowledge they represent is dangerous. In this sense, Jubair reflects Good's argument that "postcolonialism combines with presentism to inculcate the past as a substitute for trying to understand it."⁷⁰ The fact that Jubair is seen to be literally burning down the historical tradition of Damascus due to his rejection of the texts' validity is an interesting metaphor for how empiricists view those of the pro-presentism camp. Jubair and his ideals can be seen as a stand-in for negative opinions towards presentism within this particular debate.

⁶⁸ Ubisoft, *Assassin's Creed*, Ubisoft Inc, PlayStation 3/Xbox 360/Microsoft Windows, 2007.

⁶⁹ Graham Good, "Presentism: Postmodernism, Poststructuralism, Postcolonialism," in *Humanism Betrayed: Theory, Ideology, and Culture in the Contemporary University* (Montréal, Canada: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2001), 63.

⁷⁰ Good, "Presentism," 70.

Killing Jubair to stop him from spreading his dangerous ideals is also considered justifiable due to his status as a Templar, the organization whose characters are positioned as the antagonists of the early games in the series. The ideals that Jubair is pushing are those promoting the idea of questioning the historical tradition. For his rejection of Damascus' historical texts, he is killed by Altaïr, who ironically argues that "men must be free to do what they believe." In a 2003 article defending the role of presentism in analyses of the past, Chandra L. Power states that accusations of presentism in the analysis of history "function to legitimize a narrow, one-dimensional view of the past and to reify a selective tradition."⁷¹ Based on what players witness in the game, men must be free to do what they believe, until what they believe conflicts with the dominant selective tradition. Furthermore, the game developers are able to use Jubair as a mouthpiece to parrot popular questions often posed by those who support presentism. For example, Jubair asks the soldier, "Do you ever stop to think of who put [the words] there? Or why?" In building on the presentist idea that what is deemed important from the past is intrinsically shaped by contemporary political concerns,⁷² Jubair points to the role that religious and historical texts have played within his own contemporary period when he demands of Altaïr, "Is it not ancient scrolls that inspire the Crusaders? That fill Salahaddin and his men with a sense of righteous fury?" *Assassin's Creed* is not the first video game to pose such questions. Kevin Schut notes that games like *Sid Meier's Civilization* (1991), as well as the *Battlefield* series (first game released in 2002) and *Total War* series (first game released in 2000), create an open-ended picture of history

⁷¹ Chandra L. Power, "Challenging the Pluralism of Our Past: Presentism and the Selective Tradition in Historical Fiction Written for Young People," *Research in the Teaching of English* 37, no. 4 (2003): 425.

⁷² Victoria Hattam, "History, Agency, and Political Change," *Polity* 32, no. 3 (2000): 338.

that provides “an alternative to the assumed determinism in most accounts of the past.”⁷³ However, by having Jubair directly address the role that historical texts and their contemporary interpretations have played in spurring on the Third Crusade, the game developers can use him as a way to encourage players to question how and why history is used, both politically and ideologically.

Just as Jubair challenges Altaïr and the soldier to question why they place so much blind faith in the historical texts with which they are familiar, so too do the developers challenge players to answer Jubair’s questions. In doing so, they also cast the characters of *Assassin’s Creed* as actors within the larger debate surrounding the salience of primary source material and historical narrative within the field of public history. They further complicate this dialogue by originally presenting the conflict between the Assassins and the Templars as a fight between “good” and “evil.” This concept is repeatedly called into question by the characters themselves, particularly Altaïr, who finds himself continuously questioning what he thinks is true. Although Altaïr does not seem to find a clear resolution to these questions for himself, the following conversation between Warren Vidic and Desmond Miles sees the former place a value judgment on the role of memory as a key factor for determining the legitimacy of historical narratives.

Warren Vidic and Desmond Miles

Outside of the Animus, players, as Desmond, have the opportunity to explore the space in which Desmond is being held captive, primarily the room where Abstergo Industries houses the Animus and Desmond’s sleeping quarters. Typically, these brief

⁷³ Kevin Schut, “Strategic Simulations and Our Past: The Bias of Computer Games in the Presentation of History,” *Games and Culture* 2, no. 3 (2007), 229.

forays into Desmond's point of view take place in between Memory Blocks. During these moments in the game's present, Desmond can also speak with Lucy Stillman and Warren Vidic. Following the completion of Memory Block 5 – the same Memory Block where Altaïr assassinates Jubair, who treats him to a lecture on the dangers of blind faith in primary source material – Desmond has an almost identical, or at least parallel, conversation with Warren. Awoken by Warren at the beginning of Memory Block 6, Desmond attempts to understand why the history he is seeing within the Animus does not match up with what he 'knows' to be true, saying:

Desmond: Some of the stuff I'm seeing in the Animus... sometimes it seems wrong, untrue, like the history is off somehow. It doesn't –

Warren: - it doesn't what, Mr. Miles? Match up with what you read on an online encyclopedia? What your high school history teacher taught you? Let me ask you something: do these supposed experts have access to secret knowledge kept hidden from the rest of us?

Desmond: There are books, letters, documents, all sorts of source material from back then. Some of it seems to contradict what the Animus is showing me.

Warren: Anyone can write a book, and they can put whatever they want on its pages. Anything! Used to be we thought the world was flat.

Desmond: Some people still do.

Warren: Yes, and they publish books about it. Or that the moon landing was a hoax? I believe there's also a book [that] claims the world was created in seven days. A best seller, too [...]. The point I suppose, is that you shouldn't trust everything you hear, everything you read. What's that your ancestor's said? "Nothing is true [...]"?

Desmond: “Everything is permitted.”

Warren: Yes, exactly! It’s part of what makes the Animus so spectacular. There’s no room for misinterpretation.⁷⁴

Once again, *Assassin’s Creed’s* characters raise important questions about the validity and legitimacy of primary sources in the creation of historical narratives. In questioning why we perceive certain parts of history as “accurate” versus “inaccurate,” Warren Vidic challenges Desmond – and ostensibly the player – to question their own perception of the historical events being played out within the Animus. It is a message from the developers to the players that they, like Desmond, must reevaluate their perceptions of history. This conversation can be broken down into two consecutive parts for analysis, namely: problematizing how history is taught, as well as how historical narratives are constructed, legitimized, and disseminated; and the role of memory within the field of public history, as represented by Desmond’s ancestral memories accessed through the Animus.

One of the central themes of the conversation between Desmond and Warren revolves around questioning how history is taught, as well as why certain historical narratives have been legitimized and disseminated more widely than others. In questioning why some of the history being shown to him in the Animus appears “wrong” or “untrue,” Desmond alludes to the repetition of information contained within the historic record that lends a sense of legitimacy to certain claims. For example, Desmond notes that there exists a plethora of primary source material that is seemingly contradicted

⁷⁴ Ubisoft, *Assassin’s Creed*, Ubisoft Inc, PlayStation 3/Xbox 360/Microsoft Windows, 2007.

by the genetic memories of his ancestor, Altaïr. However, Warren's argument that the history contained within the Animus only appears untrue because the history Desmond has been exposed to is now diluted by personal, ideological, and political biases is an attempt to create another link between Desmond and the player. According to El Nasr et al., "the experiences of playing a video game, like *Assassin's Creed*, is a personal experience shaped through [the player's] emotional values, expectations, knowledge, and attitudes as influenced by culture."⁷⁵ In comparing each of their personal and cultural backgrounds, the authors reflected on how Maha Al-Saati and Magy Seif El Nasr's Middle-Eastern backgrounds fundamentally influenced their reactions to the game's portrayal of the Third Crusades in comparison to their American colleagues, Simon Niedenthal and David Milam. By questioning Desmond's perceptions of "accuracy" in the Animus and Altaïr's retelling of the past, Warren forces both Desmond and the player to question how their own backgrounds might influence their views.

The conversation between Warren and Desmond also acts as a way for *Assassin's Creed's* developers to engage in public history debates surrounding the legitimization of historical narratives. Warren's challenge to Desmond, in which he asks him if "these supposed experts have access to secret knowledge kept hidden from the rest of us," references arguments about how certain historical narratives are disseminated and legitimized within educational institutions. Many historians who study the history of public education argue that educational institutions reinforce the importance of particular historical narratives within their curriculum through repetition of allegedly correct facts and fixed interpretations, which in turn tends to encourage shallow interpretations of

⁷⁵ El Nasr et al., "Multi-Cultural Read," 1.

history and fails to provide sufficient appreciation of history as a construct.⁷⁶

Furthermore, Warren references conspiracy theories (e.g., “Flat Earth” and the “Moon landing hoax”) as a way of further aligning himself with those in the public history sphere that argue that the crowd-sourcing capabilities provided by the internet only erode the distinction between ‘truth’ and ‘fiction.’ As Serge Noiret notes: “digital history rewrites and reinterprets the history profession” in a way that “often lacks historical consciousness, internal and external criticism of sources, and contextualization.”⁷⁷ What, then, does Warren provide as a solution to the dilution of history? Memory.

The second main theme present within Warren and Desmond’s conversation relates to the role memory plays within the field of public history. At the end of the conversation, Warren makes a very bold claim when he states: “There’s no room [in the Animus] for misinterpretation.” Here, Warren claims that the Animus, which permits test subjects like Desmond to re-enter the genetic memories of their ancestors, *is* the way to see history “as it truly was.” He is essentially arguing that Altair’s genetic memories present the purest form of the historical events, people, and places with which he interacted. However, some scholarly sources reflecting on the role of memory in the *Assassin’s Creed* series have argued that “the past ‘as it was’ no longer exists, and even though the producers imply that it is possible to achieve, it is not possible, as it is always a reconstruction by the present.”⁷⁸ This trepidation surrounding *Assassin’s Creed’s*

⁷⁶ Christoph Kühberger, “The Private Use of Public History and its Effects on the Classroom,” in *Public History and School: International Perspectives*, ed. Marko Demantowsky (Oldenbourg, Germany: De Gruyter, 2019), 70; Rob Sieborger, “Public History and the School Curriculum: Two South African Case Studies,” in *Public History and School: International Perspectives*, ed. Marko Demantowsky (Oldenbourg, Germany: De Gruyter, 2019), 48, 49.

⁷⁷ Serge Noiret, “Digital Public History,” in *A Companion to Public History*, ed. David Dean (Hoboken, New Jersey: Wiley, 2018), 111, 114.

⁷⁸ Bello, “Problem of Memory.”

representations of the past has been mirrored in analyses of other historical video games, with scholars noting that even when developers strive for verisimilitude, there is a distinct possibility that gamers will have little or no knowledge of the history being recreated.⁷⁹ For those that do, their perception of ‘accuracy’ is often mediated by their expectations or prior knowledge. Furthermore, even the developers and historians who worked on both the original *Assassin’s Creed*, as well as the series as a whole, are divided on the portrayal of memory within the game and the role it plays in mediating player interactions with the past. Jade Raymond, who worked on the first game, stated that “the whole experience is being processed by Desmond (a Modern American guy) through the Animus,”⁸⁰ with Desmond relying on his own experience to understand Altaïr’s life. In contrast, historians who worked on the series acknowledged that the research they conducted for the game developers aimed to provide representations of the past “consistent with the expectations and needs of players.”⁸¹

Although exploration of memory in various facets has been extremely popular within the social sciences in the last 40 years, the legitimacy of individual memory as a means of understanding history, as well as the role memory plays in cultivating historical narratives, is still being widely debated within the field of public history. Writing in 1999 about the interface between individual and collective history, Michael G. Kenny writes that “supposedly objective academic debate is contaminated by ‘memoropolitics’” – a term he defines as “a power struggle around knowledge, or claims of knowledge’

⁷⁹ Rejack, “Virtual Reenactment of History,” 415.

⁸⁰ El Nasr et al., “Multi-Cultural Read,” 25.

⁸¹ Translated from the original French; See: Marc-André Éthier and David Lefrançois, “Quelle Lecture les Historiens d’*Assassin’s Creed* Font-Ils de ce Jeu Vidéo d’Histoire?” *Revue de recherches en littérature médiatique multimodale* 7 (2018).

focusing on the validity of psychoanalytic modes of interpreting the relation between past and present.”⁸² This power struggle is perhaps best exemplified by the backdrop of the Third Crusade in the original *Assassin’s Creed* game, as well as Jubair’s earlier remark regarding the ways in which both Salahaddin and the Crusaders use their respective religious texts and cultural memories to justify war. In addition, the internal dialogue of the game, which operates as an extension of the game developers’ and writers’ goals to “provide a level of immersion that was not possible on previous consoles,”⁸³ has been critiqued as being “simply a collective memory of the producers [as they aim to] deliver an entertainment product,”⁸⁴ thus reinforcing the developers’ and their audiences’ ideas surrounding “authenticity” and “accuracy.”

Contrary to Warren’s claim regarding a lack of room for misinterpretation within Altaïr’s memories, many historians would argue that “individuals are nothing without the prior existence of the collectivities that sustain them,” and that, in turn, memory as a form of historical knowledge is inherently fragile because it is embedded within ever-changing institutional systems of social and political life.⁸⁵ According to Lakshmi Menon, “Memory is also subject to its own flaws,” as they can be “suppressed, modified or altogether erased, thereby making it impossible to recount memories in a linear, continuous manner.”⁸⁶ Based on the opinions of these authors, the idea that Altaïr’s memory represents historical knowledge that leaves no room for misinterpretation must

⁸² Michael G. Kenny, “A Place for Memory: The Interface between Individual and Collective History,” *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 41, no. 3 (1999): 421.

⁸³ El Nasr et al., “Multi-Cultural Read,” 13.

⁸⁴ Bello, “Problem of Memory.”

⁸⁵ Kenny, “Place for Memory,” 421; Lloyd Kramer, “The Enduring Public Struggle to Construct, Control, and Challenge Historical Memories,” *History and Theory* 60 (2021): 150, 151.

⁸⁶ Lakshmi Menon, “History First-hand: Memory, the Player and the Video Game Narrative in the *Assassin’s Creed* Games,” *Rupkatha Journal on Interdisciplinary Studies in Humanities* 7 (2015), 109.

be problematized. After all, Altaïr and his memories are intrinsically linked to the various cultural, temporal, political, and social factors that impact who he is as a character. His personal moral compass and the tenets of the Creed shape his worldview and influence the way he perceives the events taking place around him, as well as how he perceives the worldviews of the Templars he assassinates. In addition, Altaïr is only able to see and hear about *fragments* of the history that is unfolding around him because he is limited by time (the time it takes for news to travel; and the time it takes for him to learn things) and space (the physical distance that separates him from various events). Players, through Altaïr, only see the *moment* where Altaïr learns of Al-Mualim's betrayal of the Assassin Order. For Altaïr the betrayal takes place in that singular moment. In reality, however, the betrayal has been taking place for years and Altaïr is only able to contextualize it retroactively. Warren's argument surrounding the purity of memory as a form of historical knowledge finds itself at odds, then, with many public historians who would claim that transmission of historical memory is "contextual, partial, and subject to self-interested manipulation and obfuscation."⁸⁷

As was the case with the Jubair Al-Hakim conversations, the conversation between Warren Vidic and Desmond Miles serves multiple purposes for the developers. Not only does it represent another example of the ways in which in-game conversations challenge players to think critically about their personal understandings of the past, but it also engages in a complex debate surrounding the role of memory in public history. In addition, the idea that the history represented within the Animus is "true" because it represents Altaïr's first-hand experiences of the historical events shown in the game leads

⁸⁷ Kenny, "Place for Memory," 425.

us to our next conversation surrounding the external dialogue taking place about the universe of *Assassin's Creed* – a conversation about “detail/accuracy” and “narrative/fiction.”

External Dialogue: Conversations in the Gaming Sphere

In contrast to the internal dialogue of *Assassin's Creed*, which allows the game's developers and writers to introduce commentary challenging players to think critically about historical narratives, the external dialogue surrounding the game comes out of an online environment where players can craft their own responses to the game's content. External dialogue comes in many forms, ranging from game reviews in online magazines to video game playthroughs on YouTube. It is this external dialogue that allows players to publicly discuss and attribute value to different elements of the game, such as graphics or storyline, and reveals to the developers which parts of their game players believe gave it merit. With the original *Assassin's Creed* title, game reviewers noted right away that the cliffhanger ending “blatantly [left] open the possibility of a sequel,”⁸⁸ and they actively asked developers to “throw out everything that doesn't work, and go all the way back [to the] drawing board”⁸⁹ while maintaining the qualities of the game that they enjoyed. As *Assassin's Creed* was the first game in a prospective series – a way for Ubisoft Montréal's development team to ‘test the waters,’ so to speak – feedback from players that overwhelmingly favored one component of the game over another could greatly alter the trajectory of the series. Therefore, the first part of this section will quickly examine the game's initial reception, specifically its sales, accolades, and overall reviews. In addition,

⁸⁸ VanOrd, “Assassin's Creed Review.”

⁸⁹ Kohler, “*Assassin's Creed* Fails.”

it will seek to demonstrate how the game’s external dialogue began to craft a dichotomy between “detail/accuracy” and “narrative/fiction” that would span the rest of the games within the Desmond narrative arc.

Initial Reception: Sales, Accolades, and Reviews

Released on November 13, 2007, Ubisoft initially projected that *Assassin’s Creed* would sell around 3 million copies in its first year on the shelves.⁹⁰ Quickly surpassing expectations, the game became one of the fastest-selling video games of its time, amassing a whopping 2.5 million copies sold within the first four weeks of its release.⁹¹ The game also received multiple awards and was nominated for numerous others, both prior to and following its release date. For example, following the Electronic Entertainment Expo (E3) of 2006, IGN awarded *Assassin’s Creed* the title of “Best Action Game (PS3)” and the game was nominated for two other awards for “Best Graphics Technology” and “Console Game of the Show,” all while it was still in its beta phase.⁹² It would continue to hold IGN’s title for “Best Action Game” in 2007, with IGN stating, “What impressed us about Assassin’s [Creed] most was the scale and detail of Jerusalem,” and that the ability to scale buildings brought players “ever closer to a spectacular view of the historically-accurate [city].”⁹³ In 2008, the game also won the “Outstanding Achievement in Animation” Award at the 11th Annual D.I.C.E. Awards held by the Academy of Interactive Arts and Sciences. The organization – which allows its

⁹⁰ Stuart, “Success of Assassin’s Creed.”

⁹¹ Stuart, “Success of Assassin’s Creed.”

⁹² “IGN’s Overall Best of E3 2006 Awards,” IGN, May 19, 2006, <https://www.ign.com/articles/2006/05/19/igns-overall-best-of-e3-2006-awards>. “Beta” is a term used to refer to games that are playable, but still considered incomplete by the developers. For further clarification see: “Understanding betas, demos, and trials on Xbox,” Xbox Support, accessed January 15, 2024.

⁹³ “City” has replaced “Jerusalem” to avoid repetition; “IGN’s Overall Best of E3 2007 Awards,” IGN, July 20, 2007, <https://www.ign.com/articles/2007/07/21/igns-overall-best-of-e3-2007-awards>.

membership base of more than 30,000 industry professionals, developers, and studios to vote on awards in categories relating to animation, art, audio, story, and technology in video games – notably nominated *Assassin's Creed* for another six awards relating to its animation, art direction, and visual and gameplay engineering, but *not* for its storyline.⁹⁴ Finally, in addition to its numerous accolades, the majority of critic and player reviews displayed an overall positive outlook on the game – although *Assassin's Creed* did not escape without a few harsh critiques.

Analyzing *Assassin's Creed's* Reception: “Detail/Accuracy” vs. “Narrative/Fiction”

Within the *Assassin's Creed* series, and historical video games as a whole, there exists a dichotomy between fiction (narrative) and accuracy (detail). The narrative created by a historical video game's developers and writers comprises multiple factors, including: who developers choose to represent within their game; how players are meant to empathize with the game's characters; and what version of history is privileged throughout the storyline. Although genre, plot structure, and a player's own level of knowledge can form a sliding scale of perceived 'accuracy' in relation to the aforementioned factors, 'narrative' is generally understood to be 'fictitious,' in which representations of the past are used to challenge or legitimize player's perceptions of a particular historical period. This element of 'narrative' was touched on in the earlier discussion of *Assassin's Creed's* internal dialogue, in which the game's developers utilize conversations between in-game characters to challenge players to think critically about the history they consume. In contrast, 'detail' or 'accuracy' is brought forward by factors

⁹⁴ “Assassin's Creed,” Academy of Interactive Arts & Sciences, accessed January 15, 2024, https://www.interactive.org/games/video_game_details.asp?idAward=2008&idGame=910.

such as the musical score, the physical reconstruction of the in-game environment, the game's graphics, the costuming (i.e., what characters are wearing), and the way that characters can interact with their environment. While both 'narrative' and 'detail' are *internal* to a video game, it is how this dichotomy is *externalized*, often through online discourse, that reveals which of these factors players felt to be the most impactful to their gaming experience.

In examining reviews of *Assassin's Creed* written between 2006-2008, one theme that emerged rather quickly was the appreciation players and critics had for the level of detail presented within the game. While the game's storyline often received mixed reviews, the sheer attention to detail its design possessed created an immersive experience, with many reviewers going so far as to applaud the game for its 'authenticity' or 'accuracy.'⁹⁵ It became clear rather quickly that although a few players and critics may have appreciated the story, the level of detail Ubisoft's development team had pumped into the game far outstripped the story in level of importance for critics and players alike. For example, IGN's Hilary Goldstein was quick to condemn *Assassin's Creed* for its "bad story, repetitive gameplay elements, and poor AI," but softened the blow by writing that the game was "steeped in *historical fact* [... and] The attention to creating an *accurate representation* of Jerusalem, Acre, and Damascus [was] commendable."⁹⁶

⁹⁵ See the earlier comment made about *Assassin's Creed* by IGN upon designating it the "Best Action Game" of 2007's E3 line-up. In this comment, they highlighted the "scale and detail" of Jerusalem and called the game's presentation of Jerusalem "historically-accurate."

⁹⁶ Italics added to the original quotation to provide emphasis. See: Hilary Goldstein, "Assassin's Creed Review: Does it live up to its potential or does it disappoint?", IGN, November 13, 2007, <https://www.ign.com/articles/2007/11/13/assassins-creed-review?page=1>.

Goldstein was not the only critic to provide this type of commentary about accurate representation, although many disagreed with their negative evaluation of the game's AI. Instead, next to the free-running capabilities of Altair, one of the key game elements that received the most attention was the new interactive AI the game introduced. Keith Stuart wrote in his review for *The Guardian* that *Assassin's Creed's* 'crowd system' introduced "hundreds of seemingly unique characters lining the streets, shoving, chatting, [and] reacting" to what was taking place around them.⁹⁷ This sentiment was echoed by many others. Kohler, whose slam piece on the game was discussed in the introduction to this chapter, begrudgingly acknowledged that the game was "filled with thousands of people that give it an organic feel."⁹⁸ Peter Rizkalla with Animation World Network also stated that "the Middle Eastern characters and environment not only look gorgeous, but the NPCs actually speak various Arabic dialects, and crowded marketplaces make you forget that you are playing a game filled with polygonal characters," while Frank Caron noted that there was a "certain authenticity about the crowd that is surprising."⁹⁹ What resounds through many of these critiques is the notion that the interactive AI provided not only an authentic feel to the game, but an unprecedented level of immersion. Players were made to feel that they were standing in the streets of Damascus, Acre, and Jerusalem as the crowds moved around them.

Alongside positive reviews of the game's NPCs were equally positive remarks about *Assassin's Creed's* graphics, particularly how the cities of the Holy Land were

⁹⁷ Stuart, "Success of Assassin's Creed."

⁹⁸ Kohler, "*Assassin's Creed* Fails."

⁹⁹ Caron, "Everything is Permitted"; Peter Rizkalla, "Press Start: January 2008 - Games That Rock Your Face!", Animation World Network, January 7, 2008, <https://www.awn.com/animationworld/press-start-january-2008-games-rock-your-face>.

recreated and the level of detail that went into the world-building. Kevin VanOrd applauded the game for making the architecture in the game's huge cities look natural, with "tons of small detail [that] will constantly amaze you."¹⁰⁰ In addition, Goldstein wrote that "the revolutionary element [...] is that the architecture dictates how you scale a building. You must think like a rock climber, looking for cracks and wall ornaments that offer a good foothold. Every piece of art used for buildings matters [...] getting vertical is [...] the best part of Assassin's Creed."¹⁰¹ One commenter on Keith Stuart's article summed up the effect this immense attention to detail had on audience perceptions of the game when they noted: "Prettiiness = sales. Graphically stunning titles have always sold well, because playground bragging rights won't ever be built around storytelling capabilities or believable characters."¹⁰²

Finally, although the game did receive some positive reviews for its complex and additively twisty storyline, designed to slowly grab players as they progressed through the game,¹⁰³ players who responded to these reviews in the comments were less enthused. One commenter on VanOrd's article criticized them for praising the game's storyline, writing, "[The] Good story emblem seems rather undeserved to me... Was there really much of a story at all? [...] Throughout the game, not one character grasped my interest [...] they were all flat generic stereotypes you can meet in any other video game [and]

¹⁰⁰ VanOrd, "Assassin's Creed Review."

¹⁰¹ Goldstein, "Assassin's Creed Review."

¹⁰² CheddarFrenzy (username). Comment on the article, "What does the success of Assassin's Creed mean?" by Keith Stuart. *The Guardian*, 14 December 2007, 5:57 AM, <https://www.theguardian.com/technology/gamesblog/2007/dec/13/whatdoesthesuccessofassas#comment-4553123>.

¹⁰³ Caron, "Everything is Permitted"; Reparaz, "Assassin's Creed Review"; VanOrd, "Assassin's Creed Review."

there were no surprises.”¹⁰⁴ Another left a comment on Stuart’s article, stating that “The cities and level of detail make a compelling argument to spend your money on [the game]. I mainly bought it for the experience of running around a convincing city and only for that reason.”¹⁰⁵ Notably absent from this comment is any mention of purchasing the game for its story.

In seeking to understand what components of *Assassin’s Creed* appealed to players and critics, an analysis of numerous articles written between 2006-2008 revealed common themes. The game was overwhelmingly praised for its attention to detail, as well as the level of ‘accuracy’ and ‘authenticity’ players felt these details provided. This ‘attention to detail,’ both by the developers themselves and those who reviewed the games, was further emphasized by the awards and nominations the game received, many of which rewarded aspects of the game’s animation and graphics. With sales skyrocketing in the four weeks after the game’s release, and with a sequel already in the works at the beginning of 2008,¹⁰⁶ the influence these reviews, player comments, and accolades would have on the rest of the games in the Desmond narrative arc cannot be understated.

¹⁰⁴ Stonefish22 (username). Comment on the article, “Assassin’s Creed Review” by Kevin VanOrd. *GameSpot*, comment left in 2012 (exact date unknown). <https://www.gamespot.com/reviews/assassins-creed-review/1900-6188960/#comments-block-32405275>.

¹⁰⁵ Tab553 (username). Comment on the article, “What does the success of Assassin’s Creed mean?” by Keith Stuart. *The Guardian*, December 13, 2007, 10:04 PM, <https://www.theguardian.com/technology/gamesblog/2007/dec/13/whatdoesthesuccessofassas#comment-4553123>.

¹⁰⁶ Andy Kelly, “Assassin’s Creed 2 Is the Ultimate Sequel,” *The Gamer*, August 2, 2022, <https://www.thegamer.com/assassins-creed-2-is-the-ultimate-sequel/#:~:text=But%20it's%20a%20miracle%20it,a%20game%20of%20this%20scale.>

Conclusion

According to Rosenfeld, one of the fundamental benefits of ‘alternate history’ is that the genre “has consistently functioned as a means of using alternate pasts to expose the virtue and vices of the present.”¹⁰⁷ As a game that can be largely categorized as falling within the genre of ‘alternate history,’ *Assassin’s Creed* allows the developers to create scenarios in which players can interact with and interrogate the past. However, in doing so, they also challenge players to think critically about the history they are consuming both within and outside of the game. Using the battle between the Assassins and the Templars as a framework, both in the period of the Third Crusades and in the “present-day” setting of 2012, the game latches onto conspiracies surrounding major corporations, and puppet masters who seek to control the world from the shadows. The Assassin motto – “Nothing is true; everything is permitted” – further steeps the game in a layer of mystery that calls into question all knowledge that a player might see as “true” or “factual.” While this also serves the dual, and extremely convenient, purpose of giving the developers and writers of *Assassin’s Creed* the space to propose a “(re)interpretation of events in the past in order to consecrate the historical fiction being brought forward by the game,”¹⁰⁸ it also creates an interesting space in which to engage with public history debates.

The groundwork laid by the game’s ‘internal dialogue’ can be quickly undone, though, by discourse within the realm of its ‘external dialogue.’ In discussing sales and

¹⁰⁷ Gavriel Rosenfeld, “Why Do We Ask ‘What If?’ Reflections on the Function of Alternate History,” *History and Theory, Theme Issue* 41 (2002): 94.

¹⁰⁸ Translated from the original French. See: Alexandre Joly-Lavoie, “*Assassin’s Creed*: synthèse des écrits et implications pour l’enseignement de l’histoire,” *McGill Journal of Education* 52, no. 2 (2017): 462.

factors that contribute to a video game selling well, the relative success of *Assassin's Creed* can be analyzed by examining the positive public reaction to the game, which placed overwhelming emphasis on elements besides its storyline. When so much money is on the line, the initial reception of a game series by critics and players can easily shape the future of a series. *Assassin's Creed* is undoubtedly a "story-heavy title."¹⁰⁹ The internal dialogue between characters, while often quite heavy handed, especially with the dialogue delivered in lengthy, unskippable cutscenes, does introduce interesting conversations surrounding how history is legitimized and disseminated in a way that is meant to challenge players to think critically about their own perceptions of historical "fact." Instead of seeing merit in *Assassin's Creed's* storyline, however, the game's success was attributed by players and critics to be due largely to the developers' attention to detail. Players and critics also made this attention to detail synonymous with 'accuracy/authenticity' - a conflation that would have *significant* impacts on the remaining games in the Desmond narrative arc. In the following chapter on the Ezio Trilogy (*Assassin's Creed II*, *Assassin's Creed: Brotherhood*, and *Assassin's Creed: Revelations*), this thesis will seek to examine the continued tension between the game series' internal and external dialogue.

¹⁰⁹ Goldstein, "Assassin's Creed Review."

CHAPTER THREE

The Ezio Trilogy: *Assassin's Creed II* (2009), *Brotherhood* (2010), and *Revelations* (2011)

Introduction

Following the massive success of the first *Assassin's Creed* (*ACI*) game in 2007, Ubisoft followed through on the first game's cliffhanger ending by releasing *Assassin's Creed II* (*ACII*) two years later. Jumping forward to the Italian Renaissance (specifically 1476-1512), players were introduced to Ezio Auditore da Firenze, a headstrong and carefree 17 year old whose life would soon be turned upside down by a Templar plot resulting in the murders of his father and brothers. Within the first 7 months of its release, 9 million copies of *ACII* were sold, tripling the sales figures of the original game within the same timespan.¹¹⁰ Speaking about Ubisoft's intent with the series, the game's director, Benoit Lambert, stated: "The idea was to challenge ourselves on the weaknesses of *ACI*. We worked on not only adding and refining things, but also rebuilding part of the game [...] People were very frustrated with [the mission system]. We really scrapped everything on that side."¹¹¹ Many critics were also quick to point out that the scope of *ACI* paled in comparison to that of its successor,¹¹² and they appreciated that the developers had done away with the repetitive aspects of its gameplay and storyline.¹¹³

¹¹⁰ Brendan Sinclair, "Assassin's Creed II ships 9 million, Ubisoft posts \$54 million annual loss," *Gamespot*, May 18, 2010, <https://www.gamespot.com/articles/assassins-creed-ii-ships-9-million-ubisoft-posts-54-million-annual-loss/1100-6262887/>.

¹¹¹ Peter Nowak, "Assassin's Creed 2: the pride of Montreal," *CBC*, November 9, 2009, <https://www.cbc.ca/news/science/assassins-creed-2-the-pride-of-montreal-1.776975>.

¹¹² Chad Sapieha, "Review: Assassin's Creed II," *The Globe and Mail*, November 20, 2009, <https://www.theglobeandmail.com/technology/review-assassins-creed-ii/article4293814/>.

¹¹³ "'Assassin's Creed: Brotherhood' Writer Explains Story's Secret Meaning," *Game Rant*, December 13, 2010, <https://gamerant.com/assassins-creed-brotherhood-secret-politics/>; Chris Kohler, "Review: *Assassin's Creed II* Is the Ultimate Killer App," *Wired*, November 17, 2009, <https://www.wired.com/2009/11/assassins-creed-ii-review/>; James Stephanie Sterling, "Review: Assassin's Creed II," *Destructoid*, November 25, 2009, <https://www.destructoid.com/review-assassins-creed-ii/>; Kevin VanOrd, "Assassin's Creed II Review," *Gamespot*, November 17, 2009,

Sebastian Puel, one of the game's producers, revealed that another goal Ubisoft had for *ACII* was to "increase the personality of the characters (especially the protagonist)."¹¹⁴ This focus on Ezio's overall narrative and characterization was a benefit to the series, as critics noted that Ezio was a more sympathetic, appealing, and fully realized protagonist than Altaïr, making *ACII*'s story more compelling than its predecessor.¹¹⁵

Attempting to capitalize on Ezio's charisma, Ubisoft decided to churn out two additional games revolving around the Italian assassin in the same number of years. *Assassin's Creed: Brotherhood (Brotherhood)* was released in 2010 and *Assassin's Creed: Revelations (Revelations)* followed shortly after in 2011. By recycling the same characters and historical era from *ACII*, Ubisoft could focus more in-depth on targeting and fine-tuning areas of the gameplay and design that players did not like, relying on the knowledge that players were more likely to buy a sequel that promised a familiar storyline and cast of characters they had grown to love. In order to justify the new releases, *Brotherhood* added a multiplayer component – although this received mixed reviews – as well as a Brotherhood of assassins for players to recruit and control.¹¹⁶ In

<https://www.gamespot.com/reviews/assassins-creed-ii-review/1900-6240415/>; Lou Kesten, "Old Italy lives in 'Assassin's Creed II,'" *The Ledger*, November 20, 2009, <https://www.theledger.com/story/news/2009/11/20/old-italy-lives-in-assassins-creed-ii/26673224007/>; Nowak, "Assassin's Creed 2"; Steve Boxer, "Assassin's Creed 2," *The Guardian*, November 17, 2009, <https://www.theguardian.com/technology/gamesblog/2009/nov/17/assassins-creed-2-game-review>; Stuart Andrews, "Assassin's Creed II Review," *Trusted Reviews*, December 8, 2009, <https://www.trustedreviews.com/reviews/assassins-creed-ii>; Tom Bramwell, "Assassin's Creed II: Renaissance," *Eurogamer*, August 21, 2009, <https://www.eurogamer.net/assassins-creed-ii-preview>.
¹¹⁴ Patrick Garratt, "Interview - Assassin's Creed II devs on launching, pacing and the 'Nintendo joke,'" *VG247*, December 7, 2009, <https://www.vg247.com/interview-assassins-creed-ii-devs-on-launching-pacing-and-the-nintendo-joke>.

¹¹⁵ Andrews, "Assassin's Creed II"; VanOrd, "Assassin's Creed II."

¹¹⁶ See: Ben Gelinias, "How To Succeed in Assassin's Creed: Brotherhood's Multiplayer or Die Trying," *Edmonton Journal*, December 13, 2010, <https://edmontonjournal.com/entertainment/how-to-succeed-in-assassins-creed-brotherhoods-multiplayer-or-die-trying>; Ben Kendrick, "Assassin's Creed: Brotherhood Review," *Game Rant*, November 18, 2010, <https://gamerant.com/assassins-creed-brotherhood-reviews/>; and Chris Kohler, "Review: Recycled Assassin's Creed Brotherhood Is Uneasy Blend of Killing, Farming," *Wired*, November 17, 2010, <https://www.wired.com/2010/11/assassins-creed-brotherhood-review/>.

contrast, Timothy J. Seppala noted that, rather than adding a new element to the series, *Revelations* instead polished off all the series elements it had carried forward.¹¹⁷ More story driven, *Revelations* brought Altaïr back as a playable character and allowed players to witness both Ezio and Altaïr grapple with their lived experiences while highlighting the parallels between the two historic Assassins to tie all the games in the series together.¹¹⁸ The decision to bring Altaïr back – rounding out his story and providing a more in-depth look into his psyche that was sorely missing from *ACI* – also allowed Ubisoft to use nostalgia as a selling point. Both games saw even higher sales projections than the first two games in the series, with *Brotherhood* selling 6.5 million copies for an estimated revenue of \$390 million and *Revelations* selling 7 million copies – both within the first three months of their release.¹¹⁹ Most significantly, the continued success of the series, despite the recycling of series tropes, reinforced the notion that blockbusters could rule the gaming industry.¹²⁰

Just as the ‘Ezio Trilogy’ – *ACII*, *Brotherhood*, and *Revelations* – introduced new elements to a series that had quickly gained popularity after the original game’s release,

¹¹⁷ Timothy J. Seppala, “*Assassin’s Creed Revelations* review: the upside of yearly releases,” *Ars Technica*, November 15, 2011, <https://arstechnica.com/gaming/2011/11/assassins-creed-revelations-review-climbing-up-the-walls/>.

¹¹⁸ Kevin VanOrd, “Assassin’s Creed: Revelations Review,” *GameSpot*, November 14, 2011, <https://www.gamespot.com/reviews/assassins-creed-revelations-review/1900-6345194/>; Lydia Sung, “Assassin’s Creed Revelations: SP Preview - In Search of Hidden Truths,” *Neoseeker*, October 11, 2011, https://www.neoseeker.com/Articles/Games/Previews/assassins_creed_revelations_sp_preview/; Richard George, “Assassin’s Creed Revelations Review,” *IGN*, January 17, 2012, <https://www.ign.com/articles/2011/11/14/assassins-creed-revelations-review>.

¹¹⁹ Dean Takahashi, “Ubisoft ships 6.5M copies of Assassin’s Creed Brotherhood,” *GamesBeat*, February 14, 2011, <https://venturebeat.com/games/ubisoft-ships-6-5m-copies-of-assassins-creed-brotherhood/>; Eddie Makuch, “Assassin’s Creed: Revelations ships 7 million,” *GameSpot*, February 15, 2012, <https://www.gamespot.com/articles/assassins-creed-revelations-ships-7-million/1100-6350453/>; Naomi Alderman, “Why Assassin’s Creed: Brotherhood is the best videogame ever,” *The Guardian*, March 15, 2011, <https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2011/mar/15/assassins-creed-brotherhood-best-videogame>; Robert Purchase, “Assassin’s Creed: Brotherhood total sales,” *Eurogamer*, February 14, 2011, <https://www.eurogamer.net/assassins-creed-brotherhood-lifetime-sales>.

¹²⁰ Takahashi, “6.5M copies.”

these three games altered the ways in which the core themes from *ACI* showed up in the series. Analysis of *ACI* grappled with four main themes, split unevenly between the game's internal versus external dialogue. The first game's internal dialogue examined the weight given to primary sources as a form of knowledge, sought to problematize the way in which history is taught, and analyzed the role of memory in the field of public history. Meanwhile, the external dialogue seen in conversations among critics, players, and academics focused solely on the dichotomy of narrative/fiction versus detail/accuracy.

This chapter explores these four themes, evenly distributed between the internal and external dialogue for the games in the Ezio Trilogy. This shift in the distribution of themes between *ACI* and the Ezio Trilogy reflects the change in direction the series' developers took in their approach to gameplay and narrative following player and game critic feedback from the first game. Placing greater weight on character development and storyline saw the game developers of the Ezio Trilogy moving away from extended, dialogue-heavy cutscenes in which Templars expounded the virtues of their cause, limiting interruptions to gameplay. While this removed many of the public history-related conversations from the forefront of the game's storyline, the developers found new ways to fit these elements into the game. In *ACII* and *Brotherhood*, they introduced puzzles whose design was meant to continue to challenge players to problematize the way in which they had been taught and consumed history. Meanwhile, the overall branding of "memory" in the Trilogy, as well as the way in which it invades various facets of *Revelations*' storyline, continued to carry on conversations surrounding the role memory plays in the field of public history. The setting of the Ezio Trilogy, as well as the overall length of time given to exploring this period over three games, led to a breadth of

secondary literature analyzing this part of the *Assassin's Creed* series, building on and reflecting previous conversations surrounding historical representation in video games. The theme of examining the weight given to primary sources as a form of knowledge, therefore, moved from the internal to the external dialogue to join analyses of the dichotomy of narrative/fiction versus detail/accuracy.

The primary focus of this chapter – and the subsequent role it plays in this thesis – is an exploration of the convergence and divergence of the manifestations of these four themes within the series. Using the Ezio Trilogy as a transition period, it will lay the foundation for the eventual reversal of themes, and how they are distributed between each game's internal versus external dialogue, from *Assassin's Creed* to *Assassin's Creed III*. Examining how the developers responded to critiques of the first game, as well as the precedent these responses seem to have set for allowing external dialogue to influence game development decisions, sets the scene for the overall direction the series would eventually take, especially in the 'post-Desmond narrative arc' (*Assassin's Creed IV* and beyond). *ACI* grew out of a pre-existing trend of historical representation in video games, specifically the 'alternate history' genre. Following from this, the games in the Ezio Trilogy find themselves relating to tropes (both emerging and established) within the video game industry, including: political commentary; conversations surrounding video game-inspired tourism; and the use of anachronisms to boost playability. This chapter will first provide a brief overview of both Desmond and Ezio's storylines across all three games. It will then examine both the Trilogy's internal and external dialogues to highlight these key points of convergence and divergence with Chapter 2 of this thesis, as well as trends within the video game industry as a whole.

Overview of the Game's Story

Desmond Miles – 2012 AD

Starting where the first *Assassin's Creed* game left off, *ACII* brings players back to Abstergo Industries, where Lucy Stillman is helping Desmond Miles escape.

Following their successful escape from Abstergo, Lucy and Desmond meet up with Rebecca Crane and Shaun Hastings – two people working with the Assassins – to try to track down more Pieces of Eden. Using an Animus built by Rebecca, Desmond is sent back into the memories of Ezio Auditore da Firenze in Renaissance Italy so he can use his ancestor's experiences to quickly hone his assassin skills in the present day. Recovering Ezio's Apple of Eden under the Roman Colosseum at the end of *Brotherhood*, Desmond is shown a vision by one of the First Civilization beings, Juno, that Lucy plans to betray him and the Assassins. Desmond is forced to kill Lucy with his hidden blade, and is immediately dropped into a coma. Throughout the final game in the Ezio Trilogy, *Revelations*, Desmond is kept alive using the Animus. There, he has the chance to talk with Subject 16 (a previous Abstergo test subject), uncovers more information about the Templars and their motives, unravels the threads of Ezio and Altaïr's lives, and comes to terms with his identity as an Assassin.

Ezio Auditore da Firenze – 1476-1512 AD

At the start of the Ezio Trilogy, Ezio Auditore da Firenze's carefree life is quickly interrupted when he is plunged into the world of Medici, Pazzi, and Borgia family politics. Watching helplessly as his father and brothers are hanged, Ezio escapes Florence with his mother and sister, fleeing to his uncle Mario's villa. Under Mario's watchful eye,

Ezio learns about the fight between the Assassins and the Templars, and he vows to get revenge on those responsible for the murder of his family members. Over the course of the Ezio Trilogy, Ezio is able to get revenge on various members of the Templar Order, including some of history's famous villains, such as Rodrigo Borgia, also known as Pope Alexander VI, who Ezio fist fights in a secret chamber underneath the Vatican. He also develops friendships with other historic figures such as Leonardo da Vinci, Niccolo Machiavelli, and eventually Prince Suleiman. While the Trilogy initially starts in Italy in the year 1476, when Ezio is approximately 17 years old, by *Revelations* Ezio is running across the rooftops of Constantinople (1511-1512 AD) at the age of 53. Although the Trilogy primarily focuses on Ezio, players access some of Altaïr's memories through him, briefly playing as the 12th Century Assassin during *Revelations*.

Internal Dialogue: Historical “Truths” and Crafting a Brand

As with the original *Assassin's Creed* game, the internal dialogue present in the Ezio Trilogy also works to problematize the way in which history is taught, as well as to question the role of memory in the field of public history. However, the ways in which these themes manifest in the Ezio Trilogy are vastly different from the original game. In *ACI*, both themes were overt and built into the unskippable cutscene dialogue between characters. Players were forced to sit and listen to characters debate the value of memory, as well as how certain historical narratives are legitimized and replicated. While problematization of history and historical narratives still appears overtly in the Ezio Trilogy through “the Truth” puzzles, it is no longer as emphasized in the dialogue. Instead, players must go out of their way to find the “glyphs” – hidden symbols on the sides of prominent buildings and other historic locations – that, when found, reveal

hidden knowledge relevant to the series' meta-narrative, segments of a video called "the Truth." In addition, these puzzles are not part of the main storyline. Instead, they are "side missions" (referred to in the game as "secondary memories") that players do not have to finish in order to complete each game.

The role of memory within the series has been altered – albeit more significantly in comparison to the first theme. The role of memory in the field of public history was also originally overtly represented within the original *Assassin's Creed's* dialogue. In stark contrast, memory has now been turned into a "brand" in the Ezio Trilogy. Memory – specifically Desmond's ancestral genetic memories accessible to him through the Animus – become the sole context through which players engage with the game. Therefore, the goal of this section is to analyze the ways in which the presence of these themes has been altered within the Ezio Trilogy in response to player feedback on *ACI*. This section will first begin by exploring the role "the Truth" puzzles play in both *ACII* and *Brotherhood*, as well as connect the message from these puzzles to conversations taking place within the field of public history around the time of the games' development. In addition, it will examine 'memory as a brand,' particularly as it reaches new heights in *Revelations*, building on Warren Vidic's assertion from the first game that memory leaves no room for misinterpretation.

“The Truth” – Problematizing How History is Taught

“We have been lied to this whole time. Everything we know, everything we’ve been brought up to believe. It’s wrong.”¹²¹

These are the words of Subject 16 to the player as they interact with the first glyph in *ACII*. One of Abstergo’s Animus test subjects, Subject 16 managed to encrypt hidden messages within the Animus for future test subjects to uncover. Once each of these files are decrypted, they unlock a small portion of a video entitled “the Truth,” which reveals “the Truth” about the “First Civilization” and seeks to shatter player perceptions of the world’s history as they know it. In the fully decrypted video, players witness a couple running away from an unknown danger. As they hurtle away from their pursuer, the couple bypasses a factory where labourers are being controlled by a watchman wielding an Apple of Eden. Escaping to the roof of the building, the couple turns, and, in this moment, we see that one of them is carrying an Apple of Eden as well. Calling out to each other, they call each other ‘Adam’ and ‘Eve’ and as the screen fades to black, four lines of binary code flash across the screen. The code, when converted to plain text, spells out “EDEN.” The implication is that the man and woman in the video are Adam and Eve, that the Piece of Eden they are carrying is actually the Apple from the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil, and that the Bible had it wrong all along. Rather than being cast out, the two had attempted to escape Eden, spurred on by knowledge revealed to them by the Apple.

¹²¹ Ubisoft, *Assassin’s Creed II*, Ubisoft Inc, PlayStation 3/Xbox 360/Microsoft Windows/OS X/PlayStation 4/Xbox One/Nintendo Switch, 2009.

Appearing in both *ACII* and *Brotherhood*, “the Truth” is another clear attempt by the series’ developers to push players to rethink history as they know it while still responding to player feedback from the original *Assassin’s Creed*. In an interview with Patrick Garratt from *VG247*, Sebastien Puel, the producer for *ACII*, stated: “We got rid of the long monologues; well, we transferred them [...] And then with the truth puzzles, we even made uncovering information interactive. What we’re striving for is a way to merge gameplay and narrative so that the two don’t fight with one another for people’s attention.”¹²² With each of the glyphs a player uncovered and decrypted, they would gain access to new audio recordings or correspondence between Templars, but the narratives displayed in the puzzles were different between games. In *ACII*, clues and completed puzzles cast centuries’ worth of historical figures as actors in the fight between the Templars and Assassins, attributing their influence to the possession of a Piece of Eden. For example, Figure 1 (see next page) – a screenshot of a completed series of puzzles from Glyph 6 – features Cain and Abel fighting over an Apple of Eden, with the implication that their Biblical feud, and Abel’s subsequent murder at the hands of his brother, was a result of the Apple’s influence. Similarly, after solving the first puzzle in Glyph 15, players are shown a message that says, “The death of all tyrants will set the people free.”¹²³ Proceeding to the second puzzle in the glyph, an interactive map is revealed, which features some of history’s more infamous historical figures (see Figure 2, next page). The game’s writers cast each of these figures as Templars, and imply that their deaths are attributable to the Assassin Order.

¹²² Garratt, “Interview.”

¹²³ Ubisoft, *Assassin’s Creed II*, Ubisoft Inc, PlayStation 3/Xbox 360/Microsoft Windows/OS X/PlayStation 4/Xbox One/Nintendo Switch, 2009.

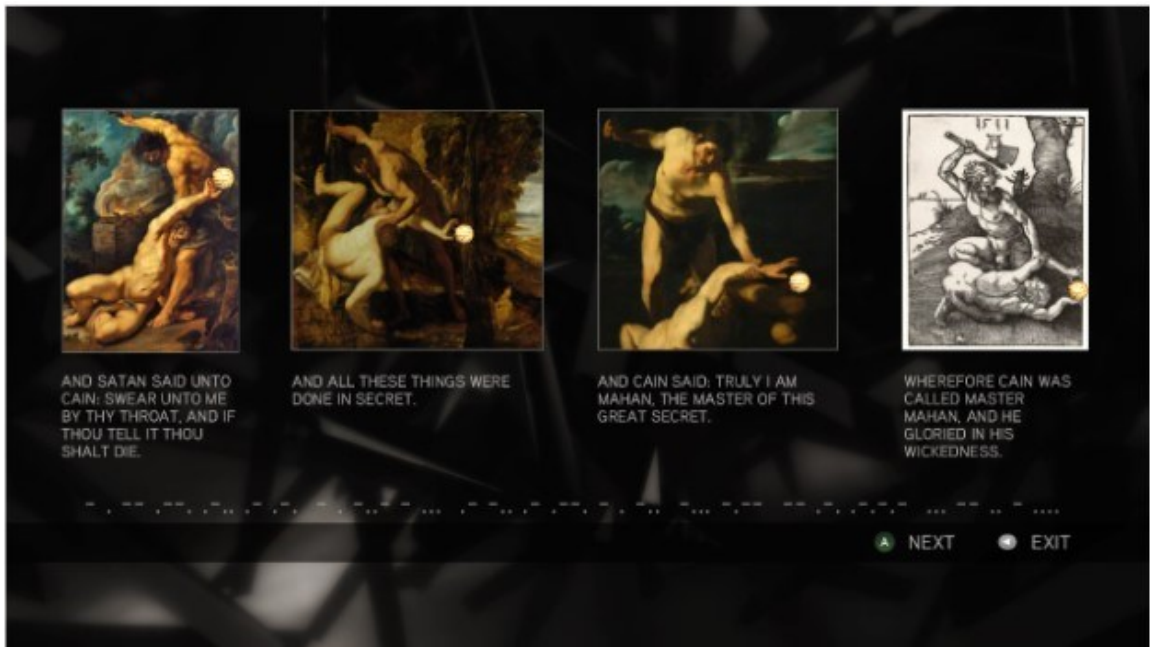


Figure 1. Cain and Abel with the Apple of Eden from “The Truth” Glyph Puzzle 6. (Screenshot from Ubisoft, *Assassin’s Creed II*, Ubisoft Inc, 2009).

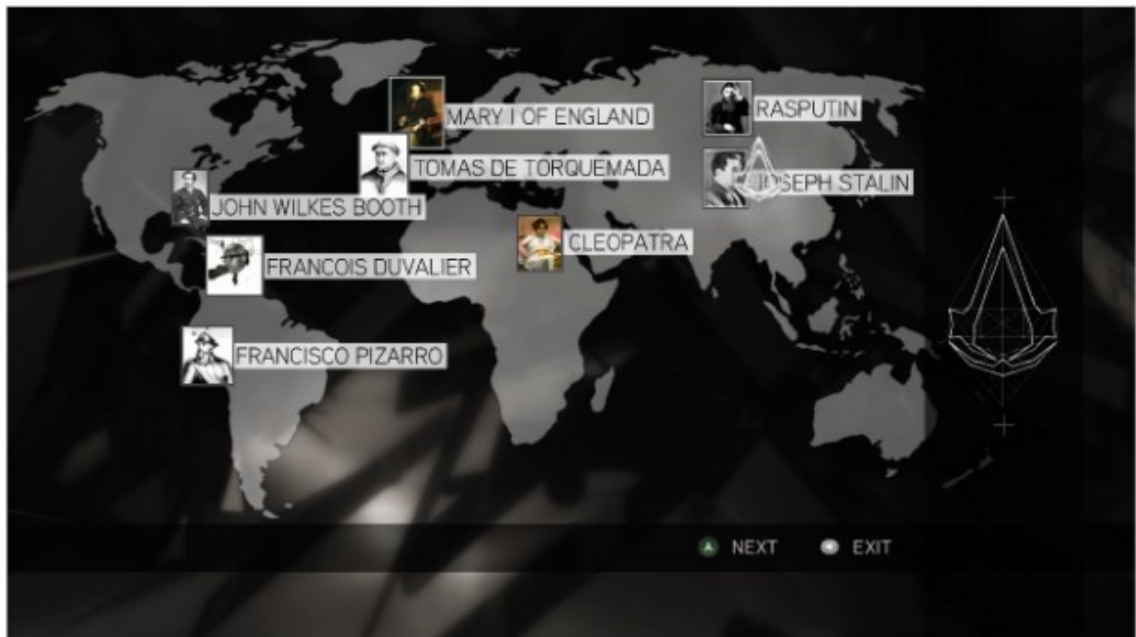


Figure 2. Infamous Historic Figures Pictured Around the World from “The Truth” Glyph Puzzle 15. (Screenshot from Ubisoft, *Assassin’s Creed II*, Ubisoft Inc, 2009).

While *ACII*'s glyph puzzles place a wide range of historical figures from the Biblical Genesis to WWII Germany (and beyond) in the centuries' old fight between the Assassins and Templars, the commentary was surface level. In contrast, *Brotherhood* shifted its focus to more pointed political commentary. Referred to as "clusters" in this game, "The Truth" puzzles in *Brotherhood* served the same purpose as the glyphs in *ACII*: to force players to confront their personal views on certain historical events and figures. One particularly interesting cluster was Cluster 6, which referenced the *Bush v. Gore* (531, U.S. 98, 2000) case. Shown in Figure 3 (next page), the U.S. Supreme Court Justices present for the ruling are seen surrounded by smaller snapshots of various members of the Bush Administration (2000-2009), including: former Vice President of the United States, Dick Cheney; former Secretary of Defense, Donald Rumsfeld; former U.S. Secretary of State, Condoleezza Rice; and former U.S. Secretary of Commerce, Don Evans.



Figure 3. US Supreme Court and the *Bush v. Gore*, 531 U.S. 98 (2000) case from "The Truth" Cluster 06. (Screenshot from Ubisoft, *Assassin's Creed: Brotherhood*, Ubisoft Inc, 2010).

Scrolling over each of the members of the Bush Administration reveals quotes from each that highlight the importance of capital. A list of each person's corporate affiliations draws attention to the fact that each stood to gain financially from George W. Bush's successful defeat of the *Bush v. Gore* case. This juxtaposition is designed to showcase the irony of an administration that is simultaneously claiming that capital and the growth of entrepreneurial classes will, as Condoleezza Rice is quoted as saying (Figure 4), act as "an asset in the promotion of human rights and individual liberty," while simultaneously lining their own pockets.¹²⁴ The fact that Justice Roberts is depicted with a Templar ring on his finger in Figure 3, indicates that, according to the game's writers, both the Bush Administration and the U.S. Supreme Court were acting in the interests of the Templar Order.



Figure 4. Condoleezza Rice, as quoted in "The Truth" Cluster 06. (Screenshot from Ubisoft, *Assassin's Creed: Brotherhood*, Ubisoft Inc, 2010).

As with the original *Assassin's Creed* game, the Ezio Trilogy's writers' desire to include political commentary aiming to unsettle players' understanding of historical

¹²⁴ Donald Rumsfeld was simultaneously the Chairman of Gilead Sciences and the U.S. Defense Secretary; George W. Bush was the Director of Harken; Condoleezza Rice was on both the Chevron Board and the Hewlett-Packard Board; and Don Evans was the CEO of Tom Brown Inc. Oil while he was U.S. Commerce Secretary. For specific quotes from each member of the Bush Administration featured in Cluster 06, see: Ubisoft, *Assassin's Creed: Brotherhood*, Ubisoft Inc, PlayStation 3/Xbox 360/Microsoft Windows/OS X/PlayStation 4/Xbox One/Nintendo Switch, 2010.

events and figures did not emerge from thin air. While *ACII* focused primarily on solidifying the game's metanarrative, the political commentary present in the *Brotherhood* clusters are a direct response to larger debates taking place contemporaneous with the game's creation. For example, *Brotherhood*, which was developed in 2010, came out the same year in which the Texas State Board of Education (SBOE) sought to rewrite its social studies curriculum. In the first half of 2010, the Republican-dominated SBOE was mired in controversy as they voted in favor of teaching a version of American history purporting America to be a nation chosen by God to be a beacon to the world, and emphasizing the roles of free enterprise, the military, Christianity and modern Republican political figures.¹²⁵

Unsurprisingly, this decision was immediately met with criticism from educators and historians. Both Daniel Czitron, a history professor at Mount Holyoke College in Massachusetts, and Eric Foner, a Columbia University historian, argued that the SBOE's attempts to champion a celebratory history denying the existence of the fundamental conflicts shaping America's past was a means of ignoring complicated historical narratives.¹²⁶ Benjamin T. Jealous, president of the NAACP at the time of the SBOE debates, also noted that "the biggest danger is we'll end up with children who don't understand history," acknowledging that "the school board members are entitled to their

¹²⁵ Chris McGreal, "Texas schools board rewrites US history with promoting God and guns," *The Guardian*, May 16, 2010, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2010/may/16/texas-schools-rewrites-us-history>; Michael Brick, "Texas School Board Set to Vote Textbook Revisions," *The New York Times*, May 20, 2010, <https://www.nytimes.com/2010/05/21/education/21textbooks.html>.

¹²⁶ "Historians protest as Texas history rewrite heads for final vote," *Church & State*, May 1, 2010, <https://web-p-ebscobhost-com.ezproxy.library.dal.ca/ehost/pdfviewer/pdfviewer?vid=0&sid=6d596ceb-1bc6-4b06-a52c-b310ccd0e5e8%40redis>.

own opinions, but not their own facts.”¹²⁷ The SBOE’s largely socially conservative representatives argued, however, that their efforts were an attempt to balance a perceived liberal bias in the presentation of history, with Don McLeroy, a Republican board member, claiming, “I think there is a bias [....] How can we go forward as a great society unless the children know what the truth is?”¹²⁸ Interestingly, it is the very image of America the SBOE was hoping to present that was being criticized so actively in the *Brotherhood* “Truth” clusters, many of which focused on ways that corrupt individuals and governments weaponize religion, military force, and ‘free enterprise’ to their benefit, while simultaneously rewriting history in a way that exonerates their deception.¹²⁹

This type of explicit political commentary is nothing new in the video game industry. In their book, *Persuasive Games: The Expressive Power of Videogames* (2007), Ian Bogost analyzes various political and historical video games, many of which came out immediately after the events portrayed in these games. *Kuma\War*, for example, was released in 2003, the same year in which Uday and Qusay Hussein were killed in a gun fight with U.S. Special Forces in Mosul, Iraq. The game had players reenact the U.S. Army’s stand against the Hussein brothers, and “touted the player’s ability to choose

¹²⁷ Brick, “Texas School Board.”

¹²⁸ Kari Huus, “Texas school board debates ‘pro-Islamic’ bias in textbooks,” *NBC News*, September 23, 2010, <https://www.nbcnews.com/id/wbna39311882>; “Rewriting the States’ Standards on Social Studies Stirs Debate,” *Education Week*, March 10, 2010, <https://www.edweek.org/teaching-learning/rewriting-of-states-standards-on-social-studies-stirs-debate/2010/03/>.

¹²⁹ Speaking on his motives when writing the *Brotherhood* clusters, writer Jeffrey Yohalem stated, “I believe that today’s world is being hijacked by selfish agendas and many politicians/corporations believe that people can be convinced to do anything through propaganda and advertising.” See: Kevin Ohannessian, “Hardcore History and Modern Conspiracy: Behind the Scenes With the Writer of Assassin’s Creed: Brotherhood,” *Fast Company*, November 19, 2010, <https://www.fastcompany.com/1703753/hardcore-history-and-modern-conspiracy-behind-scenes-writer-assassins-creed-brotherhood>.

whether to follow the events of history [...] or [attempt] an alternate plan.”¹³⁰ Others, like *JFK Reloaded* (2004), which encourages players to “put to rest any suspicions of a conspiracy theory of the assassination” by setting up the game “to allow the ‘re-creation’ of the Warren Commission’s account of the shooting,”¹³¹ were released years after the featured events. In contrast to games that focus on specific historical events, other politically motivated video games simply seek to relay a message. *America’s Army: Operations* (2002), a First Person Shooter game designed and marketed for teenagers, was created by the American Military for recruitment purposes immediately following the 9/11 terrorist attacks.¹³² According to Bogost, the game represents “a manifestation of the ideology that propels the U.S. Army [and] encourages players to consider the logic of duty, honor, and singular global political truth as a desirable worldview.”¹³³ *A Force More Powerful* (2006) is another politically motivated game commissioned by the International Center for Nonviolent Conflict. Based on the documentary, PBS series, and book of the same name, *A Force More Powerful* seeks to expose players to the argument that “the democratizing interests of the West align democratic governance with free-market capitalism, a topic of considerable controversy in contemporary geopolitics.”¹³⁴

While these video games are far removed from the subject matter of the Ezio Trilogy, their representation of historical events and the opportunity they provide players to experience a version of historical agency are similar at their core to the goals of the *AC* series. Extrapolating from the examples above, as well as the work of David Mather, this

¹³⁰ Ian Bogost, *Persuasive Games: The Expressive Power of Videogames* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 2007), 127.

¹³¹ Bogost, *Persuasive Games*, 128.

¹³² *Ibid.*, 78, 79.

¹³³ *Ibid.*, 79.

¹³⁴ *Ibid.*, 80.

sense of agency bestowed upon consumers of historical video games reinforces the malleability of historical narratives and allows players to decide historical “truth” for themselves – although the “truth” is often presented through a very biased lens.¹³⁵ Working on a video game series that fits within the genre of alternate history, the *Assassin’s Creed* writers are poised to answer McLeroy’s earlier question of “what the truth is” for their audience. Using “the Truth” puzzles, *ACII* and *Brotherhood* mix entertainment with narrative, challenging players to question the historical narratives with which they are familiar. By doing so at a time when the Texas State Board of Education was actively dismantling and rebuilding historical narratives, the writers drew attention to how these narratives are crafted, legitimized, and disseminated. As Jeffrey Yohalem, the writer for *Assassin’s Creed: Brotherhood* stated, “As creators, I feel it is our duty to say something to players, to engage in a conversation about our world [...] One of the major themes of *Assassin’s Creed* has always been to encourage players to think, to see the truth rather than sit back passively and allow others to control them.”¹³⁶

Memory as a Brand

While it is clear from Yohalem’s statement that the goal of *Assassin’s Creed* has always been to encourage players to actually *think* about the history they have been taught rather than accepting everything at face value, what tools have the developers/writers employed to reach this goal? “The Truth” puzzles act as an excellent conduit through which the games’ writers can encourage players to question why certain

¹³⁵ Bogost, *Persuasive Games*, 260; David Mather, “Extended Memory: Early Calculating Engines and Historical Computer Simulations,” *Leonardo* 39, no. 3 (2006), 241; Kevin Schut, “Strategic Simulations and Our Past: The Bias of Computer Games in the Presentation of History,” *Games and Culture* 2, no. 3 (2007), 217.

¹³⁶ Ohannessian, “Assassin’s Creed: Brotherhood.”

historical narratives are promoted over others. Many game critics were quick to mention the content of these puzzles in their reviews, generally categorizing them as a positive add-on to the series.¹³⁷ In contrast to the original *Assassin's Creed*, however, these puzzles are entirely optional to the game's progression and are not actually part of the main storyline. This allows players to circumvent these missions because, as Kevin VanOrd points out in his review of *Brotherhood*, players can "expect to put in more effort if [they] hope to uncover more of the conspiracy that drives the series."¹³⁸ If players do not want to put in this effort, they do not have to engage with the content. Furthermore, "the Truth" puzzles are labelled in both *ACII* and *Brotherhood* as "secondary memories."¹³⁹ While open world games like those in the *AC* series allowed players to explore the game's world at their own pace, with the option to take their time or to breeze rapidly through the main storyline, secondary memories are just that: an *option*. The implication? All of the aforementioned content regarding "the Truth" puzzles – those aspects designed to get players to question their views of history – are optional.

In examining the role memory plays in the *AC* series, it is clear that the series relies heavily on memory as a brand. The original emphasis on the concept of memory within the series started with the use of "Memory Blocks" in the original game, as well as in-game debates surrounding the reliability of memory as a means of legitimizing

¹³⁷ Andrews, "Assassin's Creed II"; Boxer, "Assassin's Creed 2"; Kendrick, "Brotherhood"; Kohler, "Assassin's Creed II"; Nowak, "Assassin's Creed 2"; Sapielha, "Assassin's Creed II"; VanOrd, "Assassin's Creed II."

¹³⁸ VanOrd, "Brotherhood."

¹³⁹ While the *Assassin's Creed* series uses the terminology of "primary" versus "secondary memories," this terminology is not unique but is instead part of the game series' branding. Many video games utilize terms such as "missions," "objectives" or "quests" in place of "memory," often denoting importance through ordinal numerals (primary, secondary, tertiary, etc.), introducing suggested orders of completion for missions or implying each mission's level of importance to an overall understanding of the game's story.

historical narratives. The premise of *Assassin's Creed* is itself built around players buying into the notion that a machine called the Animus can transport Desmond back into the memories of his ancestors, which have been passed down to him through his DNA. Warren Vidic's assertion in Chapter 2 of this thesis that the memories shown to Desmond (and the player) through the Animus leave "no room for misinterpretation"¹⁴⁰ is an argument that can be problematized. This overt expression of the role memory plays within the dialogue of the first game, however, welcomes active analysis by players. Memory plays a different role in the Ezio Trilogy. Memory still acts as the conduit through which players are experiencing the story, but is not as overtly acknowledged by each of the Ezio games' dialogue in comparison to the original. Instead, memory becomes part of the "brand" that defines the *Assassin's Creed* series – a brand which reaches its zenith in *Revelations*.

At the start of *Revelations*, players watch as Desmond wakes up to find himself stranded on "Animus Island" - a projection of his fragmented mind held together through the use of the Animus after the trauma he experienced at the end of *Brotherhood*.¹⁴¹ He learns that in order to return from this purgatory, he is going to have to unravel the various threads of his past, starting with Ezio, then Altaïr, and finally himself, in order to establish how the actions of each of the historic Assassins (Ezio and Altaïr) have impacted those of the present-day (Desmond). Examining the role of memory in the field of public history, Ross Poole wrote that "the role of memory is not simply to provide us with cognitive access to the past; it is also to provide a route by which responsibility for

¹⁴⁰ Ubisoft, *Assassin's Creed*, Ubisoft Inc, PlayStation 3/Xbox 360/Microsoft Windows, 2007.

¹⁴¹ For an explanation, see the earlier section entitled, "Overview of the Game's Story."

past events is transmitted to the present, and thus to identify a locus of present responsibility for these events.”¹⁴² Revealed by a member of the First Civilization (Juno) to be the key to stopping a disaster of apocalyptic proportions, Desmond finds himself responsible for the decisions of his ancestors. It is only by untangling the memories of his ancestors that he can learn how their past actions bleed forward into the present.

Revelations’ storyline is reminiscent of the adaptive functions of autobiographical memories. According to Ryan Burnell, Sharda Umanath, and Maryanne Garry, autobiographical memories serve three adaptive functions: they “help people maintain a coherent sense of *identity* across time[...], *direct* people’s behaviour[...], and encourage *social* bonding with others by promoting intimacy, helping people illustrate a point or eliciting empathy.”¹⁴³ By disentangling the memories of his ancestors, Desmond learns more about their motivations, which “forms the emotional cores of the entire experience,”¹⁴⁴ allowing him (and players) to empathize with their stories. In addition, by analyzing his own memories in game levels that Kaszor refers to as “an esoteric pairing of a *Portal*-like exploration puzzle game and a highly abstracted oral-history style speak-along narrative,”¹⁴⁵ Desmond reconciles himself with his identity as an Assassin, acknowledging responsibility for his past actions, and informing his future decisions in the series.

¹⁴² Ross Poole, “Memory, history and the claims of the past,” *Memory Studies*, no. 2 (2008): 152.

¹⁴³ Ryan Burnell, Sharda Umanath, and Maryanne Garry, “Collective memories serve similar functions to autobiographical memories,” *Memory* 31, no. 3 (2023): 317.

¹⁴⁴ George, “Assassin’s Creed Revelations.”

¹⁴⁵ Daniel Kaszor, “Review: Assassin’s Creed Revelations almost meets its high expectations,” *Financial Post*, November 15, 2011, <https://financialpost.com/technology/review-assassins-creed-revelations-almost-meets-its-high-expectations>.

The notion of “memory as a brand” and how that manifests within the Ezio Trilogy, particularly *Revelations*, also resonates with the idea of “episodic memories.” Timothy A. Allen and Norbert J. Fortin argue that “episodic recall involves the ability to ‘mentally time travel’ to reexperience specific events.”¹⁴⁶ Taking this definition in the most literal way possible, the developers of the *Assassin’s Creed* series have Desmond mentally time travel back into the genetic memories of his ancestors, allowing him and the players to re-experience historical events across various time periods broken up into clearly defined ‘episodes.’ As examined in Chapter 2 of this thesis, however, the historical events portrayed within Desmond’s genetic episodic memories are inherently mediated by “the language, conventions, and value characteristic of the social groups to which [he] belong[s].”¹⁴⁷ Furthermore, starting with the Ezio Trilogy, players are able to replay any individual memory within the game, allowing players to approach the same memory a different way multiple times.¹⁴⁸ In introducing this feature, the developers lean into one of the strengths of the series: demonstrating the postmodernist view that ““there is no truth, only a plethora of interpretations, and no objective reality, only a plurality of perspectives.””¹⁴⁹ However, in a continuation of the discussion between Warren Vidic and Desmond from the previous chapter, proposing that the history demonstrated by the Animus leaves no room for misinterpretation, while simultaneously falling back on the Assassin motto (“Nothing is true; everything is permitted”), creates mixed-messaging for the player. This is especially the case when the history being portrayed in the games is

¹⁴⁶ Timothy A. Allen and Norbert J. Fortin, “The evolution of episodic memory,” *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences of the United States of America* 110 (2013): 10379.

¹⁴⁷ Poole, “Memory,” 152.

¹⁴⁸ Kendrick, “Brotherhood”; VanOrd, “Brotherhood.”

¹⁴⁹ Martha Rose Beard, “Re-thinking oral history - a study of narrative performance,” *Rethinking History* 21, no. 4 (2017): 533.

described on the loading screen as the result of the game developers' collaboration with historians and other experts, lending a feeling of legitimacy to the game's story.

External Dialogue: Perceptions of Accuracy and Video Game-Induced Tourism

As noted in Chapter 2 of this thesis, the external dialogue that surrounds a game – composed of game critic and player reviews, awards and nominations, and articles within the academic sphere, among others – is a means of attributing “merit” to a video game. In turn, game developers observe the factors that provide their game with merit, according to the public, and use that information to inform future development decisions. In a departure from the original *Assassin's Creed*, all three games in the Ezio Trilogy received award nominations for their storylines, highlighting the success of the game developers' mission “to address and modify what people didn't enjoy in AC1 and amp up what they did.”¹⁵⁰ In creating a well-rounded story based in historical ‘fact’, however, the writers and developers of the Ezio Trilogy blurred the once clear-cut lines of the narrative/fiction versus detail/accuracy dichotomy predominant within the external dialogue of the Ezio Trilogy. Therefore, as a result of player, game critic, and academic feedback for *ACI*, a second theme emerged in the external dialogue around the Ezio Trilogy that was not present for the first game: the weight given to primary sources as a form of knowledge. This section will examine this theme, as well as the theme of the dichotomy of narrative/fiction versus detail/accuracy, to highlight the ways in which responses to the Ezio Trilogy influenced the development trajectory of *Assassin's Creed III*. This section will first provide an overview of the various awards and award nominations received by

¹⁵⁰ Garratt, “Interview.”

ACII, *Brotherhood*, and *Revelations*. Then, it will explore the evolution of how game critics, players, and academics interact with the games' narrative/fiction and detail/accuracy.

Initial Reception: Awards and Nominations

All three games in the Ezio Trilogy received numerous awards and award nominations, demonstrating the continued popularity of the series and highlighting what game critics believed to be the key features providing it with merit. *ACII* won in the "Action/Adventure Game of the Year" category for both the 28th Annual Golden Joystick Awards and the 2009 Spike TV Video Game Awards.¹⁵¹ The British Academy of Film and Television Awards (BAFTA) also nominated *ACII* for six categories, including Action, Artistic Achievement, Best Game, Gameplay, Original Score, and Story.¹⁵² It also received a similarly impressive list of nominations at the 13th Annual D.I.C.E. Awards held by the Academy of Interactive Arts and Sciences, such as "Adventure Game of the Year," "Game of the Year," and "Outstanding Achievements" in Animation; Art Direction; Gameplay Engineering; Original Music Composition; Sound Design; Visual Engineering; Original Story; and Game Direction.¹⁵³

¹⁵¹ Ben Kendrick, "The 2009 Spike VGA Winners," *GameRant*, December 14, 2009, <https://gamerant.com/2009-spike-vga-winners/>; "Spike TV Announces 2009 Video Game Award Winners," *Independent*, December 14, 2009, <https://www.independent.co.uk/tech/spike-tv-announces-2009-video-game-award-winners-1840587.html>; Stephany Nunneley-Jackson, "28th Annual Golden Joystick Awards done and dusted, here are your winners," *VG247*, October 29, 2010, <https://www.vg247.com/2010-golden-joystick-awards-are-live-here-are-your-winners>.

¹⁵² "Video Games Awards Nominations Announced," BAFTA, February 16, 2010, <https://www.bafta.org/media-centre/press-releases/video-games-awards-nominations-announced>.

¹⁵³ "Assassin's Creed II," Academy of Interactive Arts & Sciences, accessed January 2, 2025, https://www.interactive.org/games/video_game_details.asp?idAward=2010&idGame=1073.

The remaining two games in the Ezio Trilogy followed suit. *Brotherhood* won “Best Action-Adventure Game” at the 2010 Spike TV Video Game Awards, was nominated for “Ultimate Game of the Year” and “Best Action/Adventure” at the 29th Annual Joystick Awards, received further nominations for “Game of the Year” and “Best Visual Arts” at the Game Developers Choice Awards, and was nominated in seven different categories by BAFTA.¹⁵⁴ *Revelations* received fewer nominations and award wins, but tracked in similar categories to the two previous games in the series. At the 2012 Golden Joystick Awards, it was nominated for “Best Action-Adventure” and “The Golden Joystick Ultimate Game Award.”¹⁵⁵ It also received one win for “Art Direction, Period” and two nominations (“Original Dramatic Score, Franchise” and “Game Sequel Adventure”) through the National Academy of Video Game Testers and Reviewers Corp (NAVGTR), as well as a nomination for “Best Action-Adventure Game” at the 2011 Spike Video Game Awards.¹⁵⁶ In addition, the game received nominations through various publications, such as nominations at the 2011 Game Rant Video Game Awards (“Best Action-Adventure Game,” “Best Multiplayer Experience,” and “Best Story”).¹⁵⁷ It

¹⁵⁴ Andrei Dumitrescu, “Limbo, Red Dead Redemption and Mass Effect 2 Lead Game Developers Choice Nominations,” Softpedia, January 17, 2011, <https://news.softpedia.com/news/Limbo-Red-Dead-Redemption-and-Mass-Effect-2-Lead-Game-Developers-Choice-Awards-Nominations-178549.shtml>; “GAME British Academy Video Game Awards Nominations Announced,” *BAFTA*, February 16, 2011, <https://www.bafta.org/media-centre/press-releases/game-british-academy-video-game-awards-nominations-announced>; Joe Anderson, “Spike VGA 2010 winners - Red Dead Redemption scoops GOTY,” *VG247*, December 12, 2010, <https://www.vg247.com/spike-vga-2010-winners-red-dead-redemption-scoops-goty>; Stephen Coleman, “Golden Joystick Awards 2011 nominees unveiled,” *HEXUS*, September 8, 2011, <https://hexus.net/gaming/news/industry/31674-golden-joystick-awards-2011-nominees-unveiled/>.

¹⁵⁵ Stephany Nunneley-Jackson, “2012 Golden Joystick Awards - Skyrim wins Ultimate Game of the Year,” *VG247*, October 26, 2012, <https://www.vg247.com/2010-golden-joystick-awards-are-live-here-are-your-winners>.

¹⁵⁶ John Gaudiosi, “Minecraft Beats Skyrim To Win 2011 Game Of The Year NAVGTR Award,” *Forbes*, April 22, 2012, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/johngaudiosi/2012/04/12/minecraft-beats-skyrim-to-win-2011-game-of-the-year-navgtr-award/>; Rob Keyes, “2011 Spike Video Game Awards: Complete Winners List,” *Game Rant*, December 11, 2011, <https://gamerant.com/2011-spike-video-game-awards-complete-winners-list/>.

¹⁵⁷ Rob Keyes, “The 2011 Game Rant Video Game Awards: Nominations,” *Game Rant*, December 22, 2011.

also won for “Best Ending,” “Best Story” and “Best Environment/Art” through *Gaming Bolt’s* Game of the Year 2011 Awards, as well as nominations for “Best Voice Acting” and “Best Open World Game.”¹⁵⁸ Ultimately, all three games in the Trilogy received similar nominations to the original game, with one clear difference. All three games in the Ezio Trilogy received awards or nominations for story.

Blurring Lines Between Narrative/Fiction vs. Detail/Accuracy: Exploring the Weight of Primary Source Material

The ‘fiction’ or ‘narrative’ the developers crafted for the Ezio Trilogy clearly struck a chord among players and game critics alike. By creating a likable character (Ezio) and placing him in a period full of political intrigue (Renaissance Italy around the time of the Pazzi conspiracy; Constantinople during the early 16th Century), the writers and developers for *ACII*, *Brotherhood*, and *Revelations* were then able to weave in the typical Templar versus Assassin conspiracy elements that are a hallmark of the series. Speaking on the gradual buildup to the main storyline the writers crafted for *ACII*, Chris Kohler states that “Before you’re asked to buy into *Assassin’s Creed II’s* convoluted conspiracy theories and Secret Knight’s Templar plots, you’re actually caring about his family.”¹⁵⁹ The developers also managed to excite players about the history they chose to privilege throughout the storyline by featuring historic buildings, events, and figures in the games’ various missions. As Cyril Lachel noted about *Brotherhood*, “There’s a sizable story here, one that includes a lot of really exciting events in famous buildings and

¹⁵⁸ Rashid Sayed, “Game of the Year 2011 - Nominations and Winners,” *GamingBolt*, December 19, 2011, <https://gamingbolt.com/game-of-the-year-2011-nominations-and-winners>; Rob Keyes, “The 2011 Game Rant Video Game Awards: Nominations,” *Game Rant*, December 22, 2011, <https://gamerant.com/best-of-2011-video-game-awards/>.

¹⁵⁹ Kohler, “*Assassin’s Creed II*.”

outdoor locations,”¹⁶⁰ allowing players to feel like they are a part of the world appearing on their screens.

However, by tying the games’ storylines so closely to real historic events, people, and places, the series began leaning farther into the realm of ‘historical reproduction.’ The games began to become more about developing the accuracy of the visual reproduction of various eras, rather than problematizing the very notion of ‘accuracy’ itself. To ensure players bought into the games’ reproduction of the Renaissance era, the developers engaged player expectations, introducing historical anachronisms into the games for the sake of playability and player familiarity. Though introducing historical anachronisms while simultaneously attempting to ensure visual fidelity may seem counterintuitive, this seems to have increased regular players’ beliefs in the accuracy of the history presented in Ezio Trilogy, thanks to what some historians referred to as “video game-induced tourism.”¹⁶¹ Players visiting Italy, for example, could project their in-game experiences directly onto the real-world locations depicted in the game, thus fostering a greater connection with the games’ content and historical portrayals. While historians or others knowledgeable about Italian architecture or history may scoff at attempts to pass off these historical anachronisms as ‘accurate,’ Ubisoft is able to skirt criticisms by including notes in the Animus Database acknowledging their decisions. This has impacted the ways in which the various participants in the games’ external dialogue interact with the second half of the dichotomy: construing ‘detail’ as ‘accuracy.’

¹⁶⁰ Cyril Lachel, “Assassin’s Creed Brotherhood,” *Gaming Nexus*, December 13, 2010, <https://www.gamingnexus.com/Article/Assassins-Creed-Brotherhood/Item2879.aspx>.

¹⁶¹ Louis-Etienne Dubois and Chris Gibbs, “Video game-induced tourism: a new frontier for destination marketers,” *Tourism Review* 73, no. 2 (2018).

Reviews of the original *Assassin's Creed* game applauded it for its 'authenticity' or 'accuracy,' due to the level of detail imbued into the game's world, with the understanding that the game's 'narrative' was based in 'fiction.' In examining reviews of the Ezio Trilogy written between 2009-2011, strong appreciation for the level of 'authenticity' afforded to the physical reconstruction of the in-game world continues to be a prominent theme. For example, in discussing *ACII*, many game critics noted that the meticulously detailed and stunningly rendered in-game world was on par with or greater than that of the original game, making it feel more immersive, alive, and authentic.¹⁶² Similar comments were made about Rome as a "fabulously detailed and lovingly produced"¹⁶³ city in *Brotherhood* with "Dozens of historically accurate landmarks,"¹⁶⁴ acting as "an enormous and authentic looking sandbox for Ezio to explore."¹⁶⁵ *Revelations*, too, received positive reviews, with critics noting that the developers had capitalized on what Daniel Kaszor called the "much-improved graphics engine,"¹⁶⁶ going to "great lengths to recreate the city as to how it was during the Ottoman rule."¹⁶⁷ As Kevin VanOrd also wrote in his review of *Revelations*, the "Deep golds and reds make a stroll through the grand bazaar a feast for the eyes, and famous landmarks like Hagia Sophia cut striking silhouettes against the night sky,"¹⁶⁸ boosting the levels of immersion and perceptions of realism for players.

¹⁶² Boxer, "Assassin's Creed 2"; Nowak, "Assassin's Creed 2"; Sapiha, "Assassin's Creed II."

¹⁶³ Seth Schiesel, "Adventurously Bashing Borgias Amid the Clamor of Old Rome," *The New York Times*, December 6, 2010, <https://www.nytimes.com/2010/12/07/arts/video-games/07assassin.html>.

¹⁶⁴ Schiesel, "Bashing Borgias."

¹⁶⁵ Kendrick, "Brotherhood."

¹⁶⁶ Kaszor, "Assassin's Creed Revelations."

¹⁶⁷ Alex Ritman, "Assassin's Creed: Revelations is historically impressive," *The National News*, November 13, 2011, <https://www.thenationalnews.com/arts/assassin-s-creed-revelations-is-historically-impressive-1.444681>.

¹⁶⁸ VanOrd, "Revelations."

In a departure from *ACI*, however, critics began to deliver mixed reviews surrounding the ‘authenticity’ of the game’s story, blurring the line between narrative/fiction and detail/accuracy. There continued to be a certain degree of understanding among critics that the storyline of the Ezio Trilogy was largely fictitious. For example, writing for *The New York Times*, Seth Schiesel stated that “Assassin’s Creed II provides an unparalleled historical adventure along the lines of an interactive Dan Brown or James Clavell novel, melding historically accurate locations, personages and events with pseudoplausible conspiracy theories rooted in antiquity.”¹⁶⁹ Many other critics also made a similar comparison to Dan Brown’s work.¹⁷⁰ Furthermore, speaking about “the Truth” puzzles in *Brotherhood*, Matt Miller wrote: “I love the conspiracy at the heart of Assassin’s Creed, but Ubisoft needs to be careful that it doesn’t get too caught up in its own fiction. There’s a fine line between a game mystery and overly obscure nonsense.”¹⁷¹ Interestingly, though, many authors also sought to legitimize the storyline of the Ezio Trilogy by drawing attention to the use of real-world influences shaping the games’ plots. For example, writing for *The National News*, Alex Ritman makes sure to list each of the historical figures players can interact with in *Revelations*, including: coming to the aid of a teenage Suleiman; meeting the famed Turkish cartographer Piri Reis; and killing Manuel Palaiologos, heir to the Byzantine crown. Ritman also notes that “It is the rivalry between [Prince] Ahme[t] and his brother Selim

¹⁶⁹ Seth Schiesel, “On the Scenic Trail of Intrigue: Adventures in 15th-Century Italy,” *The New York Times*, December 7, 2009, <https://www.nytimes.com/2009/12/08/arts/television/08assassin.html>.

¹⁷⁰ See: Andrews, “Assassin’s Creed II”; Sapiha, “Assassin’s Creed II”; Stephen Totilo, “The End of Brotherhood And The Future of Assassin’s Creed,” *Kotaku*, December 13, 2010, <https://kotaku.com/the-end-of-brotherhood-and-the-future-of-assassins-cree-5712917>; VanOrd, “Assassin’s Creed II.”

¹⁷¹ Matt Miller, “Assassin’s Creed: Brotherhood Review,” *Game Informer*, November 16, 2010, https://www.gameinformer.com/games/assassins_creed_brotherhood/b/xbox360/archive/2010/11/16/review.aspx.

that forms the basis of much of the storyline in the game, along with tensions between the Greeks and Ottomans.”¹⁷²

Player feedback for the Ezio Trilogy also shifted from that of the original game. While players noted that the level of detail in the physical reconstruction of the various in-game cities had been a driving force behind their purchase of *ACI*, they were less enthusiastic about the game’s narrative. In contrast, Amanda G. Madden – a professor who used *ACII* in their university classroom to encourage students to immerse themselves in Renaissance Italy – noted that both the game’s ‘narrative’ and ‘detail’ were compelling to students as a result of perceived ‘accuracy.’ For example, one of Madden’s students commented that “Before this class started, I actually didn’t know much at all about the Italian Renaissance period [...] I think the game’s accuracy made me get into the game and the class material more.”¹⁷³ Another of Madden’s students states that the developers “used real events from the lives of the historical characters to help the plot line develop and seem plausible,” and that “the Assassin’s Creed games are a fun way to learn about historical events, even if you do not realize that you are learning.”¹⁷⁴ While the first student’s quote provides a general reflection on the game as a whole, the second student’s comment points to the idea that some players may perceive the in-game storyline to be accurate, due to the developers’ use of real-world events and historical figures. It also suggests that by interacting with *ACII*, players are learning and internalizing information related to the Italian Renaissance, possibly without realizing.

¹⁷² Ritman, “Assassin’s Creed: Revelations.”

¹⁷³ Amanda G. Madden, “Blending a First-Year Composition Course Using *Assassin’s Creed II*,” in *Blended Learning in Practice: A Guide for Practitioners and Researches*, ed. Amanda G. Madden, Lauren Margulieux, Robert S. Kadel and Ashok K. Goel (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 2019), 263.

¹⁷⁴ Madden, “Using *Assassin’s Creed II*,” 263.

This internalization of information when playing historical video games without the proper reflection or analysis can have profound effects on players' understanding of history. According to Schut, players and educators alike should be aware of the impact perceived accuracy of historical video games can have on players. In particular, they argue that "being able to enter into history is quite profoundly different from reading about it or watching it unfold as a spectator."¹⁷⁵ With increasing complexity and realism, video games are able to immerse players like never before, creating the perception that attempts at 'authenticity' by the developers automatically equate to accurate portrayals of historical eras.¹⁷⁶ These claims of authenticity are usually rooted in the developers' inclusion of historians, cultural consultants, or other experts in the design process. For example, the website for *Brothers in Arms: Road to Hill 30* (2005) notes that the game features "unprecedented authenticity," and recreated battlegrounds, uniforms, various pieces of equipment, and events through the use of Signal Corps photos, Aerial Reconnaissance Imagery, and eyewitness accounts.¹⁷⁷ Meanwhile, military strategy games like those in the *Close Combat* series find themselves in a liminal space between fact and fiction, often raising similar questions about the role 'realism' plays within historical game-fictions.¹⁷⁸ Prior to the release of the games in the Ezio Trilogy, the majority of analysis about realism in video games focused almost exclusively on either First Person Shooter or military strategy games. However, the general message still rings true: players should consistently question why certain decisions have been made in the

¹⁷⁵ Schut, "Strategic Simulations," 230.

¹⁷⁶ Aaron Hess, "'You Don't Play, You Volunteer': Narrative Public Memory Construction in *Medal of Honor: Rising Sun*," *Critical Studies in Media Communication* 24, no. 4 (2007), 340, 353; Schut, "Strategic Simulations," 213.

¹⁷⁷ Rejack, "Virtual Reenactment of History," 415.

¹⁷⁸ Hess, "*Medal of Honor: Rising Sun*," 341.

development process, and how these decisions – usually surrounding overwhelming attention to ‘detail,’ but also in the developers’ portrayals of certain events and historical figures – create the impression of ‘authenticity’ or ‘accuracy.’ Otherwise, simply taking the level of immersion afforded by historical video games for granted can result in players walking away with selective memories of past events.¹⁷⁹

Moving past the classroom, the Ezio Trilogy – as well as later games in the series – also plays a part in the larger discourse surrounding video game-induced tourism. Video game related tourism is not a new phenomenon, and certainly predates the release of the games in the Ezio Trilogy. Just as thousands of people make “pilgrimages” each year to historic sites like Gettysburg to engage in historical reenactment, so, too, have fans of historical video games (and video games in general) begun visiting the sites recreated in the games that they play to create a further sense of immersion. Tourism campaigns have even used video games to reach wider audiences. “As a western tourist on a personal pilgrimage,” Sarah Maria Griffin with *The Guardian* created a comprehensive list of hotspots to visit in Japan for gamers interested in games like *Animal Crossing* and the *Super Mario* series.¹⁸⁰ Abhishek Bhuniya with *India Outbound* used screenshots from video games and superimposed them on top of photos of the real locations, with the stated purpose of curating a list of locations for players to visit.¹⁸¹ The list included the Colosseum (*Assassin’s Creed: Brotherhood*), Notre Dame (*Assassin’s Creed: Unity*), Lan Kwai Fong in Hong Kong (*Sleeping Dogs*), the Reichstag (*Call of Duty: World at War*),

¹⁷⁹ Hess, “*Medal of Honor: Rising Sun*,” 354; Schut, “Strategic Simulations,” 230.

¹⁸⁰ Sarah Maria Griffin, “‘A portal to a different world’: a gamer’s guide to visiting Japan,” *The Guardian*, August 1, 2023, <https://www.theguardian.com/games/2023/aug/01/gamers-guide-to-visiting-japan-super-nintendo-world>.

¹⁸¹ Abhishek Bhuniya, “Video game tourism: When gamers turn into tourists,” *India Outbound*, February 4, 2022, <https://indiaoutbound.info/experiences/video-game-tourism-when-gamers-turn-into-tourists/>.

the Moscow Metro (*Metro: 2033*), and Chernobyl (*Call of Duty: Modern Warfare*), among others.¹⁸² In addition, online travel agencies like Skyscanner™ use slogans like “Gami-vacation: Level up the travel game” to hype up trends in the video game tourism industry and sell tourism packages.¹⁸³ Some video games also provide players with a sense of ‘virtual tourism’ due to the game’s level of immersion, making players feel as if they are actually touring the real locations depicted in the game.

In the case of the Ezio Trilogy, Stuart Andrews noted in his review of *ACII* that Ubisoft has found a way to present “virtual tourism at its best,” largely facilitated by the introduction of the Animus Database.¹⁸⁴ Not present in *ACI*, the Animus Database provides players with the ability to access information about historical people, places, and events as they traverse the game’s map. As players guide Ezio past a landmark, for example, they are prompted to access information about it. Much like a guided walking tour of a city, players can learn as they go – although this information is mediated by what the developers believe is important for players to know to further contextualize the game’s world. As an offshoot of the virtual tourism afforded to players by the games’ database, the popularity of the Ezio Trilogy also facilitates video game-induced tourism. In writing about media-related tourism, Louis-Etienne Dubois and Chris Gibbs compared reviews of various famous locations in Italy that were left by tourists, focusing on those that specifically mentioned the *Assassin’s Creed* series. One tourist quoted by Dubois and Gibbs wrote: “Ezio [...] is the main reason I chose Italy as my holiday destination.”¹⁸⁵ In

¹⁸² Bhuniya, “Video game tourism.”

¹⁸³ “Gami-vacation: Level up the travel game,” Skyscanner™, Accessed March 1, 2025, <https://www.skyscanner.ca/travel-trends/gaming>.

¹⁸⁴ Andrews, “Assassin’s Creed II.”

¹⁸⁵ Dubois & Gibbs, “Video game-induced tourism,” 192.

another review posted to Trip Advisor, a tourist wrote about the Cupola del Brunelleschi, stating that “[They] had virtually seen and climbed this Cupola in Assassin’s Creed and finally had the chance to see it for real!”¹⁸⁶ Tom Van Nuenen notes that while *Assassin’s Creed* enacts a specific form of tourism – such as “YouTube comparisons between tourist sites as they are rendered both inside the game and outside of it,” encouraging players to participate in discourse surrounding the historical ‘accuracy’ and ‘authenticity’ of the games themselves – the creators took liberties with the tourist sites they included.¹⁸⁷

Returning to the conflation of ‘accuracy’ with ‘detail,’ especially those that match player expectations, some academics worry that the use of historical anachronisms in the Ezio Trilogy may create a misrepresented version of this historical period for players. For instance, the developers adapted the architectural profiles of Florence, as well as other in-game cities, to create routes that would facilitate navigation through the space, including the introduction of scaffolding, ropes, and other ornamental features.¹⁸⁸ The appearance of certain buildings was also changed to match player expectations. For example, the Vasari corridor added to the Ponte Vecchio, the dome of the Basilica of San Lorenzo (not built until the 17th Century), and the game’s version of the Santa Croce’s façade (constructed in 1863) are all elements that would not have been present during the time period being portrayed in the games.¹⁸⁹ Derby McDevitt, the lead scriptwriter for

¹⁸⁶ Dubois & Gibbs, “Video game-induced tourism,” 192.

¹⁸⁷ Tom Van Nuenen, “Touring the Animus: *Assassin’s Creed* and Ludotypical Movement,” *Loading... The Journal of the Canadian Game Studies Association* 10, no. 17 (2018): 24.

¹⁸⁸ Translated from the original Spanish. See: José Enrique Ocaña Romero and Francisco Javier Ruiz del Olmo, “El videojuego de temática histórica como arte visual: anacronías conscientes y licencias creativas en la representación de espacios urbanos de la saga *Assassin’s Creed*,” *Co-herencia* 17, no. 33 (2020): 58-59.

¹⁸⁹ Douglas N. Dow, “Historical Veneers: Anachronism, Simulation, and Art History in *Assassin’s Creed II*,” in *Playing with the Past: Digital games and the simulation of history*, ed. Matthew Wilhelm Kapell and Andrew B. R. Elliott (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2013); Romero and Ruiz del Olmo, “El videojuego,” 58.

Revelations, also stated that although there would have only been two minarets on the Hagia Sofia during the time period represented, “[the developers] put four because [they] thought that this was the iconic image of the Hagia Sofia.”¹⁹⁰ Furthermore, the architecture in *Brotherhood* leans towards that of the late 16th Century Baroque period despite the game being set at the beginning of that same century, as the developers believed this would produce a more recognizable visual appeal.¹⁹¹

As a video game series, *Assassin’s Creed* is designed to sell copies of their games and maximize profits. Regardless of claims the developers may make, “the representations of the past, based on rigorous research, [still] conform to the expectations of players and [their] needs in terms of playability.”¹⁹² In seeking to make the famous locales depicted in the Ezio Trilogy accessible to players, while simultaneously meeting player expectations, the developers have created a scenario in which ‘authentic’ experiences of these locations will become “inaccessible to the gamer who will always see it refracted through the gaming environment.”¹⁹³ Therefore, in contrast to player and game critic feedback, which saw the overwhelming level of ‘detail’ within the Ezio Trilogy to be a mark of ‘authenticity,’ writers within the academic sphere sought to problematize anachronistic choices made by the developers in favor of playability and player familiarity.

¹⁹⁰ Ritman, “Assassin’s Creed: Revelations.”

¹⁹¹ Van Nuenen, “Touring the Animus,” 24.

¹⁹² Translated from the original French. See: Alexandre Joly-Lavoie, “*Assassin’s Creed*: synthèse des écrits et implications pour l’enseignement de l’histoire,” *McGill Journal of Education* 52, no. 2 (2017): 455.

¹⁹³ Dow, “Historical Veneers,” 223.

Conclusion

According to Alexandre Joly-Lavoie, the *Assassin's Creed* series is “an artifact that exists because of collective memory [...] and an objective that contributes to the creation of this memory,” while Marta Fernández-Ruiz claims that “it is not the historical rigor that makes the saga stand out, but the fact that it is a negotiated historical fidelity, closer to memory.”¹⁹⁴ This idea that the series both contributes to, and is reflective of, collective memories surrounding particular people, places, and historical events introduces interesting implications for the series as a whole. For example, in attempting to subvert historical narratives and encourage players to *think* about the history they consume, the developers of the Ezio Trilogy have still gone out of their way to nestle their in-game narratives within a ‘historically accurate’ setting. Furthermore, by employing historians, architects, and various other experts in the making of the games, Ubisoft automatically receives a badge of ‘authenticity’ from the average consumer. Referring to the architecture in *ACII*, one critic stated: “The luscious detail and natural, ennobling proportions and styling of the environments [...] suggest that Ubisoft employed more than a few [architects].”¹⁹⁵ Raphael Lacoste, the art director for *Revelations*, also made sure to mention in an interview that their construction of Constantinople started with historians and the study of 16th Century maps, while Corey May, a co-writer for *Brotherhood*, noted that they studied Machiavelli’s contemporary

¹⁹⁴ Joly-Lavoie’s work was translated from the original French, and Fernández-Ruiz’s from the original Spanish. See: Joly-Lavoie, “*Assassin’s Creed*,” 460; Marta Fernández-Ruiz, “Más allá de la adaptación. *Assassin’s Creed* y los mundos transmediales,” *Transvases entre la literatura y el cine* 3 (2011): 104.

¹⁹⁵ Schiesel, “15th-Century Italy.”

history of the city and consulted an array of historians.¹⁹⁶ Despite this, many historians were divided on the ‘authenticity’ of the games, particularly in regards to their physical reconstruction of in-game environments.

Ultimately, though, regardless of what historians may have to say about the series, priority is given to catering to the needs of the player. Ensuring “immersion” – which Van Nuenen describes as “not just about historical veracity, but also about the *recognizability* of the things one can do and see within that context” – will inevitably lead to sacrifices to ‘authenticity’ or ‘accuracy.’¹⁹⁷ As long as the *player* perceives their experience to be ‘authentic’ or ‘accurate,’ historical anachronisms are a small price to pay. While there still exists a dichotomy of narrative/fiction versus detail/accuracy, the decisions Ubisoft’s developers made with the Ezio Trilogy set the precedent that they are willing to compromise their stated objective of encouraging players to question their views of history. Instead, the developers present versions of history that will meet player expectations. The next chapter of this thesis will examine how decisions made in the development of the Ezio Trilogy affect *Assassin’s Creed III* and undermine the initial goals of the series.

¹⁹⁶ Keith Stuart, “Assassin’s Creed and the appropriation of history,” *The Guardian*, November 19, 2010, <https://www.theguardian.com/technology/gamesblog/2010/nov/19/assassin-s-creed-brotherhood-history>; Ritman, “Assassin’s Creed: Revelations.”

¹⁹⁷ Emphasis added. Van Nuenen, “Touring the Animus,” 25.

CHAPTER FOUR

Assassin's Creed III (2012)

Introduction

Focusing on the American Revolution, *Assassin's Creed III (ACIII)* (2012) follows the story of Ratohnhaké:ton, a half-Kanien'kehá:ka (Mohawk), half-British assassin fighting to save his people. While the historic portion of the story was set a few centuries after that of Ezio Auditore da Firenze, the 'present day' storyline picks up right where *Assassin's Creed: Revelations* ends: Desmond Miles wakes up from his coma and is once again on track to saving the world. The jump between Ezio and Ratohnhaké:ton, though, caused fans to wonder how Ubisoft would portray the American Revolution and whether or not Ratohnhaké:ton would live up to Ezio's legacy. *ACIII*'s developers were once again applauded for the overall level of detail they infused into the game, reflected in one game critic's review: "Nobody in mainstream entertainment has ever tried to capture 18th-Century [America] at this level of detail."¹⁹⁸ Writing for *Forbes*, Erik Kain also praised the game for its overall level of immersion, saying, "Without a doubt, this is one of the best looking games to hit consoles this generation [...] Boston is absolutely brilliant, the most convincingly realistic depiction of that city and time in a game that I've played."¹⁹⁹ With the departure of Ezio, described as one of the "most compelling, likable, and engaging protagonists in the gaming medium,"²⁰⁰ it would not be unreasonable to

¹⁹⁸ Erik Sofge, "The American Revolution: The Game," *Slate*, October 26, 2012, <https://slate.com/technology/2012/10/assassins-creed-iii-is-a-thrilling-hyperdetailed-journey-to-the-colonial-era-there-are-also-aliens.html>.

¹⁹⁹ Erik Kain, "'Assassin's Creed III' Review - Part One: Into The Great Wide Open," *Forbes*, November 1, 2012, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/erikkain/2012/11/01/assassins-creed-iii-review-part-one-into-the-great-wide-open/>.

²⁰⁰ Nick Cowen, "Assassin's Creed 3 - review," *The Guardian*, October 31, 2012, <https://www.theguardian.com/technology/gamesblog/2012/oct/31/assassins-creed-3-review>.

expect a dip in players' level of excitement for yet another *Assassin's Creed* installation. However, the game instantly beat the sales records of the previous games in the series, selling 7 million copies worldwide within the first month and a half of its release, making it the fastest-selling title in Ubisoft's history as of December 2012.²⁰¹ *ACIII* did receive criticism for inconsistent quality of the game missions, which often led to players feeling frustrated or that their creativity was being restricted, but the developers nevertheless received praise for the unprecedented level of content they managed to include in the game.²⁰²

Just as the original *Assassin's Creed* game created new avenues for historical representation in video games, *ACIII* represented a welcome departure from previous historical video games by being the first AAA game²⁰³ to include a playable Indigenous protagonist.²⁰⁴ Many critics and contemporary academic authors applauded this departure from previous industry norms. Describing *ACIII* as a cultural milestone, *Indian Country Today* (ICT) wrote: "The high marks for the game, both as a game and as a window onto

²⁰¹ Brett Molina, "'Assassin's Creed III' sales top 7 million," *USA Today*, December 12, 2012, <https://www.usatoday.com/story/tech/gaming/2012/12/12/assassins-creed-sales-7-million/1764437/>. Prior to *Assassin's Creed III*'s launch on October 30, 2012, Ubisoft had sold more than 40 million copies in the *Assassin's Creed* series. By 2016, *AC3* would sell over 12 million copies, with the whole franchise, including *AC3*, exceeding 77 million copies sold. See: Molina, "'Assassin's Creed III'"; and Vincent Boutonnet, "Historical Agency and Videogame Play: A Case Study Of *Assassin's Creed 3*," in *E-teaching History*, ed. Joanna Wojdon (Newcastle Upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2016), 122.

²⁰² Chris Thursten, "Assassin's Creed 3 Review," *PC Gamer*, November 30, 2012, <https://www.pcgamer.com/assassins-creed-3-review/>; Cowen, "Assassin's Creed 3"; Kain, "'Assassin's Creed III'"; Keza MacDonald, "Assassin's Creed III Review," *IGN*, October 30, 2012, <https://www.ign.com/articles/2012/10/30/assassins-creed-iii-review>; Noah Gordon, "Assassin's Creed III Fails to Flaunt its Assets," *The Amherst Student*, November 13, 2012, <https://amherststudent.com/article/assassins-creed-iii-fails-flaunt-its-assets/>.

²⁰³ AAA games (or "Triple-A") refers to typically high-budget video games produced by mid-sized or major video game publishers.

²⁰⁴ Ashlee Bird, "Digital dispossessions: the importance of regional specificity and sovereign spaces within video game representations of native American cultural heritage," *Studia Neophilologica* 93, no. 2 (2021), 249; Stephen Joyce, "Authentic-Deconstructionist Games and Tragic Historiography in *Assassin's Creed III*," *American Literature* 94 (2022), 144.

history, make clear what many Native gamers and moviegoers have thought all along: That it's possible to make good entertainment without dragging out the same tired stereotypes."²⁰⁵ Reflecting on the historic lack of diversity among characters in the video game industry, Alex Hutchinson, *ACIII*'s creative director, stated, "I think now that we're trying to be more progressive as an industry, I think more and more people will see the value and all the new stories you can tell by being more ambitious with your lead character," noting, "We're definitely better than we were 10 years ago, when it wasn't even a discussion, but there's a long way to go."²⁰⁶ Steve Masters, the game's lead designer, also claimed that "Considering the general treatment of [Indigenous characters] in video gaming, [Ubisoft had] one of the strongest and most accurately portrayed characters that has ever been created."²⁰⁷

More recent scholarship, however, has reflected on the role *ACIII* played in the larger development of historical video games, and offered critiques of the methodology Ubisoft used to inform its representation of Indigenous culture. In doing so, these authors point to indie games²⁰⁸ created by Indigenous design teams that came out either prior to or after the release of *ACIII*, specifically pointing towards a need to elevate Indigenous voices and narratives not just within the *details* of a game, but within the *narrative* as

²⁰⁵ ICT Staff, "'Assassin's Creed III': A Critical Success, and a Cultural Milestone," *ICT*, September 13, 2018, <https://ictnews.org/archive/assassins-creed-iii-a-critical-success-and-a-cultural-milestone>.

²⁰⁶ Laura Parker, "Recreating Colonial America in Assassin's Creed III," *GameSpot*, October 25, 2012, <https://www.gamespot.com/articles/recreating-colonial-america-in-assassins-creed-iii/1100-6398835/>.

²⁰⁷ Larry Frum, "American history unfolds in 'Assassin's Creed 3,'" *CNN*, October 19, 2012, <https://www.cnn.com/2012/10/19/tech/gaming-gadgets/assassins-creed-3-history/index.html>.

²⁰⁸ "Indie" games (or "Independent" games), unlike AAA games, are games created independent of major studios. They are typically produced by one individual or a smaller development team. Within the context of video game culture, a game's "indieness" can be owed to the reputation of its developers and/or its production budget, but also its storyline or general aesthetic qualities. For more information, see: "What is an Indie Game? A Comprehensive Guide," Toronto Film School, April 25, 2023, <https://www.torontofilmschool.ca/blog/what-is-an-indie-game/>.

well. One common comparison that arose from the literature was the sidescroller game *Never Alone <Kisima Ingitchuna>* (2014), created by E-Line and Upper One Games as a collaborative video game project with the Cook Inlet Tribal Council of the Iñupiaq community of Alaska.²⁰⁹ The game is based on the tale of ‘Kunuksaayuka’ and weaves different perspectives and knowledge, including non-human knowledge, together.²¹⁰ The game was heralded for its inclusion of the Iñupiaq at every stage in the design process, and empowered the community by providing an outlet through which they could share their history, worldview, and knowledge.²¹¹ Often compared to *ACIII* in the literature reviewed for this chapter, *Never Alone* was applauded for including the Iñupiaq community in all stages of the design process, “to ensure that all creative and business decisions were appropriately considered and supported the goals of all stakeholders.”²¹² In contrast, *ACIII* mainly focused on Indigenous consultation for the creative process alone.

As with the Ezio Trilogy, the developers for *ACIII* also sought to grow from player feedback and to lean into the game elements that players enjoyed. Based on the *AC* series’ development, though, Ubisoft found itself backed into a corner in which historical accuracy in the physical reconstruction of place, as well as the need to cater to the expectations of players, often seemed to take precedence over narrative. Choosing the

²⁰⁹ Bird, “Digital Dispossessions,” 254; Elizabeth A. LaPensée, Outi Laiti, and Maize Longboat, “Towards Sovereign Games,” *Games and Culture* 17, no. 3 (2022), 330; “Indigenous game designer challenges stereotypes,” *CBC*, March 4, 2016, <https://www.cbc.ca/radio/unreserved/unreserved-honours-the-strength-of-indigenous-women-1.3472826/indigenous-game-designer-challenges-stereotypes-1.3476519>; Rachel N. Simons, Kenneth R. Fleischmann, and Loriene Roy, “Leveling the playing field in ICT design: Transcending knowledge roles by balancing division and privileging of knowledges,” *The Information Society* 36, no. 4 (2020), 192.

²¹⁰ Simons, Fleischmann, and Roy, “Leveling the playing field,” 192.

²¹¹ LaPensée, Laiti, and Longboat, “Towards Sovereign Games,” 254.

²¹² Simons, Fleischmann, and Roy, “Leveling the playing field,” 192.

American Revolution as a setting, described as “an era personal to many Americans,”²¹³ also complicated attempts to subvert widely perpetuated and accepted narratives of the United States’ foundational mythology. This chapter, along with the literature surrounding *ACIII*, argues that the developers’ approach to the representation of the American Revolution ultimately undermined the series’ originally stated narrative goal: attempting to challenge how players view the past. *ACIII* also serves as the conclusion to the Desmond narrative arc. This arc, which spans from the original game and through the Ezio Trilogy, ends with Desmond’s implied death at the end of *ACIII*. As a result, *ACIII* serves not only as a reflection of the growth of the series up until this point, but also as a jumping-off point for future games in the *AC* series. Therefore, in order to place *ACIII* within the larger historiography surrounding historical representation in video games, this chapter will first analyze attempts by the development team to challenge players to rethink their views on history through the use of Animus Database entries. Building from this analysis, the external dialogue section will then explore three themes: the dichotomy of narrative/fiction versus detail/accuracy, the role of memory in the field of public history, and the weight that is given to primary sources.

Overview of the Game’s Story

Desmond Miles – 2012 AD

Following the events of *Assassin’s Creed: Revelations*, Desmond re-emerges from the Animus and travels with his estranged father (William Miles), Sean Hastings, and Rebecca Crane to New England in search of a First Civilization Grand Temple, in the

²¹³ Cyril Lachel, “Assassin’s Creed III,” *Gaming Nexus*, January 4, 2013, <https://gamingnexus.com/Article/Assassins-Creed-III/Item3784.aspx>.

hopes of preventing the end of the world. Accessing the genetic memories of two ancestors – Haytham Kenway and then Ratohnhaké:ton (Connor) – Desmond goes in search of a new First Civilization artifact, an amulet originally seen in Haytham’s possession. Throughout the game, Desmond emerges from the Animus to engage in side missions, learn more about the downfall of the First Civilization, and reconcile with his father. As Desmond’s narrative arc comes to a close, though, it is revealed that Desmond will have to sacrifice himself in order to save the world.

Haytham Kenway – 1754-1755 AD

Players are introduced to Haytham as he arrives at the Theatre Royal in London to watch *The Beggar’s Opera*. The year is 1754 and Haytham is there to kill a target, steal the amulet that will later become instrumental in Desmond’s quest, and then scurry off to the New England colonies. Sent on a mission to recruit men to the Order’s cause and uncover the location of the First Civilization Grand Temple, he ends up working alongside Kaniehtí:io, a member of the Kanien’kehá:ka nation. Haytham acts as the game’s false protagonist, and is only accessible to players for a short time. His role as a playable character ends in 1755 when it is revealed that he is, in fact, a Templar, and therefore the game’s main antagonist. However, he eventually teams up with his son, Ratohnhaké:ton, before being killed by him in 1781.

Ratohnhaké:ton/Connor – 1760-1782 AD

The half-Kanien’kehá:ka (Mohawk) and half-British son of Kaniehtí:io and Haytham Kenway, Ratohnhaké:ton is raised entirely by his mother. Ratohnhaké:ton’s storyline as the game’s actual historical protagonist starts when he is 4 years old, playing

with his friends in the woods near the Kanien'kehá:ka village of Kanatahséton, before he is attacked by Charles Lee and the rest of Haytham Kenway's Templars. When he regains consciousness, Ratohnhaké:ton finds his village on fire and has to watch helplessly as his mother dies in the flames. Vowing to get revenge on the men responsible for his mother's death, and concerned about the settler presence creeping ever closer to his people, he is sent by the Oiá:ner (Clan Mother) to Achilles Davenport's homestead when he is just 14 years old. Achilles, the only surviving member of the former New England Assassin Brotherhood, trains Ratohnhaké:ton, giving him the English name "Connor." Ratohnhaké:ton's overarching mission throughout *ACIII* is to dismantle the Templar Order in the colonies and protect his people. While he initially throws his support in with the Revolutionaries, participating in every major moment of the American Revolution, he eventually discovers that George Washington has planned to betray him by burning his village and salting the land. He also learns that Washington was responsible for ordering the initial destruction of his village that led to the death of his mother. Ratohnhaké:ton's story ends after he kills the remaining Templars, including his father, and goes back to his village, only to find that it has been abandoned. His people have fled as the colonists pushed farther West.

Internal Dialogue: Sidelineing Important Historical Conversations

In contrast to the previous games in the *AC* series, active engagement with public history debates within *ACIII*'s internal dialogue was fairly limited. The original *AC* game purposefully engaged with three of the four main themes examined in this thesis, namely: the weight given to primary sources as a form of knowledge; problematizing the way in which history is taught; and the role of memory in the field of public history. This

engagement took the form of unskippable cutscenes in which various characters would debate the merits of how historical narratives are legitimized and disseminated. In response to player feedback, though, these overt forms of engagement were sidelined in the Ezio Trilogy and moved into either the games' branding or into optional secondary memories that called attention to political scandals, and placed historical figures within the larger overall metanarrative of the Templar-Assassin struggle. As a result, players were given the option to engage with this content or not, and would have to actively seek it out by finding hidden glyphs/clusters scattered across the in-game maps. Within the internal dialogue of *ACIII*, only one theme remains: problematizing the way in which history is taught, in order to encourage players to question their views on accepted historical narratives. This section of the chapter will analyze a few instances of in-game dialogue that carry out this goal, as well as two entries from the Animus database.

Challenging Learned Historical Narratives Through Animus Database Entries

Players first meet Shaun Hastings in *Assassin's Creed II (ACII)* following Desmond's escape from Abstergo Industries. Acting as both an analyst and historian for the team, Shaun creates Animus Database entries that allow players to access information about historic people, places, and events in real time as they interact with the environments within the genetic memories of Desmond's ancestors. These entries were meant to be informative, playing into Ubisoft's move towards a more educational gaming environment, but they also provided a certain degree of levity by throwing in the occasional bit of 'edgy' humour. When the genetic memories of Desmond's ancestors brought him to the American Revolution, Ubisoft's writers took the chance to bolster the level of commentary Shaun provides the player. Shaun, who is British, regularly pokes

fun at Desmond, an American, within the Animus Database entries of *ACIII*, attempting to call attention to different perspectives on the American Revolution, or to insinuate that Desmond may not know his own country's history as well as he thinks he does. Since Desmond is meant to be a stand-in for the imagined player, the argument can be made that this is Ubisoft's attempt to challenge players to rethink their views of the American Revolution, and to challenge the entrenched historical narratives of the United States' foundational mythology. Shaw seconded this viewpoint, writing: "Given the way critiques are framed, they seem to be meant to educate a predominantly white American audience who has unquestioningly accepted colonial leaders as selfless revolutionaries."²¹⁴ This can be clearly seen in the Animus Database entry on the Shawnee nation, which states:

[...] By 1758, some Shawnee negotiated peace with the British in the Treaty of Easton. However, the treaty wasn't respected (and if you know anything about colonial history, you're probably sadly unsurprised by that), leading to another war – Pontiac's Rebellion in 1763. By the time the American Revolution started, many of the Shawnee opted to remain neutral, although some sided with the British – again hoping for help pushing back the Colonists.

Unfortunately, the result was the same as many other Indigenous peoples – the Shawnee were forced to leave their lands, with the majority eventually settling in Oklahoma.²¹⁵

²¹⁴ Shaw, "The Tyranny of Realism," 13.

²¹⁵ Ubisoft, *Assassin's Creed III*, Ubisoft Inc, PC/Nintendo Switch/Xbox 360/Xbox One/PlayStation 3/PlayStation 4/Microsoft Windows, 2012.

‘Shaun’ (i.e., Ubisoft’s writers) chooses to end the Shawnee entry with a quip, writing, “Good lord. Settling in Oklahoma. As if their story couldn’t get any worse.”²¹⁶ This joke is meant to alleviate any awkwardness the player might feel upon reading that the Shawnee were dispossessed of their land by the colonists, instead playing off of regional rivalries in the United States. Provided the player is not from Oklahoma, it is bound to get a good chuckle from the audience. As with the glyphs and clusters of *ACII* and *Brotherhood*, though, reading the Animus Database entries is entirely optional and, unlike the glyphs and clusters, reading the entries does nothing to boost the player’s level of ‘synchronization’²¹⁷ between Desmond and his ancestors. *ACIII* also throws numerous, lengthy database entries at players who might not be motivated to stop in the middle of an action sequence to read about the Old Meeting House or Benjamin Franklin.

There do exist some in-game conversations between characters that draw attention to the darker aspects of America’s colonial past. For example, when Ratohnhaké:ton’s mentor, Achilles, first brings him to Boston, he renames him Connor. Achilles, a man of African descent, tells his pupil: “Your skin is fair enough that you might pass for one with Spanish or Italian blood. Better to be though a Spaniard than a Native. And both are better still than I.” When Ratohnhaké:ton tries to argue that this is not true, Achilles says,

²¹⁶ Ubisoft, *Assassin’s Creed III*, Ubisoft Inc, PC/Nintendo Switch/Xbox 360/Xbox One/PlayStation 3/PlayStation 4/Microsoft Windows, 2012.

²¹⁷ “Synchronization” is used to track the player’s level of progress in the game, specifically how much of the game they have completed. Each of the *AC* series games, including the first, have featured some form of “collectibles” for players to find around the map (Templar or Borgia flags, feathers, etc.), and the Ezio Trilogy introduced additional objectives for each memory (such as killing a target in a certain way), all with the goal of adding replayability value. Players who want to 100% complete the game will need to spend additional time uncovering all of these elements throughout the game world.

“What’s *true* and what *is* aren’t always the same.”²¹⁸ Their conversation calls attention to the different reality that they, as members of marginalized communities, occupy in comparison to the white colonists around them. In addition, it demonstrates to players that Ratohnhaké:ton must give up a part of his Indigenous identity in order to move freely throughout the Colonies. In another instance, Ratohnhaké:ton follows Samuel Adams through the streets of Boston. Expressing his enthusiasm for the colonists’ willingness to “finally take a stand against injustice,” Samuel Adams is challenged by Ratohnhaké:ton who draws attention to the fact that Adams still owns a slave. Adams brushes this off, though, claiming that “she’s not a slave, but a freed woman... At least on paper,” and notes that the colonists must first focus on defending their own rights before they can have the luxury of tackling racial injustice.²¹⁹

Unfortunately, these conversations are few and far between. Shaw also argues that any attempt to draw attention to the mistreatment of marginalized communities during this supposedly triumphant period of America’s history “is almost always undercut by gameplay or maladroit humour.” One of the worst offenses, Shaw notes, is the database entry on slavery, which “is followed up with a joke belittling sexual molestation.”²²⁰ This particular database entry, simply entitled “Atlantic Ocean,” attempts to draw attention to the unequal experiences of European travellers versus enslaved Africans when crossing the Atlantic. The entry opens with a couple short paragraphs about the dangers and discomfort facing Europeans looking to travel to the Colonies before stating:

²¹⁸ Ubisoft, *Assassin’s Creed III*, Ubisoft Inc, PC/Nintendo Switch/Xbox 360/Xbox One/PlayStation 3/PlayStation 4/Microsoft Windows, 2012.

²¹⁹ Ibid.

²²⁰ Shaw, “The Tyranny of Realism,” 14.

For Africans captured into slavery, the Atlantic voyage was much worse – across the “middle passage,” usually the Caribbean. The journey was just as long, but slaves were kept below decks and rarely allowed out in the fresh air – with the men usually in shackles. They were given only one meal a day – less if provisions were low. Disease was rampant, and mortality rates were high.

I will never complain about being inappropriately touched by airport security again.

Though to be fair, we’re now firm friends, and Juan was very gentle.²²¹

In a game almost devoid of overt commentary, entries like these can serve to desensitize the player and help create distance between themselves and the mistreatment of marginalized communities. Furthermore, many of the Database entries contain generic titles that do not immediately signal their contents to players. This second entry on the Atlantic Ocean, for example, appears during Haytham Kenway’s crossing from England at the beginning of the game, and the tonal divide between Haytham fist fighting (and killing) crewmen aboard the ship versus attempting to engage players in discussions of slavery appears nonsensical. It is easy to see, then, why scholars have accused *ACIII* of placing more emphasis on recreating dominant historical narratives rooted in American nationalism than attempting to subvert these historical narratives to provide thoughtful commentary. As a result, the focus of the external dialogue section will be on deconstructing Ubisoft’s portrayal of the American Revolution, and analyzing the

²²¹ Ubisoft, *Assassin’s Creed III*, Ubisoft Inc, PC/Nintendo Switch/Xbox 360/Xbox One/PlayStation 3/PlayStation 4/Microsoft Windows, 2012.

implications of these decisions within the larger context of the historiography of historical representation in video games.

External Dialogue: Indigenous Representation and National Memory

ACIII has been the specific focus of scholarship surrounding historical representation in video games. While the original *AC* game featuring Altair is mentioned in both academic and non-academic literature, and is often regarded as setting new precedents for the representation of history in video games, its primary role is usually to act as a set-up for later games in the series. Authors do their due diligence by recognizing *Assassin's Creed* before quickly moving on to more popular games in the series. As a result, there exists a larger literature surrounding both the Ezio Trilogy and *ACIII*. For literature focusing on the Ezio Trilogy, the main focus was establishing which elements of the narrative matched the historical record, and scrutinizing how the developers used detail to distract from historical anachronisms that they had introduced to encourage video game related tourism.

For *ACIII*, on the other hand, the choice to tell the story of the American Revolution through the eyes of an Indigenous protagonist resulted in a breadth of analysis on the game's role in the field of Indigenous video game studies. Players and critics reviewing the game immediately following its release were quick to praise Ubisoft's bravery in being the first AAA game to feature a playable Indigenous protagonist, and applauded the company for their efforts in seeking out Kanien'kehá:ka consultation. More recently, though, the game has been used as a benchmark, with Indigenous video game scholars tending to view the game, as well as its development process, more critically and lamenting that the game's plot only further legitimizes dominant cultural

narratives. As a result, this chapter will analyze three themes – the dichotomy of narrative/fiction, the role of memory in the field of public history, and the weight given to primary source material – and place *ACIII* within the larger scholarship surrounding historical representation in video games.

Decolonizing the Dichotomy of Narrative/Fiction vs. Detail/Accuracy: Discussions of Indigenous Representation in Video Games

In choosing to represent a half-Kanien'kehá:ka, half-British main character, Ubisoft knew they would need to ensure an authentic and respectful representation of Indigenous culture. After all, as Ashlee Bird notes in her article on the importance of regional specificity and sovereign spaces within video games, there exists a “continuous misrepresentation of Indigenous peoples within popular media [and] One of the most egregious offenders is the video game industry.”²²² When Indigenous representation does occur, it is usually without the involvement of the Indigenous communities in question, resulting in “representations that often fall into stereotypes and/or appropriation,” commonly featuring Indigenous characters as generic, spiritual individuals who guide the (predominantly) white protagonist through their quest.²²³

In wanting the game's hero to reflect the diversity of the team behind its development, and recognizing that their efforts were leading them into the path of faux pas and factual errors, *ACIII*'s development team hired Thomas Deer, the cultural liaison for the Kanien'kehá:ka Onkwawén:na Raotitíohkwa Language and Cultural Center, in

²²² Bird, “Digital dispossessions,” 243.

²²³ LaPensée, Laiti, and Longboat, “Towards Sovereign Games,” 328; Jared Newman, “*Assassin's Creed III*'s Connor: How Ubisoft Avoided Stereotypes and Made a Real Character,” *Time Magazine*, September 5, 2012, <https://techland.time.com/2012/09/05/assassins-creed-iiis-connor-how-ubisoft-avoided-stereotypes-and-made-a-real-character/>.

April 2011 to be on call at all times.²²⁴ With the help of Deer, *ACIII*'s developers were able to gain access to a local immersion school in the Kahnawà:ke Mohawk Territory to record Mohawk children at play (used as background audio); contract residents from the community to help translate, sing, and voice act; and ensure that clothing, jewellery, and portrayals of the Kanien'kehá:ka as a matriarchal society were accurate.²²⁵ They also removed (mis)representations of Kanien'kehá:ka culture. For instance, prior to Deer's appointment as a cultural consultant, the development team had included scalping as a fight mechanic, despite it never having been a Kanien'kehá:ka practice.²²⁶ *ACIII*'s developers had also chosen to portray certain cultural artifacts, such as ceremonial masks, that Deer informed them would have been offensive to include, as those artifacts and the ceremonies associated with them are private.²²⁷ Reflecting on his work with the development team, Deer stated, "I don't think [my role] was really so much to cover their butts, just that they wanted to have a real, authentic product that stood up."²²⁸

Despite the development team's best efforts and Thomas Deer's assertions of good intent, many were quick to point out that the game's lens was still inherently colonial.²²⁹ This is largely attributable to the racial/ethnic tourism built into the *Assassin's Creed* series' plot structure. Using the Animus, Desmond, a white-passing man in his mid-twenties who acts as a stand-in for the imagined player, accesses the genetic

²²⁴ Sofge, "The American Revolution"; "Native hero stars in Montreal-made Assassin's Creed III," *CBC News*, October 31, 2012, <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/montreal/native-hero-stars-in-montreal-made-assassin-s-creed-iii-1.1226283>; Newman, "Assassin's Creed III."

²²⁵ Newman, "Assassin's Creed III"; Parker, "Recreating Colonial America"; Sofge, "The American Revolution."

²²⁶ Shaw, "Tyranny of Realism," 11.

²²⁷ Newman, "Assassin's Creed III"; Parker, "Recreating Colonial America"; Shaw, "Tyranny of Realism," 11.

²²⁸ Joyce, "Authentic-Deconstructionist Games," 145; Newman, "Assassin's Creed III."

²²⁹ Bird, "Digital Dispossessions," 250; Joyce, "Authentic-Deconstructionist Games," 145.

memories of various ancestors from different time periods and racial/ethnic backgrounds. Elaborating on the work of both Lisa Nakamura (2002) and David Leonard (2006), Shaw noted that “*AC3* still positions the player as Desmond, privileging a white male gaze regardless of what ancestor [the player] ends up playing as,” allowing players to put on a racialized mask and assume a character without actually being asked to take on the perspective of the represented marginalized group.²³⁰ It should also come as no surprise, then, that Ezio Auditore da Firenze, Desmond’s only ancestor of visibly ‘pure’ European descent with a role as a main protagonist is often lauded as the most likable of Desmond’s ancestors. For example, Keza MacDonald of *IGN* called Ratohnhaké:ton a “hot-tempered Native American assassin” who “isn’t as straightforwardly charming as Assassin’s Creed II’s Ezio,” while Nick Cowen with *The Guardian* described Ratohnhaké:ton as replacing “all of the charisma of his predecessor with a furrowed brow and not much else.”²³¹ Other game critics noted that he is “often characterized as naïve and close-minded, believing in ideals of freedom that have no basis in the real world,”²³² or arguing that they “found [themselves] having a difficult time connecting with single-minded Connor [and] stopped caring about Connor’s plight long before it concluded.”²³³

Despite focusing so intensely on ensuring that the right level of *detail* was achieved in order to ensure accurate depictions of Kanien’kehá:ka culture (specifically material culture and language), *ACIII*’s designers and writers forgot to create a storyline that also privileges Indigenous *narratives* of the American Revolution. This, according to those who study Indigenous representation in video games, is where the game falters.

²³⁰ Shaw, “Tyranny of Realism,” 10.

²³¹ MacDonald, “Assassin’s Creed III”; Cowen, “Assassin’s Creed 3.”

²³² Gordon, “Assassin’s Creed III Fails.”

²³³ Lachel, “Assassin’s Creed III.”

Similar to the Ezio Trilogy, most of the game is spent immersing players in historical tourism, with Ubisoft assuming that players are most interested in engaging with and unpacking the British-Patriot conflict without critiquing the ‘inevitableness’ of these historical events.²³⁴ As a result, Stephen Joyce notes that “fans frequently complain that Ratohnhaké:ton is simply photo-bombing the revolution rather than playing a meaningful role.”²³⁵ Even the game’s user interface privileges a colonial viewpoint. When accessing the map, players will notice that sites of colonization, such as the established American cities of Boston and New York, are given a name on the game’s map, while locations outside of these two regions are referred to as the ‘Frontier.’ According to Bird, “this juxtaposition of the ‘civilised’ world and the ‘frontier’ indicate the open consumability of the non-urbanised areas of the map,”²³⁶ with players frequently encouraged to (over)consume/hunt animals in the Frontier in order to ‘discover’ which animals belong to each hunting district and to trade their skins for in-game currency.

Indigenous game studies scholars often contrast the experience of playing games like *ACIII* with those created by Indigenous development teams. They argue that participatory design, such as focus-testing with Indigenous communities or engaging cultural consultants, still results in the greatest agency being placed in the hands of the non-Indigenous game developer.²³⁷ Instead, many Indigenous games studies scholars advocated for Indigenous-led games in which Indigenous peoples would be present at not only every step of the design process, but every level as well. According to Elizabeth LaPensée (an Indigenous game developer) and their co-authors, “sovereignty can be

²³⁴ Joyce, “Authentic-Deconstructionist Games,” 135; Shaw, “Tyranny of Realism,” 18, 19.

²³⁵ Joyce, “Authentic-Deconstructionist Games,” 140.

²³⁶ Bird, “Digital dispossessions,” 250.

²³⁷ Simons, Fleischmann, and Roy, “Leveling the playing field,” 185, 189.

enacted in how games are developed, with consideration for who is involved and in what roles, how funding is gained and distributed, how intellectual property rights regarding Indigenous knowledge are managed, and how decisions are made regarding who can access a game and in what ways.”²³⁸ Furthermore, building on Donna J. Haraway’s (1992) work, Rachel N. Simons et al. argue that “Emphasizing prioritizing individuals’/groups’ own articulation of their knowledge over others’ representation of that knowledge” is salient to enacting sovereign self-representation within video games.²³⁹

In addition to leading game design, Indigenous sovereignty within the video game sector can be enacted through capacity building. According to LaPensée et al., capacity building “involves actively looking for and training people who may not otherwise have access to game development tools and education.”²⁴⁰ Comparing case studies of three self-determined Indigenous games – *Lost Memories* (2018), *Terra Nova* (2019), and *When Rivers Were Trails* (2019) – LaPensée et al., applauded the work of Mi’kmaq artist Ray Caplin who, after being given the resources (both financial resources and time) to create pixel art for *Terra Nova*, was able to successfully blend his personal aesthetic with the game art, “resulting in a unique style where nature and technology become interrelated through pixels.”²⁴¹ In an example specific to Kanien’kehá:ka self-determination in video game development, the Skin project has led to numerous indie

²³⁸ LaPensée, Laiti, and Longboat, “Towards Sovereign Games,” 329.

²³⁹ Simons, Fleischmann, and Roy, “Leveling the playing field,” 185.

²⁴⁰ LaPensée, Laiti, and Longboat, “Towards Sovereign Games,” 335.

²⁴¹ *Terra Nova* is described as a “2D platformer that plays with the experience of ‘first contact’ through Indigenous Futurisms”; See: LaPensée, Laiti, and Longboat, “Towards Sovereign Games,” 335.

games focusing on Kanien'kehá:ka storytelling and worldviews.²⁴² Emerging as the result of a collaboration between *Aboriginal Territories in Cyberspace (AbTeC)*, the Owisokon Lahache of the Kahnawà:ke Survival School, and *Obx Labs*, the Skins Workshop “was created to teach Aboriginal youth a multitude of skills related to game production while at the same time encouraging them to develop game concepts, characters, and mechanics based on their own cultural experience.”²⁴³ The Skins Workshop also helps to facilitate inter-generational communication, encourage teens to “embrace computer technology as a means of creative expression and production” rather than just consumption, and learn to use digital media production techniques.²⁴⁴

Another key element of self-determined video game representation brought forward by LaPensée et al. is support, specifically the ability to acquire funding, and acknowledging that “the sources and structures of funding directly influence the extent to which sovereignty can be enacted.”²⁴⁵ Using the example of *When Rivers Were Trails*, which received funding through various Indigenous-run non-profit organizations in the United States, LaPensée et al. point out that “the non-profit structure meant that design decisions could be made based on input from Indigenous communities, collaborators, and the funders exclusively rather than needing to consider how to appeal to a wide enough

²⁴² Games include *Otsì:! Rise of the Kanien'kehá:ka Legends* (2008-2009) and the winner of the 2010 imagineNATIVE Best New Media Award, *The Adventures of Skahì:n:hati: Legend of Stone Giant* (Skins 2.0 - 2011), *Skahì:n:hati: Rise of the Kanien'kehá:ka Legends* (Skins 3.0 - 2012), and *Ienién:te and the Peacemaker's Wampum* (Skins 4.0 - 2013) among others. See: “Celebrating Indigenous Gaming and Comics,” *Pinnguaq*, July 23, 2015, <https://pinnguaq.com/stories/celebrating-indigenous-gaming-and-comic-books/>; “*Otsì:! Rise of the Kanien'kehá:ka Legends*,” *AbTeC*, Accessed February 10, 2025, <https://otsi.abtec.org/>.

²⁴³ “*Otsì:!*”

²⁴⁴ “Skins 1.0 - Kahnawake Survival School,” *AbTeC*, Accessed February 10, 2025, https://skins.abtec.org/skins1.0/?page_id=509.

²⁴⁵ LaPensée, Laiti, and Longboat, “Towards Sovereign Games,” 336.

audience to make sales in a commercial market.”²⁴⁶ Funding also permitted the developers to offer the game for free. AAA games like those in the *AC* series, on the other hand, are beholden to the need for profit. As such, they have to take into account the needs of the imagined player, as well as absorb feedback from players, game critics, and academics, ultimately influencing how decisions are made regarding the portrayal of certain historical narratives.

In contrast to the Indigenous-led indie games explored above, which enact Indigenous sovereignty at every stage in the design process, *ACIII* is often touted as an example of participatory design. The nature of the *AC* series, which relies heavily on both racial/ethnic and historical tourism, necessitates the need for the series’ developers to possess greater agency over the design process, as exhibited by the fact that the Kanien’kehá:ka consultants were “apparently not involved in key stages [...] including the original decision to represent their knowledge within the game” in the first place.²⁴⁷ As a result, players must problematize *ACIII*, as well as the *AC* series’, reliance on a clear-cut dichotomy of narrative/fiction versus detail/accuracy because it fails to serve the need for Indigenous self-determination. By focusing exclusively on ensuring accuracy through detail, *ACIII*’s developers relegate Indigenous knowledge holders to the role of consultants. Furthermore, by intertwining the fictional Templar-Assassin narrative so thoroughly throughout Ratohnhaké:ton’s quest to save the Kanien’kehá:ka from settler incursion, the game’s narrative (understood by players to be fictitious) obfuscates the

²⁴⁶ LaPensée, Laiti, and Longboat, “Towards Sovereign Games,” 336.

²⁴⁷ Simons, Fleischmann, and Roy, “Leveling the playing field,” 192.

very real effects of colonization that the game seeks to represent through the inclusion of an Indigenous protagonist.

Memory and the American Revolution: Influence of Conflicting Viewpoints on User Engagement

It started with a trailer on the Fourth of July, 2012: one that replaced the typical game graphics of the *AC* series with “live-action actors sternly narrating their grim determination to fend off the Evil British.”²⁴⁸ The controversial Fourth of July trailer was quickly followed by two new trailers, one released in the United Kingdom and the other in the United States. Both of these trailers followed a similar format with a few key differences: the UK trailer was at least 18 seconds longer than its US counterpart, featuring more pointed commentary about the eventual betrayal of the Kanien’kehá:ka at the hands of the American colonists; and while the UK trailer showed Ratohnhaké:ton killing both Loyalists and Patriots, the US trailer only showed him killing Redcoats.²⁴⁹ The first trailer, as well as the disparity between the two that followed, instantly sparked outrage among British audiences, who worried that Ubisoft was going to tap into a “Hollywood-style” – or, as others put it, a “good old Tea Party-style” – American nationalism.²⁵⁰

²⁴⁸ Erik Kain, “Watch The Terrible 4th Of July ‘Assassin’s Creed III’ Live-Action Trailer,” *Forbes*, July 10, 2012, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/erikkain/2012/07/04/watch-the-terrible-4th-of-july-assassins-creed-iii-live-action-trailer/>.

²⁴⁹ Alexis Benoit and François Furstenberg, “L’univers d’*Assassin’s Creed III* et la désobéissance civile au profit de la pensée historique,” in *Les Usages Pédagogiques des Jeux Vidéo Assassin’s Creed*, ed. Marc-André Éthier and David LeFrançois (Québec City: Presses de l’Université Laval, 2023), 109, translated from the original French by Ally Montminy; Carol Pinchefskey, “UK Trailer for Assassin’s Creed III Is More Historically Accurate Than the US Version,” *Forbes*, October 7, 2012, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/carolpinchefskey/2012/10/05/how-the-uk-trailer-for-assassins-creed-iii-tops-the-us-version/>; Boutonnet, “Historical Agency,” 122.

²⁵⁰ Joyce, “Authentic-Deconstructionist Games,” 133; Kain, “Live-Action Trailer.”

Despite these trailers' one-sided depictions of Redcoats being hacked to pieces by Ratohnhaké:ton's tomahawk while American officers gallantly led the charge into battle, many were pleasantly surprised by the actual product in comparison to the pre-release trailers.²⁵¹ Rather than the US hagiography that many were expecting, fans were relieved to discover that *ACIII* was less nationalistic than the marketing campaign implied, with Templars showing up on both sides of the Revolution.²⁵² Expressing excitement over the level of research that went into reconstructing this time period, Erik Sofge wrote in their review of *ACIII*: "When Assassin's Creed III comes out on Tuesday, millions of gamers will be exposed to the American Revolution for the first time. What they'll find is the most accessible reconstruction of the Revolutionary War era that's ever been made."²⁵³ Building on what players enjoyed from the previous games in the series, specifically the perceived level of immersion offered by the *AC* games, Ubisoft's marketing plan noted that: "There's the American Revolution you know from history books. And then there's the revolution you'll be fighting, set in a world that's far more realistic, gritty, and alive than any history book ever could be."²⁵⁴ Other game critics joked that *ACIII* would simultaneously be a high school history teacher's best friend and biggest nightmare, surmising that teachers would not be amused once their students began claiming that the American Revolution was really a cover-up for the age-old battle between the Assassins and Templars.²⁵⁵

²⁵¹ Game Rant Staff, "'Assassin's Creed 3' Writer Denies British Hate," *Game Rant*, June 12, 2012, <https://gamerant.com/assassins-creed-3-anti-british-bias/>.

²⁵² Cowen, "Assassin's Creed 3"; Joyce, "Authentic-Deconstructionist Games," 135.

²⁵³ Sofge, "The American Revolution."

²⁵⁴ Boutonnet, "Historical Agency," 116.

²⁵⁵ Cyril Lachel, "Assassin's Creed III," *Gaming Nexus*, January 4, 2013, <https://gamingnexus.com/Article/Assassins-Creed-III/Item3784.aspx>; Darren Franich, "'Assassin's Creed

The mixed reactions to *ACIII*'s pre-release media campaigns raise interesting questions about how video game developers have, and should, go about representing historical events with fundamental ties to a nation's national identity, such as the role the American Revolution plays in the United States' foundational mythology. In particular, it raises questions concerning the role of collective memory in the field of public history, as well as how much weight should be given to competing primary source materials. Furthermore, conversations surrounding *ACIII*'s depiction of historical events and figures calls attention to another debate about historical representation in video games: is it possible to create a balanced view of a historical event in order to alleviate player discomfort, and is it always necessary to do so? Many of the comments under Cowen's article for *The Guardian* expressed discomfort with the depiction of the British in *ACIII*, as either they, themselves, were British, or they felt it was unbalanced. This inevitably sparked discourse, with commenters drawing comparisons between the discomfort the British felt at being portrayed as the "bad guys" with how Russians, Germans, and people of Middle-Eastern descent must feel whenever they are portrayed as the enemy in military First-Person Shooter (FPS) games.²⁵⁶ While these comments are from 2012, a resurgence in similar conversations surrounding the depiction of WWII Germany would

3' trailer: See it here!" *Entertainment Weekly*, March 5, 2012, <https://ew.com/article/2012/03/05/assassins-creed-3-trailer-revolutionary-war/>.

²⁵⁶ One commenter with the username <R042> wrote: "Games where you go around shooting dozens of poorly stereotyped Russians, Africans and Arabs as a stereotyped American soldier - 'It's just a game, definitely no political subtext here, it's not real it's not real it's not real.' Game where you play an American killing English soldiers - 'ANTI-BRITISH PROPAGANDA.'" Another user going by the name <dressedtodepress> commented: "thank christ we're not russian or german, there's hundreds of games where they're slaughtered mercilessly as the bad [guys]. The portrayal of the brits seems to be rather fair in comparison." For further comments, see: Cowen, "Assassin's Creed 3."

arise when Germany lifted its ban on Nazi symbols in video games in 2018, causing many to reflect on Western white-washing of “difficult” national histories.

Although the official ban on Nazi symbols in video games dates back to the 1990s, concerns surrounding the whitewashing of history, particularly as it pertains to Nazi Germany, extends much farther back.²⁵⁷ Looking into concerns of the whitewashing of history within the video game industry, many authors cited the legacy of the “clean Wehrmacht” trope that arose following the Nuremberg Trials. This trope attempted to absolve regular German soldiers and officers belonging to the Wehrmacht of any guilt by portraying them as “just fulfilling their duty,” rehabilitating their image by instead showcasing them as admirable professionals.²⁵⁸ While Germany’s ban did force games like those in the *Call of Duty* series to remove swastikas and other Nazi-related symbolism before they could be sold in German stores, a fear of displaying Nazi symbolism is not the most insidious part of historical whitewashing.²⁵⁹ Instead, it is the ease with which game developers, especially those who develop FPS games like *Call of Duty* or *Battlefield V*, are able to lay into the “clean Wehrmacht” trope and turn the Wehrmacht into generic stock villains in German uniforms. Developers also distance their game characters from potentially harmful effects on profitability that associations with the Nazi regime engender, even when the associations are glaringly obvious. For example, *Battlefield V*’s developers landed themselves in hot water when they released a

²⁵⁷ “Germany lifts total ban on Nazi symbols in video games,” *BBC*, August 10, 2018, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-45142651>.

²⁵⁸ Ivy Taylor, “How games whitewash Nazism, and the responsibility developers have to history,” *Games Industry.biz*, February 28, 2019, <https://www.gamesindustry.biz/how-games-whitewash-nazism-and-the-responsibility-developers-have-to-history>; Rob Zacny, “Games Have Always Tried to Whitewash Nazis as Just ‘German Soldiers,’” *Vice*, June 19, 2019, <https://www.vice.com/en/article/games-have-always-tried-to-whitewash-nazis-as-just-german-soldiers/>.

²⁵⁹ Game Rant Staff, “‘Assassin’s Creed 3.’”

Downloadable Content (DLC) character skin of a German super soldier, replicating the fascist aesthetic of the *Übermensch*. Developers defended this decision by claiming that the character was not a Nazi, but a regular German soldier.²⁶⁰ By relying heavily on ‘realistic’ depictions of WWII that absorb players in the minutiae of faithful recreations of historic weapons or uniforms, rather than focusing on meaningful social commentary, these games can sidestep difficult conversations about the past and avoid challenging players’ preconceived views.²⁶¹ However, as Denning argues, “It is the games, films, and novels that operate in a realist register that more often obscure historical thinking by submitting history to narrative conventions.”²⁶²

In calling out British players’ discomfort at the portrayal of their country’s colonial past in the *ACIII* pre-release trailers, online commenters attempted to sympathize with German players who may be uncomfortable with depictions of WWII Germany in the video game industry. On one hand, this argument supports the notion that rather than running away from any negative portrayals of their nation’s history, British players *should* grapple with the implications that they are the “bad guys” in another country’s historical narrative. On the other hand, it demonstrates a naiveté on the part of American players in assuming that they are equally not the “bad guys” in the story of the American Revolution. Quoting Denning, Jon Niccum wrote in their article for *KU News* that

²⁶⁰ Taylor, “How games whitewash Nazis”; Zacny, “Nazis as Just ‘German Soldiers.’”

²⁶¹ In speaking on how these depictions of the Wehrmacht in video games has turned the gaming sphere into a fruitful recruitment ground for neo-Nazi and fascist movements, game designer Sebastian Schulz noted that FPS games depicting Germany in this fashion “do not challenge their views on the world,” allowing them to “still happily deny the Holocaust and play historical games.” See: Taylor, “How games whitewash Nazis.”

²⁶² Denning, “Deep Play?”, 184.

“WWII [was] the last time the United States was the unqualified good guy.”²⁶³ Yet, if WWII is the *last* time the United States was the unqualified good guy, then the American Revolution is the *first* – at least in the eyes of the American foundational mythology. Game critics often espoused this view of their country’s heritage by recognizing their emotional connections to the game’s subject matter. For example, Mark Purcell wrote about his experience witnessing George Washington accept command of the Continental Army and sign the Declaration of Independence while playing *ACIII*, stating: “I realized that I was witnessing the creation of my country. Even though it happened in a video game, the event still profoundly affected me [and] All of a sudden, I had the patriotic urge to join the cause against the British.”²⁶⁴ Adam B. Vary also noted that “After plunging headlong into waves of lethal gunfire during the battle of Bunker Hill, you’ll never look at a musket – or American history – quite the same way again.”²⁶⁵

Another author, though, commented on their lack of knowledge about the events of the Revolution, writing that “[they] had no idea that George Washington had ordered the torching of [Indigenous] villages.”²⁶⁶ Unfortunately, they were not alone. During *ACIII*’s development, Ubisoft regularly quizzed Americans on their knowledge of the American Revolution. Commenting on the results, Alex Hutchinson remarked that “Americans were as likely to identify Christopher Columbus and Billy the Kid as

²⁶³ Jon Niccum, “Video games shape how Americans understand historical events,” *KU News*, May 5, 2021, <https://news.ku.edu/news/article/2021/05/05/video-games-shape-how-americans-understand-historical-events>.

²⁶⁴ Mark Purcell, “Assassin’s Creed III gives players a new connection to history,” *Venture Beat*, November 8, 2012, <https://venturebeat.com/community/2012/11/08/assassins-creed-3-proves-how-profound-video-games-can-be/>.

²⁶⁵ Adam B. Vary, “Assassin’s Creed III review,” *Entertainment Weekly*, October 30, 2012, <https://ew.com/article/2012/10/30/assassins-creed-iii-review/>.

²⁶⁶ Sofge, “The American Revolution.”

Colonial-era figures as they were to cite George Washington and Benjamin Franklin.”²⁶⁷

Multiple authors also commented on Americans’ fundamental lack of understanding of the nuances of the Revolution, particularly in regards to the number of belligerents involved. According to Alexis Benoit and François Furstenberg, as well as Carol Pinchefsky, many Americans boil down the Revolution to a war solely between the United States and the British Empire, championing the Patriots as struggling for not only *their* rights but those of *humanity* against a ruthless, tyrannical empire attempting to deprive them of their freedom.²⁶⁸ Failure to recognize the participation of Indigenous allies, freed and enslaved African American soldiers, and other European allies (e.g., France) demonstrated the singularity of focus on the idea of the American freedom fighter. Conveniently, it also drew focus from the mistreatment of Indigenous and African American allies following the United States’ formation as an independent nation.

Although *ACIII*’s developers claimed that their biggest struggle in choosing to depict the American Revolution was due to the abundance of knowledge about the era, with Wikipedia and online searches making it simple for any player to pinpoint historical inaccuracies in the game,²⁶⁹ it is necessary to problematize how the developers are defining ‘knowledge.’ While ‘knowledge’ of immutable historical ‘facts’ might have been seen as the biggest challenge for the developers to overcome, one can argue that collective consciousness or memory surrounding the Revolution was an even bigger hurdle. While it may not have been perceived by players to be the hyper-nationalistic depiction of the American Revolution that they feared it would be based on the trailers,

²⁶⁷ Sofge, “The American Revolution.”

²⁶⁸ Benoit and Furstenberg, “L’univers d’*Assassin’s Creed III*,” 110; Pinchefsky, “UK Trailer.”

²⁶⁹ Frum, “American history unfolds.”

ACIII's engagement with this historic period is still accused by historians of reinforcing dominant historical narratives and failing to capture the nuance their choice of an Indigenous protagonist necessitates. Instead, the choice to infuse the Templar-Assassin struggle with a certain degree of moral ambiguity, placing Templars on both sides of the Revolution, simply worked to balance out the narrative and comfort both American and British audiences.

Conclusion

When developing *AC3*, Ubisoft absorbed player critiques about the game's predecessors and introduced players to Ubisoft's retelling of the American Revolution, as told through the eyes of an Indigenous protagonist. In response to that choice of an Indigenous character, many scholars focusing on Indigenous representation in video games argued that the game did not quite meet the standards of its indie (specifically Indigenous-led) counterparts. The decision to choose a triumphant moment in American history and mix it with Ratohnhaké:ton's inevitable failure to save his people, for example, disregarded the video game medium's lack of an internal aesthetic tradition of tragedy. According to Stephen Joyce, mainstream video games are designed around the central need for victory upon the completion of skill-based contests, which is fundamentally at odds with the defeat necessary to facilitate Ratohnhaké:ton's tragic outcome.²⁷⁰ Despite this, *AC3* still received mostly positive reviews from players and game critics, further entrenching the notion that blockbusters like the installments of the *Assassin's Creed* series can continue to be pumped out, as long as the company is willing

²⁷⁰ Joyce, "Authentic-Deconstructionist Games," 133.

to undermine their own goals in favor of catering to the imagined player. As the final game in the Desmond narrative arc, *AC3* is the culmination of four game's worth of feedback from players, solidifying Ubisoft's formula for a successful game that engages players' need for historical immersion without overcomplicating its narrative.

CHAPTER FIVE

Conclusion

When *Assassin's Creed* was first released in 2007, the developers clearly stated that they wanted to have players rethink history as they know it, challenging pre-conceived notions of “accuracy” and “authenticity.” To this end, they co-opted the Hashashin motto for the Assassins – “Nothing is true; everything is permitted.” Ubisoft’s developers also employed in-game conversations between characters that explicitly problematized how Desmond (as a stand-in for the player) understood and interacted with the history shown to him through the Animus. Rather than applauding the message, though, players praised the level of detail within the game’s physical reconstruction of the Holy Land. They also resented the game’s attempts to force player dialogue with historical narratives by critiquing the game’s inclusion of long, conversation-heavy, unskippable cutscenes. As a result, *Assassin's Creed* morphed over time into a game focused on the “accurate” representation of history – primarily in regards to the physical recreation of *place* (material culture, character design for NPCs and player-characters, music/audio, and the appearance of buildings and cities, among others) – at the expense of *explicit* and *overt* engagement with historical narratives. In addition, by crafting an in-game metanarrative (the Desmond narrative arc) that veered into conspiracy theory territory, Ubisoft strayed into the fantastical and made it easy for players to discount any actual attempts at discourse.

With *Assassin's Creed II*, as well as the other games in the Ezio Trilogy, the series began to shift from overt to covert commentary. Many players (myself included) saw attempts by the *ACII* developers to fit various historical figures into the timeline of the

Assassin-Templar battle as simply a quirky attempt at surface level commentary. It was easy for Ubisoft to slap a Templar stamp of approval onto historical figures like Hitler because the Templars are seen as the “bad guys.” However, this commentary failed to go any deeper. Rather than engaging players in conversations about how Hitler’s policies would have benefited the Templar search for peace through order and control, players can instead chuckle at the tongue-in-cheek letters and audio in the *ACII* glyphs and move on. *Brotherhood* came closer in their attempt at creating a dialogue by directly calling out political scandal and employing the use of direct quotations from various historical and/or political figures to highlight their hypocrisy. However, the *Brotherhood* clusters were still *optional* parts of the gameplay, positioning their commentary as secondary to both the central plot and a player’s understanding of the game’s world.

ACIII, acting as the finale to the Desmond narrative arc, needed to wrap up Desmond’s story in a way that would satisfy players. Choosing to set the game in the American Revolution, the developers found themselves pigeon-holed into a set direction based on the predicted expectations of the (predominantly American) imagined player. In attempting to still offer a plot that would ‘subvert historical narratives,’ the game’s developers chose to use an Indigenous main character. Speaking on the design team’s choice of Ratohnhaké:ton as the game’s protagonist, Alex Hutchinson stated in *The Making of Assassin’s Creed: 15th Anniversary*: “[it] was incredibly exciting for us to have someone who could stand outside of the sort of cliché positions of the audience. He wasn’t going to be aligned with the redcoats and he wasn’t going to be aligned with the patriots. He could be a character who spoke for the player and offered an external

perspective.”²⁷¹ Ultimately, however, Indigenous game studies scholars criticized Ratohnhaké:ton’s depiction in *ACIII* as merely a tokenization that allowed the developers to create the perception of an attempt to challenge dominant historical narratives without actually altering the plot in any meaningful way. If we compare *ACIII*, which uses the American Revolution as both its plot *and* its background, to *ACI*, which merely uses the Third Crusades as a backdrop through which players contextualize their surroundings, the problem becomes clear. It would be hard for a AAA game like *ACIII* to be set in the period of the American Revolution and *not* interact with its major events, as this would fail to meet player expectations that the choice in period would produce.²⁷² In-game interaction with the events of the Revolution, however, would automatically trigger greater scrutiny of the perceived historical accuracy of the game’s portrayal of said events, forcing the developers to reinforce dominant historical narratives. In comparison, the era of the Third Crusades, which is not as well known to Western audiences, could be easily used as a backdrop because the developers knew that players might not be familiar with the major events of the Crusades.

The series does not end after *ACIII*. Instead, Ubisoft would go on to produce numerous games following Desmond’s death, each focusing on different time periods ranging from depictions of the Peloponnesian War in *Assassin’s Creed: Odyssey* (2018) to the onset of the Second Industrial Revolution in *Assassin’s Creed Syndicate* (2015). Catering to the need for “accurate” reconstructions of the past, Ubisoft’s developers even

²⁷¹ Alex Calvin, *The Making of Assassin’s Creed: 15th Anniversary*, eds., Ian Tucker and Anastacia Ferry (Milwaukie, OR: Dark Horse Books, 2023), 99-100.

²⁷² For some players, it would have the same effect as setting a game in WWII France during the German occupation and, instead of playing as a soldier (or even a member of the French Resistance), you play as a simple farmer who does not interact with the main events and narratives of the War in Europe.

went so far as to create museum-like experiences within the later games in the series. In “*Assassin’s Creed Origins* Discovery Tour A Behind the Scenes Experience,” Perrine Poiron discusses their role as a dialectical coach brought in by Ubisoft to help build a realistic audio environment for a series of virtual tours curated by historians and centering around daily life in Egypt’s Ptolemaic Period.²⁷³ The Discovery Tour – which is a standalone feature of the *Assassin’s Creed* series specific to *Origins*, *Odyssey*, and *Valhalla* – takes out the fighting and narrative components of the games and focuses solely on providing an educational experience for its audiences. *Assassin’s Creed Origins* (2017) features 75 virtual tours built around five main themes. It also provides players with access to museum documentation and other primary sources (albeit virtually), allowing audiences to follow the writers’ research threads to see the artifacts and schematics Ubisoft’s artistic team used as a base when recreating details of the landscape and daily life environment.²⁷⁴ Ubisoft decided to continue this trend with their release of *Assassin’s Creed: Odyssey* (2018), which Aris Politopoulos et al. examine in “‘History Is Our Playground’: Action and Authenticity in *Assassin’s Creed: Odyssey*.” Much like Poiron, the authors note that the game provides its players with a richly reconstructed past world, in which “building materials and styles are period accurate, city layouts and landscapes conform to what is known about their original geography, other material culture mostly adheres to the styles and technology of the day, people tend to be dressed and act appropriately, and scenes of daily life fit within scholarly expectations.”²⁷⁵

²⁷³ Perrine Poiron, “*Assassin’s Creed Origins* Discovery Tour A Behind the Scenes Experience,” *Near Eastern Archaeology* 84, no. 1 (2021), 81.

²⁷⁴ Poiron, “*Assassin’s Creed Origins*,” 82.

²⁷⁵ Aris Politopoulos et al., “‘History Is Our Playground’: Action and Authenticity in *Assassin’s Creed: Odyssey*,” *Advances in Archaeological Practice* 7, no. 3 (2019): 317.

Ubisoft has also stated that its Discovery Tours have been used by schools and other educational institutions in order to introduce a range of audiences to different facets of history.

The shifting values surrounding “authenticity” and “accuracy” in *Assassin’s Creed* are reminiscent of larger patterns within the video game industry as a whole – attributable, in part, to shifting political landscapes mobilizing around right-wing lobbyists from 2014 onward. For example, Gamergate²⁷⁶ – which Harmeet Kaur with *CNN* described as an “angry online mob waging a virulent harassment campaign against women and diversity in the video game industry” – quickly became a rallying cry for men who felt a perceived loss of status as the industry shifted towards more diverse audiences.²⁷⁷ Centering around a sentiment that “woke” media and DEI (diversity, equity, and inclusion) are impacting how history is portrayed, many in the video game industry’s “traditional” audience – predominantly white men in their teens and twenties – have rejected “presentist” analyses of the past in favor of an empiricist viewpoint. The mere presentation of diversity in a character(s)’s gender, sexuality, race, ethnicity, age, or ability (among other factors) is seen as pushing values of the present onto representations of the past. Recently, for example, Ubisoft has come under fire for their choice to include a Black samurai named Yasuke as a playable protagonist in their new game *Assassin’s*

²⁷⁶ According to Harmeet Kaur, Gamergate started on August 16, 2014, when a male programmer “posted a more than 9,000-word tirade about the dissolution of his relationship with video game developer Zoë Quinn” and accused her of “sleeping with a journalist for the gaming site Kotaku in exchange for a positive review.” Despite a lack of evidence to substantiate his claims, internet users on online forums like 4chan quickly mobilized behind the man’s attack on Quinn to target women and diverse representation in the video game industry in its entirety. See: Harmeet Kaur, “How Gamergate foreshadowed the toxic hellscape that the internet has now become,” *CNN*, March 24, 2025, <https://www.cnn.com/2025/03/23/us/gamergate-harassment-reddit-twitter-ccc/index.html>.

²⁷⁷ Kaur, “Gamergate.”

Creed Shadows, despite the developers' claims that the character has historical precedent.²⁷⁸ However, even when games *do* provide an "objective" view of history, it is not always enough to satisfy gamers. The online game *War Thunder* has had numerous related scandals in recent years in which overzealous fans were willing to leak classified information related to their country's tanks' capabilities in order to win online arguments and prove that the game's developers were peddling in inaccuracies.²⁷⁹

In most cases, the online arguments surrounding "presentism" and "wokeism" in video games usually tend to circle back to the idea that older video games never challenged representations of the past or encouraged players to engage critically with their own perceptions of "accuracy." Ironically, for instance, players arguing that Ubisoft has given into DEI agendas by portraying Yasuke in *Shadows* made callbacks to the 'good old days' of the early *Assassin's Creed* games, particularly those in the Desmond narrative arc. However, as has been explored at length in this thesis, Ubisoft's development team for the original *Assassin's Creed* – led by Jade Raymond (a female video game producer) – were actively attempting to engage players in conversations that would cause them to reflect on how they view the past. In *Assassin's Creed: Brotherhood*, the team even chose to make pointed political commentary that called out prominent politicians and historical figures. Then, in *Assassin's Creed III*, Ubisoft attempted to grapple with the harsh realities of colonization by featuring the first Indigenous playable protagonist in a AAA game and telling the story of the American Revolution through his

²⁷⁸ MacDonald, Keza, "The disturbing online misogyny of Gamergate has returned – if it ever went away," *The Guardian*, June 19, 2024, <https://www.theguardian.com/games/article/2024/jun/19/the-disturbing-online-misogyny-of-gamergate-has-returned-if-it-ever-went-away>.

²⁷⁹ Noah Smith, "Fans wanted a war game to be more real, so they leaked classified docs," *The Washington Post*, August 5, 2022, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/video-games/2022/08/05/tank-plan-leaks-war-thunder/>.

eyes. Clearly, though, if players perceive these early games in the *Assassin's Creed* series to have been devoid of political commentary, it further legitimizes the notion that the changes Ubisoft made in response to player feedback eventually undermined the original goal of the series.

Nestling the Desmond narrative arc games within a broader tradition of history-based video games, the goal of this thesis has been to demonstrate the shift in the *Assassin's Creed* series over time in response to feedback within the game's external dialogue that favored reconstructionist over deconstructionist viewpoints. Examining four common themes within the Desmond narrative arc – the weight given to primary sources as a form of knowledge; problematizing the way in which history is taught; the role of memory in the field of public history; and the dichotomy of narrative/fiction versus detail/accuracy – allowed me to recognize concrete changes that were made in the series in response to player feedback. Ultimately, these changes demonstrate the willingness of the developers to put aside the series' original goal – to encourage players to rethink their views of history and question why certain historical narratives are legitimized over others – in favor of conforming to player expectations. While this is not inherently controversial – after all, AAA games like those in the *Assassin's Creed* series are designed to maximize profit – players should be wary of passively consuming the history represented within historical video games. Instead, they should commit to active analysis of the motivations behind why certain design decisions are made rather than falling back into the same pitfall of arguing over the minutiae of “accuracy.”

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