How intentional anachronism changes identity processing

via history in 'Assassin's Creed'

Noah Hastings

In a Tortoiseshell: *In Hastings' paper, he develops the key term "intentional anachronism" to forward a complicated argument that investigates the multiple identities revolving around the main character of the video game Assassin's Creed, Altaïr. Risk-taking in subject and in the issues he considers, his essay showcases a thrilling take on the worldwide phenomenon of Assassin's Creed and is a model consideration of such a topic.*

Excerpt

In an essay from *Loading…: The Journal of the Canadian Game Studies Association,* Adrienne Shaw, an Assistant Professor in Temple University's Department of Media Studies and Production, asks, "Could there even be a historical game, which was still satisfying as a game (for argument's sake, meaning that it could be winnable and fun), that could make players simultaneously question what they know about history and be confronted with their privilege?"[1] She argues that *Assassin's Creed III* (set mainly in colonial America),[2] the third installment in one of the best-selling video game franchises of the 21st century, fails to present a critical enough version of the history of the American Revolution. However, Douglas Dow, a Professor of Art History at Kansas State University, argues that in *Assassin's Creed II* (set mainly in Renaissance Italy), "Strict accuracy would run counter to the objective of the game, and in any case the player's agency and freedom allows for a different—and more resonant—engagement with the past than its alternative."[3] Building on Dow's logic, I posit that the game Shaw is looking for exists, and that it is in the same series. She overlooks the first (eponymous) *AC*[4] game (released in 2007 and set mainly in the Levant during the Third Crusade), which does lead players to reevaluate how they interact with history. However, *Assassin's Creed* achieves this objective not by simply presenting history "as it really happened," but instead—via a complex mechanism involving what I will call intentional anachronism—Dow presents one example of this technique. In this paper, I will first demonstrate how the game joins history and memory, an equivalence that provides an entrance to a conversation about memory's effect on identity processing. That discussion will allow us in turn to explore identity processing in *AC*'s characters and, via association, players. Finally, I will present why intentional anachronism is

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[1] Adrienne Shaw, "The Tyranny of Realism: Historical accuracy and politics of representation in *Assassin's Creed III*," 16.

[2] The *Assassin's Creed* games use a narrative structure that includes two parallel plotlines, one in the present day and one in a separate historical time period. This will be explained in more detail later.

[3] Douglas N. Dow, "Historical Veneers: Anachronism, Simulation, and Art History in *Assassin's Creed II*," cited in Matthew Wilhelm Kappell and Andrew B. R. Elliott, ed, Playing with the Past: Digital games and the simulation of history, 21.

[4] I will abbreviate *Assassin's Creed* (both the franchise and the first game of the series) as "*AC*."

effective in facilitating this engagement with the game and association between player and character. In the end, *AC* does fulfill Shaw's goal of leading its players to question their knowledge of history, but it is not via historical accuracy as she assumes—counterintuitively, it is *AC*'s deliberate inaccuracies that lead its players to reconsider history.

Before I demonstrate how *AC* connects the player to history, I wish to note that the essence and flavor of intentional anachronism is visible even within a single character. The main playable character of *Assassin's Creed* is Altaïr Ibn-La'Ahad (in Arabic, الطائر ابن لاأحد, "The flying one, son of no one"), a man of Syrian Muslim descent who is a member of a medieval Islamic sect shrouded in myth. At first glance Altaïr seems like the stereotypical Oriental villain, a figure of mystery that social scientist Mirt Komel describes as having "Quintessentially evil characteristics as a sneaky and bloodthirsty cutthroat."[5] However, upon closer inspection, the player will notice that Altaïr is clean-shaven (unlike many of the game's male characters), has a light skin complexion, and speaks with an American accent and diction. More subtly, Altaïr is imbued with eagle imagery that serves partially as a symbol of his American quality: his first name in Arabic carries the connotation of a bird, he has a heightened perceptive power which the game calls "Eagle Vision," and his outfit is designed so that his silhouette in midair is that of an eagle [Image 1][6]. All of these features serve to portray Altaïr not as the expected Oriental villain, but as an Occidental hero. Transporting this modern, western persona to a different time period—a medieval setting in the Middle East—may make it easier for a western gamer to engage with the perspective of the eastern "other." The intentional anachronism visible in Altaïr is indicative of the larger phenomenon in the game.

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[5] Mirt Komel, "ORIENTALISM IN ASSASSIN'S CREED: SELF-ORIENTALIZING THE ASSASSINS FROM FORERUNNERS OF MODERN TERRORISM INTO OCCIDENTALIZED HEROES," 78.
[6] Magy Seif El-Nast et al, "Assassin's Creed: A Multi-Cultural Read," 11.

Author Commentary
Noah Hastings

One of the challenges I faced in writing this piece was treating non-academic subject matter (a video game) in an intellectual manner. I was pleasantly surprised to find extant scholarship about the *Assassin's Creed* series specifically, and it was from those sources that I drew my example of how to examine the game in an academic light and that my niche and role in the ballroom came into view. My reaction crystallized when I saw that the claims of one scholar (Shaw) had been refuted by others in conjunction.

I knew that I wanted to stage that intellectual conversation on my own terms, but I couldn't use my own *key* terms. The scholars who have written about *Assassin's Creed* had chosen different games in the popular series; I chose the first installment because, in my view, it sets the stage for all following narratives; it felt like a solid foundation on which to build my thesis. Yet I recognized that my argument, unlike some of my sources (like "Assassin's Creed: A Multi-Cultural Read"), could not lean on the impressions of individual players. My argumentative ammunition was the discipline of memory studies. That step required explorative research in scientific journals to find a relevant and meaningful source. I started broad and eventually found a study establishing a link between memories of a specific type and identity processing. Annotating the article with the logos of the Assassins and Templars, I knew I had found what I was looking for.

Several chalkboards' worth of work later, I had distilled a mechanism representing my broadest intellectual move. Ultimately it was an answer to Shaw's attempt to directly connect the player and history in *Assassin's Creed*. Instead, what I saw was a deeply counterintuitive loop tying history to memory, memory to identity, identity to characters, and characters to the player. I learned about and grounded each of these elements in my research; the only new term I coined myself was "intentional anachronism," under which I categorized Komel's self-orientalization and Dow's imaginative interaction. By anchoring these risky and frighteningly big terms to the work and definitions of other scholars, I did my best to prevent them from exploding beyond the context of my argument and control them as cogs in the mechanism of my thesis.

To show readers how the mechanism worked and what it meant was a tremendous challenge that required me to lean into the counterintuitive nature of my subject matter and make it my goal to dissect apparent contradiction. How could I concisely and effectively explain the strangeness of *Assassin's Creed* and then argue something even more counterintuitive about the game? The result is an interwoven fabric of exposition and analysis that takes risks in joining previously unacquainted academic voices to show something new—that we don't need to know what "really happened" in order to question what we know about history.

Fellow Commentary

Ron Martin Wilson

Even apart from the execution of this argument's opening paragraphs, deft in its quick but clear presentation of the case to be made, Noah's essay distinguishes itself foremost, we believe, in that the subject and thesis occurred to its author at all. There is much that might have dissuaded Noah from this topic, to say nothing of the striking position he takes upon it. First of all, though scholarly work on popular nonliterary media gains ground yearly within universities, there is still palpable suspicion against media such as video games for their synonymy with the popular, with entertainment, with juvenilia. In such an "intellectual" climate, to have undertaken a study of *Assassin's Creed* required some heroism in its own right. Nevertheless, bravery, too, can on occasion be ill-advised, and never more so than when ill-executed; but Noah, as if aware that what video games lack in academic clout would have to be offset by the seriousness of his treatment, writes a thesis one easily could imagine nailed to the door of a highbrowist skeptic.

Noah's gamesmanship, argumentatively speaking, turns upon what in writing pedagogy circles is described as *motive*: If I know what emptiness it is which someone's argument has filled in, then he has explained the *motive* for his writing it—and for what reasons I, with some urgency, should heed it. To signal that *Assassin's Creed* (and, by extension, any video game potentially) just might deserve our immediate and undivided attention, Noah quotes a source that asks, "Could there even be a historical game...that could make players...question what they know about history...?" Perhaps our most cherished prejudice against video games is that they lack educational value, "historical" or otherwise; and with this quotation, Noah lets us know we are not alone in this all-too-understandable skepticism. Yet the author also knows that this question, however skeptical it may be, contemplates the very possibility of which it is doubtful: What if PlayStation and the like are not the prison-houses of cognition that we feared? Surely, if *Assassin's Creed* can cultivate *critical historical thinking* in its players, as Noah ultimately argues, then readers will urgently want to be convinced of it, particularly those for whom the argument is a referendum on the possibility itself that *some* video games accomplish more for us mentally than to improve hand-eye coordination.

But Noah's thesis, we hasten to add, addresses the doubts we may have about computer-based gaming in general, precisely because he shows what a specific video game, namely *Assassin's Creed*, can do for the mind in particular. The author defines how this game refashions our grasp on history, arguing for the game's use of "intentional anachronism," a "complex mechanism" that, by our count, does two things: First, it "is effective in facilitating [an] engagement with the game and association between player and character" despite the great historical and cultural gaps Noah seems to perceive between the players of today and the game's protagonist, Altaïr Ibn-La'Ahad, whom he describes as "a man of Syrian Muslim descent who is a member of a medieval Islamic sect shrouded in myth." Secondly, intentional anachronism, through a process only a full reading of the essay could safely explain, "lead[s] its players to

question their knowledge of history"—but not, as we might assume, by schooling us on facts. On the contrary, says Noah: "counterintuitively, it is *AC*'s deliberate inaccuracies that lead its players to reconsider history." Despite the limited depth inherent to even the best introductory paragraphs, one can see that Noah's argument speaks to a broader audience than just the proponents and detractors of gaming. Anyone interested in how media—whether inked, painted, or plugged in—can represent history through imaginative, even downright fictional, means, will want to read the essay to the end.

We might say, then, that the bravery of Noah's essay is twofold. Not only does he argue with intelligence for a medium believed widely to thrive by evacuating it. He also makes of *Assassin's Creed* a case study for how the weighty facts of history might be profitably aligned with less earth-bound imaginings of fiction, which, like video games themselves, have been thought inimical to responsible intellection since Plato argued famously to unplug the poets. And yet it must also be said that Noah, who writes under the long shadow of Edward Said's *Orientalism*, has perhaps leapt, if bravely, with too little caution at moments in his argument. In rushing to show that Altaïr, the game's protagonist, is not the Western caricature of "Oriental" villainy he might seem to be, Noah assures us that,

> upon closer inspection, the player will notice that Altaïr is clean shaven (unlike many of the game's male characters), has a light skin complexion, and speaks with an American accent and diction. More subtly, Altaïr is imbued with eagle imagery that serves partially as a symbol of his American quality: his first name in Arabic carries the connotation of a bird, he has a heightened perceptive power which the game calls "Eagle Vision," and his outfit is designed so that his silhouette in midair is that of an eagle. All of these features serve to portray Altaïr not as the expected Oriental villain, but as an Occidental hero.

Of course, no one will be surprised if, like Hollywood, the video game industry had produced a cultural artifact or two with a narrow view of "American quality"—as clean-shaven, light-complected, and speaking with an "American accent and diction," whatever that could possibly mean in this country. Like film and literature, which long have trafficked in depthless depictions of multidimensional social realities, video games will repeat such missteps. But it *is* surprising—or should be—that Noah, in his rush to Americanize Altaïr, does not tell us, for instance, whether the eagle has any significance in the tradition from which he hails. Most surprising, however, is that the essay's otherwise eagle-eyed author would find, in a game set in the East, an historical and educational use for the *imaginatively anti-historical*—and yet fail to identify the *un*imaginative anachronism in his own description of modern-day Americans. Still, these few false moves result from leaps Noah makes daringly into the dangerous crossroads of fantasy, otherness, and history. A lesser essay would make fewer, and less interesting, mistakes.

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Bios

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