Equal Opportunity Murder: Assassin’s Creed, Games of Empire, Colonial Strategies and Tactical Responses

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Keywords
Race, Racism, Games of Empire, Assassin’s Creed, Game Studies, Strategies, Tactics, Digital Games, Dissonant Development

ABSTRACT
This paper argues that when it comes to the deployment of racial stereotypes, Ubisoft’s 2007 action-adventure game Assassin’s Creed defies simple categorization. That the game’s protagonist is Arabic is enough to make it an outlier in a sea of mainstream games that deploy racialized characters solely as villains, athletes, or bystanders; a fact for which Assassin’s Creed has won academic acclaim. (Williams et al. 2009, 824–826; Sisler 2008, 204–205; Leonard 2006, 83–85; Sisler 2009, 281; El Nasr et al. 2008, 28). ‘Equal Opportunity Murder’ departs from existing literature on Assassin’s Creed by unpacking the game’s use of race in order to offer a more nuanced critique. It draws on concepts established in works by Nick Dyer-Witheford, Greig de Peuter (2010; 2009, 29:187–191), and Yasmin Jiwani (2011, 339) to argue that Assassin’s Creed stands on the fault line between two opposed movements: the game is both a ‘Game of Empire’ that deploys the strategies of the colonizer, while simultaneously being a ‘Game of Multitude’ that valorizes the deeds, agency, and cultural richness of an often-subjugated group. The paper begins by noting that Assassin’s Creed’s medieval sequences are heavily inspired by historical accounts of the Era of the Third Crusade. The game attempts to be as accurate as realistically possible in portraying the architecture and nature of everyday life in Acre, Damascus and Jerusalem circa 1191 (El Nasr et al. 2008, 18–21). Rather than being invisible (Sisler 2009, 282), or expendable, the civilians in Assassin’s Creed are an integral part of the game and must be respected and paid attention to if the player is to succeed (Ubisoft 2007). As such, a great deal of effort and care was put into the game’s city dwellers to make them a dynamic, believable part of the game, reinforcing the game’s message about the importance of preserving peace for the sake of civilians of all racial denominations (El Nasr et al. 2008, 27). Players must also be aware of and creative in their use of the different architectural features in Acre, Damascus, and Jerusalem (Ubisoft 2007). In this way, the game’s design teaches the player how to play effectively by utilizing various architectural features in the three different cities, which also avoids any sense of interchangeability between the three (Jiwani 2011, 339). The paper recognizes that in presenting a rich, culturally nuanced tapestry with an interesting historical backdrop brought to life by interesting and complex characters, Assassin’s Creed stops short of deploying the first of Jiwani’s Strategies – erasure – opting instead
for a celebration of identity (Jiwani 2011, 339; Ubisoft 2007). Unfortunately, the game’s cultural sensitivity and accuracy does not extend to the protagonist, Altair. Although the game’s developers hired a voice actor of Arab descent to play Altair, his speech, accent, mannerisms, and use of personal space all come across as Caucasian-American (El Nasr et al. 2008, 28). However, the paper also points out that by the end of the game, each of the various factions’ ideological positions have been discredited, thus completely shattering any remaining semblance of a Manichaean Allegorical framework. By establishing a Manichaean binary (Assassins = Good, Crusaders = Bad) at the beginning of the game, and then making the player complicit in dismantling it, the game implicitly challenges players to rethink their willingness to use racial representation as a commonsense indicator of good and evil (Jiwani 2011, 339; Sisler 2009, 282). The paper argues that Assassin’s Creed privileges the white male gaze at the expense of Altair’s agency. The real main character of the game is Desmond the American bartender. By using the Animus, the white Desmond – and by extension the player – is literally occupying and manipulating an ostensibly Arab body. In the same narrative thrust, Altair is simultaneously imbued with agency and deprived of it. The parts of his life that aren’t relevant to the white characters’ selfish mission are rendered completely invisible. Altair is also disposable: once the present-day characters have gleaned the information they need from him, Altair is suddenly and unceremoniously forgotten about (Ubisoft 2007). In many ways playing through Assassin’s Creed is like playing through an act of cultural pilfering, followed by Erasure (Jiwani 2011, 339). The paper concludes by recognizing Assassin’s Creed as a product of Dissonant Development: one that takes an important step towards a fairer, more sensitive visual discourse of race and racialization in digital games, and whose flaws can help identify where more work is yet needed (Dyer-Witheford and de Peuter 2010).

**BIBLIOGRAPHY**


