

“The Templars do not fight for the Crown”: The constructing of
protagonists and antagonists in *Assassin’s Creed III*

Eemi Vanhala

Bachelor’s seminar and thesis (682285A)

English philology, Faculty of Humanities

University of Oulu

Autumn 2016

Table of contents

1. Introduction	3
2. Theoretical background	5
2.1 The American Revolutionary War and Assassin's Creed III	5
2.2 Analysing video games	6
3. Data and method of analysis	10
3.1 The <i>Assassin's Creed</i> series	10
3.2 Data	11
3.3 Methodology	12
4. Analysis	13
4.1 The Templars and the Assassins	13
4.1.1 Haytham Kenway	13
4.1.2 Ratonhnhaké:ton/Connor Kenway	16
4.1.3 The Templar Order and the Assassin Brotherhood	19
4.2 The War and its belligerents	22
4.2.1 The Americans	22
4.2.2 The British	25
5. Conclusion	27

1. Introduction

Assassin's Creed III is a 2012 video game developed by Ubisoft Montreal and published by Ubisoft. It is the fifth major instalment in the *Assassin's Creed* (AC) series and it is primarily set around the American Revolution. *Assassin's Creed* is a series of historical fiction games, starting with the first game in the series taking place during the Third Crusade in the Holy Land, and later titles spanning from Renaissance Italy to Victorian era London. The primary story revolves around millennia-old struggle between two ancient orders, the Assassins and the Templars, woven around real-world historical events. Producer Jade Raymond has called the series "speculative fiction" (El-Nasr et al., 2008:6), and the player characters often influence important events in world history, as well as encounter significant historical figures, ranging from Leonardo da Vinci and Karl Marx to George Washington and Napoleon.

The previous games in the series contain a very clear and simple good/evil dichotomy between the protagonists, the eponymous Assassin Brotherhood and the villains, the Templar Order. When the game was announced, the marketing materials were met with criticism and suspicions of pro-American and anti-British bias in handling the historical conflict. However, after its release, the game's story was received positively. It is the first game in the series to critically examine the dynamic of heroes and villains, and, indeed, the first game to include a Templar, the traditional antagonist, as a playable character. This prompted me to study the ways in which the game portrays the different factions, both fictional and historical, and the ways in which heroes and villains are constructed in the game. Scholarly work around the *Assassin's Creed* series has been conducted, for example, on *AC1* by Browne (2014) and El-Nasr et al. (2008), centred around cultural representation, and on *AC3* by Shaw (2015), examining the tensions around realism found in the game. Whereas Shaw focuses on the significance of the Native American protagonist and the related cultural representation, I wish to focus on the portrayal of the British and the Americans. As the game series has a tradition of pitting the Assassins on the "good" side of history and the Templars on the "bad", I felt that it was also important to analyse the dynamic between those fictional groups. The primary goal of this study is to examine the ways the game constructs its protagonists and antagonists and how simple or complex the constructed dynamic is. This way we will study the way both the Assassins and the Templars, as

well as the British and the Americans are portrayed. The goal of this study is not to determine the historical accuracy of the events that occur in the game, since they are so heavily fictionalised by the presence and actions of the playable characters. It will instead examine how the factions, their goals, actions and ideologies are presented in the story.

First, I will summarise the history of the American Revolution as well as the background of the game's release, and then provide the theoretical background for the thesis. Then I will discuss the data and give a brief plot description of the game series as a whole and specifically *Assassin's Creed III*, as well as discuss the method of analysis used. Last, I will report on the analysis of the game and briefly discuss conclusions and challenges.

2. Theoretical background

In section 2.1, I will outline the basic background for the game, as well as the historical setting of the game. In section 2.2, I will draw from academic sources in setting a framework inside which the game will be analysed. The aim is not to present a rigid theoretical method on which the thesis would heavily lean, but instead to discuss the unique features, challenges and possible advantages that video games as a medium provides, and set some guidelines for understanding the particular game under study.

2.1 The American Revolutionary War and *Assassin's Creed III*

The American Revolutionary War was a conflict between Great Britain and its Thirteen Colonies in North America, and it lasted from 1775 to 1783 and resulted in the establishment of the United States of America. According to the *Outline of U.S. History* (2013), published by the US Department of State, the roots of the conflict lay in years of colonial self-government interrupted by the English Crown's involvement following the French and Indian War, with such measures as restricting settler expansion westward and, perhaps more importantly, its fiscal policies such as the Stamp Act, the Townshend Duties and the Coercive Acts. All these things gradually eroded colonial support for British rule and resulted in military occupation, conflict and finally war. The colonists, or Patriots, formed the Continental Congress to govern themselves during the Revolution, and after open conflict broke out in 1775, declared independence in July 4, 1776. With the leadership of George Washington and the aid of the French and the Spanish, the Patriots eventually gained their official independence in the Treaty of Paris in 1783. The ideological framework of the Revolution would prove to be very influential both in and outside North America. From the cries of "taxation without representation" and the works of Thomas Paine and John Locke to the opposition to tyranny and yearning for freedom and equality, similar ideas inspired the French Revolution in 1789. The Founding Fathers of the United States are still revered figures in the United States today, starting with the First President of the United States, George Washington.

Since the Revolution is such a significant period in American history, it was interesting from the start to see and analyse how the developers have chosen to portray the period, especially through the

characters, both fictional and historical, such as the revered Founding Fathers. The *Assassin's Creed* series markets itself as a nuanced, alternative take on history, and the inclusion of a Native American protagonist makes the topic especially sensitive. Considering the reputation that video games often have relating to the representation of history and – especially in the years since 9/11 – conflicts including Americans, *AC3* was a natural source of controversy. After the announcement of the game, it was surrounded in accusations of pro-American, anti-British bias, with journalist John Walker of *Rock, Paper, Shotgun* calling one trailer “jingoistic bullshitapocalypse” (2012). The cover art depicts Connor killing a British Redcoat and the marketing materials in the US omitted scenes of Connor also killing Patriots. When the game released, however, reviewers described the portrayal as fair and balanced. For example, journalist Stephen Totilo of *Kotaku* commented in his review that “this is not a game that worships American's founding fathers blindly” (2012). All this set an interesting stage for the study.

2.2 Analysing video games

This thesis falls in the field of game studies, or more specifically, video game studies. As mentioned above, the aim of this section is to examine the defining features of video games and how, despite those unique features, it is possible to extract an easily examinable, single narrative in the case of *AC3*. According to Julian Kücklich (2006), “literary theory and criticism have played a significant role in the formation of digital game studies” (96). Video games are a multimodal medium, but the advantage of literary theory in games studies, according to Kücklich, is that literary theory studies the relationship between real and fictional worlds, and that the objects of study, like video games, are fictional (98). Following this line, Kücklich analyses digital games in terms of three aspects of literary theory: poetics, hermeneutics and aesthetics. Only the first two terms are relevant for the scope of this study. Aesthetics, or “the study of literature’s effects” (99) has been studied a lot in its own right, and is present, for example, in Shaw’s (2015) study. In terms of poetics, Kücklich uses Espen Aarseth’s (1995) term ergodic text, or text that requires “non-trivial effort to traverse” (100). This is used to convey the interactivity of video games, as the effort of the player “is not only directed at understanding the text, but also at constructing it, for example by making decisions, throwing dice, or engaging in some form of contest” (100). This is an important distinction in understanding historical

games, such as *Assassin's Creed III*, and the relationship of the player to the historical narrative, since in an ergodic text, the player does not only experience a pre-written narrative, but actively constructs it.

The player's relationship to the narrative ties into the analysis of hermeneutics, or the study of meaning, in video games. Kücklich mentions *Deus Ex*, which is a stealth game, or a type of video game where the player often has a choice between non-violence and brute force in achieving a goal. These types of games often offer a range of meanings rather than a single, fixed one, due to their interactive nature (103-104). When applying this to studying *AC3*, the range of player choice becomes important. *AC3* does offer optional objectives, which must be completed in order to achieve "full synchronisation" in the Animus system – a machine through which contemporary characters access the memories of their ancestors and the historical settings – thus allowing the player some room to affect specific, minor events. According to Shaw (2015), a few of these options might offer players some incentive to ponder certain narrative choices through their gameplay (17). However, completing optional objectives is not required in order to complete the game and, furthermore, the "full synchronisation" system effectively reinforces that there exists a single, canonical, albeit fictional, history. Kücklich also quotes Janet Murray (1997) in "agency is the satisfying power to take meaningful action and see the results of our decisions and choices" (98). He also asserts that "[a]gency is another word for interactivity" (108), so it can be said that the narrative agency of the player in *AC3* is limited, since the player's interaction with the narrative is limited. By this logic, this range of meanings is more limited and allows us to extract more specific meaning from the events and representations. In plain terms, the content analysis performed on *AC3* does not differ much from literary and cultural studies and is not limited by the interactive nature of video games. One interesting aspect of the *AC* series that adds to the conclusions reached above is that inside the game, the action in the historical settings is experienced by a character in the 'present', in the case of *AC3*, Desmond Miles, a 21st century member of the Assassin Brotherhood. This happens through the Animus system introduced above. Shaw (2015) calls the Animus a "game-within-a-game" and says that "*AC3*'s Animus puts the player in multiple subject positions, playing as characters not through avatars. The term avatar implies self-representation" (9). This, combined with my earlier conclusions, makes it possible to examine the story and characters of *AC3* in a way not too distinct from other

fields where content analysis is applied, since the issue of a video game characters not being merely characters, but also avatars of the player is not present in *AC3*.

Shaw (2015) analyses *Assassin's Creed 3* by studying the tensions around realism that are present in a game based on historical elements. She approaches the game from three main perspectives: Constructed identification, constructed authenticity and constructed history, which are also useful in setting the framework of this study. When discussing identification of the player with the characters, we can use Björn and Lankoski's (2008) term allegiance. This is the key element with which the dynamic between protagonists and antagonists is constructed. Among their list of notable techniques with which allegiance with the character is constructed, the most important aspect pertaining to this study is "moral evaluation in relation to standards set in game world (i.e., character needs to be morally better than other characters)". They also state that "[s]uccessful allegiance makes players feel that what they are doing in the game is the right course of action since they buy into the goals of the [player characters]." (Björn and Lankoski, 2008) Shaw's second term, constructed authenticity, describes the way the game and its realism is produced. Shaw uses it mainly to analyse *AC3*'s portrayal of Native American culture, which mostly falls outside the scope of this thesis, but is useful in relation to the game's portrayal of Connor as the protagonist. Finally, constructed history is "the version of history portrayed in the game" (4). Shaw states that "[a]ll representative practice is reductive, and no good critique can focus on the inability of a game, television show, or historical tome to cover everything" (12). The fact that it is not possible nor desirable to critique the game for not including all the available data on the historical events rather makes the goal of this study reachable, since we can study which events and actions of the characters are portrayed in the game, as well as analyse their significance. Shaw borrows from Salvati and Bullinger (2013: 154) three factors that construct "selective authenticity", of which the most useful for this study is documentary authority, which Shaw identifies as largely coming from the Animus database (Shaw: 13). This makes the Animus database – which is detailed later in chapter 3.2 – very useful for this study, since it is one of the tools with which the game narrates history and the pivotal historical characters, offering a contemporary perspective in addition to the historical perspective of the characters.

All in all, despite the unique features of video games in terms of storytelling and meaning, *AC3* allows for quite conventional content analysis, as the possible range of meanings is little wider than for

example in literature or film. Thus, following the ideas presented here, we can conclude that through the limitations the game places on the ranges of objectives and meaning, it is possible to extract quite a well-defined message from the story that the developers present within the game.

3. Data and method of analysis

In this section I will briefly summarise the backstory of the game and the series, give an overview of the data used, and describe the methodology which I will use to conduct the analysis of the game.

3.1 The *Assassin's Creed* series

The *Assassin's Creed* series started in 2007 with the release of the eponymous first game. Until *AC3*, all follow two timeframes, one set in the present day and one set in the past. The main character in the present in all five games is Desmond Miles, a 21st century member of the Assassin Brotherhood, who relives the memories of his ancestors through a system called the Animus. It was developed by Abstergo Industries, a modern-day front of the Templar Order, the series' primary antagonists. Throughout the series, Desmond (and the player) play as various characters in various eras. The first game is set in the Holy Land during the Third Crusade and the three subsequent games are set in Renaissance Italy. The goal of both the Assassins and the Templars in the present day is to find the secrets of an ancient First Civilisation by exploring the past.

The Assassins and the Templars are both ancient organisations with both ultimately aiming for peace, but with very different methods. The Assassins believe in peace, pacifism, equality and freedom by any means possible. However, their ideology is not without contradictions. The Master Assassin Altaïr Ibn-La'Ahad stated in *Assassin's Creed II*:

What follows are the three great ironies of the Assassin Order: 1. Here we seek to promote peace, but murder is our means. 2. Here we seek to open the minds of men, but require obedience to a master and set of rules. 3. Here we seek to reveal the danger of blind faith, yet we are practitioners ourselves.

The Templars, on the other hand, believe, in Grand Master Haytham Kenway's words, in "Order. Purpose. Direction." They, however, work in the shadows and plot and manipulate societies, countries and their leaders and are willing to sacrifice human lives for the greater good.

Assassin's Creed III begins in 1754 with the story of Haytham Kenway and his quest to find a storehouse once belonging to the First Civilisation, now located in Indian lands. In a surprise twist, it

turns out that he is a Templar, and the story moves to follow the life of a son Haytham has with a Kanien'kehá:ka woman, the to-be Assassin Ratonhnhaké:ton. Mostly called by his adopted name, Connor — as he will be mostly referred to in this study, as in the game — is enraged by the burning of his village and the death of his mother, embarks on a quest to hunt down the Templars in the Colonies, help the Patriots in the war, and save his village. He finds and assassinates the members of the Colonial Templars one by one until coming into contact with his father, Haytham. They work together for a brief time but ultimately fall out when Connor finds out that the burning of his village was perpetrated by George Washington and that Haytham had withheld this information from him. Eventually, Connor assassinates the remaining Templars, including his father, and plays a pivotal role in the victory of the Patriots.

3.2 Data

Since the focus of this study is the historical depiction of the American Revolution, the modern-day storyline is largely irrelevant. The main focus is on the main portion of the game, set in 18th century Colonial America. Most of the material relevant to this study is concentrated on the main story arc of Haytham and Connor Kenway. Some side activities were studied, but few of them were relevant to the larger picture, since the bulk of the narrative is told through the main story. An additional resource that will be used is the Animus database, the in-game database that documents major people, locations and events during the game. Since it is written in-game in the present by Shaun Hastings, it offers another angle through which the game's story and especially the people are portrayed. This allows us to contrast the characters' reactions and attitudes with a "contemporary" source, opening another angle to the events and people portrayed.

As it pertains to the backstory of the games, especially in relation to Assassins and Templars, other games in the series are referenced as well. While the main focus is on this game, in order to gain an understanding of the dynamic between these groups, and thus of the whole conflict as presented in the fictional history, the story and narrative of other games must be taken into account as well.

All the findings, including all events, actions, quotes, descriptions and all references to other games, are my own unless mentioned otherwise in the text. For convenience, the Animus text database can be found online in its entirety in the fan-powered Assassin's Creed Wiki.

3.3 Methodology

As outlined in section 2, *Assassin's Creed 3's* relatively limited narrative agency allows for a straightforward analysis, since it contains mostly a single narrative. Even the range of objectives is relatively low, and the optional objectives do not change the narrative at all. Thus, the story can be analysed in some places as if it was a movie, but a large part of the narrative content still happens in interactive situations, where features specific to interactive games need to be considered. The whole scope of the analysis includes the cinematic sequences, gameplay objectives and instructions, sounds and music, and all dialogue and information that is presented during gameplay. One of the methodological tools used in the content analysis leans on the techniques of creating the player's allegiance with characters in a video game as listed by Björn and Lankoski (2008). These are features of positive evaluation, such as "physical beauty", "expressions of affection or fear", "moral evaluation in relation to the standards set in the game world", and gameplay-related strategies, such as skills used during gameplay. (Björn and Lankoski, 2008) These are some tools that were used in the analysis but the aim was to mostly keep the analysis quite simple. The bulk of the analysis will consist of closely examining the storyline of the game, discerning the motivations and goals of characters, studying the dynamic and emphasis between different groups, and looking for interesting details that affect the larger storyline.

4. Analysis

The analysis will be divided into two larger parts. First, I will analyse the playable characters, Haytham and Connor, and their respective groups, then the dynamic between the British and the Americans and the historical events portrayed in the game. I will examine the role the characters are given and the morality of their actions presented to the player in relation to the fictional groups, as well as the real-life belligerents of the war. In analysing the historical figures and the historical events, I will emphasise the portrayal of the major American figures, especially George Washington. Furthermore, there will be no emphasis placed on historical accuracy, but instead they will be examined in the context of the game story and overall themes.

4.1 The Templars and the Assassins

As detailed in section 3.1, the Templars and the Assassins are two ancient organisations vying for power in competition with each other for millennia. They both see the other group as their arch enemies and the main story of each game in the *Assassin's Creed* series is largely created around the tension between these fictional groups. The most important thing to note is that traditionally up to *AC3*, the Assassins have been the clear protagonists, or “good guys”, and the Templars the antagonists, or the “bad guys”. In this part, I will first analyse the character of Haytham Kenway, a Templar, then the character of Connor Kenway, an Assassin, and finally the dynamic between the two groups.

4.1.1 Haytham Kenway

The game begins in 1754, with Haytham entering the Theatre Royal opera house in London, where he then assassinates a man he clearly knows and obtains a medallion he believes is a key for a First Civilisation storehouse. On the orders of Grand Master Reginald Birch, he then travels to the British colony of Boston. There he gathers men faithful to their cause, and together they free a large group of Kanien'kehá:ka tribespeople. Together, they cause the defeat of General Edward Braddock, a former fellow member of the Templar Order, at the battle of Fort Duquesne, and Haytham then kills him. He arrives at the Grand Temple together with the tribeswoman Kaniehtí:io, only to find out he cannot open the door with the medallion. He then develops a romantic relationship with Kaniehtí:io. He is

revealed to the player (and Desmond) to be a Templar, instead of an Assassin, when he initiates his loyal follower Charles Lee to the Templar Order.

The beginning of the game is clearly designed for the player to believe that they are playing with an Assassin. Haytham's clothing resembles an Assassin's clothing, only missing the iconic hood that the Assassins wear. The controls and actions of the character resemble an Assassin, and he even kills the man at the opera house with a hidden blade, traditionally a trademark of the Assassins. However, there are many hints to his true identity. When murdering the man at the opera house, Haytham seems slightly saddened, but does not show the same kind of compassion usually shown by the Assassin characters in previous games. After he has killed the man, he hushes a child that looks on, while the camera is positioned in an upward angle, and ominous music plays. He is thus right from the start given a much more insidious appearance than previous protagonists.

Another hint is when in the ship Providence, sailing to the Colonies, the captain suspects a mutiny is being planned. Haytham first acts courteously, but when the captain mistreats him, he quickly loses his courtesy and calls him "a poor leader, ill-tempered and cruel" to his face and threatens him. He is again presented in an ominous manner and as quite proud and vain, even if he had been slightly mistreated. He nevertheless agrees to help the captain out of necessity, and eventually finds out that there is a ship tailing them. He insists on fighting but is told to go below deck. Here he shows courage, but there is no emotion really at any point. When discovering that a crewman on the ship named Mills was actually an Assassin (the player, at this point, is led to think Mills is a Templar) waiting to ambush him, he asks and receives a sword, which would be an oddly honourable gesture for a Templar. The first hint, however, is already in the tutorial level that the player completes as Desmond, where there are guards that are then assassinated. These guards are dressed in exactly the same outfit that a man in Haytham's (and presumably Templars') service is, just moments later. This is an example of a way that the game can subtly build its narrative through gameplay elements.

During the time in Boston, Haytham is portrayed as courteous but determined and pragmatic. He is shown to be quite able and merciless when invading a bandit camp to retrieve his associate's stolen research. He tells the poorer bandits: "Your kind has no need of books and maps." This kind of behaviour is not typical of an Assassin, even if it is only words. He also remarks, "[S]hame so many had

to die” when they have to fight their way through the bandit camp. Again he speaks as if he is slightly saddened, but not disturbed by the loss of life. He is angered by the sadism of a slaver, Silas Thatcher, who is portrayed as almost cartoonishly evil. They free the slaves and Haytham kills Silas. However, at no point does Haytham really comment on the practice of slavery itself, and clearly expects the tribespeople to pay him the debt he thinks he is owed for saving them from slavery. Nevertheless, as in the Silas case, Haytham is consistently portrayed as honourable relative to other characters, which Björn and Lankoski (2008) point out as “a notable technique to prompt positive evaluation” of the player character. In the beginning, he, and by extension the Templars, are humanised much more than in the previous games, by being portrayed as honourable and moral compared to other, clearly immoral characters. When the gameplay and the story switch to Connor’s perspective, Haytham is only seen rarely in much of the rest of the game. He is put in a clearly antagonistic position when he is seen inciting the riot leading to the Boston Massacre. This is made especially clear in the discussion between Connor and his Assassin mentor Achilles, where pictures of Templars that are placed on Achilles’ wall portray Templars in an ominous light and Haytham, as Grand Master, has his picture on the very top, signifying his significance in Templar operations.

However, Haytham’s status as a villain is again made more complicated when he meets with Connor again. He doesn’t kill Connor even though he has the chance to and doesn’t see Connor as necessarily an enemy but a possible ally. He then denigrates to Connor both Connor’s enemy, the English Crown, saying “the Templars do not fight for the Crown”, as well as Benjamin Church, a traitor to both the Templars and the Patriots. The quote also establishes “the Crown” as a bigger antagonist than the Templars, since at this point, Connor’s opposition is specifically to the British. The relationship between Haytham and Connor develops when they start working together. Although Haytham is pompous and dismissive towards Connor, there are subtle signs of affection. When first talking to Connor, he awkwardly says, “Perhaps... perhaps some time together might do us good. You are my son, after all, and might still be saved from your ignorance”. He even says, “He is my son” when trying to infiltrate a warehouse, showing some sign of realisation at that point. However, a revealing moment regarding their relationship is when Haytham learns of Connor’s mother’s death and is visibly upset and grieved. Haytham maintains that neither he nor the Templars had anything to do with it. After this, Haytham wishes to show Connor the faults in Washington and reveals that it was

Washington that burned Connor's village. Connor, however, is upset at him for withholding the information and tells him to leave him alone. Haytham starts saying "Son..." but is interrupted and told not to follow or oppose Connor. It is somewhat clear by his worried and woeful facial expressions in interactions with Connor that Haytham regrets not staying together with Kaniehti:io to raise his son, evidenced also by the fact that he tries to win Connor's trust by revealing the information about Connor's mother and Washington. However, he does not seem to want to admit to being too affected by this, evident by him saying earlier "I do not feign affection," which seems to contradict his behaviour and expressions of sorrow earlier.

In his last appearance, Haytham has gotten Charles Lee out of Connor's reach, as he still believes that Lee is the best candidate to lead the new United States in behalf of the Templars. The two fight and in the end, Connor kills Haytham. During the fight, he reiterates the justifications for his actions, also asserting that he did not hurt Connor's people nor support the crown. In his dying moments, Haytham tells Connor: "Still, I'm proud of you in a way. You have shown great conviction. Strength. Courage. All noble qualities... I should have killed you long ago." In the end, Haytham seems to believe that the affection he eventually had for his son was his downfall, as affection was something he always hid, and what caused him to let his guard down around Connor. All in all, Haytham is portrayed as much more human than Templars traditionally in the series. He seems to be portrayed in two mirroring ways in the two parts of the game. First, he is shown as an Assassin but with suspicious moral ambiguity, and later, as a Templar with surprising humanity. Overall, his character seems to serve as an example of the game's attempt to humanise and make both protagonist and antagonists, as well as their relationship, more complex.

4.1.2 Ratonhnhaké:ton/Connor Kenway

The character of Ratonhnhaké:ton, or Connor, is placed in a position of an oppressed hero right in the beginning of his story. He is ambushed by a group of Templars led by Charles Lee, who was portrayed if not morally good, at least neutral in the first part of the game, but had just 'betrayed' those expectations and is used for shock value in order to ally the player with Connor. In the scene, Connor also shows bravery and conviction, as well as affection for his family. He then finds his mother burning alive in their burning village. Here, the player is given a button prompt to try and lift a log off his

mother and save her, but it is still not possible. The game toying with player agency makes the player empathise with the character, since are seemingly given a playable chance to save her (since button prompts rarely appear in games if they are not meant to be effective) but then fail at the task together. All in all, the whole beginning of Connor's story is designed to give him a goal that is truly justified and is not only rooted in personal revenge but in the affection for his people. Here it is also made clear through meeting with the old Assassin mentor Achilles that the Templars support the British in order to achieve their goals of "control, order, structure". Achilles is also introduced as a troubled but sympathetic mentor character by him positively reacting to Connor's resilience and courage. This part of the game, perhaps most of the whole game, sets up a clear dichotomy of good and evil, and Connor is placed firmly on the good side.

The goals of Connor are made much clearer than those of Haytham, contributing more to establishing the player's allegiance with him. Also, as stated by Björn and Lankoski (2008), the fact that Connor has and develops more gameplay skills than Haytham over the course of the game helps with identifying with him. This is also present in the storyline, where Connor undergoes training under Achilles, learns more of the Templars and Assassins and finally, gets to put on the robes of the Assassins, connecting him to previous heroes in the series. Combined with Connor being the only Assassin left to fight the Templars and the strength of his conviction, the player can identify with the struggle and sense of achievement. Most of the historical story of the American Revolution is experienced from the point of view of Connor, who struggles with the actions and motivations of both sides of the war and especially the Patriots, whose side he is mostly on. The portrayal of major historical figures such as George Washington and eventually the revelations about his actions are experienced through Connor, and he becomes the moral barometer for the story's events and characters' actions.

Much like Connor's goals as outlined above, his values are also more spelled out. He constantly professes his wish to see equality and freedom for all, and thus sees the Patriot cause as his own. However, his values are even much more progressive than other characters in the game, including the liberal Patriots. In many cases, while not coming off as preaching or unrealistic in the setting, his values and beliefs seem distinctly modern-day in nature. This is strengthened by the similarity to the tone of the Animus database, the in-game database written by a modern-day—and notably British—character, Shaun Hastings. He writes in an overtly sarcastic style which is put into use especially in

critiquing an American-centric view of the war. Shaw (2015) argues that this reveals the game's expected audience as white American that the "Others", in this case the British Shaun, attempt to educate. This "education" is quite obvious, for example, in Boston, where a database entry on the Old State House states:

This building housed the Massachusetts government from 1713 to 1798. Before the revolution, that would have meant the governor, his advisors, and the elected assembly. Of course, by 'elected', I mean 'selected by white male property-owners' since they were the only people that had the right to vote.

This is very similar to a quote by Connor in the game: "I hear much talk of freedom and equality, but it seems one must be a landed white man to benefit." Addressing the issue of racial inequality, he continues: "What about someone like me? Or Surry?", mentioning a slave owned by a Founding Father, Samuel Adams, "What role for us in this new world?" While the Animus database written by Shaun Hastings does this overtly, Connor also seems to implicitly act as a moral evaluator, addressing the 21st century players' concerns. While not always ultimately in the right or even completely reasonable, he holds his moral values consistently in every situation while not being unaffected by personal feelings and naïveté. He often narrates his thoughts and feelings on events, characters and his own beliefs to the audience, which gives substantially more access to his character, strengthening his bond with the player.

Regarding Connors consistent application of his morals, he regularly reacts to various things around him with horror and distaste but is not impervious to believing that the ends justify the means. For example, a Patriot ally Stephane Chapheau's house is raided and his possessions taken by British soldiers, which leads him to incite a riot in protest of British taxation. Although Connor heavily protests his use of violence, he reluctantly protects Stephane, and in the process, he (and the player) is forced to kill British soldiers. Even despite this and the negative reaction he has towards Stephane's actions, he recruits Stephane to the Brotherhood and considers him a friend later. He is also honest to a fault, as seen after the events of the Boston Massacre. He is framed for the events but still reacts negatively to the proposal that he should try to manipulate public opinion in order to clear, even though he is indeed innocent. Based on all the above, it seems that Connor is positioned both as a

protagonist character inside the game's story, as well as the modern-day players' counterpart in the historical world. These aspects are sometimes linked, as in the case of Connor's disenchantment with the Patriot cause and especially George Washington. The moral grey area that is built around the Patriots and the slowly-built distaste for Washington is woven into Connor's personal story and tragedy, while also being the developer's intention in portraying the history of the Revolution as morally grey.

All in all, Connor is portrayed as a traditional hero motivated by personal tragedy and possessing great moral conviction. From the stylistic aspects surrounding him such as the game's theme music that follows his key moments as opposed to the more ominous music used in Haytham's context, to his relatively non-violent commitments compared to Haytham's pragmatic brutality, Connor seems to be the developer's attempt to build a morally serious storyline as well as both address and deconstruct the expectations the player is expected have about the game's fictional and historical setting.

4.1.3 The Templar Order and the Assassin Brotherhood

In addition to discussing the two main characters, it is also crucial to look at the two groups they represent in the story. The battle between the Assassins and the Templars form the centrepiece of the franchise as a whole, and their role in the story is thus essential to fully understanding the game. As mentioned before, *Assassin's Creed III* was a unique part of the series when it was released, since it was the first one to include a playable Templar character. The first part of the game, played through Haytham Kenway, and its ending scene, are clearly meant to evoke a shocked reaction from the audience, as exemplified by the reaction of the modern-day Assassins, which is horror. In order to get to effectively fool the players in the beginning, the Templars need to be much more humanised than before. In previous games, the Templars have almost all been evil, conspiratorial villains attempting to control the world through a self-serving ideology that only gives the appearance of principle. However, as discussed in chapter 4.1.1 in regards to Haytham Kenway, the portrayal this time is much more nuanced.

The game starts with the assumption that Haytham Kenway is indeed an Assassin, as evident in the database entry of the Grand Master of the British Rite of the Templar Order Reginald Birch, that states that he is an Assassin. When landing in the Colonies, Haytham gathers around him a group of

Templars that, before their allegiance is known, are each presented with unique personalities and motivations: William Johnson, the agent of the British on matters of the Indian Iroquois Confederacy; John Pitcairn, a Scottish officer famous for the first military engagement of the War in Lexington and Concord; Benjamin Church, the first Surgeon General of the United States Army and an eventual traitor; Charles Lee, a general of the Continental Army; and Thomas Hickey, a US soldier and the first to be executed for treason against the United States. All these characters were based on historical figures both in name and to some extent in personality and actions. As in real life, they had varying backgrounds and personalities as well as different fates and historical reputations. Following history, the one with the most pleasant personality and noble intentions was William Johnson, who had extensive ties with Native peoples and whose knowledge is used in the search for the First Civilisation storehouse. When the Templars attack young Connor in the forest, Johnson is seen as watching quite disapprovingly when Charles Lee bullies Connor, but does not intervene. Connor and Achilles see Johnson as a target because of his intentions to buy the land from the Native tribes, including Connor's, and he is assassinated by Connor during a meeting with the tribes' leaders. He is seen as being quite reasonable and pleading in the meeting, but then threatens the tribesmen with violence when they do not agree. In his dying moments, he insists to Connor that he wants to protect the land both from the English and the Colonists. This later turns out to be quite true, as insisted also by Haytham and as evident in the revelation that it was Washington who ordered the burning of the village before and again later.

Another character of similar nature is John Pitcairn. He was the commander of the British troops at the battles of Lexington and Concord and was assassinated afterwards by Connor in order to help the Patriots. He also maintains that the Templars have no intention of starting a war, but that he instead wanted to parlay with the Patriots and bring an end to the conflict before it starts. Like Johnson, he maintains that the Templars do not fight for the British, but for peace. The same was not true for Benjamin Church, who was rescued from a slaver by Haytham and fought for the Patriots but later betrayed both. He is hunted down by Haytham and Connor and beaten to a pulp by Haytham for betraying the Order, before being assassinated by Connor. He is described as acting only for his own profit and he betrays the Templars and the Patriots simply because he sees British victory as inevitable, but when dying, he maintains that neither Connor's or Haytham's cause is right and fair,

casting more doubt on Connor's mind. Similar is the case of Thomas Hickey, the leader of the underworld in service of the Templars, who Connor assassinates because of his attempts to kill George Washington. Although shown to be cruel, brutal and unpleasant, even he shows a more human side in his dying moments. He maintains that Connor wants a utopia whereas he just wanted to live a full life. Although unprincipled, even he is not portrayed as particularly evil. Both Hickey and Church are also outcasts of the Order, Church is hunted for his treason and Hickey simply treated as a servant, such as when Haytham simply shrugs when asked about him by Connor.

Charles Lee is the second-in-command of Haytham Kenway and eventually succeeds him as the leader after the latter's death. He is portrayed perhaps as the main antagonist, and indeed the final antagonist of the game. Thought to be responsible for the burning of Connor's village, he is constantly seen hatching no plots and cruelties. When the game shifts to Connor's perspective, Charles, at first seen as pleasant and obedient, has turned to a cruel racist and sadist, resembling a mad man in appearance and speech. Enraged by the choice of George Washington as the commander of the Continental Army, the Templars plot to kill or depose him, and install Lee on his place. Lee shows the least humanity of all the Templars, but even his treatment is subtler than would first seem. He constantly professes and seems to be genuinely motivated by the principles of the Templar Order, despite his obvious character flaws. When denigrating Washington to Connor, Lee seems not only childishly upset over the choice, but legitimately concerned by the incompetence and stupidity of Washington's leadership. When Haytham dies, Lee displays genuine grief and anger over his death and vows to have his revenge on Connor, mirroring Connor's grief over his mother's passing. Before he is assassinated, the wounded Lee offers Connor a drink and smiles at him, seemingly as a small gesture of respect, and then signals Connor to end his life.

To conclude, the Templars are portrayed as individuals with individual motivations. The game plays with the dynamic of the hero and the villains, first positioning them as allies to the player, then as villains, and finally humanising them again, even revealing some of them to be noble and principled men. At some points, their ideology is shown to be seemingly more pragmatic and more realistic than that of the Assassins. This can be seen in Connor's character arc, where he realises little by little when assassinating the Templars, he sees not only the faults in them, but in Assassins and Patriots too as well. Eventually, Connor is willing to work together with the Templars to achieve the goals they both

wanted. Their ideological clashes all seem to end in Connor having some realisation, such as when Connor maintains that the people had chosen Washington, Haytham replies that “the people chose nothing”, referencing the small group of people actually making decisions for the Patriots. When they are brought to blows over Lee, it seems to be more of a blind trust and tribalism that causes Haytham to back Lee, rather than the Templar principles.

The Assassins seem to be virtually non-existent in the start of Connor’s story. Achilles has retired and unwilling to keep fighting and Connor essentially does the actual fighting alone even though he is trained by Achilles. Aided by few allies, he is essentially aligned with the Patriots first because of the fight against Templars and even with the Assassins mostly because of the fight for his people. The Assassins play a very small role in the story and even though they are placed in the protagonist’s position, the emphasis of the story is very clearly on the Templars. The Assassins seem to be placed as the heroes by default, since, for example, the series is obviously named after them, but most of the values they represent in the game seem to be inserted by the lone Assassin Connor, since there is no hierarchical structure or order. To conclude, the game places much more emphasis on defining the characters and motivations of the Templars than the Assassins and while the Assassins are largely the protagonists, the focus is on giving the Templars a more defined character and motivations, and in subverting the players’ expectations on this matter.

4.2 The War and its belligerents

In this section, I will examine the role and portrayal of the American Revolutionary War and the two sides that fought in it, the British and the Americans. First, I will focus on the American revolutionaries and especially emphasise the role of major historical figures and then switch focus to the British.

4.2.1 The Americans

While in the case of the fictional factions, the emphasis is on the presumed villains of the story, the Templars, here it is the opposite. The historical framework of the story mainly follows the American, or Patriot, side of things and the British are mostly commented on through them and through the Templars. As we have established, while the position of the Templars as either heroes or villains varies greatly, Connor is a character that is consistently aligned with morality and ideological purity.

As such, much of the commentary on the factions of the game happens through him and his allegiance with the Patriots puts them on the favourable side of the player by default. In the beginning, the British are portrayed as oppressing the Americans, and the standard reasoning for the Revolution is shown, like taxation without representation, the Boston Massacre, British occupation and cruelty. However, there are clear signs from the beginning pointing to the faults of the Patriots. The database entry of Connor's village that appears in the beginning of his story relates that the Revolution is referred to by the Indians as "the Burning of the Valleys". Connor himself iterates to his friend that he fears that eventually the settlers, meaning the colonists, will take over their lands. Nevertheless, Connor sees the Patriots' goals as similar to his own beliefs of equality, fairness and freedom from tyranny. He is enchanted by George Washington whom he sees as a great leader of the people. However, much of his liking for the Patriots seems to actually stem from the hatred towards the Templars for burning his village and what he interprets as wanting to control and oppress the people, and support the Crown. Here, we also see that the British are placed into a villainous position by default because of their association with the Templars. Achilles also maintains to Connor that "your struggle is the colonists' struggle". The most obvious way through which the game represents the Americans is through the historical figures, especially the Founding Fathers, George Washington and Samuel Adams.

Samuel Adams is introduced in the beginning of Connor's story in after the Boston Massacre. He is presented as well-mannered, pragmatic and tolerant, offering a symbolic handshake to Connor. Throughout the game, he is the figure that is seen as tirelessly fighting for freedom and independence. However, when Connor questions him about him owning a slave, he refers to the practice as "barbaric" but states that: "We must focus on defending our rights. When this is done, we'll have the luxury of addressing these other matters." When Connor pushes back on if Adams really thinks the status of the slaves and the colonists is the same, Adams says it is. After this, Connor still supports Adams and the Patriots, but slowly begins seeing the colonists' rule as inadequate and hypocritical, but nevertheless better than British rule.

George Washington, on the other hand, already appears during Haytham's part of the game. Accompanying General Edward Braddock, he takes part in the Braddock Expedition, a disastrous military campaign against the French. Braddock is a traitor to the Templars whom Haytham is hunting

down. Haytham eavesdrops on Washington's conversation, where Washington is portrayed as calm, reasonable and opposed to cruelty. However, he does support Braddock, who is shown to be almost cartoonishly evil and cruel, and Washington knows this. When the Revolution starts, Washington is chosen as the Commander-in-Chief of the American forces but is constantly referred to by other people as incompetent and stupid. He does not see the way that the Templars are undermining him and underestimates threats against him. He is eventually revealed to be responsible for burning Connor's village because he feared Native attacks. In the epilogue, the player can have a conversation with him about the newly independent country. Washington states that he will leave building the country's foundation to "men with far greater minds", before changing the subject to Bocce, a ball sport. Connor reacts to this with disdain and Washington is once again seen as weak, unprincipled and incompetent.

Thus, one of the most revered figures in American history, George Washington is portrayed in an extremely negative light. The myth around him is actively deconstructed in almost every way. He is portrayed as weak of character, incompetent as a general, and his historical victories are all delivered by the heroics of Connor and competency of his officers. This follows a general theme in the game. Almost all of the major historical events are affected by the fictional characters and their agendas. The Boston Massacre was instigated by the Templars. The Boston Tea Party was mostly carried out by Assassins, and the Battles of Lexington and Concord effectively won by Connor's leadership. Figures such as a Paul Revere are made into humorous, clownish characters. Paul Revere's ride, a legendary event in American mythology, plays out in an almost comedic way, with Connor doing all the actual work of alerting the militias for the battle. The signing of the Declaration of Independence is portrayed as a fairly unceremonious event, and like in other parts, the cast of Founding Fathers is very limited, possibly to contribute to the deconstruction of the American myth. Connor eventually mostly helps the Patriots because their interests align. The biggest positive aspect is the ideology of liberty and equality. Even though it is heavily criticised, it is a focal point of the American story. The game ends with Connor watching a crowd of Americans shouting at parting British ships. He looks behind them and sees slaves being sold on the market, with the people literally having turned a blind eye to them. It seems that this is the final point of the developers' intention of challenging the assumptions and beliefs of 21st century players.

4.2.2 The British

In the case of the British, the situation is almost a mirror image of the situation with the Assassins. Whereas the Assassins are the protagonists almost by default since the game is played from an Assassin's perspective, the British are the default enemy. In addition to the fact that they are the storyline enemy of the Patriots who Connor is allied with, British Redcoats play the role of guards in the towns and on the frontier for most of the game and thus are pitted against Connor in his quests and made the enemy from the gameplay perspective. Aside from these aspects, they are not given all that much commentary on the game. From the beginning, the game portrays the British as a huge, almost unseen and invincible force, strongly connecting them to the Templar ideology. During the game, the connection between the British and the Templars begins to dissipate, with the major Templars turning to support the Patriots after the deaths of Pitcairn and Johnson. However, this does not result in a shift of position for the British, but instead, they are seen as the bigger villain. Due to the nature of the narrative, they are still not portrayed as evil or all-powerful in the whole game, but instead the whole conflict is commented on as foolish and vain. There are moments where the British are placed on the same level with the Americans, with Johnson commenting on how neither would care about the Native lands and Pitcairn saying that neither side would listen to him and instead fuelled war. Benjamin Church's speech in his dying moments is the starkest commentary casting the British in a more positive (or at least less negative) light:

Are these the same men and women who fight with muskets forged from British steel?
Who bind their wounds with bandage sewn by British hands? How convenient for them.
We do the work. They reap the rewards.

It's all a matter of perspective. There is no single path through life that's right and fair
and does no harm. Do you truly think the Crown has no cause? No right to feel
betrayed?

The speech puts the British in a different light, as it highlights the complexity of the conflict and gives some credence the British reaction. The fact that, for example, the Boston Massacre is not really the fault of the British alone, but instigated by the Templars, seems to absolve the British of some responsibility for the war, although other parts do the opposite. A notable fact is, however, that the

Templars took hold in the Colonies in the 1750s, when the tensions started to rise, and it is hinted that they are behind some of the instability. All in all, the British play the role of the expected and necessary enemy.

In concluding the Analysis section, perhaps the single biggest notable theme in the story of the game is the subversion of player's expectations regarding both the fictional and the historical groups. Whereas the game spends much time in deconstructing the mythology of the assumed historical heroes, the American Revolutionaries, it does the same on reverse to the fictional villains, the Templars. This creates an effect where no single group or ideology is seen as wholly good or wholly evil. The fact that this is done on two levels makes it seem like an attempt on the developers' part to create more shades of grey on the moral dynamic of the series both on a fictional level as well as a historical, which are both crucial to the franchise. This also makes it a much more morally serious game than, for example, the magical battles with the Pope in *Assassin's Creed: Brotherhood*. As far as historicity of the game goes, there seems to be a lack of real commitment to any serious interpretation of history, as evidenced by the heavy fictionalisation of all major historical events of the war.

5. Conclusion

This study set out to explore the ways by which *Assassin's Creed III* constructs its heroes and villains, and to find out whether the portrayal of the four main factions in the game was simple or complex, biased or fair. The answer to the first question is clear. The way that the Templars are portrayed in the game subverts both series conventions and player expectations. Even less prominent characters are complex human beings with goals and motivations appropriate to the setting and often even in regards to historical accuracy. The portrayal of the Assassins, on the other hand, is simpler but no more one-sided, since the game interweaves the principles and motivations of the two groups quite thoroughly. It is clear that Connor Kenway is the hero but not so clear whether Haytham Kenway is a villain. When analysed, Haytham revealed many features that made him a complex, conflicting character. These idiosyncratic elements are also present on the historical side of things. However, the speech of Benjamin Church and the commentaries of other characters seem to highlight the way *AC3* approaches the conflict. They attempt to portray all sides as something beyond black and white, good and evil, but also seem unwilling to commit to specific historical perspectives. The commentary on different issues and causes for the war is mostly relegated to fuel the fictional conflict and relationship between the Templars and the Assassins. The history of the American Revolution is more of a backdrop, a stage for the true actors to perform. The specific historical events the game chose to portray definitely do not portray the Patriots as the villains but it is not clear what kinds of heroes they are either.

Returning to the theoretical background laid out in section 2.2, the things that were laid out regarding Kücklich's ideas of the "range of meanings" in relation to *AC3* proved to be quite true. The game told its story in a rather straightforward and easily discernible manner which allowed to extract some ideas not only of the story presented, but also of the intent of the developers in portraying certain things in certain ways. For example, the quote from Kücklich, "[a]gency is another word for interactivity" (108) and Murray's quote, "agency is the satisfying power to take meaningful action and see the results of our decisions and choices" (98), are relevant not in that *AC3* offers a lot of choice for the players per se, but in that the player is inserted into many historically significant moments, diluting the possible historical interpretations that could be extracted since they played out by the

player as a fictional character. As mentioned in the previous paragraph, this makes it seem like the developers did not intend to offer much commentary on major historical events, or were shy to interpret the conflict in too strong a manner.

All of the above opens perhaps two major avenues for future research. First, regarding the use of a historical period in the game (and in other games in the series and outside the series), it could be useful to branch into the field of history and examine more closely the historical data that is available and how the accuracies and inaccuracies affect the portrayal of history. Especially in terms of the Founding Fathers as well as Native American history, there is much to study in terms of how they are represented and how these representations differ from factual history as well as other similar representations. Some of this is present in regards to the AC series in studies by Shaw (2015) and El-Nasr et al. (2008), for example, but serious historical scholarship could be centred around the series' various instalments as well. The aforementioned study by Nasr et al. also includes the other major possible approach for studying AC3: it examines the cultural and historical representation in the game by also including the developers' intent and point of view in the conversation. This could be useful in studying AC3 as well, since it has a setting which has in itself major cultural significance and baggage associated with it. All in all, what *Assassin's Creed III* lacks in conviction, it makes up for in complexity, but these ideas could definitely benefit from further study.

Bibliography

Aarseth, Espen. "Cybertext: Perspectives on Ergodic Literature." University of Bergen, 1995. Print. Bergen.

Assassin's Creed III. Ubisoft. 2012. Video game.

Björn, Staffan and Lankoski, Petri. "Character-Driven Game Design: Characters, Conflict, and Gameplay" 12 Nov. 2008. <https://petrilankoski.wordpress.com/2008/11/12/character-driven-game-design-characters-conflict-and-gameplay/>. Accessed 12 November 2016

Bryce, Jo, and Jason Rutter. *Understanding Digital Games*. 1st ed Vol. London: SAGE Publications Ltd, 2006. Print.

El Nasr, M., Al-Saati, M., Niedenthal, S., Milam, D. "Assassin's Creed: A Multi-Cultural Read." *Loading...* 2.3 (2008). Print.

Kapell, M. W., and A. B. R. Elliott. *Playing with the Past: Digital Games and the Simulation of History*. Bloomsbury Publishing, 2013. Print.

Mäyrä, Frans. *An Introduction to Game Studies*. London: SAGE Publications Ltd, 2008. Print.

Murray, Janet H. *Hamlet on the Holodeck : The Future of Narrative in Cyberspace*. Cambridge (MA): MIT Press, 1997. Print.

Payne, Matthew Thomas. "War Bytes: The Critique of Militainment in Spec Ops: The Line." *Critical Studies in Media Communication* 31.4 (2014): 265-82. Print.

Perron, Bernard, et al. "Methodological Questions in 'Interactive Film Studies'." *New Review of Film and Television Studies* 6.3 (2008): 233-52. Print.

Seron Ordonez, Inmaculada. "Translating Video Games with Historical Content, Or Researching to Rewrite History." *TRANS.Revista de Traductologia* 15 (2011): 103-14. Print.

Shaw, A. "The Tyranny of Realism: Historical Accuracy and Politics of Representation in Assassin's Creed III." *Loading...* 9.14 (2015). Print.

Spring, Dawn. "Gaming History: Computer and Video Games as Historical Scholarship." *Rethinking History* 19.2 (2015): 207-21. Print.

Totilo, Stephen. "Assassin's Creed III: The Kotaku Review" *Kotaku*, 31 Oct. 2012, <http://www.kotaku.com.au/2012/10/assassins-creed-iii-the-kotaku-review/>. Accessed 11 November 2016.

U.S. Department of State. "Outline of U.S. History" Bureau of International Information Programs, 2013. Print.

Wainwright, A. M. "Teaching Historical Theory through Video Games." *History Teacher* 47.4 (2014): 579-612. Print.

Walker, John. "By Jingo! AssCreed III Trailer Takes Itself Seriously" *Rock, Paper, Shotgun*, 4 July 2012, <https://www.rockpapershotgun.com/2012/07/04/by-jingo-asscreed-iii-trailer-takes-itself-seriously/>. Accessed 11 November 2016.