# Rupkatha Journal

### On Interdisciplinary Studies in Humanities

An Online Open Access Journal ISSN 0975-2935 www.rupkatha.com

Volume VII, Number 1, 2015

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1	21100201709	Rupkatha Journal on Interdisciplinary Studies in Humanities	0	0	0.1	0.304	0.034	0.1	0.271	0.038	0.107

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## History First-hand: Memory, the Player and the Video Game Narrative in the Assassin's Creed Games

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#### Abstract

This paper will look at the convergence of the interactive free flow of video games and the questioning and revisioning of historical continuity using the example of the Assassin's Creed series by Ubisoft. With a story that exists simultaneously in the modern day and the 15<sup>th</sup> century, the games allow the player to take control of characters and alter, or make possible, events recognisable as historical fact. It plays with both history and memory and history as memory, as the life of the primary player character is being relived through the genetic memories of one of his descendants. Being highly narrative-bound, the Assassin's Creed games use, via the medium of the screen, the rift between history and memory as a central element of narrative, theme, and game design, which this paper will explore. Furthermore, using theories of convergence this paper will examine how video games provide a new, interactive mode of storytelling that is rapidly becoming representative of our age.

There was a time when video games were merely considered to be base forms of indoor entertainment, with early games like Pong or Pacman which had simple objectives and no discernible plot or structure. With time, however, games have evolved from these simplistic origins to complex narratives, containing driven, well constructed characters, complex plot (or plots), and involving a greater involvement from the players than mere accurate button-pushing. Games today, with advancements in graphic design and capability of the platforms on which they can be played, are almost akin to interactive films- in which the player not only consumes the movie-like storyline, but becomes an active participant in the narrative and its outcomes.

This interactivity is, as pop culture theorist Henry Jenkins would put it, a marker of the media convergence that is so significant to our age. Ours is an era in which there is an increasing participation of the consumer of a popular cultural text with the text itself-whether as the voting audience of a reality television show, or the creators of fan-art and fiction. Video games therefore become one of the most significant examples of this participatory culture. Technologies have advanced to make this convergence even more possible, and along with that, have intensified how far reaching the effects of convergence can be. Older regimes of knowledge are called into question, and the dimensions of time and space can be compressed into a completely different format. Games in recent times have developed complex narratives that create alternative realities and histories: they find new methods of storytelling through a synthesis of

textual and cinematic media, bound only by the rules that bind gameplay. We have come a long way from games in which the only objective was 'don't die'.

In this paper, I will look at the convergence of the interactive free flow of video games and the questioning and revisioning of historical continuity using the example of the Assassin's Creed series by Ubisoft: open-world, action adventure stealth historical fiction games, consisting of nine main games and a number of supporting materials on multiple platforms. I will focus particularly on the games that follow the adventures of Ezio Auditore da Firenze, and Edward Kenway – in Renaissance Italy and the Caribbean respectively. The games in the Assassin's Creed series exist in two time frames, and a basic understanding of the story is necessary in order to theorise fully its implications with regards to my arguments on history and memory. The games revolve around the rivalry between two ancient secret societies: the Assassins and the Knights Templar.

The real-world chronological setting of the first three games in the series feature Desmond Miles, who is forced into the Animus, a device that allows him to experience his ancestral memories. Desmond explores the memories of a number of Assassins; including, in Assassin's Creed II, Ezio Auditore da Firenze, an Assassin in Italy during the late 15th and early 16th centuries of the Italian Renaissance. Assassin's Creed IV puts the player in control of an employee of a company developing games based on the now deceased Desmond's genetic memory, with the pirate Edward Kenway being the first of his ancestors to be used for this purpose. Throughout the games, there is a constant switching of the gameplay between the characters in the present, trying to solve Abstergo's mysteries, and the ancestral Assassin who is – in effect – playing out incidents that form part of the history that we know and recognise, only with differences that are important to the plot structure of the games.

While the premise of Assassins and Templars is fictitious, the events that Ezio and Edward participate in are true, as are many of the characters they interact with, such as Leonardo da Vinci in Ezio's case and Blackbeard in Edward's. The mythology of the games suggest that it has been the actions of the two rival factions that have affected many of the events in history; for instance, Rodrigo Borgia is a member of the Templars, and is part of the conspiracy to bring down the Medici family in Florence, and it is suggested that the first Templar was the Biblical betrayer Cain.

The series therefore plays with the idea of history and memory, and history as memory, as the lives of the ancestors are relived through the genetic memories of their descendants. The idea of genetic memory is explained using examples from nature: how birds know how to fly south for the winter without having to be taught, that instinct is drawn from genetic structure. This suggests that memory isn't something that is limited to an individual but coded into our very existence, not very differently from the way a computer program or in this case, a game, is coded. Memory, of course, is subject to its own flaws- memories can be suppressed, modified or altogether erased, thereby making it impossible to recount memories in a linear, continuous manner.

Coming back to Henry Jenkins and his idea of convergence being characteristic of modernity, it is also interesting to note that he adopts a tone of caution in discussing its further ramifications. The reason for this caution is something that theorist David Harvey expands further in The Condition of Postmodernity. Modern society is characterised by a degree of fragmentation, a sense that life is fleeting, that no single moment will be the same as the last. As a result of this, history too becomes something that can only be defined in terms of change. If history has any meaning, it can only be found in the disruptive process of change itself: "Modernity, therefore, not only entails a ruthless break with any or all preceding historical conditions, but is characterized by a neverending process of internal ruptures and fragmentations within itself." The everchanging, unstable nature of modernity is what renders history as discontinuous, which means there is no necessary linearity that links the present and future to the past, allowing there to be several 'histories' at the same time. It is from this idea of a historical discontinuity that we can then come to the relationship between memory and history, and the disruption of the traditionally accepted hierarchy between the two. Using Pierre Nora's view that there is an increasing collapse of memory itself, Dennis Washburn says, "The collapse of memory, in Nora's view, has occurred because it operates in fundamental opposition to history. Memory atomizes the sheer data of experience and emphasizes the present as the temporal context in which individual lives may be understood. Because the acceleration of history disrupts the individual's sense of connection with the past, a sense of the collective unity of the past can be recovered only through what Nora calls "sites of memory," places where an imagined collective memory acts as a simulacrum of actual memory to resituate the present within a historical narrative of the past."<sup>2</sup>

In this way, Assassin's Creed becomes, then, a site of memory and creating a collective memory among the players that is sharable within the on-screen space of the game. Through allowing the player to live the historical lives of Ezio and Edward by taking control of them much like the character in the Animus, the games construct a history. This is not to say that the history represented in Assassin's Creed becomes credible in a real-world sense of the world, however, within the space of the game as it is played, it becomes an essential, indivisible part of the narrative. The unfolding and understanding of this history is necessary in order for the player to successfully understand and complete the game. The games go through great pains to construct this history in a way that is, in the space of the game, believable. Nora's 'sites of memory' play an important part in this process. The player loads up the game with certain ideas of the historical world already in place in their consciousness. In Assassin's Creed II, Renaissance Italy appears in all its architectural and artistic splendour, the game's universe generating around the player in awe-inspiring detail. The peppering of the narrative with identifiable characters like the Medici family and Niccolo Machiavelli become part of constructing this 'believable' history, the sites of memory that the game uses to connect with the player. In Assassin's Creed IV, the player as Edward Kenway explores early colonies in Nassau and Havana, and captains his own pirate ship called the Jackdaw. Interesting additions to this gameworld are sea-shanties that the crew of the Jackdaw sing during the sea-based missions of the game. The shanties, based on authentic pirate songs from the 18<sup>th</sup> century, are an important part of building the historical game world, creating for the player a more immersive experience of the era through the convergence of visual imagery with musical cues. The construction of the game world therefore becomes important, as action games have developed since the

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>1</sup> Harvey, David. The Condition of Postmodernity: An Enquiry into the Origins of Cultural Change. Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1989.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>2</sup> Washburn, Dennis. Mastering Narrative in Final Fantasy X. Retrieved from muse.jhu.edu.Accessed 20/01/15.

early iterations where they were defined by fighting and physical drama. In the days of classic arcade games, there was little scope for player interaction in the progression of the storyline, if there was one present at all. Newer games have seen the emergence of more complex relationships between the game worlds themselves and the experience of playing. In her essay, "Towards a Poetics of Virtual Worlds: Multiuser textuality and the Emergence of Story", Lisbeth Klastrup examines how the objects and spaces in a game world are all organised around the act of play, how they all exist for the player character to interact with in some degree. The areas are, Klastrup says then, not realistic as they would be in a cinematic film, but reductive, creating their own rules in order to facilitate gameplay.

Returning to the concept of history, we then must examine why there is a necessity to maintain the present-day narrative in the form of Desmond or the Abstergo employee. This, I posit, furthers the idea of the history as a possibility in the space of the game. While exploring the intricate worlds of the past in the form of Ezio or Edward, is reminded of the 'real world' that they themselves are located in, forming a psychological link with the player character in the present day as well; like Desmond or the employee, they too are experiencing history through the ancestral memories. All the games in the Assassin's Creed series have an element of metafiction, and the fourth iteration acknowledges this fact by taking the narrative into the space of the game industry itself, drawing parallels between Ubisoft, the company that develops the series, and the fictional Abstergo Entertainment within the game.

The entire story of the Assassin's Creed series takes several hours of gameplay to unfold, to explore entirely the environments whether in the form of Renaissance Italian cities or the oceans around the West Indies. The segments which require player interaction are interlaced with cut-scenes, cinematic videos through which the story is essentially told, which on their own could form a film of their own. It is interesting to note that several fans have taken to putting these cinematics together to create fulllength films based on the games. What this essentially signifies is that the experience of these games is not shaped entirely by the gaming abilities of the player. This comes back to Jenkins' idea of media convergence, in which the interface between the game and the conventions of a traditional video-game narrative is disrupted by the cinematics. Jenkins is pessimistic about the inclusion of these cut-scenes, believing that it is interactivity that is the mark of the video game industry and the cinematics are merely imitations of other media. However, Rune Klevjer in "In Defence of Cut-scenes", believes them to be the authorial voice in the creation of a diegetic world – a fictional world created by discourse. "The cut-scene may indeed be a narrative of re-telling... but more importantly: it is a narrative of pre-telling, paving the way for the mimetic event, making it part of a narrative act, which does not take place after, but before the event. The cut-scene casts its meanings forward, strengthening the diegetic, rhetorical dimensions of the event to come."3 The introduction of cut-scenes is an important and successfully employed mechanic in several games that gives the players an impression of being capable of contributing to the plot, bringing one back to Jenkins' initial desire for interactivity. The more the player is invested in the plot and its progression, the greater will be the feeling of interactivity in the space of the game.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>3</sup> Klevjer, Rune. *In Defence of Cutscenes*. Computer Games and Digital Cultures Conference, Tampere, 2002. Retrieved from fanlore.org.

The games also include numerous subplots, side-quests, and a slew of characters to interact with along the way. The story of Ezio's growth into an Assassin in Assassin's Creed II might be the primary thread, but woven along with are optional missions, treasure hunts, and character relationships. Edward Kenway, aside from his primary storyline, is free to explore the seas and raid fortresses, engage in naval battles, build up a fleet of ships and go whaling. The player experiences the history of the game in its fullest in interacting with all these secondary characters and participating in various quests that do not ultimately affect the outcome of the game, but do have an impact on how a player experiences the world that the game has created. Furthermore, in order to fully complete the game, attain what is called '100% synchronisation' with the Animus, the player is required to participate in all of these quests, to attain mastery over not only the basic controls of the game but also the narrative itself - it is possible to end the games without fully discovering the hidden areas or certain intricacies of plot, but it is far more fulfilling to do so. In Assassin's Creed, the player therefore becomes both a participant in the narrative and a spectator of it, through encouraging even further engagement with the vast game world and the characters that populate it. The idea of 'mastery' in the sense of these games translates to attaining skills, knowledge and weaponry required by them to unveil the entirety of the narrative; Edward Kenway, for instance, must restore the pirate town he founded to full functionality through investing in it – this in itself can only be achieved if the player spends time building up capital through exploration and side-quests. An individual who is fully aware of the expectations of the game environment is therefore capable of a simulated self-realization. The games are, then, forms of bildungsroman, coming of age stories narrating the growth not only of the characters in the games but also of the players themselves, growing into the idea of mastery.

The biggest nuance narrative based games such as the Assassin's Creed series has brought, is the fact that they are dependent on the idea of different outcomesoutcomes created by the choices the player makes. These are not merely choices as simple as 'if I jump from here I'll die, and if I don't, I survive', but more complex ones that have an impact on the way the story plays out. It must be noted that even in a game where the player has a lot of options for input; the basic story is set and doesn't change. Rather, it is uncovered by gameplay. Interactivity means that a player can determine the order or even some nuances of the story. However, even a complex game is not truly open ended. The idea that the player can actually exercise choice is an illusion—though it is an illusion that mimics the reality effects of historical narrative. The series maintains its attempt to remain 'historically accurate', therefore Ezio can't assassinate Rodrigo Borgia before he becomes the Pope any more than he can prevent himself, and the assassins as a whole, from being written out of the history that is universally recognised- a fact that the game claims to be due to the actions of Templars. Unlike many games that have fantasy narratives which allow for the establishment of alternate histories that do not necessarily have to be plausible, the historical narrative of the Assassin's Creed games requires a level of plausibility. It is therefore essential for the series that at least the illusion of reality is maintained, and it is more than likely that it is due to this illusion that the series has garnered such popularity.

Video games have long been dismissed as not being particularly worthy of academic attention, but it is clear with new complexities in narrative structure and game design, they are becoming increasingly significant texts to be studied. In an age where interactivity is an integral part of storytelling, this mode that relies almost entirely on the premise of interactivity cannot be ignored. Through this participation and the fact that media forms are now not in isolation but an age of convergence, this can only grow. As the Assassin's Creed games posit, after all, "Everything is permitted."

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