
Video Game Reviews

In an ongoing effort to broaden the reviews section of the *American Historical Review* beyond the realm of the scholarly monograph, the journal's editorial team solicits reviews of other kinds of material of potential interest to historians. The *AHR* now reviews films, historical fiction, memoirs, graphic histories, document collections, pedagogical materials, digital sites, role-playing games, cartographic histories, and more.

In this issue, we offer a cluster of three reviews of Ubisoft's enormously popular historically based video games in their Assassin's Creed franchise. For good or for ill, many young people receive their initial impression of historical epochs, characters, and events in this visually compelling ludic format, and historians should pay attention to these virtual renderings of the past. Assassin's Creed is but one small slice of a very large universe of historical video games that cover a myriad of historical eras and themes, and we may consider others for review in the future. The reviews in this is-

sue are accompanied by Andrew Denning's History Unclassified essay describing his own experience playing games based on the history of World War II. Denning, a historian of Nazi Germany, asks how recent video games focused on National Socialism shape public understanding of the Third Reich.

Innovative reviews of a wide range of historical materials now constitute a regular feature in the *AHR*. As we do here, we group them in special sections in successive issues, rather than scatter a few in each issue. Future issues will contain reviews of titles in the Ohio University Press's Short Histories of Africa series, historians' memoirs, podcasts, and (COVID-19 permitting) reviews of US National Park Service historic sites. The editors invite further proposals for reviews of this kind of material. Please send suggestions to Associate Editor Fei-Hsien Wang at bkreview@indiana.edu.

Assassin's Creed III. Montreal: Ubisoft, 2012.

Ubisoft's Assassin's Creed video game series traces a fictional story drawing on the Knights Templar mythology spanning from the fifth century BCE to the nineteenth century. Each game is set in a new location and time period, while the series has an overarching narrative that continues to the present as players move back and forth between the game's historical characters and its present-day protagonists. Based on a conspiratorial tradition, the narrative pits the Templars, who are the antagonists seeking to control society through order, against the Assassins, the protagonists fighting for free will represented by *Assassin Creed III*'s half-Mohawk, half-British main character, Connor. After earlier games set during the Crusades and the Italian Renaissance, in 2012, Ubisoft released *Assassin's Creed III*, which was set in the American revolutionary era. The title was hugely popular, selling twelve million copies in the first quarter after its release, and it was reissued in a "remastered edition" in

2019. Ubisoft had a number of historical consultants, including academic historians, contribute to the development of the game, and thus the game drew on recent academic historiography to a degree uncommon in most popular portrayals of the American Revolution. Because of this and its popular success, *Assassin's Creed III* must be understood as an expression of popular culture and as a product of the cultural memory of the Revolution.

Unlike more typical popular cultural expressions of the Revolution, the game does not take a triumphalist, Whiggish approach to its narrative and depiction of the Revolution. One of the game's developers said, "As for the siding between Rebels and Loyalists, we have been very cautious in favoring neither side of the war and instead focusing on showing the strengths and weaknesses of multiple key historical characters." While Connor is effectively siding with the Americans, he does so for his own purposes and on his own terms.

The game goes to great lengths not to depict the Revolution itself as a clear struggle between good and evil. At multiple points throughout the story, the game complicates both the idealism and intentions of the revolutionaries to a much greater degree than many popular “Founders Chic” biographies and histories.

Beyond the broad strokes of its evenhanded narrative, the game incorporates several recent and not-so-recent historiographical developments. First, from the animals in the streets to the interiors of taverns and homes, the game took seriously the ethos of social history regarding the importance of recovering the everyday lived experience of common colonists. As a result, it offers highly detailed and relatively accurate depictions of everyday life in urban and frontier early America. Moreover, because the game is played in an “open world” setting, the player is actually free to ignore the given mission at any time and just look around and engage with people, including by playing various card games in Boston taverns or playing ninepins on Bowling Green in New York. The attention paid by the game developers and their historical consultants to details of both the actual and social geography of these urban settings produced one of the most authentic depictions of eighteenth-century life in popular culture, perhaps rivaled only by HBO’s *John Adams* miniseries. Indeed, as a 2013 article in the *Globe and Mail* reported, “The game’s version of Boston’s State House is so painstaking that State House archivists have asked to use Ubisoft’s documents in restoring the building.”

The game also incorporates the ethos of the neo-Progressive interpretation of the period, which has focused on the conflict between class interests in the Revolution. By depicting and allowing players to interact with characters such as shopkeepers, seamen, and tavern goers, the working and middle classes of the game are constantly visible. Their roles in key events and in the revolutionary struggle generally are highlighted. Moreover, the game includes a number of scenes that make clear the fact that their politics did not always align with their revolutionary leaders’. Connor’s democratic sympathies for the colonists, particularly those on the bottom of colonial society, make him a decidedly neo-Progressive hero in a story about the Revolution.

The game reflects the historiographical efforts of the New Left, neo-Progressive, and more recent “inclusion school” historians not only in its depiction but in its foregrounding of the racial and ethnic diversity of the colonies in this period. Connor is a Native American with a British father, and in a good portion of the early part of the game, the player—as a teenaged Connor living on the frontier on his own—must complete such tasks as hunting for food, building weapons, and other activities common in Native American life in the period. Such depictions of Mohawk traditions and cus-

toms—including the use of the Mohawk language, Kanien’kehá:ka—were the result of having a Native American consultant from the Kanien’kehá:ka Onkwawén:na Raotitióhkwa Language and Cultural Center and scholars of Indigenous studies on the development team. The impulse by historians of recent generations to recover the lives of marginalized groups is reflected directly not just in the game’s narrative but also its gameplay. While slavery does not play as large a part in the story as it does in the historiography, the game ends with Connor watching the last British ship leave New York before turning around to see slaves being led to auction.

The game also reflects the rapid growth in the amount of recent scholarship on Native American life and on the role of Native Americans in the Revolution and its aftermath. Some critics bristled at the notion of a Native American character choosing to side with the Americans, but there are multiple scenes throughout where Connor confronts and wrestles with the atrocities being committed by the Continental Army against his own people. Ultimately, the developers created a narrative in which Connor has multiple goals (to aid the patriots, to fight Templars, and to help his people establish a new home following its destruction) that at times coincide and at other times conflict. As a result, he is forced to make hard choices that do not always turn out as he anticipated. Connor reflects the current understanding of Native Americans and of their relationship to the Revolution in that he lost so much as a result of the Revolution but kept fighting for his own self-determination. In this way, *Assassin’s Creed III* has a greater degree of contingency than one might expect in a game about a historical event for which the outcome is known. Historians themselves have been exploring this dynamic recently through new studies regarding the vagaries and contingencies of allegiance in the revolutionary era.

The progressing technology and development of video games now allow for the telling of long-form narratives. This makes video games ideally situated as a cultural form to tell the kind of complex story of the Revolution reflected in recent academic scholarship, as opposed to the more simplistic good-versus-evil narrative typically used in depictions of the Revolution in popular culture. The genre of historical fiction has served a similar purpose, especially in such recent novels as those by Laurie Halse Anderson. But one must ask: is there something about the visual, interactive, and immersive experience that distinguishes video games from historical fiction? Questions like these are now being considered by historians, as in the recent edited volume *Playing with the Past: Digital Games and the Simulation of History* (2013). The form and capabilities of the format as well as its reach now allow video games to serve, intentionally or unintentionally, as a form or expression of public history. Video games

now stand as a new, additional platform that can contribute directly to shaping the collective memory of the Revolution.

As the immediate precedent to the hugely popular *Hamilton: An American Musical*, it helped put the Revolution closer to the forefront of popular culture than at any time since the bicentennial. Due to that prominence, critics of the game pointed to its popularity and to the general lack of awareness of history among Americans as problematic. Because the game intertwines a fictional conspiratorial story with actual historical events and persons, some, like Ian Brown in the *Globe and Mail*, have argued that it is “rewriting history” and that it serves to “undermine conventional history’s authority.” Similar concerns about authority and audience were raised about *Hamilton*, but it enjoyed much greater and more visible public support

from many prominent academic historians, which helped to downplay the existence and significance of the musical’s misrepresentations of the Revolution and its era. Yet *Assassin’s Creed III* is far more grounded in recent academic scholarship than the musical, which was based on Ron Chernow’s decidedly hagiographic “Founders Chic” biography of Hamilton. Overall, the game offers a much more realistic depiction of the settings and contradictions inherent in the revolutionary experience. It brings the spirit of recent academic scholarship and how it has reshaped our view of the Revolution to a general audience more effectively than *Hamilton* and other popular history. In doing so, *Assassin’s Creed III* has also made a significant contribution to the collective memory of the Revolution.

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Assassin’s Creed IV: Black Flag. Montreal: Ubisoft, 2013.

Pirates have been misunderstood ever since Robert Louis Stevenson’s *Treasure Island* depicted them carrying treasure maps with large Xs marking the locations of buried treasure. The zombies in Disney’s *Pirates of the Caribbean* films haven’t clarified matters, either. What about video games? Have they perpetuated myths and fantasies for the sake of entertainment? Or do they help us understand the complexities associated with real people of the past?

Assassin’s Creed IV: Black Flag is one of the best-selling pirate-themed video games. According to a 2013 *Fortune* magazine article by John Gaudiosi, the action-adventure game was projected to sell eight million copies within a year of its release. Ubisoft Entertainment, the French video game company that created the *Assassin’s Creed* series, actually sold eleven million copies in just the first six months. At an average retail price of \$60 a game, *Black Flag* made the single largest contribution to Ubisoft’s annual revenue in 2014, which the website *VentureBeat*’s Jeff Grub reported as \$1.38 billion. How much academic research made its way into this popular game?

Academics have spilled a lot of ink on pirates. Tyson Reeder, Mark Hanna, and Peter Leeson have done much to increase our knowledge of the ways in which seizing and selling contraband goods contributed to mainstream political and economic developments in coastal communities around the world. Marcus Rediker’s books and articles make the case that pirates were part of a highly subversive international proletariat that fought against the rise of capitalism. Does *Black Flag* engage with this scholarly debate?

The *Assassin’s Creed* games involve two competing organizations, the Assassins and the Templars, who

use time travel to find powerful artifacts in the past. *Black Flag* stars Edward Kenway, an English privateer-turned-pirate in search of fame and fortune in the Caribbean during the early 1700s. Kenway learns about a device that can observe anyone, anywhere once provided with a sample of their blood. He fights against Assassins and Templars to get this device. And in the end, he realizes that family is more important than power or riches.

Ubisoft marketed the game for its historical accuracy. Jean Guesdon, creative director at Ubisoft, explained for *Fortune* that “players will be able to interact and play with the most infamous pirates of all time. Blackbeard, for example, is really interesting because he is a ‘character.’ The real historical man was named Edward Thatch (or Teach), and he voluntarily, on purpose, created the character of Blackbeard to appear as frightening as possible and avoid violence as much as he could . . . This is the kind of thing we want players to discover through the course of the game.” The novelty of the game’s historical setting contributed to its brisk sales and to the company’s revenue. Gamers, it turns out, enjoy exploring the past.

The lead writer, Darby McDevitt, was proud of the historical research he had done in preparation for creating the script for *Black Flag*. McDevitt stated in an interview with Colin Campbell for the website *Polygon* that he read several books over the span of five months, including Colin Woodard’s *Republic of Pirates* (2007) and Matthew Parker’s *The Sugar Barons* (2011). Woodard and Parker are very fine writers of nonfiction. “I read about the sugar trade and plantations and how sugar was making British people in particular very wealthy,” said McDevitt. “That informed a game de-