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PLAYING AT KNOWING ANCIENT EGYPT. THE TOURIST GAZE IN *ASSASSIN'S CREED: ORIGINS*

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A *ssassin's Creed* is a single-player, action-adventure stealth video game franchise by Canadian developer Ubisoft. The game series lets its player delve into history from Renaissance-era Florence to Victorian London. In this article, we perform a close reading of the 'discovery tour mode' function in *Assassin's Creed: Origins* (2018), a game taking place in ancient Egypt. Our goal is to understand the purpose of placemaking as a technology for virtual and identity tourism. We argue that due to its quasi-touristic staging of an ancient civilisation, the discovery tour mode is a particularly potent feature in exploring how games render history palatable for an implied white Western game audience.

Keywords: Game Studies, Ubisoft, postcolonial theory, placemaking, identity tourism

INTRODUCTION

Assassin's Creed (Ubisoft, 2007-) is a single-player, action-adventure stealth video game franchise that lets its player delve into history, from Renaissance-era Florence to Victorian London. In this article, we focus on one game in this series, *Assassin's Creed: Origins* (2018; henceforth ACO), and specifically its 'discovery tour mode' function that stages ancient Egypt as a site for virtual and identity tourism (Nakamura, 2002). Hence, we ask how ACO functions as a 'cultural technology' in the contexts of placemaking (Álvarez & Duarte, 2018) and storytelling. We argue that due to its quasi-touristic staging of an ancient civilisation, the discovery tour mode is a particularly potent feature in exploring how games render history palatable for an implied white Western audience (see Gilbert, 2019; Radošinská, 2018).

What makes the discovery tour mode specifically interesting is the focus that ACO has put on the othering and cultural appropriation of classical civilisations through gameplay (see Mukherjee, 2018). As a tool frequently employed in games to 'immerse' players into exotic, colonial landscapes and marginalised bodies, othering simultaneously mobilises a Western imperial cartographic memory while objectifying and mystifying people and places. This is actualised through the narrative strategy of the discovery tour mode that provides the assumed Western player with a particular cultural representation of an ancient non-Western civilisation.

Our article unpacks these dynamics of placemaking in ACO through three narrative viewpoints. The first of these, referred to as the cultural gaze, examines the transcultural depiction of Egypt as a particular kind of landscape, an exoticised 'Other' designed for white Western gamic consumption.

Secondly, we look at the protagonist, and how 'possessing' the bodies of available avatars becomes a sociocultural entry point into the discovery tour mode of the game. ACO's character creation tool raises questions pertaining to identity tourism (Nakamura, 2002) and digital blackfacing (Gray, 2012; Leonard, 2004). In this section we analyse how ACO's discovery tour mode facilitates such practices as part of the player's cultural gaze.

Thirdly, we look at the game's voice-over, exploring what might be termed *museumification*, a practice of knowledge making that is characteristic of Western 'ethnographic museums' rooted in colonialist presence in non-Western countries (Lidchi, 1997). In this part, we argue that ACO's discovery tour mode is a version of digital museumification in that it turns Egypt into a digitally rendered 3D space designed by and for a Western cultural gaze. This means that the local geographical space of Egypt is digitally reconfigured as a Westernised space, repurposed and refashioned to satisfy the expectations of non-local game audiences.

Methodologically, we conduct a textual analysis of the ACO discovery tour mode to shed light on the intersectional quality of these three narrative dimensions of cultural gaze, protagonists, and the voice-over. Our findings highlight the importance of postcolonial perspectives in understanding the use of non-Western locations in games. They suggest that the

museumification of digital games continues traditions of Orientalist othering, making non-Western locations palatable for implied white Western game audiences under the guise of literacy and learning (Gilbert, 2019; Westin & Hedlund, 2016).

ASSASSIN'S CREED: ORIGINS AS A SITE FOR LUDIC HISTORY

The player of the *Assassin's Creed* series takes control of several narrative modes as they traverse through 3D-rendered historical periods. The games rely on temporal-spatial intersections as the central character relives their ancestors' experiences to fight an apocalyptic prophecy (see Seif El-Nasr et al., 2008; Veugen, 2016). The game franchise is loosely based on *Alamut*, a 1938 novel by Slovene author Vladimir Bartol set in 11th century Persia, displaying a fascination with a group of assassins known as *Hashāshīn* in Arabic. The group is said to have been pitted against the Knights Templar as the Arabic and Persian equivalent to the Christian military order. Bartol's novel, translated in English as late as 2004, is set in the castle of Alamut, where its master, Hasan ibn Sabbah, trains his soldiers through trickery to become fanatic assassins to repel foreign conquerors. The novel was published just before WWII and is often interpreted as a contemporary allegory of rising totalitarian regimes in Europe. It is also regarded to convey a nationalistic message, although this semantic level is subdued in it (Hladnik, 2004).

The novel, and in turn the games, offer a convoluted reinterpretation of Arabic and Persian mysticism through heavily convoluted narrativity and spatiality. The figure of assassin is, in Bartol's novel as well as in the game franchise, a tool with which to reshape the figure of modern Islamic fundamentalism and terrorism. Simultaneously as the assassin is conceived as an orientalised villain, they are transformed into an occidentalised hero, "thus enabling a self-othering of the Western subject and an identification, rather than disqualification, with this specific Arabo-Islamic Other" (Komel, 2014, p.525). In *Assassin's Creed: Origins*, the main character is a Medjay, a member of an ancient Egyptian police, called Bayek, who is responsible for protecting the Siwa Oasis during the troubled times of conflict in the Ptolemaic Egypt (305–30BCE).

The game dislocates the physicality of history through various narrative means; for instance, a voice-over narrator helps players make sense of the

historical environment they are navigating. Players control aspects of the narrative by making selections that incur varying results, but they are also allowed to freely roam certain settings without specific game objectives to discover the distant time and place through the game character's embodied experience. This roaming experience, the discovery tour mode, is a particular feature of ACO, and its purpose is to bring a virtual, historical tourism aspect to the game. As the game studio Ubisoft promises in its promotional text (Ubisoft Support, n.d.), the discovery tour "will allow you to explore ancient Egypt without being interrupted by combat or quests," an activity which is supposed to be 'purely educational'.

NARRATIVITY IN THE ACO DISCOVERY TOUR MODE

In the context of this article, we explore how this promise of 'pure education' around ancient Egypt is constructed on the three ludo-narrative levels of spatiality, character design, and museumification through voice-over. In doing so, we are drawing on the theories of narratologists Mieke Bal (2009) and Gerald Prince (2003), especially their notion of 'sujet'. Defined by Bal (2009) as the quintessential story, or the basic plot, the sujet is the backbone of the narrative. The adaptation into various media, such as novels, films, or games, is the fleshing out of the backbone (Bal, 2009). In the case of ACO, the sujet is the journey in ancient Egypt and the form is a digital game. In order to adapt a sujet to a specific medium, narrative perspective is necessary. In ACO, such perspective is spatiotemporal, making the sujet, that basic storyline, oscillate between the parameters of the ancient landscape on the one hand, and the contemporaneity of the player on the other hand.

A core element of narrativity is the central character. As protagonist, their role is to anchor the sujet to an actantial model. A narratological term coined by Greimas (1986), the actantial model divides the acting participants in the narrative to protagonist, antagonist, object of quest, and helper. In the ACO discovery tour mode, the protagonist remains the same from the perspective of the player. The object of the quest is the unraveling of the sites. The 'antagonist' is a lack of educational knowledge, and the 'helper' is the educational information provided to players.

In addition to sujet and a character, setting is the third major element in narrativity. It is defined as "the spatiotemporal circumstances in which the

events of a narrative occur” (Prince, 2003, p.88). Thus, discussing spatiality and temporality highlights the role the setting performs in the narrative structure of the ACO discovery tour mode.

In this mode, there are two time frames: The sujet can be seen in the historical in-game time, where the timeline of presented ‘facts’ occurs. The narrative plot time, however, is determined by the player, as they make choices around avatars and virtual tours. This sense of temporality is orchestrated by the game designers. The audience is assumed to be familiar with the convention of historical staging via Western museums. They are further assumed to be interested in ‘learning’ through a convenient breakdown of ‘facts’, structured in a particular quantifiable fashion. This aligns the narrativity of ACO’s discovery tour with what game scholar Mukherjee (2015) describes as spatiality of empire building. While the discovery tour mode is not explicitly themed as an empire game, it still incorporates an imperial gaze which lays claim to knowing and controlling ‘ancient’ spaces and peoples.

SEEING THE OTHER: THE CULTURAL GAZE

This section examines the ACO narrative as othering of ancient Egyptian culture and proposes the concept of the cultural gaze as a tool for this process. ‘Gaze’ as a concept originates from feminist film criticism and most notably from Laura Mulvey’s ‘male gaze’ (1975), which refers to the male objectification of women in film. From this, we derive the notion of a ‘cultural gaze’, whereby a viewer, in our case an (implied Western) player looks at an othered cultural object, in our case the historicised location of ancient Egypt in ACO.

The cultural gaze is related to the concept of Orientalism, famously introduced by Edward Said in *Orientalism* (1978). The term itself ranges from academic, cultural, and literary construction of the ‘Orient’ as opposed to the ‘Occident’, as part of the colonialist project to objectify and devalue non-Western, specifically African, Arab, and Islamic cultures, and to justify colonialist domination of those regions. Orientalism is thus a European invention, an imperialistic othering tool targeting African and Arabo-Islamic cultures, and sustaining white supremacy (Burney, 2012). This is evident in literary and artistic representations, ranging from translations, or

mistranslations of works from that region into European languages to original Western media, including paintings, cinema, and more recently, gaming (Fickle, 2019).

ACO's discovery tour mode applies a cultural Orientalist gaze in its visual design of ancient Egypt in order to serve dominant stereotypical expectations potential Ubisoft audiences might already hold of ancient Egypt. Gamers traverse a detailed geographical map of 'ancient Egypt' rife with pyramids, temples, palm trees, and camels. Places of 'interest' are highlighted as starting points for virtual museum tours. Throughout each tour, a golden line is showing players the way, structuring the place for optimal consumption. Combined with this 'authentic' environment, the guided tour establishes its techniques of an Orientalist cultural gaze in Edward Said's sense (see also Burney, 2012), in that it frames 'ancient' space as controllable and knowable by the uninformed 'tourist'. In addition to the promotional material, the in-game text reinforces this message by addressing players directly: "Guided tours will take you through majestic landmarks, and acquaint you with ancient Egyptians and their culture" (Fig. 1).

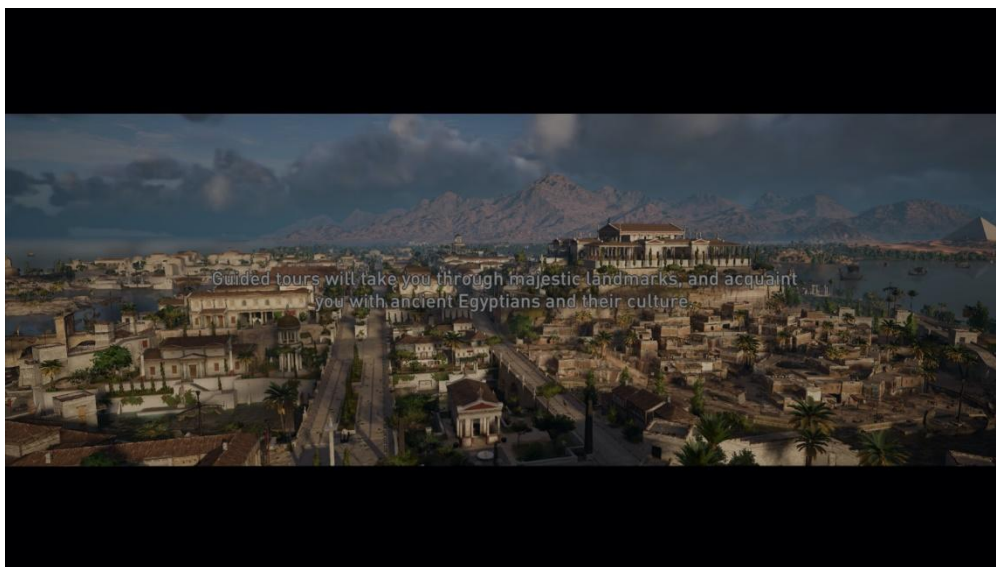


Figure 1. Screenshot of the Assassin's Creed: Origins discovery tour mode. It promotes guided tours to the player featuring a bird's-eye view on Alexandria.

This narration, projected on a bird's-eye shot of Alexandria (Fig. 1), establishes the game's relationship of us/players versus them/ancient Egyptians which promises the player an Orientalist cultural intimacy ('acquaintance') with an ancient civilisation. Paradoxically, this offer is based on knowledge curated by a contemporary game company, whose educational materials are derived from colonial-ethnographic museum culture. This is best shown in the various instances where the game presents fact sheets and illustrations by French Orientalist artists like Jean-Léon Gérôme (Fig. 2).



Figure 2. Screenshot of Orientalist imagery used in *Assassin's Creed: Origins* discovery tour mode: *The Sphinx of Giza* by French painter Jean-Léon Gérôme.

BEING THE OTHER: ANCIENT AVATARS

The discovery tour mode allows players to choose one of many avatars from a selection of 'authentic' historical celebrities, including Cleopatra and Julius Caesar. Their selection happens freely and with no consequence to the game mechanics itself – it is mere decoration, and avatars can be changed at will at any time during a tour.

From a spatial perspective, it is interesting how the avatar literally becomes the player's entry point to the cultural landscape of ancient Egypt. Most of the

avatars presented are bodies of colour. When moving around, the player takes possession of these bodies, and a third-person camera frames them as the player's bodies, therefore positioning the player into a 'subjective' experience, a way of walking in the Egyptians' shoes. When introducing historical facts, the game camera moves up, and we leave the avatar's body. This frames history as 'objective,' detached from bodily experiences and the lives of the historical characters we have just inhabited, and beyond our control.

Given the game studio Ubisoft's proximity to white supremacist gamer culture (e.g. Good, 2020), a core audience of ACO's discovery tour mode can be expected to be white gamers. This makes avatars susceptible to 'identity tourism' (Nakamura, 2002), a version of the cultural gaze whereby white users inhabit non-white bodies in an often unconsciously racist fashion. A similar term discussed in regard to racist game character performances is 'high-tech blackface' (Leonard, 2004; Marriott, 1999), which refers to players' desire to 'be black' for the duration of a game, for instance by inhabiting "stereotypical visions of strength, athleticism, power and sexual potency" in sports games (Leonard, 2004).

In the context of ACO's educational vision, these conversations can be extended to include the pleasures of becoming an ancient Other, thereby symbolically taking full control of ancient Egyptians' culture, traditions, and ways of living. Not only are players of ACO allowed to traverse and 'acquaint' themselves with the environments and people in the game; they can 'be ancient' for the duration of the game, inhabiting certain bodies of colour whose exciting personal histories are thereby exhibited as controllable and ready for appropriation.

Since ACO's list of period characters available in the discovery tour mode features persons of different races, white gamers have the hypothetical option to resist identity tourism and digital blackfacing; they might choose a character of their own skin tone. However, by providing game characters of different races as equally available to all players, the game positions white players as entitled to 'look through the eyes' of simultaneously historically famous and racially marginalised avatars. Thus, the game models a form of ludic white entitlement over brown bodies which – even if unintended by design – offers a platform for white supremacist fantasies.

Furthermore, as opposed to ACO's story mode where Bayek serves as a focus character in the player's 'discovery' of ancient Egypt, the discovery tour mode offers a long list of avatars to select from. The players can swap their avatars mid-tour, should they ever get bored by a character or desire to explore a location in a different 'skin'. This presents ancient Egyptian protagonists as ultimately replaceable and dehistoricized; they can be moved in and out of local contexts at the player's will. Overall, this treatment of protagonists as subjected to the cultural gaze presents ACO's education as a practice which does not necessitate decolonial deconstruction of colonial activity; it rather perpetuates such activity by molding it in the 'innovative' form of digital gaming.

KNOWING THE OTHER: VOICE-OVER

In narratology, omniscient and omnipresent narrators represent authority (Prince, 2003). Their ability to be present everywhere and to know more than the reader places them above readers and grants them unquestionable authority. The ACO discovery tour mode presents such an omniscient narrator in the form of a voice-over conveying information through a decidedly American English accent. Mimicking conventions of a classical museum tour, the voice-over is positioned to help players make sense of the game space by structuring and prioritising information to provide 'purely educational' knowledge. It thereby acts as an extension of institutionalised discourse on ancient Egypt, a voice of neutral reason and rationality which audiences are supposed to trust.

Paradoxically, by being American English, the perceived 'neutrality' of this voice is constructed through the use of an accent which does not reflect first-hand local experience of Egypt. The game thus uses a US-centric imperialist voice to mark the narrative contents as trustworthy, neutral, and suited to provide players with the necessary 'facts' of history.

CONCLUSION

Our goal in this article has been to understand the purpose of placemaking as a cultural technology for virtual and identity tourism in games. Examining the discovery tour mode in *Assassin's Creed: Origins* has been an exercise in unpacking how cultural representation works in a postcolonial theoretical

setting. In this article, we have conducted a close reading of three related narrative elements of cultural gaze and space making, character design, and museumified voice-over in order to understand digital games as sites for contemporary colonial activity. What makes ACO's discovery tour mode a specifically interesting example in this regard has been the designerly effort it puts into the high-definition rendering of an ancient and mysterious version of Egypt, inviting an Orientalist player gaze on East vs. West (Burney, 2012; Said, 1978) while promoting this choice as 'purely educational' (see also Hammar, 2017; Karsenti et al., 2019). By dividing player and game landscape along the binary of Orient vs. Occident, us vs. them, the discovery mode mobilises a white imperialist cartographic memory for player edutainment (e.g. Gilbert, 2019; Mukherjee, 2018) under the guise of objective, 'pure' education.

Not only does this digital touristic 'museum package' stage ancient Egypt in a way which perpetuates a colonial cultural gaze, it also stages the bodies of 'authentic' historical celebrities of colour as freely accessible and 'possessable' by any consumer of the discovery tour. Furthermore, the neutral museumified voice-over frames the player's tour as an objective learning experience, delivering on Ubisoft's marketing promise to produce 'pure education' (Ubisoft Support, n.d.). This positions any player as entitled to inhabit the spaces and bodies of 'authentic' others, and to gain knowledge and 'education' via a Western quasi-omniscient narrator, the game designers. The three dimensions of a high-definition cultural gaze, the 'authentic' celebrity bodies, and the 'real' museum narration helps the game avoid questions around coloniality and accountability. Whose 'pure education' does the discovery tour facilitate in rendering its version of ancient Egypt? Who or what is actually being 'discovered' by players? Addressing such questions would expose the power dimensions baked into the Orientalist design decisions, including an analysis of who is entitled to 'discover' (White western audiences) and who is being discovered (the imagined 'Orient') in the game.

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