$\mathcal{MJUR}$

"Competent, Capable, and Practically Dressed": The Representation of Women in the *Assassin's Creed* Series

Stephen J. Fishbune
St. Mary's University of Minnesota

Abstract

In this paper, I discuss how the inclusion of female protagonists into the historical settings of Assassin's Creed *is an attempt to rectify gender inequality both in the present and in the past, but ultimately only serves to exemplify the limitations of inclusivity through representation.* Assassin's Creed *is a video game series in which players are placed into historical settings. Throughout the series, shifts in the video game industry's perception of women coincided with the inclusion of more influential female characters. Often viewed as a realm for men and boys, the video game industry splintered into chaos when a harassment campaign known as Gamergate uncovered that gamers were much more gender diverse than many believed. The incorporation of women into 2015's* Assassin's Creed Syndicate *directly responded to the issues raised by Gamergate. Even so, comparisons between the male and female protagonists in the game reveal the persistence of gender normativity. At the heart of the issue is* Assassin's Creed's *position as an historical video game. Depicting a Victorian London with widespread gender equality,* Assassin's Creed Syndicate *tells more about the present than the past. As such, the game is a manifestation of history's affective turn.*

In late 2015, feminist video game critic Anita Sarkeesian reviewed the game, *Assassin's Creed Syndicate,* not based on its merits as electronic entertainment, but rather on its efforts to include a diverse cast of characters. A great majority of the review was devoted to the game's portrayal of female characters, an aspect of the game that Sarkeesian found particularly positive: "Syndicate gives us an image of a world in which the existence of women as people is treated as completely normal." One of the primary reasons for this image is the game's addition of a playable female character named Evie. Sarkeesian wrote that the details that make Evie so refreshing in the video game landscape

"are sometimes easier to notice by identifying what she isn't rather than what she is. Evie is not objectified, she is not sexualized, and she is not created exclusively for the sexual arousal of a presumed straight male audience." Sarkeesian similarly described the female combatants that Evie faced as being "competent, capable, and practically dressed."[1]

Anita Sarkeesian's review of *Assassin's Creed Syndicate* is notable for two reasons. First, Sarkeesian was one of the primary targets of a harassment campaign known as Gamergate. Beginning in 2014, when an independent female developer faced accusations of using her relationship with a gaming journalist to receive positive coverage for one of her games, Gamergate became a widespread online movement in which anonymous internet users, most of whom turned out to be male, sent abusive messages to women who challenged sexism and misogyny in the gaming industry.[2] Often the abuse escalated to threats of sexual assault and murder. Sarkeesian, already known for her feminist critiques of the video game industry, received the bulk of this abuse, and the constant death threats forced her out of her home and stalled her business. News coverage of the event made Sarkeesian the leading figure in the fight against sexism and misogyny in the industry. Second, Sarkeesian's review is significant because she addressed gender in an historical setting. Each entry of the *Assassin's Creed* series takes players to a different period in the past. *Syndicate*, for example, places players in mid-nineteenth century industrial London. Had the game been historically accurate, women would not have the kind of gender equity displayed throughout. However, Sarkeesian directly attacked this line of reasoning in her review:

> While it might seem "unrealistic" to imagine women . . . who are treated and respected as full human beings in 1868, realism is not really the goal in a game where Assassins and Templars have been waging a centuries' old war over artifacts created by an ancient civilization and where you can leap from the top of St. Paul's Cathedral into a pile of leaves and walk away unharmed. The inclusion of these characters works not because of realism, but because of believability and internal consistency. That believability is a result of the developers' conscious decision to make the presence of these characters normalized and respected by everyone else in the game.[3]

Therefore, the woman at the heart of the issue of sexism in the gaming industry praised *Assassin's Creed Syndicate*, a game based in history. History became the background for a progressive movement, as Ubisoft, the creators of the *Assassin's Creed* series, attempted to balance the needs of game development

1.   Anita Sarkeesian, review of *Assassin's Creed Syndicate*, developed by Ubisoft, *Feminist Frequency*, October 22, 2015, accessed September 2, 2016, https://feministfrequency.com/video/assassins-creed-syndicate-review/.

2.   The erroneous accusations against the female developer, Zoe Quinn, originated on the message board website 4chan. Gamergate supporters considered any gaming news outlet that did not report on the Quinn story part of the conspiracy. This created a maelstrom of harassment that eventually targeted anyone who spoke out against sexism in the video game industry.

3.   Ibid.

with the growing desire for female representation in video games, resulting in a video game that seeks to rectify current gender inequalities by placing strong and capable female characters in historical settings.

Historians are increasingly paying attention to these emotional connections to the past as part of what has become known as the affective turn, a scholarly turn in which historians observe how the personal lifestyles, values, and feelings that pervaded the events of the past are viewed in the present. Historian Vanessa Agnew refers to affective history as "historical representation that both takes affect as its object and attempts to elicit affect."[4] Generally, this analysis tends to focus on historical reenactment. Reenactors pride themselves on being as historically accurate as possible. Agnew instead argues that "body-based testimony tells us more about the present self than the collective past."[5] Furthermore, Agnew posits that the types of historical events being depicted hint towards the type of affect that reenactors hope to extract. For instance, reenacting the Civil War without depicting slavery focuses more on patriotism than the processes of history. Because of this manipulability, Agnew writes, "Reenactment's emancipatory gesture is to allow participants to select their own past in reaction to a conflicted present."[6]

Media studies scholar Brian Rejack has broadened the study of the affective turn to include virtual reenactment, specifically video games. He suggests that historically based video games are superior to normal reenactment in their ability to display visually the past, but they also have major limitations. The most obvious limitation is that playing a video game does not involve the entire body. Whereas reenactors often use all of their senses in order to "experience" the past, virtual reenactment is constrained to the audio-visual. Rejack also notes that playing video games is often a solitary action instead of a collective experience. Even with these limitations, Rejack notices that the promotional elements of many historical video games use the language of reenactment. For example, Gearbox, the developers of the World War II game *Brothers in Arms*, hired Colonel John F. Antal to be a historical advisor and advertised the game for its detail and authenticity. However, Rejack also notices a conflict between the game's attempts at realism and its role as a form of entertainment: "While Antal . . . may think of *Brothers in Arms* as a way to re-create the past, it ultimately needs to be recreational."[7] Developers must measure historical accuracy against a video game's focus: play. The phrase "playing the past," commonly used in historical video game studies, simultaneously raises questions of play, realism, reenactment, and affect.[8]

4.   Vanessa Agnew, "History's Affective Turn: Historical Reenactment and Its Work in the Present," *Rethinking History* 11, no. 3 (September 2007): 301.
5.   Vanessa Agnew, "Introduction: what is reenactment?" *Criticism* 46, no. 3 (Summer 2004): 335.
6.   Ibid., 328.
7.   Brian Rejack, "Toward a Virtual Reenactment of History: Video Games and the Recreation of the Past," *Rethinking History* 11, no. 3 (September 2007): 415–420.
8.   The phrase is an extremely popular title. See *Playing with the Past: Digital Games in the Simulation of History* by Matthew Kapell and Andrew Elliott, *Playing the Past: History and Nostalgia in Video Games* by Zach Whalen and Laurie Taylor, or playthepast.org.

Curating reenactment for commercial entertainment also requires developers to create an experience that is marketable and enjoyable for a wide audience. Historian John Brewer writes that this process, "given the ways in which marketing strategies work, is largely seen as a question of establishing forms of identification."[9] By identification, Brewer refers to the process by which consumers connect with the characters they view in media. The connection forms, in Brewer's definition, when consumers have some sort of characteristic in common with the character, whether that be national, ethnic, or gendered. Brewer argues that this connection between consumer and character is vital to commodified reenactments: "Such reenactment enables us . . . to place ourselves in a larger history, to see ourselves, ordinary as we may be, as participants in or the beneficiaries of a transformation—the growth of democracy, the emancipation of minorities, the defeat of totalitarianism, the emancipation of the self and so on."[10] In short, consumers of historical media want to *feel* as if they are an active part of history.

While Ubisoft's effort to ensure that both men and women identify with *Assassin's Creed Syndicate* is precisely why Anita Sarkeesian spoke so highly of the game, representing certain groups goes beyond inclusion. The feminist critiques that made Sarkeesian a target of Gamergate focused not on the number of female characters in the medium, but on the quality. The primary obstacle to representation for developers is recognizing when an image reinforces gender stereotypes. Professor of Popular Culture Jeffrey A. Brown's *Dangerous Curves: Heroines, Gender, Fetishism, and Popular Culture* addresses this issue as he examines action-heroine character types in popular culture. Analyzing the character of Lara Croft from the *Tomb Raider* series in particular, Brown claims that the character's design conveys two contradictory messages. On the one hand, Croft is a treasure-hunting, gun-toting adventurer. On the other hand, Croft is a heavily sexualized figure. Although early interpretations likened the act of men controlling Lara to a transgendered experience, Brown writes that "it may be more accurate to think of their experience as an easy oscillation between identifying with Lara Croft's masculine characteristics and objectifying her feminine form." Therefore, Brown argues, even though *Tomb Raider* includes a strong female protagonist, the game "capitalize[s] on the binary logic of our society that continues to engender adventuring as masculine and erotic spectacle as feminine."[11] What Brown discovers is that proper representation, if such a thing even exists, requires an extensive understanding of the culture surrounding the media.

As a game with a female playable character in a historical setting, *Assassin's Creed Syndicate* lies at the intersection of virtual reenactment and gender representation in popular culture, but it is only the latest entry in a series that has

9.   John Brewer, "Reenactment and Neo-Realism," in *Historical Reenactment: From Realism to the Affective Turn*, ed. Iain McCalman and Paul A. Pickering (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 82.
10.   Ibid.
11.   Jeffrey A. Brown, *Dangerous Curves: Action Heroines, Gender, Fetishism, and Popular Culture* (Jackson MS: University Press of Mississippi, 2011), 111.

struggled to find a solution to the two seemingly contradictory ideas. The series' beginnings as a male-oriented history are indicative of the gaming industry as a whole, but as the series progressed, Ubisoft attempted to include more complex, strong, and influential female characters, regardless of the historical setting in which the game took place. Ubisoft created these characters, furthermore, in a climate in which the proper representation of women in entertainment remained contested. Therefore, Ubisoft uses the later games in the *Assassin's Creed* series as an attempt to rectify current gender inequality both in the present and in the past, but ultimately only serve to exemplify the limitations of inclusivity through representation.

A Male Activity

Western societies that have widely adopted video games into their culture have considered the medium a center for men and boys since it began. As a form of play, popular opinion held that men made video games for the enjoyment of boys. Although this mindset was culturally prevalent, it was not accurate. In fact, a Pew Research survey among Americans aged eighteen and older found that in 2015, adult women were as likely to play video games as adult men. Nevertheless, men were over twice as likely to refer to themselves as "gamers" and the gap was even wider for adults under thirty.[12] Cultural attitudes about gaming are clearest in young adults, a group often fully enmeshed in popular culture. One example comes from the confessions section of teen magazine *Seventeen*, in which girls may send their secrets anonymously to be published in the magazine. A girl named Eliza, aged seventeen, wrote that she was a gamer, a fact that she keeps secret from her friends. She explains, "I guess I'm scared to admit that to them because I'm worried I'll be judged."[13]

Historian Carly A. Kocurek, in *Coin-Operated Americans: Rebooting Boyhood at the Video Game Arcade*, traces the creation of the notion of video gaming as a male activity back to early arcades. She notes that arcade machines were many individuals' first interactions with computers, giving them strong initial impressions. Kocurek then argues that since most of the developers of these early arcade games were men, they made games for a male audience: "An industry of men imagines a consumer base that is like them and so makes games that reflect their own interests and experiences." This process created a cycle. As people learned of the video game industry, they observed games made for a male audience. Part of this male audience then grew up wanting to make games of their own, and the pattern repeated.[14]

---

12.   Maeve Duggan, "Gaming and Gamers," *Pew Research Center*, last modified December 15, 2015, http://www.pewinternet.org/2015/12/15/gaming-and-gamers/.
13.   Eliza, "I Secretly Joined a Gaming Community," as told to Andrea Stanley, *Seventeen*, October 2016, 86.
14.   Carly A. Kocurek, *Coin-Operated Americans: Rebooting Boyhood at the Video Game Arcade* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2015), xxiii.

The prevalence of violence in the video games of the past few decades is both an outgrowth of and a validation for the cultural understanding of gaming as a masculine activity. Some of the most commercially successful video game series, like *Grand Theft Auto* and *Call of Duty*, are infamous for their violence, to the point where politicians and media personalities have blamed real world violence on the influence of gaming. Accusations of this sort are not new. Released in 1976, Exidy's *Death Race*, which had players kill human-like gremlins by driving over them, caused a great deal of media controversy. CBS even devoted a segment of the show *60 Minutes* to investigate the psychology of video game players due to the game's content.[15] Therefore, Kocurek claims that as media outlets began describing video games, they made violent video games synonymous with all video games.[16]

Although widespread recognition of the movement did not exist until Gamergate, the call for better female representation in video games has existed for years, but the significance and implementation of such representation have provoked fierce debates. Kocurek argues that both representation and gender balance would require a more diverse workforce. Reversing misguided understandings of video games necessitates going back to the source of the idea, which Kocurek claims is often developers.[17] In contrast, media studies scholar Adrienne Shaw does not expect that a more diverse workforce would fix the problem. Shaw argues that in order for representation to truly matter for players, developers need to understand how players identify with characters. Simply adding a character of a certain gender, nationality, or sexual orientation does not make individuals of those demographics identify with the character. Shaw writes that instead of "thinking about identification as something tied to demographic categories, we see . . . that it is much more about affective connections."[18] These affective connections are the basis for Agnew's affective turn. Reenactors identify with the past by forming emotional connections with it, but Agnew argues that these connections reflect the reenactor's ideas in the present.

Therefore, Ubisoft developed the *Assassin's Creed* series under the notion that gaming was a primarily male activity, but as the series progressed, the growing concern for female representation in the medium affected development. The title alone, *Assassin's Creed*, exudes blood, violence, and murder. The historical setting of each game reasserts this violence. Ranging from the Crusades to the Revolutionary War, from gangs to pirates, violence is at the center of *Assassin's Creed*'s narrative. *Assassin's Creed Syndicate*, commended by Sarkeesian for its respect towards female characters, uses industrial London as a backdrop for a story of gang violence. This introduction of female influence into a male history is precisely why Sarkeesian praised the game, however. *Assassin's Creed* thus exists

---

15.   Brad King and John Borland, *Dungeons and Dreamers: The Rise of Computer Game Culture from Geek to Chic* (Emeryville, California: McGraw-Hill, 2003), 178.

16.   Kocurek, *Coin-Operated Americans*, xx.

17.   Ibid., xxiii.

18.   Adrienne Shaw, *Gaming at the Edge: Sexuality and Gender at the Margins of Gamer Culture* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2014), 69.

at the intersection of violence, masculinity, representation, and history. *Assassin's Creed* is not the only historical video game made under such influences, but no other historical video game matches the consistency and popularity of *Assassin's Creed*. Ubisoft released at least one new entry in the franchise every year between the launch of *Assassin's Creed II* in 2009 and *Assassin's Creed Syndicate* in 2015. Throughout this period, the influence of female characters within the series has changed dramatically.

A Female Influence

The original *Assassin's Creed* launched on November 13, 2007. Upon start-up, the game displayed the following disclaimer: "Inspired by historical events and characters, this work of fiction was designed, developed, and produced by a multicultural team of various religious faiths and beliefs."[19] Apart from simply protecting themselves from criticism of the game's portrayal of the Catholic Church, this disclaimer reveals Ubisoft's determination to include a wide variety of ideas within the series. Every subsequent *Assassin's Creed* title included the same disclaimer—that is, until 2015's *Assassin's Creed Syndicate*. The disclaimer still existed, but the developer had adjusted it. Instead of focusing on religion, the message reads, "Inspired by historical events and characters, this work of fiction was designed, developed, and produced by a multicultural team of various beliefs, sexual orientations, and gender identities."[20] This description indicates a distinct change in focus for the development team. Gender and sexuality became significant characteristics of diversity.

Back in 2014, before the disclaimer was changed, historical video game blogger David Hussey analyzed the *Assassin Creed* series' representation of women on *Play the Past*. Hussey noticed that early *Assassin's Creed* titles included relatively small roles for women. In the historical portion of the first *Assassin's Creed* game, for example, there were essentially no female characters save for a fictional English woman who is notable for being the only assassination target that the protagonist decides to spare. Hussey narrows this exclusion down to three reasons. First, he claims that the first *Assassin's Creed*'s narrative is comparatively shallower than other entries in the series, and so even the male characters are fairly underdeveloped. Second, in the game's historical setting—the Holy Land during the Third Crusade in 1191—women did not have many freedoms. Third and most important to Hussey, the developers consciously chose not to include female characters.[21] As noted earlier, though, finding a strictly male-oriented video game was not uncommon. Hussey's surprise over the first *Assassin's Creed*'s lack of female characters is due to their inclusion in later entries of the series.

The trilogy of *Assassin's Creed* games that followed the first game

19.   *Assassin's Creed*, Ubisoft, November 13, 2007.
20.   *Assassin's Creed Syndicate*, Ubisoft, October 23, 2015.
21.   David Hussey, "Assassin's Creed Week Part III: Women of the Past," *Play the Past*, February 19, 2014.

began to reveal Ubisoft's struggle to include female characters. Each game features several female characters of moderate significance to the game's main narrative. *Assassin's Creed II*, a game set in Renaissance Italy around the turn of the sixteenth century, introduces players to Claudia Auditore, sister of the game's protagonist, Ezio. When the execution of Claudia's father and two brothers disrupts the Auditore family, Claudia takes control of the family's finances while Ezio plans for revenge.[22] These skills lead her to run her own brothel in *Assassin's Creed: Brotherhood*. While a female-managed brothel in Renaissance Italy was not altogether unusual, Claudia later shows great courage and physical strength in defending it from Templars, and she is eventually inducted into the Assassin Brotherhood.[23] Nevertheless, while a few women like Claudia have significant storylines, many more are simply nameless prostitutes. Players are able, and many times encouraged, to pay prostitutes to distract guards or provide cover. If players do not purchase prostitutes, they may instead choose to pay a muscular group of male mercenaries to attack the guards.[24] Consequently, a disconnect exists between the game's narrative component and what players actually see while playing.

While Ubisoft began implementing a greater, though still limited, number of fictional female characters into the *Assassin's Creed* storyline, they also added women of historical significance. Hussey specifically mentions the characters Caterina Sforza from *Assassin's Creed II* and Mary Read from *Assassin's Creed IV: Black Flag*. Both women were powerful in their own ways. Sforza was a noblewoman who flaunted her sexuality and prestige. Read, on the other hand, was a mighty pirate, originally disguised as a man, who was both adventurous and wise. Even though their connection to the Assassin Order is fictional, these women's personalities and positions have historical merit. Both women act as guides to the protagonist. Although they hold significant positions, however, they also find themselves subjected to the trope of being damsels in distress at some point in the storyline. Therefore, Hussey argues that their "past was manipulated in a way that reduced their status as strong women." Even so, Hussey admits that Ubisoft is "probably one of the leaders in including female characters" in the game industry.[25]

As Ubisoft continued to include a handful of female side characters in the series between *Assassin's Creed II* and *Assassin's Creed IV: Black Flag*, they also experimented with a spin-off game set in late eighteenth-century New Orleans featuring the series' first female protagonist, Aveline de Grandpré. Beforehand, all female characters in the series were essentially side characters, only vaguely tied to the game's main plot. That changed with *Assassin's Creed III: Liberation*. Created for the Playstation Vita handheld, *Liberation* released alongside *Assassin's*

---

22.   *Assassin's Creed II*, Ubisoft, November 17, 2009.

23.   *Assassin's Creed: Brotherhood*, Ubisoft, November 16, 2010.

24.   This feature was not exclusive to *Assassin's Creed II*. It was also implemented in *Assassin's Creed: Brotherhood, Assassin's Creed: Revelations*, and *Assassin's Creed IV: Black Flag*.

25.   Hussey, "Assassin's Creed Week Part III: Women of the Past."

Creed III in 2012 as an attempt to reach the portable market. The game's position as a side story for the relatively small number of Vita players gave Ubisoft the opportunity to experiment with a female main character. Significantly, they hired a woman, Jill Murray, to write the story for the game. When asked how focusing on a female character changed the game, Murray responded, "I think the really great thing is that it really hasn't changed how the game is presented." That is not to say that the game featured nothing more than a gender swap, as Murray also notes that Aveline allowed for "some new opportunities."[26] Even so, Murray's response does suggest that Ubisoft wanted to keep the *Assassin's Creed* series just as recognizable in terms of objectives and gameplay no matter the gender of the main playable character.

Thus, when Hussey suggests that *Assassin's Creed* is one of the leaders in including female characters, he is leaning more on inclusion in the demographic, rather than the affective, sense. Including a greater number of female characters after the first *Assassin's Creed* would not be difficult for Ubisoft since there were almost none to begin with, but even after six years of the franchise, up through *Assassin's Creed IV: Black Flag* in 2013, Ubisoft never really questioned how women should be added. Jill Murray, for example, focused heavily on how Aveline's race and social status affected her outfits in *Assassin's Creed III: Liberation* rather than on how Aveline's gender did so.[27] The focus at Ubisoft, as seen in the disclaimer before each game, was still on race and religion. However, Hussey only analyzed the series between the first *Assassin's Creed* and *Assassin's Creed IV: Black Flag*. Since then, there have been two major *Assassin's Creed* titles, as well as major developments to the role of gender in the series.

Anticipation for a female protagonist in the mainline *Assassin's Creed* series existed among some fans well before the announcement of 2014's *Assassin's Creed Unity*, but the series' developers were hesitant about such an inclusion. Alex Hutchinson, creative director for *Assassin's Creed III*, said having a female protagonist in that game would have been "a pain" because "the history of the American Revolution is the history of men." He feared that if they added a female protagonist, "people would stop believing [in the game's historical setting]."[28] Similarly, *Assassin's Creed IV: Black Flag*'s game director, Ashraf Ismail, worried that including a female protagonist when the majority of pirates were male would be "a detail people got stuck on." Ismail added, however, that while he did not know what the future of the series held, a female assassin "is not something we're trying to avoid at all."[29]

Despite focusing on the story of a fictional conspiracy that supposedly

26.   Jill Murray, interview by Daniel Kaszor, *Financial Post*, October 20, 2012, accessed November 8, 2016, http://business.financialpost.com/fp-tech-desk/post-arcade/assassins-creed-iii-liberation-writer-jill-murray-on-how-story-and-gameplay-can-go-hand-in-hand.
27.   Ibid.
28.   Stephen Totilo, "Just Who Is *Assassin's Creed III*'s New Hero?" *Kotaku*, March 27, 2012, accessed November 8, 2016, http://kotaku.com/5896938/just-who-is-assassins-creed-iiis-new-hero.
29.   Eddie Makuch, "Female *Assassin's Creed* Lead 'Wouldn't Be Surprising' Says Ubisoft," *Gamespot*, March 4, 2013, accessed November 8, 2016, http://www.gamespot.com/articles/female-assassins-creed-lead-wouldnt-be-surprising-says-ubisoft/1100-6404762/.

influenced almost all major historical events, some sort of historical legitimacy was important to Ubisoft. The statement seems inherently contradictory. In a game about machines that let people relive their ancestors' memories, befriend and murder famous historical figures, and interact with gods, the inclusion of women is what makes believability problematic. The absurdity of the statement suggests that it may be more of an excuse. By the time *Black Flag* was released, it was no secret that publishers believed games with female leads would not sell.[30] Ubisoft may have found it economically beneficial to have games set in historically male settings. Whether or not this was true, there is some merit to Ismail's claim. For many players, it may be more reasonable to connect a conspiracy to the patriarchal Catholic Church in the late fifteenth century than it is to control a female assassin. However, this suggests that a failure to include female characters in *Assassin's Creed* is related to an incomplete vision of history. Both developers and consumers understand these histories as dominated by men, even though women were just as active in the past, but in different ways from men.

In any case, when Ubisoft revealed that *Black Flag*'s successor, *Assassin's Creed Unity*, would include no female playable characters, the company received major backlash. Ashraf Ismail's comments about the possibility of a female assassin in the future raised some fans' hopes of a female protagonist for the next installment in the franchise. Still, when Ubisoft announced that the single-player portion of the game would have a male protagonist, there was little reaction, but when the game's multiplayer component similarly included only male characters, many in the industry attacked the decision. In response, the game's creative director, Alex Amancio, claimed that female characters were originally planned but had to be cut "due to the reality of production. It's double the animations, it's double the voices, . . . and double the visual assets." Contradicting this statement, Jonathan Cooper, who had previously worked on the animations for *Assassin's Creed III*, predicted that animations for a female character would be "a day or two's work."[31] *The Escapist*'s Robert Rath was upset for a different reason. He maintained that if Ubisoft was truly concerned that women might hinder the believability of a historical setting, then *Unity*, set during the French Revolution, would provide the developer with a great opportunity to add women of influence with historical legitimacy. Rath notes that women were major participants in the revolution, with many fighting for, ironically enough, greater representation. Furthermore, Rath believes that Ubisoft had the perfect opportunity to feature a strong female character since one of the period's most famous women, Charlotte Corday, was an assassin.[32] This was the first time that the gaming press challenged

---

30.   See former *Escapist* writer Jim Sterling's video, "The Creepy Cull of Female Protagonists," for a deeper investigation into publishers' hesitations to include female characters.

31.   Megan Farokhmanesh, "Animating Women Should Take 'Days,' Says *Assassin's Creed III* Animation Director," *Polygon*, June 11, 2014, accessed November 8, 2016, http://www.polygon.com/2014/6/11/5800466/assassins-creed-unity-women-animation.

32.   Robert Rath, "The Historical Case for Playable Women in *Assassin's Creed Unity*," *The Escapist*, June 19, 2014, accessed September 13, 2016, http://www.escapistmagazine.com/articles/view/videogames/columns/criticalintel/11758-The-Historical-Case-for-Playable-Women-in-Assassin-s-Creed-Unity.

Ubisoft so heavily, and the company did not know exactly how to respond. While *Assassin's Creed Unity* was too close to its release for the developer to make changes, another *Assassin's Creed* game was in the works, one that would be pressured not only by *Unity's* backlash but also by the great industry discussion of gender that was Gamergate in late 2014.

When Ubisoft announced *Assassin's Creed Syndicate* in early 2015, it revealed that the game would feature for the first time two playable protagonists, twins Jacob and Evie Frye. However, the addition of a female protagonist remained relatively hidden by the publisher. While Ubisoft was unafraid to tell the gaming press that Evie was a major playable character, the game's marketing materials were less clear. *Syndicate's* debut trailer only featured Jacob, shown jumping off rooftops and beating up bad guys. On the official website for *Assassin's Creed*, the announcement begins as follows: "In Assassin's Creed Syndicate you'll play as Jacob Frye, an assassin born and bred, poised to take over the criminal underworld of London during the Industrial Revolution."[33] Evie Frye is notably absent from the entire page. This unbalanced advertising between the two characters continued even through the game's release. The cover art for the game features Jacob in the foreground staring straight at the viewer, while Evie is standing in the background, no more prominent than any other gang member in the image. Thus, Ubisoft attempted to hide Evie from the average consumer while at the same time emphasizing Evie's character to the gaming press—in other words, the people who criticized the company for *Unity's* lack of female playable characters. The publisher was conflicted. On the one hand, Ubisoft necessarily pursued the largest profits, but on the other, Ubisoft demonstrated both in *Syndicate* and in earlier titles a concern for the lack of female characters in the video game industry.

It is no coincidence, then, that Ubisoft adjusted the disclaimer before *Assassin's Creed Syndicate* to emphasize gender. The game, as Anita Sarkeesian observed in her review, included gender diversity beyond Evie. Women were gang members, influential side characters, and villains. There was even a transgender character in the game. "What I can say is that it was a very conscious decision," Jeffrey Yohalem, lead writer for *Syndicate*, said in an interview. He stated that the development team had a very large debate before Christmas in 2014 about the "choice between seeing history through the lens of today or trying to get at what it really was like." They came to a decision when the women on the team said they did not enjoy reading historical fiction because it treats women terribly. Hence, they chose "to make an ideal version of Victorian London, one that didn't hit any of those pain points." Additionally, the team felt that "the video game industry is full of negative portrayals of these issues, and so just because it's historically accurate to make Victorian London an incredibly negative, restrictive place, maybe the game industry doesn't need another game that does that."[34]

33.   "*Assassin's Creed Syndicate* Announced," Ubisoft, May 12, 2015, accessed November 8, 2016, http://assassinscreed .ubi.com/en-us/news/152-202173-16/assassins-creed-syndicate-announced.
34.   "The Assassin's Den – ft. Jeffrey Yohalem (Assassin's Creed Syndicate lead writer)," YouTube video, 2:15:07, posted by "Loomer," November 2015, accessed August 15, 2016, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v =ZBIkGNJMkaU.

Syndicate's final piece of added content, which focuses on Jack the Ripper, reasserts the developers' boldness in attacking the video game industry's gender inequity. Released almost two months after *Syndicate*, the downloadable content (DLC) is set twenty years after the events of the main game, during Jack the Ripper's reign of terror. Focusing on Jack the Ripper meant that Ubisoft had to depict the serial killer's victims: prostitutes. Prostitution was a common element of Victorian London that Ubisoft previously avoided in *Syndicate*. However, the prostitutes in the DLC are not presented as victims, but rather as empowered women who do more to capture the Ripper than the police. Ultimately, though, it is up to Evie Frye to capture the killer. Notably, Evie Frye is the only Assassin in the expansion after her brother, Jacob, mysteriously vanishes. Evie sets out to rescue him, flipping the symbol of the damsel in distress on its head. Since the DLC is set twenty years after the main game, Evie is now in her forties. A middle-aged female character alone sets *Assassin's Creed* apart from the rest of the video game medium, but the developers went even further in the DLC. Evie can accomplish various tasks outside of searching for the Ripper and her brother. These include helping mistreated prostitutes, shaming those who abuse the prostitutes, and reclaiming corrupted brothels.[35] As video game journalist Stephen Totilo observed, "Evie isn't rescuing these women *from* [his italics] a life of prostitution—only from those who would seek to exploit them or do them harm." Therefore, Totilo asserted that the game does not condemn prostitution, but rather implies "that these women should be free to do whatever they want for a living."[36] Thus, far removed from its male-oriented beginnings, *Assassin's Creed* reached a point where a playable middle-aged woman defeated a male villain, saved her brother, and defended the rights of prostitutes.

A Gendered Reenactment

Ubisoft clearly recognized the lack of female characters in the video game industry, and, especially with *Assassin's Creed Syndicate*, felt that the issue was more important than historical accuracy. Or did they? Brian Rejack argued that developers of historically based video games often try to be accurate, but only up to the point where the game can remain enjoyable. Play is the central component of a video game. Since women on *Syndicate*'s development team noted their lack of enjoyment while reading fiction portraying the oppression of women of the past, the addition of a female character could be boiled down to an attempt to make the game more fun for a section of the player base. Regardless of intention, the developers at Ubisoft nevertheless added influential female characters into the series. However, as Jeffrey Brown explained earlier, the portrayal of female characters can be just as gender restrictive as a lack of female characters.

35.   *Jack the Ripper* (December 15, 2015), downloadable content for *Assassin's Creed Syndicate*, Ubisoft, October 23, 2015.
36.   Stephen Totilo, "The Good, New *Assassin's Creed* Expansion's Unexpectedly Bold Depiction Of Prostitution," *Kotaku*, December 21, 2015, accessed November 18, 2016, http://kotaku.com/the-most-interesting-things-in-assassins-creed-syndicat-1748968672.

Before examining the female characters, though, it is important to recognize the qualities of the main series' six male protagonists. At their core, the male assassins reflect one of two character types: the stoic, determined action hero or the witty, fun-loving, ladies' man.[37] In either case, the male characters represent an ideal of masculinity. Each man is fit, fast, and strong. He is able to climb the tallest buildings and kill hordes of enemies with ease, regardless of whether he grew up in an Assassin community or in poverty. What connects all of these male characters is their recklessness. Even Altaïr, the character most devoted to the Assassins, begins the events of the first *Assassin's Creed* by breaking the tenets of his order, believing that he could defeat the Templars with brute force instead of using stealth.[38] The recklessness is often tied to the character's redemption narrative. After some terrible event, such as a defeat by Templars, a loss of family members, or the destruction of a village, the young Assassin grows into a man by killing countless Templars.

Edward Kenway, protagonist of *Assassin's Creed IV: Black Flag*, captures the ideal of masculinity and the self-made man to the greatest extent. As a Welshman born into a family of farmers in 1693, Kenway was of low social status. Even so, he fell in love with a wealthy girl named Caroline. Disobeying the wishes of her parents, Caroline left her comfortable life to marry Edward. Unsatisfied with his wages on the farm, Edward quickly became a drunkard with dreams of becoming rich as a privateer. Caroline lost faith in him and moved out, hiding her pregnancy from Edward. Thus, Edward left his duties as a husband to search for his fortune, first as a privateer, then as a pirate. Although after becoming an Assassin Edward looked back and said, "there's not a man or woman that I love left standing beside me," his life was largely a success. He becomes both a Master Assassin and a famous pirate, and after many years, he returns to Britain a wealthy man.[39] The consequences of his irresponsibility are really only felt by those around him because he is still the hero of the adventure.

Despite being fewer in number, the female protagonists in the series are more difficult to group together. The first female protagonist in the series, Aveline de Grandpré, is also the most feminine. Born by a French merchant and an African slave, Aveline was of mixed race, but raised under wealthy circumstances in late eighteenth century New Orleans. Because of this social and racial flexibility, Aveline has several gameplay opportunities unique to her character in the *Assassin's Creed* series. Most significantly, she can change her outfit to reflect different social statuses. When she wears her Assassin's gear, she is the most lethal. Essentially, she can do the same actions as any of the male characters, climbing up walls and stabbing unsuspecting victims. In the garments of a slave, Aveline is able to blend in with lower class individuals, and she can even incite riots in order to make combat easier. Finally, Aveline may wear the dress of a woman of

---

37.   Specifically, Altaïr and Connor are more stoic while Ezio, Edward, Arno, and Jacob are more fun-loving.
38.   *Assassin's Creed*, Ubisoft.
39.   *Assassin's Creed IV: Black Flag*, Ubisoft, October 29, 2013.

nobility. This allows her to walk around cities without suspicion from guards. Additionally, she is able to charm guards or use a poison dart-shooting parasol to achieve her goals.[40] Popular media commonly describe seduction and poison as women's weapons, and the trope continues in *Liberation*, despite Aveline's great physical ability. Interestingly, Aveline's feminine characteristics are only visible when she wears her dress. Unlike Lara Croft, Aveline is not sexualized in any way, and so almost nothing would separate Aveline from a male character if she never wore the gown. Ubisoft thus implemented her feminine and masculine characteristics such that they do not coexist.

In contrast to Aveline, masculinity and femininity are more intermixed in the character of Evie Frye. Evie and her brother Jacob roam the streets of Victorian London strengthening their gang, the Rooks. Nobody questions Evie's coexistence as a woman and an Assassin. She wears only her Assassin gear for nearly the entire game. She also does all of the activities that her brother can do. Evie can overtake gang hideouts, participate in wild carriage races, and compete in hand-to-hand fight clubs.[41] No character ever notions that it might be improper for Evie to accomplish these tasks. They simply accept that she does them.

Therefore, the "ideal Victorian London" that Jeffrey Yohalem mentioned is essentially what the development team believed the ideal present should be. The developers emphasized a level of gender equality at which women not only have the same opportunities as men, but also at which gender is irrelevant and hardly even recognized. However, *Syndicate* only presents this gender equity from one perspective. The women in the game become "empowered" by participating in the same activities as the male characters, but the game never depicts any strictly female experience. The player never takes part in childbirth or the caring for a family. The history in *Assassin's Creed Syndicate* may not be a history of men, but it is a history of men and women completing activities presumed to be masculine. Even so, *Syndicate* is one of the most progressive video games to date.

Although it is much less apparent than other video games, comparing Evie to Jacob reveals that some gender normality still exists within *Syndicate*. Unlike earlier entries in the series, the difference is not visual, as Evie and Jacob's clothing and speech are similar in style. Instead, Evie and Jacob vary in terms of gameplay. As players progress through the game, they earn and use skill points that give Evie and Jacob new abilities. While the majority of the abilities they can learn are the same, both characters have a few unique skills. Jacob's unique abilities allow him to take less damage when hit, make his pistol more accurate, and bring his opponents to near-death more quickly. Evie's abilities, on the other hand, allow her to move around more stealthily, use more throwing knives, and turn invisible while not moving.[42] Consequently, the game sets up Jacob as more suited to big hand-to-hand combat situations and Evie as more suited for stealth. Thus, while either character can engage in combat in any way they please, the game

40.   *Assassin's Creed III: Liberation*, Ubisoft, October 30, 2012.
41.   *Assassin's Creed Syndicate*, Ubisoft.
42.   Ibid.

conditions the player to continue the gendered stereotype that men are brawlers and women must use secretive methods to succeed. The types of weapons that the characters can use further this conditioning. There are three melee weapon types in the game: kukris, large curved daggers; cane-swords, canes that contain swords inside of them; and brass knuckles, pieces of metal shaped to fit around one's knuckles. In Ubisoft's trailers focused on Jacob and Evie Frye, Jacob uses both a kukri and brass knuckles to stab and smash his way through a group of enemies.[43] Evie, by contrast, sneaks around before using her cane-sword to finish the job.[44] In other words, Jacob uses the more brutal, hard-hitting weapons while Evie uses a weapon in disguise. Despite the fact that Evie can use brass knuckles in the game just as often as Jacob, the trailers emphasize Jacob's brute force and Evie's finesse. In fact, when the characters unlock gear after missions, Evie often earns cane-swords and capes while Jacob earns brass knuckles and belts.[45] Just as gender barriers are broken within *Syndicate*, so too are gender norms reasserted.

The game maintains this gender normality in Jacob and Evie's personalities. Like other male Assassins in the series, Jacob is reckless, perhaps even more so than previous protagonists. He wants to do things as quickly as possible, regardless of the danger or destruction involved. Evie, aligning with her focus on stealth, likes to plan her every move. She is strict, organized, and often very critical of Jacob's methods. The twins also differ in their plans to defeat the Templars in London. Jacob wants to overtake the city by force, building up a gang and controlling the streets. Evie, on the other hand, searches for clues to powerful ancient artifacts known as pieces of Eden. The Assassins and Templars search for these artifacts for centuries, and so Evie's plan is more in line with the goals of the Assassin Order. In general, Evie is the more obedient character. Throughout the game's narrative, Evie often reprimands Jacob based on the teachings of their father. One of Evie's main story arcs involves her struggle to follow her father's advice: "Don't allow personal feelings to compromise the mission."[46] Although Evie eventually finds personal relationships important, she is nevertheless initially depicted as a "daddy's girl." At the same time, she acts as a mother to Jacob, scolding him for his brash actions.

A Redemptive History

In her review, Anita Sarkeesian claimed that *Assassin's Creed Syndicate* was a breath of fresh air for the video game industry and a shining example of unquestioned inclusivity. As her statement suggests, the game is far from misogynistic, but does it truly promote gender equality? *Syndicate* includes

43.   "*Assassin's Creed Syndicate* Jacob Frye Trailer [US]," YouTube video, 1:20, posted by "Assassin's Creed," May 2015, accessed November 20, 2016, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aKS8554XAmM&t=4s.

44.   "*Assassin's Creed Syndicate* Evie Frye Trailer [US]," YouTube video, 1:07, posted by "Assassin's Creed," June 2016, accessed November 20, 2016, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5Hocg3iOyxs.

45.   *Assassin's Creed Syndicate*, Ubisoft.

46.   Ibid.

far more women than most other video games, but just as it includes, it also limits. While the speech and appearance of the series' playable characters are representative of strong women, the women do not participate in anything other than the same violent activities as the men.

      Although gender equality is limited within *Syndicate*, these limits are never tied to the game's historical setting. As such, the series is representative of the affective turn. The most recent *Assassin's Creed* games display what Vanessa Agnew describes as "reenactment's collapsing of temporalities."[47] The gender roles visible in *Syndicate's* Victorian London are the gender roles that most Western cultures wrestle with today. They are not historical. The struggles, successes, motives, and general experiences of actual women of the past are not dealt with in the series: "These reenactments promote a form of understanding that neither explains historical processes nor interrogates historical injustices."[48] Within the historical context of Victorian London, present issues surrounding the role of women in gaming are visible. The confidence of every female character rejects the claims that women should not be involved in the video game industry. The inclusion of strong, violent, confident, and influential female characters in historical settings is not an attempt to fix the past, but rather an effort to deal with the problem of gender in the present.

      The struggles women face within the video game industry are not unique. Throughout the entertainment industry, women are subject to undue harassment, excessive scrutiny, and sexual objectification in realms traditionally perceived as masculine. From sportscasting to acting, historical gender norms and traditions create barriers that limit the participation and success of women. While many industries are making efforts to address these issues, problems remain. Recently, the popular animated sitcom *Rick and Morty* received nasty backlash on social media after adding four female writers to the show's writing team. Angry fans harassed the women on social media and leaked their personal information online whenever a new episode credited them as writers. One of the top comments on an *Entertainment Weekly* article covering the harassment is particularly enlightening: "Well, now we know what the Gamergaters are up to now."[49]

Bibliography

Agnew, Vanessa. "History's Affective Turn: Historical Reenactment and Its Work in the Present." *Rethinking History* 11, no. 3 (September 2007): 299–312.

---

47.   Agnew, "History's Affective Turn," 301.

48.   Ibid., 302.

49.   WoopWoop, comment, September 21, 2017 (3:15 p.m.), on "*Rick and Morty* co-creator slams trolls attacking their female writers," James Hibberd, *Entertainment Weekly*, September 21, 2017, accessed October 7, 2017, http://ew.com/tv/2017/09/21/rick-morty-dan-harmon-female-writers/.

Agnew, Vanessa. "Introduction: What Is Reenactment?" *Criticism* 46, no. 3 (Summer 2004): 327–340.

Assassin's Creed. Ubisoft, November 13, 2007. PlayStation 3.

Assassin's Creed II. Ubisoft, November 17, 2009. PlayStation 3.

Assassin's Creed III. Ubisoft, October 30, 2012. PlayStation 3

Assassin's Creed III: Liberation. Ubisoft, October 30, 2012. PlayStation Vita.

Assassin's Creed IV: Black Flag. Ubisoft, October 29, 2013. PlayStation 4.

Assassin's Creed: Brotherhood. Ubisoft, November 16, 2010. PlayStation 3.

Assassin's Creed Syndicate. Ubisoft, October 23, 2015. PlayStation 4.

"*Assassin's Creed Syndicate* Evie Frye Trailer [US]." YouTube video, 1:07. Posted by "Assassin's Creed," June 2015. Accessed November 20, 2016. https://www.youtube.com /watch?v=5Hocg3iOyxs.

"*Assassin's Creed Syndicate* Jacob Frye Trailer [US]." YouTube video, 1:20. Posted by "Assassin's Creed," May 2015. Accessed November 20, 2016. https://www.youtube.com /watch?v=aKS8554XAmM&t=4s.

Assassin's Creed Unity. Ubisoft, November 11, 2014. PlayStation 4.

"The Assassin's Den – ft. Jeffrey Yohalem (Assassin's Creed Syndicate lead writer)." YouTube video, 2:15:07. Posted by "Loomer," November 2015. Accessed August 15, 2016. https://www.youtube.com/ watch?v=ZBIkGNJMkaU.

Brewer, John. "Reenactment and Neo-Realism. In *Historical Reenactment: From Realism to the Affective Turn*, edited by Iain McCalman and Paul A. Pickering, 79–89. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010.

Brown, Jeffrey A. *Dangerous Curves: Action Heroines, Gender, Fetishism, and Popular Culture*. Jackson, MS: University Press of Mississippi, 2011.

Duggan, Maeve. "Gaming and Gamers." *Pew Research Center*. Last modified December 15, 2015. http://www.pewinternet.org/2015/12/15/gaming-and-gamers/.

Eliza, "I Secretly Joined a Gaming Community," as told to Andrea Stanley. *Seventeen*, October 2016. 86.

Farokhmanesh, Megan. "Animating Women Should Take 'Days,' Says *Assassin's Creed III* Animation Director." *Polygon*, June 11, 2014. Accessed November 8, 2016. http://www.polygon.com/2014/6/11/5800466/assassins-creed-unity-women-animation

Hussey, David R. "Assassin's Creed Week Part III: Women of the Past." *Play the Past*, February 19, 2014. Accessed September 18, 2016. http://www.playthepast.org/?p=4477.

Jack the Ripper (December 15, 2015). Downloadable content for *Assassin's Creed Syndicate*. Ubisoft, October 23, 2015. Playstation 4.

King, Brad and John Borland. *Dungeons and Dreamers: The Rise of Computer Game Culture from Geek to Chic*. Emeryville, California: McGraw-Hill, 2003.

Kocurek, Carly A. *Coin-Operated Americans: Rebooting Boyhood at the Video Game Arcade*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2015.

Makuch, Eddie. "Female *Assassin's Creed* Lead 'Wouldn't Be Surprising' Says Ubisoft." *Gamespot*, March 4, 2013. Accessed November 8, 2016. http://www.gamespot.com/articles/female-assassins-creed-lead-wouldnt-be-surprising-says-ubisoft/1100-6404762/.

Murray, Jill. Interview by Daniel Kaszor. *Financial Post*, October 20, 2012. Accessed November 8, 2016. http://business.financialpost.com/fp-tech-desk/post-arcade/assassins-creed-iii-liberation-writer-jill-murray-on-how-story-and-gameplay-can-go-hand-in-hand.

Rath, Robert. "The Historical Case for Playable Women in *Assassin's Creed: Unity*." *The Escapist*, June 19, 2014. Accessed September 13, 2016. http://www.escapistmagazine.com/articles/view/video-games/columns/criticalintel/11758-The-Historical-Case-for-Playable-Women-in-Assassin-s-Creed-Unity.

Rejack, Brian. "Toward a Virtual Reenactment of History: Video Games and the Recreation of the Past." *Rethinking History* 11, no. 3 (September 2007) 411–425.

Sarkeesian, Anita. Review of *Assassin's Creed Syndicate*, developed by Ubisoft. *Feminist Frequency*, October 22, 2015. Accessed September 2, 2016. https://feministfrequency.com/video/assassins-creed-syndicate-review/. Accessed September 14, 2016. http://www.jstor.org/stable/1864376.

Shaw, Adrienne. *Gaming at the Edge: Sexuality and Gender at the Margins of Gamer Culture*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2014.

Totilo, Stephen. "Just Who Is *Assassin's Creed III*'s New Hero?" *Kotaku*, March 27, 2012. Accessed November 8, 2016. http://kotaku.com/5896938/just-who-is-assassins-creed-iiis-new-hero.

Totilo, Stephen. "The Good, New *Assassin's Creed* Expansion›s Unexpectedly Bold Depiction Of Prostitution." *Kotaku*, December 21, 2015. Accessed November 18, 2016. http://kotaku.com/the-most-interesting-things-in-assassins-creed-syndicat-1748968672.

Ubisoft. "*Assassin's Creed Syndicate* Announced." May 12, 2015. Accessed November 8, 2016. http://assassinscreed.ubi.com/en-us/news/152-202173-16/assassins-creed-syndicate-announced.

WoopWoop. Comment, September 21, 2017 (3:15 p.m.). On "*Rick and Morty* co-creator slams trolls attacking their female writers." James Hibberd. *Entertainment Weekly*, September 21, 2017. Accessed October 7, 2017. http://ew.com/tv/2017/09/21/rick-morty-dan-harmon-female-writers/.