

Gaming the Golden Age of Piracy

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Introduction

IN ITS annual earnings report for 2014, the French multinational video game developer and publisher Ubisoft announced that it had shipped more than 11 million copies of *Assassin's Creed IV: Black Flag* (7). Set roughly between the end of the War of the Spanish Succession in 1713 and the death of Bartholomew Roberts in 1722, the best-selling *ACIV* is the second of four major installments in the franchise set in the 1700s: the events of *Assassin's Creed III*, released in 2012, take place during the American War of Independence, while *Assassin's Creed: Rogue* and *Assassin's Creed: Unity* (both 2014), take place during the Seven Years' War and the French Revolution, respectively. Downloadable content and spinoff games expand the series' coverage to the mid-1730s (*Freedom Cry*), the decade following the French and Indian War (*Liberation*), and an alternate history of the 1780s in which George Washington is crowned king of a new American monarchy (*The Tyranny of King Washington*). Together, these games have provided hundreds of hours of immersive play to tens of millions of people across the planet.¹ With respect to the computer and video game segments of the popular entertainment market, Ubisoft all but owns the eighteenth century.

The entire series' engagement with history necessarily resonates in the modern world. As Ian Bogost suggests, the very nature of game is such that the world of the player is not separate or separable from that of the simulation. Rather than the artificial and self-contained spaces described by play theorist Johan Huizinga as "magic circles," Bogost explains, games create "a two-way street through which players and their ideas can enter and exit the game, taking and leaving their residue in both directions."² This "gap" in the magic circle allows for the ideas created within and conveyed by both worlds to interact with and inform each other (135). Simply put, *ACIV* cannot keep the twenty-first century out of its version of the eighteenth nor its version of the eighteenth century out of the twenty-first.

The flow of ideas through the hermeneutic gap at once limits and enhances the game's ability to capture and convey an authentic sense of the past it simulates. *ACIV*'s treatment of pirates and piracy as popular culture, its investment in verisimilitude, and its express concerns with its status as both sensationalistic entertainment and potential vehicle of knowledge remediate similar phenomena that obtained during the same period in which the main action of the game takes place. Such specific resonances have the capacity to generate in modern players ideas and sensations analogous to those discussed and experienced by their eighteenth-century counterparts. In other words, beyond the iconic landmarks, tall ships, and famous figures one would expect from a simulation of the Golden Age of Piracy — experiences *in* the “eighteenth century” — *ACIV* remediates experiences *of* the eighteenth century.

Interactivity and immersion, however, are not without risk, and the traffic of ideas does not go unregulated. If in some respects players remain free to choose their own actions and draw their own conclusions about what they have seen, heard, read, and done, then in others their options and experiences are closely circumscribed by game mechanics and narrative fixity.³ As this article will show, the success of the game in bringing the eighteenth century to life in the twenty-first therefore varies across and throughout the simulation; the authenticity of experience depends not on any single overreaching feature or function of the game but rather upon the specific relationships of the game and its players to a given historical phenomenon. In what may be its most eighteenth-century gesture, *ACIV* directly invites players to reflect upon this dynamic by introducing a meta-narrative framework that calls attention to itself as a game, to its players as players, and to its history as simulation.

Enter the Animus

The *Assassin's Creed* series makes the movement between worlds an integral part of its game mechanics. In none of the games do players play the past directly. Instead, each installment operates as a frame narrative in which players enter history through the Animus — a virtual reality machine that allows users to relive and record past lives through the genetically encoded memories of those that lived them. An overarching story situates each adventure within a timeline extending from the near future to 75010 BC, when Adam and Eve rebelled against an older but far more advanced “First Civilization” that originally engineered human beings on Earth as a workforce. Humanity triumphed in the war that followed, but two groups emerged from victory with different visions of the future: the Assassin Order, which champions free will and individuality, and the Order of the Knights Templar, whose members seek to “perfect” civilization by bringing it under their control. As the games reveal, their conflict has been the unseen driving force of human history for more than two thousand years. The Animus remains at its center, for it is the key to recovering the

lost First Civilization artifacts needed by the Templars to impose their New World Order.

Beneath the byzantine storyline lies a simple but fantastic conceit: the near-lossless remediation of historical experience. To achieve the complete set of goals for a given memory sequence is to have attained what the Animus and game call “full synchronization” — the reliving of events exactly as those events were lived in the times of the playable avatars. Violating the rules of the game — whether by directing those avatars into areas designated out-of-bounds, failing to achieve specific mission goals, or in any way causing them to die before their time — results in what the series refers to as “desynchronization.” The Animus treats such violations as the player having strayed too far from the avatar’s “actual” experiences; in essence, the historical simulation crashes and the player must restart the memory.

Such crashes, as well as all the information and interfacing options normally provided to enhance the experience of play (including maps, health meters, inventories, tallies of points or money earned) seamlessly integrate game design and mechanics into the fictional framework of the Animus technology. At the same time, though, they quietly call attention to a gap between the promise and the possibility of an absolutely authentic historical experience. The times and places to which the Animus gives access, no matter how richly detailed or historically accurate they appear, are not actually the past; they are marked by the fact of the machine as simulations of the past within simulations of a present accessed via yet another machine — the player’s actual game console. The Animus thus serves as a reminder of an ineradicable distance and difference between past and present even as it creates a sense of approximate overlap.

In the first three games, players enter the Animus via a specific avatar: series protagonist and Assassin descendant Desmond Miles. These installments maintain a

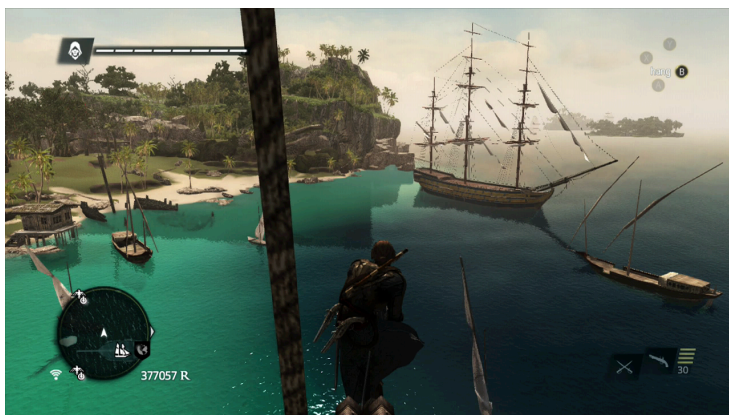


Fig. 1: Third-person perspective. *Assassin's Creed IV*. Ubisoft (2013). Still image from video clip.

third-person perspective of Miles and the Assassins whose memories he relives; players control the main characters’ actions but for the most part view the worlds they occupy from behind and above them (fig. 1). *ACIV*, however, removes the Animus technology from the darker corners of the ancient conspiracy and reinstalls it in the new entertainment division of “Abstergo Industries,” a Templar front-company. For the first time in the series, the third-person perspective of a specific twenty-first century

avatar vanishes in favor of the first-person perspective of a nameless and faceless Abstergo employee (fig. 2). Players now enter the Animus directly from a workstation in Abstergo Entertainment headquarters; charged with gathering scenes from the past for an upcoming “virtual experience” set during the Golden Age of Piracy, they use what amounts to an in-game game console to look over the shoulder and play out the life of privateer cum-pirate Edward Kenway.



Fig. 2: First-person perspective. *Assassin's Creed IV*. Ubisoft (2013). Still image from video clip.

Piracy as Popular Entertainment

Though Ubisoft has solicited the expertise of military historians, investigative journalists, and university professors, the creative license taken in the name of game design has generated feedback ranging from blogpost observations of historical anachronisms to internationally reported accusations of revisionist misprision and cultural bias.⁴ Creative license, though, has been part of the history of Golden Age piracy since the days of Golden Age pirates. On the one hand, to recapture that history is to recapture the sensationalism of its contemporary depiction. On the other hand, sensationalism by its very nature strains the bounds of credibility. In other words, reproducing the familiar and frequently outsized features of pirates and piracy — even those features that were part of the popular conception of the Golden Age in or about its historical moment — risks damaging the perception, if not necessarily the fact, of the game’s historical veracity. *ACIV*’s more *apparently* authentic representation of piracy, then, ironically depends upon what amounts to, in some respects, a less *actually* authentic representation of piracy. This contradiction creates a liminal space in which the game can simulate more of the early eighteenth century than scenery and swordplay. By insisting upon a relatively high degree of historical accuracy while

jettisoning some of the accrued excesses of popular culture, the game restores the possibility of credulity in the face of the sensational.

The modern pirate mythos owes a great debt to Captain Charles Johnson's *A General History of the Pyrates* (1724).⁵ Acknowledged by lead writer Darby McDevitt as a primary source for the game, the first edition of *A General History* offered readers biographical overviews of sixteen pirate captains and their crews; a second volume published in 1728 added another ten. Seven of these appear in *ACIV* as significant non-playable characters (NPCs), as do other figures mentioned or profiled in the text but not given their own chapters. In addition to the notorious 'Calico' Jack Rackham, Bartholomew Roberts, and Edward Teach (Thatch, according to the game, but Blackbeard to all), players interact with Charles Vane, Anne Bonny, Mary Read, Benjamin Hornigold, Major Stede Bonnet, and Woodes Rogers, first Royal Governor of the Bahamas. Their stories, which Johnson claims to have "had from the authentick Relations of the Persons concern'd in taking the Pyrates, as well as from the Mouths of the Pyrates themselves," made *A General History* a bestseller responsible in no small part for the enduring image of Golden Age piracy (a4).⁶ The text, Colin Woodard explains, "is riddled with numerous errors, exaggerations, and misunderstandings," but many of them went undetected for more than two centuries (329). Therefore, what Marcus Rediker labels the "not entirely accurate" portrait of the pirate as "a man with a patched eye, a peg leg, and a hook for a hand" had ample time to develop and secure a seemingly permanent place in the rogues' galleries of historiography and popular entertainment (*Villains* 180, 73).

That portrait may have originated in Johnson's work, but it scarcely appears there. The word "hook" occurs only once in the second edition, in reference to Sandy Hook; in none of the engravings does a pirate sport an eye-patch; and of the four legs recorded lost, Johnson describes only one (belonging to an unnamed crewman under Edward England) as having been replaced by a wooden prosthesis. *ACIV* similarly has no hook-hands or missing eyes, and at zero it has even fewer false limbs than *A General History*. Indeed, it has one less than *ACIII*, which features a "habitual drunkard" actually named Peg Leg who holds clues to the location of Captain Kidd's legendary buried treasure. The presence of such a character (or caricature) in the earlier game makes its absence from the installment properly devoted to pirates all the more conspicuous. The omission suggests a concerted effort to demythologize an icon that began life as a cameo in one chapter of an extensive history of far more significant personages. The peg-legged pirate is

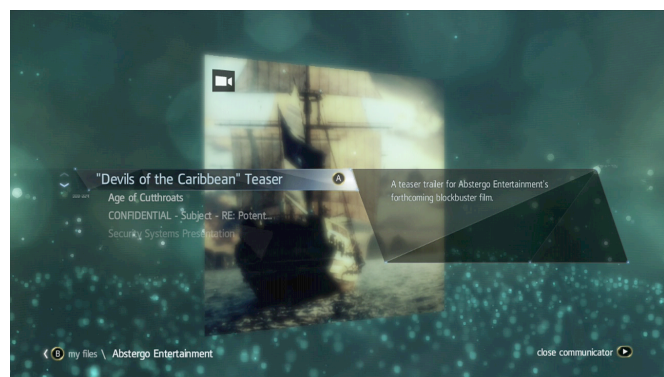


Fig. 3: "Devs of the Caribbean" Teaser." *Assassin's Creed IV*. Ubisoft (2013). Still image from video clip.

“authentick” but not authentic; he has through repeated appearances in popular culture become an ahistorical appendage to pirate lore, like Long John Silver’s shivered timbers, Robert Newton’s exclamations of “arr,” and Douglas Fairbanks’ impossible descent of a square-rigged mast via a knife in the sail. Whereas Robert Louis Stevenson could take inspiration from the one-legged “Fellow with a terrible pair of Whiskers” and the damning manner of an executioner (Johnson 123), *ACIV* had to remove him from history altogether in order to preserve its integrity as a creditable simulation of the history from which he was removed.

The team’s attempts to validate its version of the Golden Age as authoritative extend to its meta-fictional construct, the setting of which allows for more direct commentary on the content recovered through the Animus and by extension on the game’s relationship to its subject matter. During the course of exploring and hacking into the systems of the Abstergo Entertainment facility in Montreal, players encounter a teaser for an upcoming production based partly upon their own research (fig. 3). The piece begins with perhaps the most recognizable (and now largely self-mocking trope) of the teaser trailer genre. Opening with “in a world” immediately announces that the subject of piracy, at least in Abstergo’s hands, is creatively bankrupt, and what follows is indeed a series of the most familiar and least laudable clichés distilled from a century-long history of pirate movies defined for the last decade largely by the *Pirates of the Caribbean* franchise.⁷ The title of Abstergo’s *Devils of the Caribbean* unavoidably recalls that of the Disney blockbusters and suggests their guilt by association.

The Ubisoft team responsible for *ACIV* — not at all coincidentally also headquartered in Montreal — knows, and knows that its players know, the competing popular image of piracy; it relies on that knowledge to effect its satirical condemnation via a travesty that revels in its own ridiculousness. The flat, modern American accent over-articulating the silent “h” in *hola* to a group of “ladies” by a beachside bonfire emblemizes the teaser’s depiction of piracy as nothing more than the high-spirited, alcohol-fueled pursuit of money, violence, and sex; it becomes an eighteenth-century version of Spring Break. The juxtaposition of that caricature with the supposedly historicized world the player has spent hours coming to know via the Animus endows Ubisoft’s version with greater authenticity despite what would and should otherwise be the disqualifying absurdity of a framing fiction involving secret societies, global conspiracies, and ancient civilizations. The game relies upon the players’ familiarity with even more outlandish historical fictions to strengthen its own claim to historicity; the evil Abstergo produces a movie that obviously amplifies the sensational to the ridiculous, which leaves *ACIV*’s merely sensational depiction closer to one that could pass for historical truth.

Much of what *ACIV* recounts are indeed the sensational facts of the source texts. While in the Animus, players participate in Blackbeard’s audacious blockade of Charleston, hear the gentlemanly Stede Bonnet admit he “has no art for sailing,” and

see the body of Jack Rackham gibbeted at Plumb Point outside the entrance to Port Royal in Jamaica, as described in chapters three, four, and seven of Johnson's history, respectively.⁸ As Kenway scales the towers of a fort at Nassau, he can hear Woodes Rogers reading verbatim from George I's proclamation offering pardon to any pirates willing to turn themselves in, the text of which Johnson includes in his introduction.⁹ Players also, of course, have countless opportunities to play out the parts of a pirate's life that make for more conventional gaming. Swords are crossed, treasures are sought, and all manner of soldiers, sailors, and civilians come to a variety of bad ends. Kenway can even procure mugs of rum at local taverns; if commanded by the player to drink several in a row, the game introduces motion blur and horizontal tilt to simulate inebriation. At five drinks, the screen fades to black and Kenway wakes up in a haystack, thereby unlocking the "Hungover" achievement.

ACIV, then, does not entirely eschew the baser attractions of going what Johnson called "a-pyrating" in favor of a too supercilious political, social, and economic history of piracy. The nature of an interactive game, though, is such that players can often choose to what extent they wish to engage with such attractions. Much of the treasure hunting occurs in side missions unnecessary to advancing the plot, and apart from the swaggering inebriation of Calico Jack displayed in the cutscenes, most of the drunkenness is relegated to nameless louts waiting in the backgrounds to join Kenway as hired NPC muscle. When aboard Kenway's ship, the player decides which and how many enemy vessels to attack and how to dispose of their cargoes and crews once sunk or captured. Kenway even has options in his capacity as an Assassin; though the narrative demands that murder must be done, the player can accept or reject any of the game's additional assassination contracts. Simply put, many of the pirating clichés one would expect to appear in a work of popular entertainment have a place within the *Animus*, but the simulation resituates them as parts rather than the whole of Golden Age piracy. Most if not all players will certainly indulge in more boarding actions, tavern visits, and bloodletting than the story absolutely demands, but the game nonetheless allows them to chart a *via media* between the extremes of distorted caricature and corrective historiography.

Remediating the "Female Pyrates"

A game devoted to the representation of piracy as the subject of popular entertainment in the eighteenth century would have to include those contemporaneously famous figures that Johnson's own *History* billed on its title page above every single ship's captain, including their own (fig. 4). The layout indicates that the actions and adventures of the female pirates Anne Bonny and Mary Read are even more "remarkable" than those of the men below; though literally "contain'd" in the chapter on Jack Rackham, under whose flag they sailed, their names and stories

have in another sense escaped containment and threatened to disrupt the social and sexual hierarchies of the day. The challenge they posed to normative gender roles in eighteenth-century Europe have twenty-first century corollaries; to encounter Bonny and Read within the historical simulation is to confront the presence of transgressive women in not one but two spaces conventionally viewed as ‘masculine’ or male-dominated: the worlds of eighteenth-century piracy and twenty-first century “hardcore” video game culture.¹⁰ While that simultaneousness introduces a potentially

problematic presentism that jeopardizes the perception of that phenomenon as historically accurate, it also re-contextualizes and therefore recreates some degree of the sense and sensationalism of the phenomenon in its original time.

Whereas pirates with hooks for hands and parrots for companionship have maintained near-iconic (albeit comic or operatic) status despite a relative lack of historical precedent, representations of Bonny and Read (or characters like them) have experienced precisely the opposite. Their stories, as Diane Dugaw writes, “continued to be popular reading fare well into the nineteenth century” as part of a larger preoccupation with lower-class “gender disguising heroines” (183). Their place in popular culture, though, has since dwindled, especially in comparison to their male counterparts — even those who owe their apparent immortality almost entirely to fiction. While “their cross-dressing adventures were not as unusual among early modern women as previously believed,” Rediker adds, “many modern readers must have doubted them, thinking them

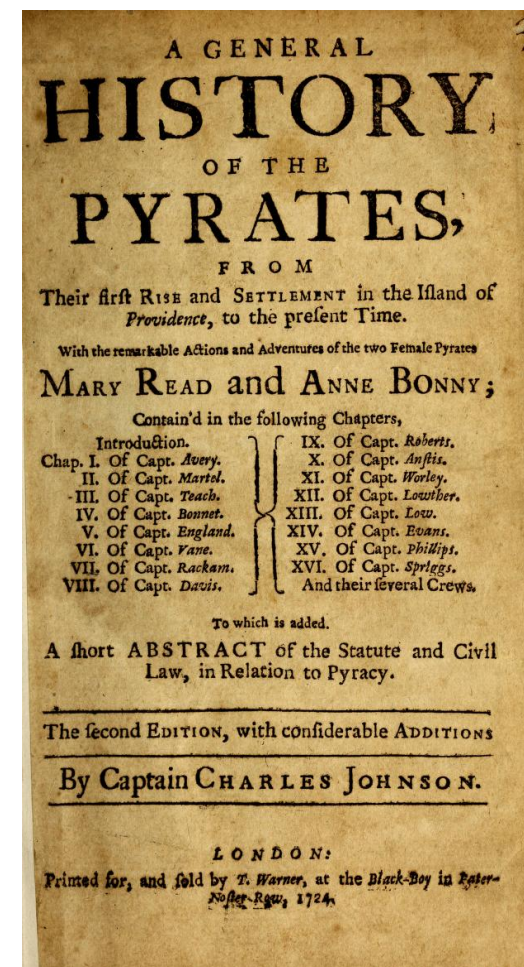


Fig. 4: Title Page, *A General History of the Pyrates*, 2nd ed. (1724). Smithsonian Library, 39088002097426.

descriptions of the impossible” (*Villains* 166). To those members of the hardcore gaming community most likely to have had their first encounters with Bonny and Read through this medium, and even more so to those gamers whose gender and perspective are already in alignment with those of Edward Kenway, it therefore seems likely that *ACIV*’s representation of what Rediker calls “not the typical, but the strongest side of popular womanhood” in the early eighteenth century would appear improbably modern (*Villains* 174) — a sociopolitical anachronism rather than an

historicized representation of phenomena separated from the world as they know it by three hundred years of patriarchal dominance, to say nothing of the continuing influence of entrenched dynamics in video game culture and the distortions of the Disney industrial complex.¹¹

At first gaze, the game would seem to support that perspective by wrapping its female pirates in the trappings of modern marketing strategies that heighten their conventional sexuality at the expense of the destabilizing power of gender amorphousness. In comparison to their depiction in Johnson's text, for example, Ubisoft presents a physically slighter, more "feminine" Read and an overtly sexualized Bonny (figs. 5 and 6).



Fig. 5: Anne Bonny and Mary Read. *A General History* (1724). © The British Library Board. C.121.b.24.



Figure 6: Anne Bonny and Mary Read. *Assassin's Creed IV*. Ubisoft (2013).

While such modeling reflects trends within the industry, it also reflects the popular fate of Bonny and Read in the eighteenth century.¹² In 1725, Hermanus Uytwerf published a Dutch edition of *A General History* featuring a different interpretation of the by-then already famous female pirates (fig. 7). The engravings in *Historie der Englesche zee-roovers* (1725) display both women with wilder hair, smaller noses, thinner faces, narrower trousers, and — most unambiguously — exposed breasts. Ubisoft’s Bonny and Read, then, are not necessarily more sexualized than were Johnson’s.¹³



Fig. 7: Anne Bonny and Mary Read. *Historie der Englesche zee-roovers* (1725) © The British Library Board. 9555.aaa.1.

Their remediation of the female pirates as portrayed in these works creates the possibility of an historical experience the authenticity of which derives in part from its playing out again in a new social context. Sally O’Driscoll offers an overview of the engravings’ original significance:

The swift visual repackaging of Bonny and Read can be read as a process of sexualization, part of the cultural work that made Bonny and Read into glamorous, notorious, and malleable figures used to reframe and normalize excessive or problematic female behavior. But it can also be read as the sign of an emerging fascination with the female body *qua* body — a fascination that is accompanied by a detailed rhetoric of investigation. The eighteenth century’s concern with the female body is made manifest through a willingness to interrogate the material reality of the female body, its uses and functions, its social meaning. The pirates’ breasts are not

simply a sign of their femaleness: they are a clue to the nature of womanhood itself (a concept that changed drastically during the course of the eighteenth century), an ambiguous signifier of what women are or should be — and a reminder of how far these particular women have strayed from the ideal. And in yet another layer of meaning, the pirates' breasts offer pleasure: the narrative frames them in such a way that the audience can enjoy them — we are given permission to commodify and consume the images of female bodies displayed for our amusement (359-60).

The issues raised by Johnson's history and the visual repackaging of Bonny and Read in the eighteenth century are raised again by the remediation of that repackaging in the twenty-first. The social meaning of the female body remains fraught, particularly in a world notorious for the often exaggerated proportions and misogynistic treatment of its female characters but which is increasingly becoming a contested space as player demographics and demands continue to shift — promising (or, to some minds, threatening) to destabilize the established social order of core game subculture and stereotypical notions of what women can, are, or should be within it.

Ubisoft's simulation reproduces a version of the two histories' intertextual dynamic entirely within itself. The bodies of Read and Bonny are not as interchangeable in the game as they appear in the engravings, which differ greatly across the texts but not across the images within them. Unlike the Bonny of Johnson's text, for example, *ACIV*'s Bonny never cross-dresses; the game thus foregoes the possibility of her passing as male. The game here seemingly follows Uytwerf's translation in superficially eradicating what O'Driscoll calls the "frisson of ambiguity" surrounding the women in Johnson's original (359). Indeed, Kenway first encounters Bonny serving drinks to and staving off the advances of a drunken Rackham; players thus immediately see her in a stereotypically gendered role and wearing revealing attire while under the implied sexual threat of a man. Kenway's very presence in the scene furthermore suggests, albeit obliquely, his greater suitability as a match and by extension the possibility of her eventual normalizing domestication.

Almost as immediately, however, the scene restores a degree of gender instability. When Rackham grabs her by the arm and asks, "dear lady, what do they call you?" Bonny responds, "Anne when they're sober, a jilt when they're sauced, but never 'lady.'" She rejects the epithet as well as the man who would impose it upon her, and though Kenway sits within blade's reach, she gives no indication that his intervention is wanted or necessary. As she pulls away from Rackham, he simply spills out of his chair and onto the floor in inebriated impotence. Despite her circumstances and appearance, Bonny neither sees herself nor allows the player to see her as a damsel in distress.

The game's characterization of Read, meanwhile, amplifies the frisson of ambiguity beyond even what Johnson achieved. Whereas *A General History* boldly advertised the names and narratives of both its female pirates, *ACIV* conceals those of Mary Read until the fifth of 12 memory sequences. Kenway knows Read only as

“James Kidd,” the illegitimate son of William Kidd. They fight in tandem (Read is also an Assassin), and at no point before she reveals her identity does any character hint at having had doubts. Johnson insists the same held true amongst her actual shipmates.¹⁴ More importantly, messages posted by players to online forums reveal that Read also passed as Kidd beyond the diegesis. A post in an *Assassin’s Creed* subreddit, for instance, asks if anyone else “found James Kidd attractive,” and while many of the 83 responses insist that Kidd’s “feminine voice” and “feminine features” revealed the truth immediately, others “just assumed that he was a physically underdeveloped guy” or “a teenager whose voice hadn’t developed yet.” One player wrote, “when I first heard Kidd speak, I remember thinking that the *voice actor* sounded quite feminine, but I didn’t even consider that the *character* might be female...Since I was so busy pondering the gender of the voice actor (rather than the character), the twist caught me by surprise” (“Did Anybody Else...?”). In this case, the ambiguity transcends the game and the historical world it simulates to trouble issues of gender in the “real” world and the making of the game itself.

Together, Ubisoft’s Bonny and Read collapse the conceptual distance between the representation of women in the game and the representation of women in gaming — a collapse facilitated by a metanarrative that refashions the Animus into a game console. If recognized, then this alignment allows players to experience the significance of the female pirates as immediately rather than only historically relevant, just as readers might have in 1725. If players have misidentified the characters as “impossible” anachronisms, then that immediacy becomes all the more poignant, as implied by this brief exchange within the same subreddit thread (fig. 8):

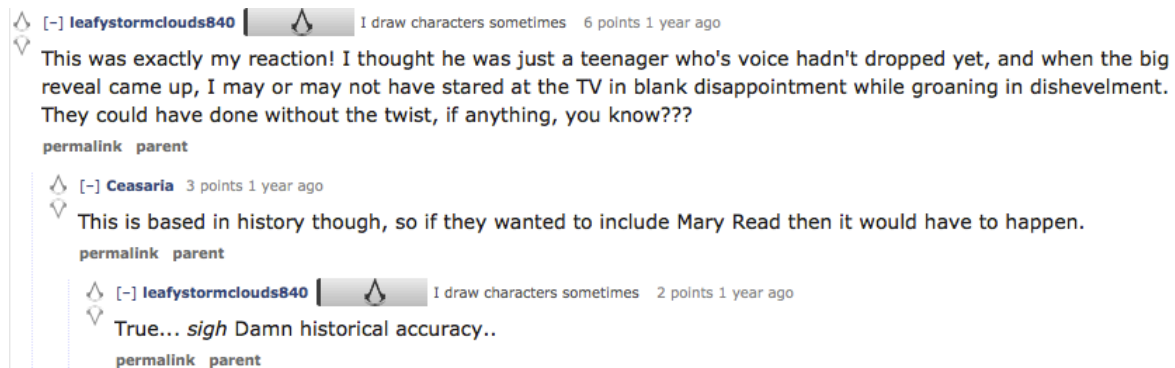


Fig. 8: Screen capture. *Assassin’s Creed IV* subreddit. Reddit (2014).

The first poster’s grudging acknowledgement that “historical accuracy” legitimizes the reveal of Read’s gender indicates an initially strong and negative presentist experience, whatever its exact substance or significations. Of course, players also remain free — again, just as readers did in 1725 — to enjoy Read and Bonny as female bodies displayed for pleasure and amusement. Comments on the attractiveness of Bonny,

Read, *and* Kidd unsurprisingly pepper the message boards along with occasional and perhaps only tenuously ironic addenda about players questioning their own sexuality and finding reassurance in the reveal.

That interpretive freedom, though necessary to the remediation of eighteenth-century literary and graphical encounters with the female pirates, entails the risk of endorsing or perpetuating stereotypes that diminish their transgressive potential. If on the one hand the script allows Bonny, who vanishes from the historical record after pleading her belly to the authorities in Kingston, to escape and serve as Kenway's quartermaster, then on the other hand it dresses up the record of Read's death in a Jamaican jail with a shift, stays, and dark red lip coloring. Both women do at a critical moment become the damsels in distress they initially refused to be, and of the two, only the less sartorially and sexually disruptive gets to live.

These reversals would seem to authorize a final reading of the female pirates as "safely" domesticated. "Yet, the narrative," as O'Driscoll writes of *A General History*, "cannot convince the reader of this interpretation because it undercuts itself; Read's pirate comrades claim that she loved being a pirate, and quote her saying she would never give it up. Read dies at the end...and so does not have the chance to choose an ending that would foreclose the ambiguity of her tale" (364). The same holds true for the Read and Bonny of *ACIV*. Read's last words promise Kenway that she will always be with him, but they immediately follow her challenging him to do his part for the Assassin Order as she has done hers; it is unclear to which she is the more devoted. Bonny, meanwhile, finally refuses Kenway's invitation to return with him to England as well as the possibility of remaining with the Assassins herself. The game, then, may impose upon Bonny the outward trappings of conventional femininity and leave Read to die in Kenway's arms, but the story does not in itself reduce them to simplistic gender stereotypes. As in *A General History*, their meaning remains ambiguous, and in Ubisoft's remediation they not only retain but also gain new power to destabilize.

Atlantic Slavery and Ludic Freedom

The game is not, though, equally willing to allow for ambiguity with respect to what lead writer Darby McDevitt calls the "delicate subject" of slavery. McDevitt explains: "slavery is a theme, but I didn't want it to be sensational...The books I read were full of horror stories, and I tried to work in some of those, at least anecdotes and stories, and make it a background fact of life" (Campbell). *ACIV* accordingly treats slavery as too delicate a subject to risk the contingency of ludic experience.¹⁵ Though in some respects the game allows what Bogost calls "free-form transitions" between play styles — defined in part as the ability to "orient one's conception of right and wrong in relation to a whole host of activities" — where slavery is concerned, *ACIV* resorts to "crude prohibition" (154-56). The game, in other words, limits ludic freedom at the

expense of historical authenticity. *ACIV*'s twenty-first century narrative overwrites eighteenth-century realities regardless of the ways in which the resultant foreclosures contradict the parameters of play in other aspects of its simulation; the fiction of the Animus thus reveals itself as such wherever and whenever the narrative overrides the possibility or the probability of "free" interactions between players and the facts of the early eighteenth-century Atlantic slave trade.

Slavery was the *sine qua non* of Golden Age piracy in its final decade. The end of the War of the Spanish Succession left thousands of sailors adrift, and Johnson specifically identifies "the Returns of the Assiento, and private Slave-Trade, to the Spanish West-Indies" as a major reason why "these seas are chose by Pyrates" (26). "To many white pirates," W. Jeffrey Bolster writes, "the majority of blacks were pawns, workers, objects of lust, or a source of ready cash," and though able black sailors "like ... Kidd's quartermaster were welcome in the Brethren of the Coast, it was with the understanding that black and white pirates preyed on black and white victims" (15-16).¹⁶ In 1718, at a time when up to a third of the vessels journeying to Western Africa were harassed by pirates — slavers making the best pirate ships — black sailors constituted the majority of Blackbeard's crew (Linebaugh and Rediker 165).¹⁷ *A General History* specifically mentions slaves, slavery, or the slave trade 31 times, and the word "negro" or one of its variants 50 times — four more times than "death" — or approximately once every 14 and nine pages, respectively.

In short, chattel slavery does not readily recede into the background of life in the West Indies during this period. It was indeed often the immediate business of piracy — a "fact of life" necessarily among those foremost in the minds of pirate crews whenever they intercepted prizes laden with human cargo. Though, as Rediker observes, "formerly enslaved Africans or African Americans who turned pirate posed questions of race" just as "women who turned pirate called attention to the conventions of gender," the game largely skirts the questions raised by the intersections of slavery and piracy and instead imposes upon its simulation moral codes and fiscal positions inconsistent with the realities of the time (*Villains* 14).¹⁸ There is no authentic history of Golden Age piracy the game could present that would not put the player in a position to engage in slave trafficking, and though *ACIV* makes the Trinidadian slave-turned-pirate Adéwalé quartermaster of the *Jackdaw*, Kenway's ship, and later sees him too inducted into the order of the Assassins, the game never compels the pair, the player, or indeed *any* pirates from Johnson's history to confront even the possibility of such engagement.

A contradiction therefore emerges in the space between the players and the pirates whose lives they experience through Kenway's memories. Though the main plot points must unfold in a particular order, the open-world format permits a degree of choice with respect to side missions.¹⁹ Players can choose to accept or reject various assassination contracts and ship-based missions, and in the "Kenway's Fleet" metagame they can determine which if any naval engagements they wish to undertake

in order to build their fortunes by securing trade routes and transporting commodities. The morality of those choices, though, is entirely pre-scripted and prescribed. This, for example, is contract 25 (fig. 9):



Fig. 9: "Assassination Contract 25." *Assassin's Creed IV*. Ubisoft (2013).

Contract 03 is somewhat more straightforward (fig.10):

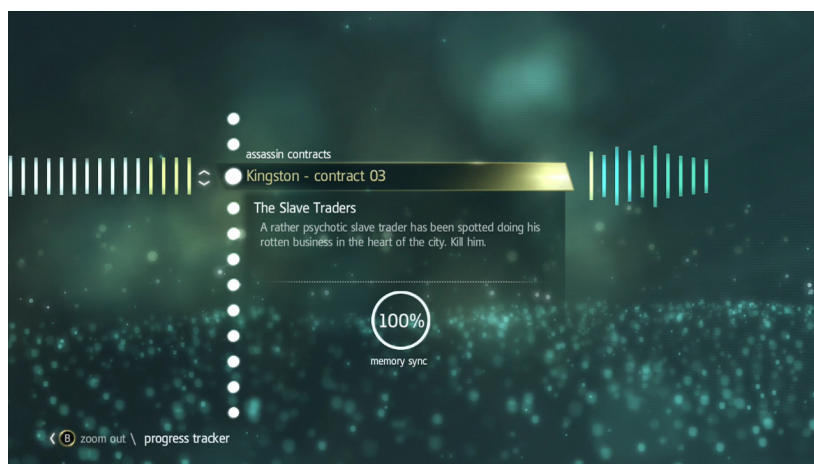


Fig. 10: "Assassination Contract 03." *Assassin's Creed IV*. Ubisoft (2013).

The game includes 30 optional assassination contracts, which if successfully undertaken add to the player's account a cash reward of between 30,000 and 45,000 reales. Targets include smugglers, grave robbers, corrupt judges, tyrannical officers, maniacal captains, and an assortment of would-be evildoers affiliated with the Templars, but fully five of the 30 send Kenway in pursuit of slavers whose manners

and business the contracts describe as “rotten,” “brutal,” “villainy,” “particularly cruel,” and “unusually sadistic.”

All five missions roundly condemn the slave trade — a position mandated by the tenets of the Assassin Order. None, though, identify any of the targeted slavers as pirates. The missions thus follow the narrative in securing the slave trade behind a *cordon sanitaire* that for the most part protects players from this part of the pirate’s life. Little or nothing is said about slavery even within a circle of friends that includes Blackbeard, whose *Queen Anne’s Revenge* was the French slave ship *La Concorde* before he captured it, and Bartholomew Roberts, who served as second mate aboard a slaver and turned pirate when Howell Davis took the ship in 1719.²⁰ Once made captain in his own right (following Davis’s murder by Portuguese slavers), Roberts “so despised the brutal ways of slave-trading captains” that he ordered or himself gave a “fearful lashing to any captured captain whose sailors complained of his usage” (Rediker, *The Slave Ship* 22-23). Kenway apparently need never be exposed to similar experiences in order to arrive at similar conclusions; nor does the player ever get to hear of them. Though players can refuse to accept any or all of the contracts, they cannot change their impetus, and any slaves freed in the wake of a slaveholder’s assassination either automatically fill empty slots in the *Jackdaw*’s crew or vanish into the background.

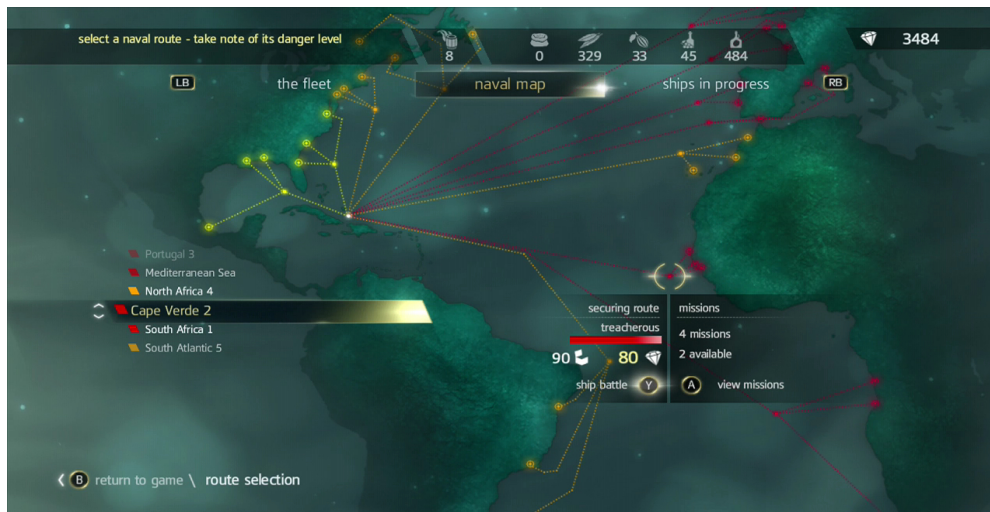


Fig. 11: “Kenway’s Fleet” metagame map. *Assassin’s Creed IV*. Ubisoft (2013)

Even deeper in the “background,” in a metagame accessed through but not actually part of the primary historical simulation, the game simply erases slavery and slaves from its picture of Atlantic commerce. As commodore of a fleet of captured ships, Kenway can (under the player’s direction) dispatch crews and cargoes to dozens of ports, including those of the Triangle Trade. Each dot indicates a port at which the player can exchange goods for ship upgrades, artifacts, treasure maps, and cash. Trade

routes extend as far north as Galway, London, and Bristol and as far south as South Africa. The above map (fig. 11) highlights Cape Verde and three West African ports associated with it: Dakar, Bissau, and Ziguinchor. All four were established sites of the slave trade before, during, and after the period in which the game is set; so too were Benguela and Luanda, represented by the coastal dots to the southeast.²¹ The icons at the top of the map, though, show that the holds of Kenway's fleet contain only rice, tobacco, cocoa, wine, and olive oil. The map thus shows the sites of slavery, but not what put those sites on the map in the first place.

With respect to slavery and race, then, the game abandons the strategic ambiguity it established and ultimately maintained regarding the questions of gender and sexuality raised by Bonny and Read. Rather than risk players' creating "incorrigible social meaning" by attempting to profit from slavery, as some undoubtedly would, *ACIV* — no doubt following the North Star of profitability to Ubisoft — fixes Kenway's moral compass.²² The designers' decision to downplay or remove the slave trade from the game and to resolve Kenway's involvement with slavery as an absolute and *a priori* rejection rather than a flexible series of financial calculations more in keeping with the nature of historical piracy clearly reveals the primacy of narrative control over even those operations the outcomes and potential significations of which remain separate from the main story. The game could but does allow for eighteenth-century actions that should be but are probably not beyond players' willingness to undertake — even if such restrictions critically undermine the integrity of a fictional framework premised upon the possibility of experiencing a realistic past.

Collecting and Collectibles

There was more to life in the early eighteenth-century than piracy. The game provides in-game access to a supplementary database that grows as the narrative unfolds but leaves players to determine the extent of their interaction with its contents. By inviting players to become avid collectors, for example, the game not only remediates the cultural phenomena of early modern antiquarianism and the curiosity cabinet but also creates the potential for the social meaning of those phenomena to be brought to bear upon the game itself. If the Animus brings the player into the eighteenth century, then the database once again brings the eighteenth century back out into the modern world of Abstergo and Ubisoft to address and reform the cultural status of the video game as a form of entertainment.

Video games have long required players to acquire objects scattered or hidden throughout their worlds. A distinction, however, must be made between "collecting" in *ACIV* and the simpler "gathering" of weapons, medicines, and other practical items. In addition to descriptions of these materials, the database stores information on

characters historical and fictional, locations and landmarks, animals, ships, and sea shanties. It also houses “Documents” and an “Art Collection,” both of which require more deliberate effort to complete. Beyond the messages in bottles and electronic notes referring to the series’ overarching fictions, the Documents database includes pages from twenty actual texts: players can, for instance, view images of and from Athanasius Kircher and Christoph Scheiner’s *Mundus Subterraneus* (1664–65), Diego Muñoz Camargo’s *History of Tlaxcala* (1585), the fifteenth-century Voynich manuscript, and the pre-Columbian Dresden Codex (*Codex Dresdenis*). The Art Collection holds an additional fifty items ranging from paintings by Claude Lorrain and Peter Lely to fine furniture and musical instruments to zoological specimens and antiquarian objects such as Taino figurines, Aztec sculptures, and Nigerian jewelry. To collect the rare manuscripts, players must unlock the locations of “secret” treasure chests, journey to each one of those locations, dispatch their guards, and open the chests; items in the Art Collection come from opening trade routes in the Fleet metagame or purchasing them outright.

To create a world in which Kenway can participate in an ersatz culture of collecting makes historical sense. The collecting career of Hans Sloane, another kind of “self-made man,” as Marjorie Swann describes him, began in Jamaica, and by the 1690s the practices that culminated in his extensive collection had significant social importance beyond the upper echelons in which eventually he found himself:

Lower down the social scale, men in seventeenth-century England assembled ‘cabinets of curiosities’ rather than collections of art...Antique coins, scientific instrument, minerals, medals, rare or unusual zoological specimens, plants, natural and manmade objects from Asia and the Americas, intricate carvings, portraits of important historical figures — the early modern English cabinet of curiosities was an exuberant hodgepodge of ‘the singular and the anomalous.’ (195; 1-2)²³



Fig. 12: Kenway’s “Hideout” and Art Collection, *Assassin’s Creed IV*, Ubisoft 2013. Still image from video clip.

The *ACIV* database combines such curiosities — “collectibles,” in video game parlance — with the art and texts of collections proper. The poor, Welsh privateer and pirate Kenway would therefore seem to seek not only the wealth and power that comes from piracy but also the social status of his betters.²⁴ In the case of the manuscript pages, Kenway comes into their actual possessions; according to the database, they all once belonged to

the immensely wealthy planter and lieutenant governor of Jamaica, Colonel Peter Beckford.²⁵

Collecting, then, might be said to function as another act of social subversion akin to the cross-dressing of Bonny and Read, the establishment of a pirate republic in Nassau, or any number of other simultaneously political, economic, social, and piratical activities. By game's end, Kenway's "hideout" on Grand Inagua, if fully upgraded, includes a façade, towers, gardens, and a guesthouse; the Art Collection bedecks his walls and fills his shelves (fig. 12). The hideout thus becomes what Swann describes as an "elite house," the purpose of which by the 1670s was "no longer to demonstrate lineage" but rather "to dazzle in its profuse display of rarities, all of which bespoke the owner's financial ability to amass objects of no use-value" (148). The objects are indeed useless, as several players have noted: in a message thread asking, "what's the point of buying art," for example, one such player observes that the collection "seems like a waste of money" and wonders if it serves an "in-game purpose" (Lear). Anonymous NPCs chat in corners as if taking in the spectacle of bat-nosed figurines and Mayan yoke-form vessels amid the more conventional markers of material wealth. Kenway seems, at least beyond Britain, to enjoy the trappings and social status of a gentleman, even though he has literally built his grand estate atop a massive pile of pirate booty secreted in the underground caverns.

A similar logic of social or cultural elevation applies to *ACIV* itself. In a franchise premised upon the possibility of accessing the past, collecting and the collection may indeed constitute the game's most immediately self-relevant examples of remediated cultural phenomena. If "a collection is always steeped in ideology and functions as a site of processes of self-fashioning that may serve either to reinforce or to undermine the dominant categories of the society in which the collection appears," then the presence *in* a video game of a collection that would not be out of place in an eighteenth-century curiosity cabinet again focuses attention on the self-reflexivity of *ACIV* as a video game (Swann 8). "In general terms," Angus Vine writes, "the antiquary conceived of himself as bridging the gap between past and present, affording 'olden time' presence so that it might speak to or inform the current time. For this reason John Aubrey likened antiquarianism to 'the Art of a Conjuror who makes those walke and appeare that have layen in their graves many hundreds of yeares: and represents as it were to the eie, the places, customs and Fashions, that were of old Time'" (3, 5).²⁶ *ACIV* strives to do the same; in the *Animus*, the dead walk again, and if they do not follow precisely the same paths charted by the historiographers, they nevertheless offer a vision of the fragmented past imaginatively reconstructed and made whole.²⁷

Though already subject to critical scorn by the late seventeenth century, antiquaries' devotion to and curiosity about the past survived into and beyond the period of the game's historical setting. Their belief that "artefacts excavated from barrows, ancient buildings and even the landscape — as well as manuscripts — could

be made to yield up the secrets of the past” echoes in the artworks, artifacts, and manuscripts re-presented in the game. The old media through which seventeenth- and eighteenth-century antiquaries sought to “reconstruct the ‘shipwreck of time’” become the contents of a new medium that pursues or, as *ACIV* particularly demonstrates, could be made to pursue the same or similar ends (Sweet xvi).²⁸ The inclusion of European art and objects from the period simply suggests that it has become another part of history in need of recovery and reconstruction. Within the fictional framework of the series, that process proceeds not by collecting material fragments of cultures, but rather by collecting material fragments of people in the form of DNA, through which the Animus allows Templar and Assassin agents to access genetically encoded memories. The game offers itself and its simulation as real-life answers to that fantasy: not the advanced technology of a lost civilization, but perhaps (for now) the next best thing — a stop between the antiquarianism of an earlier age and that of an imaginable future.

At best, *ACIV* can only uncomfortably occupy a position in the antiquary or indeed any other scholarly tradition. Its acknowledged inaccuracies and ludicrous framing narrative make it a work of historical fiction, and though that fiction relies upon serious historiography, the game in general neither asks nor expects to be taken seriously as such itself. *ACIV* knows its limits and understands its obligations as a game built, like Kenway’s house, upon piracy and gold. It also, however, gestures toward the potential of the medium to do other kinds of work, and it implicates the player as a potential obstacle or asset to achieving what might be its more culturally elevating ends. On the one hand, players can ignore the Art Collection and Manuscripts sections completely; the game requires no interaction with them. Alternatively, they can cultivate an intellectual curiosity by viewing the collections directly through the database or via a room that, as one player grudgingly puts it, “you never go into, unless you wander around the house. Blah” (“Where does the art show up?”). Though once accessed, the programmatic interface and structures of the database set the operational parameters of the experience, players must first actively choose to become “subversive” gamers in their willingness to do more than hack and slash their way through the Golden Age of Piracy in pursuit of pure entertainment.

Without this kind of self-fashioning, neither Kenway in the eighteenth century nor *ACIV* in the twenty-first can entirely escape or alter the dominant categories into which their societies have placed them. Those who choose to interact with the collection will experience the added

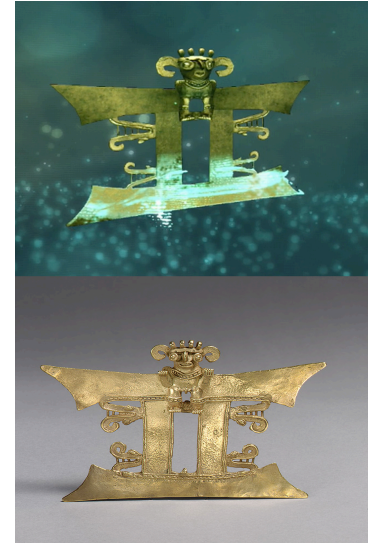


Fig. 13: Top: “Bat-Nosed Figurine,” in the Art Collection, *Assassin’s Creed IV*. Ubisoft (2013). Bottom: “Bat-Nosed Figure Pendant,” (66.196.17), in *Heilbrunn Timeline of Art History*. New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art (2000).

functionality of the game as a virtual museum: the Art Collection represents the holdings of some seven institutions, but 39 of its 50 come from the Metropolitan Museum of Art.²⁹ The images are clearly adapted from the Met’s online catalogue, and they come with abbreviated versions of the Met’s descriptions (fig. 13). To read them is to learn, for instance, that the natives of Veracruz may have used mirrored costume elements to connote high rank, that one could construct an expensive commode out of layered brass and tortoise shells, and that Hendrik Richters made some of the finest oboes of the early eighteenth century. *ACIV* combines the collecting of the amateur antiquary with the authority of a curated museum exhibition and thus (potentially) elevates the cultural status of the game. The objects and information add an educational element likely outside the general horizons of expectation for a pirate-themed, action-adventure virtual experience — particularly one like that advertised in Abstergo’s cliché-laden *Devils of the Caribbean* trailer.

The Reading Completionist

In addition to digital renditions of rare manuscript pages and objects of antiquarian interest, the database also contains numerous other “documents” that explicitly refer to the making of *ACIV* itself. This self-reflexive irony at the outermost level of the simulation encourage players to maintain critical distance from the game and once again situates them in a twenty-first century version of an eighteenth-century cultural discourse — this time, that of prose fiction. As Christina Lupton and Peter McDonald have argued, certain tropes of modern video games in general make them the clear inheritors of novels from the mid-eighteenth century. In addition to “the panicked responses” both have provoked as popular entertainment, Lupton and McDonald cite as examples of shared self-reflexivity common instances of dialogue about gameplay within the diegesis and parallels between the material book and the game-world as navigable but self-consciously artificial and contained spaces (168).³⁰ *ACIV* goes beyond such examples and complicates the connection by separating its



Fig. 14: “Cathedral of Havana.” *Assassin’s Creed IV*. Ubisoft (2013). Still image from video clip.

reflexive commentary from the eighteenth-century simulation and making it a matter of *reading* about the creation of that simulation from the first-person perspective of the Abstergo employee — provided, once more, that the player decides to do so.

Completionists, which term refers to a subset of

players who must do everything, see everything, and in this case, read everything a game has to offer, will have a different understanding of the game and its relationship to the eighteenth century it portrays than will the sensation-seeking or casual players. The former, for instance, will learn the extent to which even the physical features of the Animus' West Indies are a carefully considered authorial construction rather than an absolutely accurate recreation of historical reality. Whereas the Animus simulation always conceals or wordlessly passes over its anachronisms, the database sometimes reveals them. In those moments, the “creators” of the game reveal themselves, as in the entry on the Cathedral of Havana (fig. 14). Within the historical simulation, the cathedral constitutes what Annette Barnes and Jonathan Barnes label a “nonobvious anachronism,” a “potentially vicious” inclusion insofar as its “subtle blend of fiction and fact can render observers unable to distinguish between falsity and truth” (258).³¹ The same holds true for the Queen's Staircase in Nassau, which while not actually in Nassau until 1793 was considered “too iconic” to exclude. If read, then the entries on these landmarks undo the potential viciousness of the nonobvious anachronisms; they do so by identifying their inclusion as a matter of authorial choice rather than absolute historical fidelity, which in turn subverts the implicit claim to historicity upon which much of the eighteenth-century apparatus supporting the obviously fictional master narrative is founded.

The database, in other words, teaches its readers to maintain a skeptical posture with respect even to the supposedly accurate eighteenth-century environments they observe as players within the Animus — the detailed rendering of which environments might otherwise grant the medium particular distinction as a vehicle for the representation of historical truth. If, as Michael McKeon writes, “extreme skepticism was groping toward a mode of narrative truth-telling which, through the very self-consciousness of its own fictionality somehow detoxifies fiction of its error,” then *ACIV* applies a similar mode of truth-telling to an aspect of its narrative that players might still think they only have to see to believe (389). “Truth,” as the notes following the description of the cathedral reveal, does not necessarily precede “beauty” in the hierarchy of design priorities. “People want to see landmarks,” and so the designers weave them seamlessly into the verisimilar worlds they and their teams create. The database entries then reveal the stitching, thereby teaching the player how to “read” the game.

To form a full understanding of how far the fiction of *ACIV* goes beyond Kenway's interactions with Read, Rackham, Roberts, Bonny and Blackbeard requires a mode of autonomous engagement encouraged by early eighteenth-century novels but in this case greatly enhanced by the Ubisoft team's use of the new technology at their disposal. “Early novels,” Lupton and McDonald note, “often represent themselves as multi-directional, architectonic spaces to be traversed by a reader who can be sent backward and forwards between the conspicuously artificial boundaries of pages and scenes. J. Paul Hunter observes that “there has always been a taunting,

teasing quality about the way novels promise to tell secrets and open up hidden rooms” (35). In *ACIV*, players can move between database entries and the entire simulated world simply by pressing the “back” button and scrolling to the desired location, and the game makes Hunter’s metaphors a literal part of the Abstergo office architecture. Players sneak into a video surveillance bay, use an outdoor window-cleaning rig to enter a locked executive office, and gain access to the subbasement mainframe housing in order to hack computers and locate secret documents by winning simple mini-games posing as cybersecurity measures.

One of these documents engages directly with a conundrum that many eighteenth-century authors of prose fiction no doubt would have recognized. Approximately 1,400 words into a 1,700-word “confidential” corporate email exchange about the future of the franchise, a chief Abstergo officer asks, “couldn’t we be using this technology to educate, not placate?” The response captures the conflict between the potential of the technology to disseminate knowledge and the realities of the popular entertainment market:

Okay, come on. Until oily, humorless university professors start paying us eight-figure fees to research the “reification of normative gender signifiers in pre-colonial India,” why don't we **STICK TO SHIT THAT SELLS?**
I'm talking Jack the Ripper in Victorian London. I'm talking about guillotines, Robespierre and Napoleon Bonaparte in the French Revolution? I'm talking about Billy the Kid and Wyatt Earp in the Wild American West. I'm talking about Genghis Khan and the Mongols killing a city of millions in the span of a long, summer weekend. Action. Blood. Adventure. **CONFLICT.**

Competition in a crowded marketplace is certainly nothing new. In the first decades of the eighteenth century (a period that largely overlapped with the Golden Age of Piracy), the popularity of amatory fiction made prose fiction a source of great moral concern. According to William Warner, “the incorporation of the novel of amorous intrigue within the elevated novel of the 1740s is one of the means by which old pleasures are disowned and forgotten” (42). The first executive’s desire to use the Animus technology and by extension video games as a means of education rather than placation gestures towards Fielding’s efforts to elevate his “new species of writing.” To a limited extent, *ACIV* also follows a similar strategy of incorporation and disavowal; the conspicuous absence of peg legs and hook hands among a host of famous pirates, the efforts to distinguish the game from an interactive *Pirate Spring Break*, and the hiding of “useless” manuscripts and works of art in secret treasure chests all revise old, popular, and problematic pleasures of the genre.

The email exchange, though, finally suggests that Abstergo and by implication Ubisoft (and perhaps the industry at large) are not yet ready or able to make the kind of declarative break with “hardcore” video games that Fielding effected with amatory fiction. The moment of self-critical self-awareness occurs deep within a conversation

that (as with the Abstergo trailers, the items that make up the Art Collection, and the database entries on anachronistic landmarks) need never come to light. Even when the narrative obliges players to recover such documents, it does not or cannot compel a reading or viewing of them. Readers of Fielding's novels could, once they recognized what was before them, skip his explanatory prefaces or the ironic meta-commentaries of his narrators. The equivalent features in *ACIV*, though, occupy spaces parallel to the scenes of action rather than in their way. The game, like the Abstergo officers, thus remains structurally as well as ideologically divided upon the matter of the right ratio of *dulce* to *utile*. Following the (thoughtless, outrageous, possibly unfair) disparagement of university professors, Abstergo's Chief Creative Officer steps in to take the conversation offline. To the player, the dispute is therefore left unresolved.

Last Words

The writers, perhaps unsurprisingly, make no explicit connections between the questions raised in the exchange and their eighteenth-century parallels. Players therefore most likely confront the linked issues of autonomy, interpretation, media, and culture as present rather than historical or historicized phenomena — just as readers of novels would have 250 years ago. The game's remediation of eighteenth-century phenomena, then, extends beyond history and subject matter; there is more to it than piracy, but as has long been the case, much depends on the user. Just as readers could read for sex and scandal, players can play for parkour and plunder. They can also, though, undertake the more diligent labor of following the guidance (or guides) that the texts themselves provide in order to sit in more thoughtful judgment of their content and the circumstances of their production. The elevation of the game requires the elevation of the player. Ironically, then, the most authentically eighteenth-century experiences of *Assassin's Creed IV* may be those that take place outside rather than within the Animus.

Rhodes College

NOTES

¹ Several installments also feature multiplayer modes that extend game play; these modes, along with the seven novels published by Penguin Books and reams of fan fiction, are beyond the scope of this inquiry.

² See Johan Huizinga, *Homo ludens*.

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- ³ Narratology and ludology — theorized as a duality perhaps as early as the 1950s, certainly by the 1980s, and according to Jesper Juul utterly exhausted as such by the early 2000s— have been more usefully conceptualized as complementary or overlapping (“The definitive history of games and stories, ludology and narratology”). Espen Aarseth, for instance, writes that, “to claim that there is no difference between games and narratives is to ignore essential qualities of both categories. And yet...the difference is not clear-cut, and there is significant overlap between the two” (5). Henry Jenkins has similarly defined a “middle ground position” from which to examine “games less as stories than as spaces ripe with narrative possibility” (119).
- ⁴ Experts consulted for *ACIV* include Colin Woodard, author of *The Republic of Pirates*, and Mike Loades, a military historian, documentary television presenter, and weapons expert. Ubisoft enlisted Jean-Clément Martin and Laurent Turcot, historians from the Sorbonne and the University of Quebec at Trois-Rivières, respectively, to consult on *Unity*. In addition to the myriad posts, threads, and reviews attending a major title release, *ACIII* and *Unity* in particular attracted mainstream media attention for their respective depictions of nationalist jingoism and capitalist propaganda. See, for example, Erik Kain, “Watch the Terrible 4th of July ‘Assassin’s Creed III’ Live-Action Trailer” and John Lichfield, “French left loses its head over Robespierre game.”
- ⁵ The work originally appeared as *A General History of the Robberies and Murders of the Most Notorious Pyrates*. “Johnson” is most likely a pseudonym. In his *Checklist of the Writings of Daniel Defoe* (1932), John Robert Moore attributed the work to Daniel Defoe; the claim remained controversial. See P. N. Furbank and W. R. Owens’s *The Canonisation of Daniel Defoe*. Arne Bialuschewski more recently claimed it for Nathaniel Mist (“Daniel Defoe, Nathaniel Mist, and the *General History of the Pyrates*”).
- ⁶ Unless otherwise noted, all page numbers refer to this edition.
- ⁷ The pirate movie genre reached a critical and financial nadir in Renny Harlin’s disastrous *Cutthroat Island* (1995); see Richard E. Bond, “Piratical Americans: Representations of Piracy and Authority in Mid-Twentieth-Century Swashbucklers.” The success of *Pirates of the Caribbean: The Curse of the Black Pearl* (2003), somewhat unexpectedly rejuvenated it; Disney has (in spite of diminishing returns) slated the fifth installment in the series, *Dead Men Tell No Tales*, for release in July 2017. The company’s *Treasure Island* (1950) also gave to the public a version of Long John Silver without which International Talk Like a Pirate Day (annually celebrated on September 19th) would not be what it is.
- ⁸ Johnson writes, “the Major was but ill qualified for the Business, as not understanding maritime Affairs,” and more simply, “the Major was no Sailor” (91-92).
- ⁹ Rogers delivered the King’s proclamation, known as the Act of Grace, at Nassau in July 1718 (Johnson 33-34).

¹⁰ Steven E. Jones notes “the homosocial ethos of much of hardcore gaming” and an industry logic that in general “sees hardcore gamers as gendered ‘masculine.’” In contrast to hardcore gamers, “casual gamers” are those “interested in fun, including women in particular” (142-45). Neither demographic is monolithic. See also Melissa Terlecki, et al., “Sex Differences and Similarities in Video Game Experience, Preferences, and Self-Efficacy: Implications for the Gaming Industry”; Adrienne Shaw, “What is Video Game Culture? Cultural Studies and Game Studies”; and Justine Cassell and Henry Jenkins, *From Barbie to Mortal Kombat: Gender and Computer Games*.

¹¹ *The Pirates of the Caribbean* movies have in the last ten years featured four female pirates: Keira Knightley as Elizabeth Swann, Zoe Saldana as Anamaria (*The Curse of the Black Pearl* and *Dead Man’s Chest*), Takayo Fischer as Mistress Ching (*At World’s End*), and Penélope Cruz as Angelica (*On Stranger Tides*). Of the four, only Mistress Ching represents an identified historical personage; Ching Shih (1775-1844) led a large and organized force in the South China Sea. The other three do don traditionally masculine attire, but the films do not establish any of them as cross-dressing with the intent to pass as men.

¹² “Content analyses of video games and video game advertisements have consistently found that women are underrepresented, more frequently sexualized, more attractive, less powerful, and dressed more scantily than males” (Miller and Summers 735). See also B. Beasley and T. Collins Standley, “Shirts vs. skins: Clothing as an indicator of gender role stereotyping in video games.”

¹³ This in no way means that the game does not perpetuate potentially harmful stereotypes of and attitudes toward women; nor does its winking self-reflexivity necessarily absolve Ubisoft for following in the wake of Uytwerf’s *Zee-Roovers* when history offered an alternative.

¹⁴ “Her Sex,” Johnson writes, “was not so much as suspected by any Person on Board till Anne Bonny, who was not altogether so reserved in point of Chastity, took a particular liking to her,” at which point Read revealed herself to Bonny to “explain her own Incapacity that way” (162).

¹⁵ As Andrew Elliot and Matthew Kapell explain, “ludic” “carries with it the implication of spontaneous or aimless play” and emphasizes “the sense that games are not designed as artifacts only to be looked at or understood narratively like films or television” (3). More broadly, the ludic facilitates or encourages exploration and meaning-making rather than the strictly linear progression through assigned tasks; see W.W. Gaver, et al., “The drift table: designing for ludic engagement.”

¹⁶ Woodard recounts the story of the *Whydah Gally*, a 300-ton three-master with room “for 500-700 slaves or a large cache of plundered treasure.” The ship “had everything a pirate might want” and was taken in 1717 by the pirate Samuel Bellamy (156-58). A “Whydah

Gally style bell” appears in the game as a collectible but comes with no note of the ship’s purpose.

¹⁷ For pirates’ preference for slave ships, see Arne Bialuschewski, “Black People under the Black Flag: Piracy and the Slave Trade on the West Coast of Africa, 1718–1723.”

¹⁸ The omission received notice in major outlets. Chris Suellentrop, for example, writes that *ACIV* “virtually ignores the vital role that chattel slavery played in the economy of” the “Caribbean” (“Slavery as New Focus for a Game”).

¹⁹ Mary DeMarle refers to this design as a “gated story”; see “Nonlinear Game Narrative,” in *Game Writing: Narrative Skill for Videogames*.

²⁰ Blackbeard neither kept nor sold the “miserable human cargo” aboard *La Concorde*, but he did leave them on Bequia (part of Saint Vincent and the Grenadines), “where they would soon be rounded up by the French captain and his men” (Konstam 191).

²¹ The Portuguese in Cape Verde had relied upon slave labor since the sixteenth century; the cotton plantations there ensured that the islands remained important to the slave trade throughout the 1700s (Barry 40–42). For the histories of Benguela and Luanda in the period, see Roquinaldo Ferreira, “Slaving and Resistance to Slaving in West Central Africa.”

²² The phrase belongs to Stephanie Partridge, who argues that, “some video games contain details that anyone who has a proper understanding of and is properly sensitive to features of a shared moral reality will see as having an incorrigible social meaning that targets groups of individuals... [V]ideo game designers have a duty to understand and work against the meanings of such imagery” (304).

²³ Swann quotes Lorraine J. Daston, 461.

²⁴ “Initially pursued as an elite cultural form, the collection was soon adopted — and adapted — by ambitious, middling sort men” (Swann 194). Though less than middling, Kenway is certainly ambitious.

²⁵ The database supplies Beckford’s first and last names but not his rank or titles. The manuscript pages were “stolen sometime after 1705”; Beckford’s death in 1710 makes him rather than his son, also Peter, their most likely original owner.

²⁶ Vine quotes John Aubrey (4).

²⁷ “This act of the imagination,” writes Peter N. Miller, “lies at the heart of the antiquary’s reconstructive ambition” (31).

²⁸ This theorization of content and medium belongs to Marshall McLuhan; see *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man* (8).

²⁹ The institutions are not identified within the database, but the objects and their homes are easily located online. The other six are: the National Maritime Museum, Greenwich; the Royal Gallery, Windsor; the Whydah Pirate Shipwreck Museum, Provincetown; the Science Museum, London; Dulwich Picture Gallery, London; and Staatsgalerie Schleissheim, Munich. Two items, the beaver pelt and Scherer's Globe, could not be positively placed.

³⁰ Their analysis refers severally to *Escape from Monkey Island* (2000), the fourth installment in another video game franchise set against the background of Golden Age of Piracy.

³¹ Quoted by Douglas N. Dow, "Historical Veneers," 220.

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