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## **The Poetics of Form and the Politics of Identity in *Assassin's Creed III: Liberation***

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### **Abstract**

*Assassin's Creed III: Liberation* (Ubisoft, 2012) is a stealth, open-world adventure game about chattel slavery. A third-person historical fiction, *Liberation* presents a rare example of an exceptional black female revolutionary, and the first heroine of the highly successful franchise. Modeling an intersectional visual/cultural studies approach, I focus on three levels. First, I consider the cultural context into which this character is introduced. Second, I deconstruct the game's aesthetic origins, unveiling its poetics of form. Third, I analyze the central player-character, Aveline de Grandpré, and the mobilization of her unique Persona System, elucidating the connections between cultural content and game mechanics.

**Keywords:** Assassin's Creed, Liberation, representation, gender, race, sexuality, cultural studies, games

*Résumé en français à la fin du texte*

## Introduction

Games are mass culture forms that constitute powerful ways of understanding one's place and possibilities in the world, through complex persuasions and social engineering. Understanding their machinations can endow users with more agency as stakeholders within a given culture, in a given moment. My interest in games is rooted in intersectional cultural studies and visual studies approaches. Cultural studies utilizes an interdisciplinary toolkit borrowed from sociology, history, literary theory and political science, among others. One of cultural studies' interventions was to erode the barrier between the high and low, and mobilize deep analysis of the "popular" or "everyday" to reveal the workings of power manifested within culture, and to mine opportunities for contestation and resistance. Stuart Hall (1932-2014), whose name is synonymous with cultural studies, was director of the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies at the University of Birmingham from 1968 to 1979. He is widely considered to be one of cultural studies' founders, and its most iconic voice. Hall was largely responsible for bringing issues of race/ethnicity and representation to cultural studies, while also enhancing and expanding the important Marxist-inflected work on popular culture done by his colleagues, Raymond Williams, Richard Hoggart and others. As one scholar of Hall's thought noted, "For him, culture is not something to simply appreciate, or study; it is also a critical site of social action and interpretation, where power relations are both established and potentially unsettled" (Procter, 2004: 1). Visual studies is connected to the project of cultural studies, and was engendered by art history's disciplinary unwillingness to integrate new genres, material culture, the popular and the global into its object of study (D. C. Murray and S. Murray, 2006). As quintessential forms of visibility within a twenty-first century context defined by political, cultural and economic conflict, games both mirror and are constitutive of larger societal fears, dreams, hopes and even complex struggles for recognition. Utilizing *Assassin's Creed III: Liberation* (Ubisoft, 2012) as a focused example of playable representation, this essay models a mode of unpacking games for their complex significative potentials, through analysis of context, poetics of form, and politics of identity. This constitutes part of a larger examination of games as

culture, modeling a critical approach that fully embraces them as operating at the frontline of power relations within dominant culture.<sup>1</sup>



Figure 1: Enter the memories of Aveline de Grandpré. *Assassin's Creed III: Liberation* (2012). Created, developed and published by Ubisoft. Screen shot by author.

*Assassin's Creed III: Liberation* is a stealth, open-world adventure game about chattel slavery. This third-person historical fiction presents a rare example of a black female central protagonist, and the first heroine of the highly successful franchise. Set in colonial America in the 1760s, *Liberation* centers on Aveline de Grandpré, a New Orleans-raised Creole woman. By day, she is a gentlewoman of leisure, born of a former slave, and living under the care of her French merchant father. By night, she becomes a freedom fighter whose attacks tip the balance of power in the formulation of the new nation. In her three guises of lady, assassin and slave, Aveline negotiates her people's freedom using her feminine wiles, lethal skills and ability to blend into the enslaved population. For the sake of this examination, I will focus on three levels: first, I will frame the fraught cultural context into which this character is introduced, with the release of the game for the PlayStation Vita in 2012, and then the re-release in HD form for consoles and PC in 2014. Then, I will discuss the game's aesthetic origins, which unveil a particular poetics of form. Finally, I will critically examine the central player-character, Aveline de Grandpré, and the mobilization of her unique Persona System, elucidating the connections between the cultural

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content and game mechanics. In a larger sense, this research conveys how a politics of identity is present in the form of the game as well as its content.

### ***Assassin's Creed III: Liberation Scenario***

The narrative of *Assassin's Creed III: Liberation* is complex in that it utilizes a narrative frame within a frame. The game that is played is introduced as a product of a fictitious global corporation named Abstergo Industries, which has innovated the technology to mine genetic memories for their entertainment value. The corporation is controlled by the Templar Order, a secret monastic military society that prizes the pursuit of order and the control of free will, for the sake of world peace and to curb the natural brutality of human beings. Their sworn enemies, with whom they perpetually battle, are the Assassin Order, which values free will and fights to defend it. These conflicting ideologies have resulted in an ongoing covert war between the Assassins and the Templars. Through their innovation of the "Animus" device, Abstergo allows individuals to enter the memories of progenitors and virtually experience their lives. Abstergo's tagline is "History is our playground." The life of the assassin Aveline de Grandpré is one such batch of memories, intended to mould historical memory, but according to the narrative, also the first extracted for entertainment purposes. Her virtualized life takes place at the end of the French and Indian war, in the colonial period just previous to the U.S. War of Independence, also known as the American Revolution (1775-1783), during which time the thirteen colonies secured sovereignty from Britain. In an extremely detailed and rich rendering of historic New Orleans, we meet Aveline first as a child. We witness a primal scene of horror in which the young girl is separated from her mother in the city, after innocently chasing a loose chicken. She stumbles into a slave auction in progress, cannot find her way back, and is shoved to the ground by an unsympathetic white guard. Racial dimensions of this primal scene imply that this is likely the moment of Aveline's coming into awareness of both her own racial difference, and the precariousness of her position. Transitioning to the grown Aveline, we see her awake in terror from a nightmare of this past memory. This sets the tone for her character as traumatized and driven by the past.

Through gameplay, we see Aveline's story unfold in her relations with those around her. Her African mother is absent, missing or presumed dead. Her father is Philippe de Grandpré, a

wealthy French merchant. He has raised her and has another wife, Aveline's stepmother, Madeleine de L'Isle. Madeleine has educated and brought up Aveline in the home, and they are initially portrayed as having close relations. Fairly quickly the player is also introduced to the fact that, while Aveline is someone of privilege and status, she is not content to be a gentlewoman of leisure, and she spends her nights using her skills as a member of the Assassin Brotherhood, aiding those in need and concealing her actions from her family. Her work begins with an investigation of mysterious slave disappearances, and from that point, the story and the environments through which she moves expand. In the course of the game, she travels across several regions that primarily include the Louisiana Bayou and the ruins of the ancient Mayan city of Chichén Itzá in the Yucatan, Mexico. Using the device of nested narratives, the *Assassin's Creed* series moves across key historical moments, creating speculative fictions against a backdrop of actual events.



Figure 2: Aveline as a child with her mother. *Assassin's Creed III: Liberation* (2012). Created, developed and published by Ubisoft. Screen shot by author.

### **Context: GamerGate and the Traffic in Representation**

The year of *Assassin's Creed III: Liberation's* release (2012) proved a particularly watershed moment in terms of visibility and press coverage of the ongoing culture war around the presence of women and socially-defined minorities in games. Anita Sarkeesian, a young feminist media critic, started a Kickstarter crowdfunding campaign to support her series of web videos, *Tropes vs. Women in Video Games*. The resulting vitriolic attack on her work and her person included an

outpouring of incitements to rape and kill her (Sarkeesian, 2015).<sup>2</sup> Though she is one of many women targeted, Sarkeesian has in many ways come to embody a burgeoning organized feminist critique of games representation that pushes back against the stereotypical representation and objectification of women in games. Among the others targeted are Jenn Frank, Leigh Alexander, Mattie Brice and Samantha Allen.

On August 16, 2014, Zoe Quinn, a young game designer known most for her *Depression Quest* (2013), was smeared in a blogpost on Reddit by a former boyfriend, Eron Gjoni. He accused Quinn of providing sexual favours in exchange for positive reviews of her game, a claim that was later confirmed as baseless (Lewis, 2015; Parkin, 2014; Plante, 2014; Eördögh, 2014; Biddle, 2015). Nevertheless, an organized harassment effort began on 4chan, an image-based, mostly anonymous bulletin board. When actor Adam Baldwin used the hashtag #GamerGate for the first time on August 27, 2014, in regard to the Quinn corruption conspiracy, the tag quickly spread and became synonymous for an online movement that alleged a breach of journalistic ethics, ostensibly caused by conflicts of interest between game makers and professional game reviewers.

Leigh Alexander, in a *Time Magazine* article on GamerGate, described the incidents as evidence of “sharp growing pains” in the industry. Ultimately characterizing the debate as a “tension between ‘games as product’ and ‘games as culture’”, Alexander astutely gets closer to the core of what I would describe as a politics of identity at play in games that supercedes the notion of games as consumer products (Alexander, 2014). Lisa Nakamura similarly noted that GamerGate, “showed the world the extent of gaming’s misogyny and internal conflicts over death threats made against female gamers, critics, and game developers by a cadre of male gamers” (Malkowski and Russworm, 2015).

These recent game “culture wars,” notably GamerGate, definitively confirm that games traffic in the politics of representation, just as any other form of mass media. For example, retrograde images of women as hyper-sexualized or passive, as well as dehumanizing racial and queer

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<sup>2</sup> To know more about this issue, see also: Sreenivasan, 2014; Alexander, 2014; Frank, 2014; Stewart, 2014; Woolley, 2014; Ryerson, 2014; Ip, 2014; Lien, 2015.

images still pervade the mainstream industry. Observing these representations of “others” in games clearly shows how issues of difference and power remain at the forefront of the struggles for socially defined minorities. It marks a persisting anxiety around the presence of these constituencies in technological fields, including the games industry, which is now a global multi-billion dollar enterprise. From a perspective of how power is enacted through the popular, the GamerGate struggle to prevent “social justice” issues from seeping into and ruining games is the extension of a false dualism between an “activist” group (largely female, queer-identified people, and people of color) engaging in some kind of identity politics, and a so-called “normative” group (GamerGate) that is not. This places the “activist” group’s work in an inherently marginalized position as “political”—and this becomes the limit of their expressiveness. At the same time, this implicitly constructs the “normative” group as not “activist”, not “political” and most importantly not practicing a form of identity politics from within their dominant position. In fact, the GamerGate position is neither normative nor apolitical, despite their protestations to the contrary, that they are merely protecting games from unethical journalistic practices. There is such a sense of unshakable domain over this realm of representation—a very aggressive form of territoriality and identity politics at play, that is going unnamed. I no longer think that it is useful to merely point out racism, sexism, homophobia, etc. in games with a base presumption that these exist as a result of ignorance. It is more accurately the result of a form of essentialism and territoriality—an attempt to assert control over the lucrative and influential sphere of playable representation. My claim here is that the purportedly apolitical stance of GamerGate is, in fact, a very rapacious expression of identity politics. This positionality functions as a means to veil or mask the solidarities, and the sense of territoriality around what should or should not be included in a discussion of games, implicit within their stated commitments. I should note here that I am not suggesting that those associated with GamerGate necessarily hold any consolidated sense of power. Rather, I am suggesting that, as Hall has written, “Popular culture is one of the sites where this struggle for and against a culture of the powerful is engaged: it is also the stake to be won or lost in that struggle” (1998: 453). As a form of everyday culture, games constitute a flashpoint for dominant and subordinate entities to fight for recognition.

During an interview in 2014, Anna Everett described the persisting resistance to speak of race, gender and identity politics, cautioning that: “racial and gender assumptions still operate as

functional structuring presences underlying too many of games' 'procedural rhetorics' and tropes of mastery" (Everett, Champlin, and Vanderhoef, 2014: 5). Adrienne Shaw characterizes game culture as "particularly masculine, heterosexual and white" and digital games themselves as "the least progressive form of media representation, despite being one of the newest mediated forms" (Shaw, 2015a: 6). This is true in the sense that, with little exception, dominant games present a vision of the world that is devoid of postmodern, poststructural, postcolonial, feminist, queer or any other critical cultural intervention. Aveline appears in the middle of all this. While surely the developers of Aveline's character could not have foreseen GamerGate, the formulation of this character came at a prescient time. At the very least, a significant upswing in hostility toward the presence of difference in games representation, in games criticism, and in the industry presented a unique context for the introduction of such an unusually inclusive, multidimensional and nuanced figure within a major franchise.



Figure 3: Aveline above New Orleans. *Assassin's Creed III: Liberation* (2012) image provided by Ubisoft, Inc. Created, developed and published by Ubisoft.

### **The Poetics of Form; or What Lies Beneath**

Shaw has well explicated the construction of authenticity in *Assassin's Creed*, as well as the narrow versions of historical realism presented, and the failure to ultimately present a revisionist intervention (Shaw, 2015b). Describing a "tyranny of realism" present in games that purport to historical accuracy, Shaw outlines the ways in which the potential opportunities and affordances of more open simulation are sacrificed. She writes that both game designers and critics:

focus too much on questions of accuracy, rather than emancipatory possibility. It is also indicative of how imagined audiences over-determine the stories companies are willing to tell. If we can only imagine new ways of viewing what has been, we never get a chance to imagine what might be. (Shaw, 2015b: 21)

This is an extremely important critical conversation, particularly given the prevalence of games that model themselves after historical events or claim a particular kind of accuracy, even while necessarily indulging in all manner of speculative fiction. However, for the sake of this discussion, I am interested in the game's intersection with tropes of Orientalism, whose accuracies are more connected to "the 'dream life' of a culture", than historical fidelity (Hall, Jhally, and Media Education Foundation, 2006).

The original *Assassin's Creed* (2007) owes much to the swashbuckling vision of *Prince of Persia*, which was described by its creator Jordan Mechner as "a game inspired by movies". During a presentation on the connection between *Prince of Persia* and cinema, Mechner described the direct influence of early filmic versions of stories from *The Arabian Nights*, such as *The Thief of Bagdad* (1924) starring Douglas Fairbanks. The original action sequences for the swordfights in the first *Prince of Persia* were lifted directly from those by Errol Flynn and others in *The Adventures of Robin Hood* (1938), using a rudimentary rotoscoping technique (Center for Games and Playable Media, 2011). *Assassin's Creed* was originally envisioned by game designer Patrice Désilets as *Prince of Persia: Assassin*, and would have featured the prince's bodyguard as the central playable character. Eventually, it evolved into its own title, but the connective tissue runs deep.

The spectral presence of the swashbuckler and fantasy of adventure against an exotic backdrop looms heavily in the very form of *Liberation's* core mechanics of navigation, stealth and combat.<sup>3</sup> The presence of Aveline as a heroine can be read against the typical scenario of the Orientalist fantasy of "saving the princess" employed by Mechner in *Prince of Persia*, and inspired by innumerable previous iterations of otherness around perceptions of the Arab world. Here, I am thinking of the trope of the victimized and passive female imaged within an

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<sup>3</sup> In an interview, *Assassin's Creed: Unity* (2014) Creative Director Alex Amancio identified the core mechanics of the AC series: "There are three core pillars: navigation, stealth, and combat. The combination of those three things is really unique, it's very *Assassin's Creed*" (Williams, 2014).

Orientalist rape fantasy iconography, such as popularized, for example, in the romantic silent films *The Sheik* (dir. George Melford, 1921) and *Son of the Sheik* (dir. George Fitzmaurice, 1926) starring Rudolph Valentino. This imaging of an imperilled woman seduced or dominated by an Arab was in fact illustrated on the 1989 Broderbund cover of the original *Prince of Persia*. The noted Palestinian American academic and political activist Edward Said, in his book *Orientalism*, unpacked the deployment of extremely potent fantasy and stereotypes around Islamic society through various textual practices. Like Stuart Hall, Said was committed to cultural critique, but from a post-colonial perspective that interrogated cultural representations of the strategically exoticized “other”. He wrote:

To believe that the Orient was created—or, as I call it, “Orientalized”—and to believe that such things happen simply as a necessity of the imagination, is to be disingenuous. The relationship between the Occident and Orient is a relationship of power, of domination, of varying degrees of a complex hegemony (Said, 1979: 5).

Consider that, if we apply Said’s assertion to persisting tropes that resurface (sometimes to the extreme) in games, we must try to understand them not as outmoded ideas, that once outed, lose their potency. Rather than seeing games as reflecting the world as it is (nuance), we had better conceive of them as operating within the matrices of power, and as recreating the object of representation in a desired and highly buttressed form. That is to say, they are not mirrors of reality, but in some way must be understood to shape understanding around a given subject. Even though players are much more diverse and actively selective in their filtration of messages gleaned from such representations, we should not downplay games’ persuasiveness and profound rootedness in the project of imperialist expansion, and reification of patriarchal values.



Figure 4: Aveline fights. *Assassin's Creed III: Liberation* (2012) image provided by Ubisoft, Inc. Created, developed and published by Ubisoft.

Here, I am neither suggesting anything about the individual creator's or team's perspectives in their development of the *Prince of Persia* or *Assassin's Creed* series, nor making a presumption of their intentionality. What I am asserting has everything to do with the extremely durable myths and fantasies that are inevitably expressed in the language of the cultures that birthed them (Said, 1979: 8). These exist underneath the surface of *Liberation*, less in its literal narrative and setting, and more in its "poetics", that is to say the perceptible game elements, and how they converge and bring into being particular aesthetic and expressive effects for the player. This is related to new media scholar Lisbeth Klastrup's definition of poetics as it relates to virtual worlds:

*A poetics of virtual worlds deals with: the systematic study of virtual worlds as virtual worlds. It deals with the question "What is a virtual world?" and with all possible questions derived from it, such as: How is a virtual world an aesthetic form of expression? What are the forms and kinds of virtual worlds? What is the nature of one world genre or trend? What is the system of a particular developer's 'art' and 'means of expression'? How is a story constructed? What are the specific aspects of instances of virtual worlds? How are they constituted? How do virtual worlds embody 'non-fictional' phenomena? (italics in original, Klastrup, 2003: 101)*

Klastrup goes on to describe a kind of "worldness" created through the manifestation of these elements together in a given virtual world. This must be adapted slightly as Klastrup was referencing the community experience of virtual worlds such as *Everquest*, which she goes on to analyze specifically. However, the notion of a "poetics" is clearly applicable in terms of what I would describe as a focus on those aesthetic formations, and complex cultural signifying practices that, together, contribute to the world-making of a game and its affective experience.

In the case of *Liberation*, Aveline is a kind of princess who is in possession of the sword, and she is doing the saving, rather than being saved. This breaks with the damsel-in-distress trope and places the female figure at the center of the narrative in an activated, heroic role. However, a significant dimension of the game's poetics issues from the core mechanics: the combat, stealth and navigation. The manner in which our protagonist moves through environments with fluid maximum efficiency and command suggests a particular kind of relation to place. The covertness of her movements and the clandestine meetings suggest, among other things, access to an

insider's knowledge of the machinations of power at play in her environment, and perhaps some influence in this regard. Her methods—largely consisting of sword fighting and various kinds of hand-to-hand combat—invoke the beloved swashbuckler through her distinctive fighting stances and dramatic swordplay, and through her strong, prototypical “chivalric” desire to rescue and defend others. Together, these elements signify what lies beneath the story of Aveline, namely the vestigial presence of the decidedly gendered swashbuckler and Orientalist fantasy, which rests upon a notion of adventure that Stuart Hall described as “synonymous with the demonstration of the moral, social and physical mastery of the colonizers over the colonized” (Hall, 2015: 106). Hall discussed this specific connection between fiction, imperialism and notions of adventure in relation to the 19th century novel. However, the phrasing is very apt here, and I would extend this characterization and apply it to a broader period of European colonial expansion. In other words, while the game's narrative of liberation and its exceptional heroine of color break with the dominant reading of the swashbuckler figure and Orientalist fantasy, the game's poetics retain the eroded, fragmented, accumulated gestures that recall a cultural history of European empire.

When considering the reality of this in relation to an intersectional feminist critique, it is hard to ignore the imperialist origins of the *Assassin's Creed* formulation, and the question of whether wholesale rejection of games in general and these poetics of empire more specifically might be the only proper response. For example, writing on imperialist militarism, bell hooks states:

Early on in feminist thinking activists often failed to liken male violence against women to imperialist militarism. This linkage was often not made because those who were against male violence were often accepting and even supportive of militarism. As long as sexist thinking socializes boys to be “killers,” whether in imaginary good guy, bad guy fights or as soldiers in imperialism to maintain coercive power over nations, patriarchal violence against women and children will continue. In recent years as young males from diverse class backgrounds have committed horrendous acts of violence there has been national condemnation of these acts but few attempts to link this violence to sexist thinking. I conclude the chapter on violence in *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center* emphasizing that men are not the only people who accept, condone, and perpetuate violence, who create a culture of violence. I urge women to take responsibility for the role women play in condoning violence... (hooks, 2014: 64-5).

Hooks continues, arguing that “we must acknowledge that men and women have together made the United States a culture of violence and must work together to transform and recreate that

culture” (hooks, 2014: 65). The dismantling of the culture of violence found in so many action games would advance the cause of feminism. However, in the absence of a paradigmatic shift in which a larger culture of violence no longer holds sway, it is incredibly useful to identify and acknowledge the submerged poetics of Orientalist fantasy and imperialist violence that underpin the very formation of the formidable *Assassin's Creed's* world-building.

### **Politics of Identity: Enter Aveline**

Atop this already sedimentary foundation rests another complicated construction, in the form of Aveline. The unusual primary character and the Persona System, are considered to be the primary innovations of the game. The persona's mechanics built into *Liberation* modulate the degree to which Aveline can move, unencumbered, through the game space. The gameplay dictates which persona is to be used for each mission, and there are dressing chambers throughout the city. The Lady guise is a corseted gown with lace and a brimmed hat. In it, Aveline is most persuasive and influential with in-game characters, and able to more easily extract information and use diplomacy. She possesses the skills to bribe and “charm” male guards, and is a less suspicious figure. However, it is impossible to jump, climb or sprint. Within this persona, Aveline is weakest in combat, as there is limited availability of weaponry. The Slave persona is simplified, also relatively weak in combat with limited access to weaponry and tools. Its primary advantage is that it allows the character to free run, and also grants Aveline the anonymity that allows her to blend in with the local slaves and workforce, crowds, or other groups. The third persona, that of an Assassin, renders Aveline persistently “notorious”, which limits her anonymity. However, in this guise she may also free run and climb, and it allows her to execute a “chain kill”, which is a maneuver that more efficiently dispatches with up to three enemies simultaneously when fighting against larger groups. Jill Murray, one of the writers at Ubisoft Montreal, and co-writer of *Liberation*, suggested that in her mind, Aveline felt most authentically herself as an assassin, on the rooftops (J. Murray and Murray, 2015).



Figure 5: Aveline as lady, charming and bribing. *Assassin's Creed III: Liberation* (2012) image provided by Ubisoft, Inc. Created, developed and published by Ubisoft.

Murray (2013) presented on the development of Aveline and strategies for effectively writing for diverse characters. In a talk entitled “Diverse Game Characters: Write Them Now!”, she examines strategies regarding writing motivations, setting, voice, research, as well as gameplay to define character, as well as the mobilization of particular mechanics in games, and the importance of creating greater sensitivity to diversity within the game design team. Responding directly to the claims made by Evan Narcisse that *Liberation* specifically reiterated certain kinds of racially-oriented tropes, such as the Back-to-Africa movement, the slave vendetta narrative, the tragic mulatto and the Uncle Tom, Murray insisted that these were not consciously built into the design, and as she came onto the project after the inception of Aveline as a character, “there was no time for a cultural studies course or to learn about the entire history of African American film and literature” (Murray, 2013). According to her, the team was more focused on getting the context right, so that they would properly understand the rule of law imposed by the shifting colonial presences of France and Spain within the Louisiana region during the time. The emotional core of the story, informed by slave narratives that Murray researched, reveals itself most directly in the diary pages of Jeanne, Aveline’s mother. In these scraps of narrative that are discovered throughout the game, Jeanne chronicles her experience of being a *placée* under the regulation of the *Code Noir*, a French legal document that regulated slavery in the French territories.<sup>4</sup> As these articulations are subsumed somewhat beneath the primary narrative, they

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<sup>4</sup> *Plaçage* was a system of informal common-law marriage between a white man and a woman of colour, which was not legally recognized (because interracial marriage was forbidden), but did grant the woman and any children

feel secondary, although they provide great insight into the absent mother, Jeanne, around whom so much of Aveline's identity revolves. Murray spoke of how Aveline's subjectivity inspired the Bulgarian designers to make unique game mechanic adjustments to suit her different conditions. These were reflected in her clothing options, and the corresponding skills and limitations accorded to each.

Digital media scholar and computer scientist D. Fox Harrell makes an important intervention through his theoretical considerations of creative expression, cultural analysis and computational systems. One of his key concepts is the notion of "phantasmal media", which unpacks ways in which cultural worldviews can be built into computing systems. A "phantasm"—a term with origins in cognitive science—is a blend of a cultural idea and sensory imagination that may fluctuate from one societal context to another but which, within a given societal frame, is seemingly implicit and immediately perceived. These phantasms are highly suggestive and not conscious knowledge, but like ideology, they are persistent, implicit and largely invisible. Through theorization as well as the development of computational models that take into account the interstices of cultural phenomena at the code level, Harrell intervenes in the ways in which user representations can and sometimes do make use of phantasms that stereotype or codify power dynamics through the very rule-based systems and data structures from which they are constructed.

Phantasmal media, therefore, is about understanding computational media in terms of cultural meanings. It functions as a manual for thinking through systematized methods and for theorizing what he calls "cultural computing". In addition, it articulates methods for devising systems of computational expression that more accurately reflect the subtle and unexpected functioning of identity-based elements such as social stigma, inclusion and exclusion, interpersonal relations, non-verbal cues, gender, race, sex, ethnicity, fashion, metaphorical expression, and relative social station or class. The larger, overarching aim would be to create models of these systems that are more complex and able to computationally account for the subtle goings-on of cultural meanings as they come into being. Harrell's work emphasizes both the conceptualization of what

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produced some economic benefits and liminal security, as well as recognition of the relationship among free people of colour (Kein, 2000).

he calls a “world view” in computing systems, and the importance of expressivity, which are often insufficiently addressed in computing, or as he himself assesses, are dismissed by some in the field as fundamentally outside the aims and values of computing (Harrell, 2013). Harrell’s vital intervention provides disciplinary language and theorization that illuminates how worldviews are built into the data infrastructure of computational systems, and how this can affect engagement with that system. It is important to mention that in his case, this argument is not limited to reductive views of identity defined in terms of race, sex, gender, class and nation, but addresses categorization in general, and the larger issues of inequity that expand to include themes of interest to Harrell like oppression, power relationships and empowerment (Harrell, 2015).

Harrell’s research can help enliven an understanding of the Persona System built into *Liberation*, which modulates the degree to which Aveline can move, unencumbered, through the game space. For example, in the first sequence, a short mission entitled “Taking Care of Business” requires Aveline to investigate a missing shipment from the family business. In the guise of a lady, she bribes the ship’s guards, then “charms” the lecherous Captain Carlos Dominguez, in order to gather intel on the whereabouts of the missing cargo. When it is revealed that the goods have been hidden in two warehouses, Aveline must charm at least one guard in order to locate the missing goods. While the lady persona limits her freedom of mobility, which can be palpably sensed with the more lumbering movements of the character in her burdensome dress, the charm function is only executable while in this persona. Dressing chambers dot the city so as to provide adequate access to changes of garb. Missions provide didactic instruction about which persona to occupy, and it is highly unlikely to be able to complete a mission without the proper guise. In a mission entitled “The Secret of the Cenote”, Aveline, garbed as a slave, is in Chichén Itzá in a cave system beneath the ancient Mayan ruins. There, Aveline must navigate underground cave ponds and the extreme verticality of the caverns to find an artefact that contains a prophecy. The mobility required would be impossible in the lady guise, and the previous investigations have necessitated that Aveline blend in with the slave population that makes up the nearby community and dig site. The limited weaponry of the slave guise is acceptable, since most of the game activity consists of navigation. Aveline runs and climbs with ease, and as the environment is friendly to the semi-freed slaves, this cover allows her to move freely within the local

population. There is no need for her to coordinate a rebellion or concern herself with the disempowerment that comes with the signifiers of being a slave. Because the more powerful assassin guise would generate a spike in her notorious status and thereby call attention to her investigations, it is not an option for the mission. In a mission entitled “A Fool’s Errand”, Aveline travels to contact a fellow brother of the Assassins, Connor. As he is aware of her true identity, notoriety is not a concern, so there is no need for her to mask herself as lady or slave. With her maximum mobility as an Assassin, and her arsenal of weapons, she is best equipped to navigate the wintery terrain and locate her next mark, an officer who possesses knowledge of the identity of a key enemy. Like the cavern sequences, navigation of the space as “lady” would be impossible due to the necessary leaps and climbs, and she is well served by the additional armour that her assassin garb provides. Throughout the game, selection of persona is closely tied to the specifics of missions, and gestures toward the relative mobility and access afforded to the guise Aveline must adopt. At times, the effect is tedious in terms of the obstacles it throws up around gameplay. However, within the logic of the game, it is intended as a means to generate a series of insights within the player about the fluidity of identity and the politics of context, as it bears down on Aveline’s racially marked body. In this case, and in keeping with Harrell’s research, the Persona System effectively makes the affordances of each mode more complex so that, through play, internal self-inquiry around these various constructions is engendered. In other words, power relationships between playable and non-playable characters are determined by the game mechanics, which (as Harrell theorizes) embody particular cultural meanings in the game’s system of computational expression.

Reviewers generally accepted Aveline as a positive step in games and a complex representation. Critic Evan Narcisse noted:

Aveline may be a nearly superhuman assassin, but she’s still cut off from her history in a very raw way. You feel that void in this title. By putting you in a game where you play through the sometimes painful push-and-pull of gender and racial identity in American history, *Liberation* takes a potentially polarizing risk (Narcisse, 2012a).

Manveer Heir of Bioware, who has begun speaking out from within the industry on the necessity for more nuanced representations, similarly pointed to the game as a step forward in pushing the centrality of a character’s identity from the narrative to the mechanics level (Heir, 2014). It is

true that Aveline is a complex character, rendered in a manner that takes into account her race, her gender, as well as her class status. These are configured as integral in the game mechanics, particularly in regard to her own spatial mobility, skills and abilities. The complicated question of the character's facility to pass as other "personas" is literalized in the three forms of clothing as signifiers of complex agency.



Figure 6: Aveline blending in as a slave. *Assassin's Creed III: Liberation* (2012). Created, developed and published by Ubisoft. Screen shot by author.

Aveline's capacity to pass from one class status to another, through her use of ingenuity and the manipulation of costuming as a tactic points to a kind of intersectionality being expressed in the game—a point to which I will return. But its more immediate reference invokes the complexity of race in early American history, and more specifically the figure of the ex-slave Harriet Tubman (c.1822-1913), a freedom fighter, Union spy, abolitionist, and iconic "conductor" of the Underground Railroad. In her lifetime, she became the first woman in American history to lead an armed expedition during the Civil War as a scout. Tubman does not appear in *Liberation*, as some other historical icons in the *Assassin's Creed* series have. The game's timeframe (1760s-1770s) pre-dates Tubman's birth. However, the strategic use of clothing invokes the memory of this figure, who was known for utilizing various disguises and misdirection to evade captors. In one oft-repeated anecdote, Tubman was required to enter into a county where she would likely be recognized by a former master. Wearing a large bonnet to cover her face, Tubman carried two live chickens whose legs were tied loosely with string. When the former master passed nearby, Tubman pulled the strings and the chickens began escaping and making a scene, causing a

distraction. As one historian wrote, “Harriet was nearly always prepared with a change of costume or some other diversion” (Clinton, 2004: 89). The misdirection using fowl is—perhaps coincidentally—echoed in Aveline’s childhood traumatic moment of chasing after a loose chicken and thereby being separated from her mother. Privilege was in fact largely dependent not only upon race, but also upon one’s class. Tubman exploited this, posing as a slave, an old woman, and even donning a Union soldier’s coat and rifle during her army scouting. In keeping with the image presented in *Liberation*, it is important to remember that not all black people were slaves during pre-Independence times; in fact significant numbers of them were not. The first Africans in what would become America arrived as explorers and servants, as well as a labour force (Gonzales, 2003: 304-305). Free black people had more mobility, and some were privileged and themselves owned slaves.

Aveline’s sexual identity is similarly contingent. A presumption of heteronormativity might be made around Aveline’s sexual status, on the basis of the game mechanic of “charm” which is used exclusively on male targets, and the repeated male non-player-characters’ verbal references to her beauty. However, this matter is markedly understated in the game context. There is a strong sense that she and her childhood friend, Gérald Blanc, are close, and that he harbours romantic feelings for her. Reviewer Evan Narcisse makes mention of this and suggests that this may be a thematic nod to the “social impropriety” and prohibitions around their potential interracial union (Narcisse, 2012b). In addition to this restraint around Aveline’s sexualization, players never see Aveline naked or scantily clothed. In fact, while other characters seem preoccupied with her romantic future, Aveline has her sights set on other concerns. Early in the game, for example, Aveline’s father admonishes her: “I do fear you are more like your father than is fit for a lady...” He then indicates that Blanc has requested her assistance at the family warehouse, and his wife Madeline reacts to this by commenting to Aveline: “Is that all he has to offer? I should think for all his attention, he would request your hand.” Aveline replies: “All the same, it’s the work that interests me.” Later, in another cutscene, Gérald broaches the subject of his affection for her, and Aveline deftly sidesteps the conversation, while not pushing him entirely away.

The inference within the cutscene suggests Aveline's preoccupation with the urgent matters at hand. However, one critic takes the interpretation further, proposing that Aveline's character may be a paradigmatic example of how some games are slowly integrating indirect references to LGBTQ subjectivities into games. In Aveline's reappearance as a part of the PlayStation exclusive DLC for *Assassin's Creed IV: Black Flag* (Ubisoft Montreal, 2013), buried content as well as encoded dialogue led game critic Jagger Gravning to point out the notable ways in which sexuality operated around her. He mentions the figure of Aveline among several others, such as Lara Croft in the *Tomb Raider* reboot, whose significations were ambiguous enough to create the space for possible queer readings (Gravning, 2014). The markers analyzed by Gravning, as pointing to Aveline as queer-identified in some way, included her Assassin's clothing, a modified male costume. Combatants in pursuit sometimes refer to Aveline using a male pronoun, calling out: "He's getting away!" or "He's trying to shake us!" And, in discoverable recordings documenting the experiences of the subject who is accessing Aveline's genetic memories, we learn that this person is male. All three of these elements point, for Gravning, to a potentially transgender narrative. But most important and highlighted by the author is a section of dialogue between Aveline and a revolutionary female slave figure and potential Brotherhood recruit, Patience Gibbs, that overtly plays with sexual innuendo during their initial meeting:

Patience: "What is it you want, if not my charm?"

Aveline: "Only you. Charmless."

Patience (stepping closer): "Is it a game of flats you fancy then?"

Aveline: "A friend sent me. Connor. He will offer you safety and training."

Patience: (stepping even closer) "Mademoiselle, if you get my charm back, you can take me as your game pullet."

Uttered as repartee, this 18<sup>th</sup>-century inflected dialogue makes reference to lesbian sex (in the term "flats") and a young prostitute or sexually forward girl (with "game pullet") (G. Williams, 2001: 1110, 501). Importantly, Aveline does not display a phobic response to Patience's coy remarks, though it is less certain whether she is receptive. As Gravning puts it, "ideas of gender fluidity and homosexuality constantly surround the character Aveline. Yet she neither confirms nor denies a specific orientation" (Gravning, 2014). It is in keeping with Aveline's character, in

fact, that the liquidity that defines her own shifting identifications may also extend to all dimensions of herself. She continually re-orientates herself as per context and necessity. Maybe, in the roles of assassin, spy and freedom fighter, Aveline's sexuality would just be another tool in her arsenal (not unlike James Bond, or the Blaxploitation hero who uses sex to get what he wants). There isn't enough specificity to say for certain, but in Aveline, there is a strong sense of becoming, and queer potentiality in the sense of departing radically from normative gender role expectations on many levels. While some of these schematic references are ultimately inconclusive, these allusions at least disrupt the automatic presumption of Aveline's sexual preferences and interior life, opening up the possibility of other readings.

More importantly than the discursive imaging of her sexuality, Aveline stands as a strikingly intersectional figure in the history of game protagonists. Critical race theorist Kimberlé Crenshaw popularized the notion of intersectionality, unpacking the ways in which race and gender bear down on the lives of Black women, and highlighting the necessity of a more holistic approach to their experiences. Acknowledging the multidimensionality of the women of color, Crenshaw noted that her "focus on the intersections of race and gender only highlights the need to account for multiple grounds of identity when considering how the social world is constructed" (Crenshaw, 1989, 1991: 1245). "Through an awareness of intersectionality," Crenshaw writes, "we can better acknowledge and ground the differences among us and negotiate the means by which these differences will find expression in constructing group politics" (Crenshaw, 1991: 1299). When considering the representational politics of Aveline as an intersectional construction, we realize she occupies a rare position as a character whose subjectivity—as a woman of color, of a particular class and sexuality—is directly manifested and continually re-instantiated to the player through game mechanics.



Figure 7: Aveline and Patience Gibbs. *Assassin's Creed IV: Black Flag* (2013). Created, developed and published by Ubisoft. Screen shot by author.

## Conclusion

In considering the playable representations of games, it is important that we mine and fully understand the phantasmal aspects of culture that are at play. This is impossible without a contextual understanding of the object of study in relation to the milieu from which its representations and signifying practices arise. If it is true that, as Jill Murray (co-writer of *Liberation*) suggests, Aveline is most herself in her Assassin's guise, then it is in this gender non-conforming mode that the game presents the most possibility of complex agency, through its mechanics. Aveline and her personae do model a more diverse and multi-layered game protagonist, crosscutting issues of race, class and gender—and in her second iteration, fluid sexuality. The game mechanics, in this case the Persona System, functions to engender self-inquiry in the player as to the complexities of social mobility at the many intersections of Aveline. This is achieved through the specific affordances and limitations of each persona. But, on the level of its poetics—or all that constitutes a game's "worldliness", as Klastrup put it, ethical questions must be asked about the forms that chatter deep beneath the surfaces of our games. In a larger sense, it is important to account for how a politics of identity is expressed not only through the manifestation of the exceptional figure of Aveline, but in the very form of the game's playability.

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## Résumé

*Assassin's Creed III: Liberation* (Ubisoft, 2012) est un jeu d'aventure et d'infiltration en monde ouvert portant sur l'esclavage. Cette fiction historique à la troisième personne comporte un rare exemple de personnage féminin noir et révolutionnaire qui se trouve aussi à être la première héroïne de la populaire franchise. En s'appuyant sur une approche intersectionnelle s'inscrivant dans la tradition des *visual/cultural studies*, l'auteure développe une analyse du jeu en trois temps. Dans un premier temps, elle considère le contexte culturel dans lequel le personnage est introduit. Ensuite, elle déconstruit l'esthétique du jeu en dévoilant sa poétique de la forme. Finalement, elle analyse le personnage principal, Aveline de Grandpré, et ses différentes personas afin de mieux comprendre les liens entre le contenu culturel et les mécaniques de jeu.

**Mots-clés :** Assassin's Creed, Liberation, représentation, genre, race, sexualité