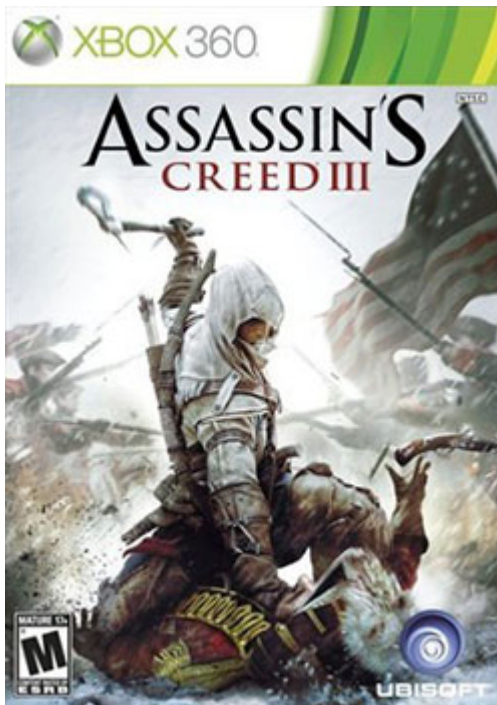


Gaming the Revolution: A Review of Assassin's Creed 3



Is Desmond Miles the new Felicity? *Common-Place* readers who teach early American literature or history have likely encountered students whose understanding of the Revolutionary era is filtered through the experience of growing up with Felicity Merriman, a girl living in Williamsburg who thinks the colonies should be free. Felicity is an American Girl doll, while Desmond Miles is a character in the Assassin's Creed video game franchise, but both are enormously popular. The current installment of the series, Assassin's Creed 3, is set in the years leading up to the American Revolution, and game publisher Ubisoft reports that it has shipped more than 12.5 million units since October 2012. This is a number that is hard for even the most popular academic author to fathom. In the years to come, this game will inform what many people think about the revolutionary era, including future students and scholars of this period. Understanding what Assassin's Creed is and does is important to our understanding of early America. To that end, Jan Rune Holmevik, a digital media scholar, and Jonathan Beecher Field, an early Americanist, teamed up to have a look at this newest entry. We are novices in each other's fields, but the video game scholar was troubled by missed opportunities on the historical side, while the scholar of colonial New England would have liked more nuance in the mechanics of the gaming.

With the release of the original Assassin's Creed in 2007, Ubisoft launched one of the most celebrated and successful video game franchises in recent years. The game is set in 2012 and features a player-controlled main character named Desmond Miles. Desmond is a descendant of the Assassin's Order who, after being

kidnapped by the Templar-controlled Abstergo Industries, soon finds himself strapped in a time machine, which enables him to experience the memories of his ancestors. This machine, known as the Animus, is the central game mechanic that allows players to explore historic places in search of several mysterious artifacts known as the Pieces of Eden. Whoever possesses these artifacts holds the power to control mankind's destiny after the cataclysm predicted to occur on 12.21.12.



Earlier installments of the game took place during the Crusades and the Renaissance, while Assassin's Creed 3 is set in colonial North America during the months leading up to the American Revolution. Here players are introduced to Desmond's third ancestor, Ratonhnhaké:ton, a.k.a. Connor, who is the protagonist during the Colonial campaign. Ratonhnhaké:ton/Connor is the son of a British father, Haytham Kenway, and a Mohawk mother, Kaniehti:io. Kenway works loosely with British officers, but his actions are motivated by his allegiance to the Templars, rather than by the real-life politics in the North American colonies. Ratonhnhaké:ton is raised among the Mohawk; when his mother is killed in a raid on their village, led by the British General Charles Lee, he vows to avenge her death.

Unfortunately, as the protagonist in Assassin's Creed 3, Ratonhnhaké:ton/Connor is less interesting than those featured in other installments of the game. He comes across as a rather flat and stereotypical video game character whose only interesting personal side comes out in the antagonistic relationship he has with his British father. For gamers who have been following the Assassin's Creed franchise from the beginning, the major surprise in this edition is that Kenway turns out to be a member of the dreaded Templar order, the sworn enemies of the Assassins. Furthermore, Kenway is the character the player controls for the first part of the game. In the previous iterations of the Assassin's Creed game, the player controlled one or another of Desmond's Assassin ancestors, so this revelation of his Templar genealogy comes as a shock. Other elements of Ratonhnhaké:ton/Connor's character are less compelling. For example, Connor's motive for joining the Revolutionary struggle is to avenge the death of his mother, which rather oversimplifies the complex political motivations for the roles Native Americans chose to play in the American Revolution. On the other hand, Benjamin Martin, Mel Gibson's character in *The Patriot*, arguably the last mass cultural representation of the American Revolution of a similar scale, also joins the cause to avenge the death of a family member (his son).

Assassin's Creed 3 presents players with a large number of both historic and fictional non-player characters, but unfortunately the majority of these come across as little more than plot elements. How interesting would it have been to have a political conversation with George Washington, or sit down to dinner with Paul Revere and his family before accompanying him on that famous midnight ride to alert the militia of the approach of the British forces? In the same vein, when the players first land in Boston and finally get off the ship from

England, they soon run into a portly, bespectacled man who introduces himself as Benjamin Franklin. Again, players are in for a letdown when it turns out that he only wants us to go collect his missing almanac pages. Here, the ambitions of the Assassin's Creed franchise bump up against the limitations of what is possible in a video game. Chasing missing almanac pages as they fly around a Boston cityscape involves running and jumping and climbing—things it is easy to make a video game character do. More verbal or cerebral aspects of life in America in the eighteenth century are harder to evoke. It is difficult to imagine, for instance, a side mission where the player uses the controller to help Franklin write his *Autobiography*, or help set type for a letter from Silence Dogood. Ubisoft is perhaps more ambitious in presenting Native American characters. The game designers worked with Mohawk language specialists to develop the Kanien'kehá:ka language that some characters in the game speak. Again, however, the challenge of integrating language into an action video game is a barrier. The cut scenes have subtitles; otherwise, the dialogue in Kanien'kehá:ka is immaterial to the progress of the actual game.

Assassin's Creed 3, like its predecessors, aims to be an open world sandbox game (a genre made popular by the acclaimed Grand Theft Auto series), where players roam freely and do quests at their own pace and in any order that they want. Much of the excitement over the original Assassin's Creed games came from the promise of being able to explore exotic historic locales complete with faithfully recreated architecture and geographical features. In Assassin's Creed 3, the main sandbox is called the Frontier, a large wilderness area covering much of New England, which constitutes the majority of the game's playable space. Players can also explore the urban areas of Boston and New York, which are the two main cities in the game. Furthermore, players will come across a number of smaller authentic period towns, trading posts, and Indian settlements scattered throughout the world. Portions of the Eastern Seaboard and the Caribbean are also available through optional naval missions.

While the previous games in the series took players to visually stunning environments with intricate and ornate architectural features such as medieval Jerusalem, Renaissance Italy, or Constantinople, the "New World" in Assassin's Creed 3 seems dull and drab by comparison. The cities and towns all look somewhat generic, and you get the impression that the houses and buildings were designed with the same limited number of textures. There is nothing that strikes a player as jarringly inaccurate in these cityscapes, but compared to Jerusalem or Florence, the designers of Assassin's Creed 3 face the same challenges Henry James describes facing Nathaniel Hawthorne. Connor inhabits a world, as James observes, with "no palaces, no castles, nor manors, nor old country houses, nor parsonages, nor thatched cottages nor ivied ruins; no cathedrals, nor abbeys, nor little Norman churches." Connor climbs a number of church steeples in Boston to get the lay of the land (and create an in-game map), but if you've seen one Congregational steeple, you've seen most of them. The real beauty in this game, though, is found in the Frontier, which features vast forests, mountains, rivers, and waterfalls that all change appearance with the passing of the seasons. Too bad, then, that the game doesn't offer players

more interesting incentives to explore and play in it.

Compared with the relative freedom of, say, *Grand Theft Auto: Vice City*, gameplay is somewhat constrained. As in previous titles, *Assassin's Creed 3* consists of one main mission and several optional side missions. The game's narrative is driven forward through the main mission, which is divided into twelve sequences with three to five missions in each. The entire first sequence, which takes place in England and on the ship to America, is the game's training session, and takes a good three hours to complete. In this sequence players must follow a strictly scripted series of events that are designed to give them the game's backstory and to teach them the basic mechanics of the gameplay. Once the player lands in Boston, the game world opens up and the player is free to explore on his or her own. While scripted training sessions are a mainstay in video games, *Assassin's Creed 3* takes it to the extreme by forcing players to sit through three hours of linear play just to begin the real game. It would have been much more interesting to make the training session optional for new players and to let more experienced players get on with the adventure right away. The way this game uses narrative to enforce linear gameplay, however, continues throughout most of the main mission sequences, and this is one of the biggest problems not just with *Assassin's Creed 3* but many of today's major video game console titles. Nowhere is this problem more evident than in the game's final showdown with the main villain who burned down Connor's village and killed his mother. After a particularly annoying chase mission through burning warehouses on the Boston waterfront, you finally find the British general and—it turns out—Templar Grand Master, Charles Lee, wounded and broken in a tavern. In the plot of the game, Lee seeks to usurp George Washington and place the United States under Templar, not British, control. As the story reaches its climax, you are in for one of the biggest letdowns in modern video game history: a QuickTime video event where all you have to do is listen to his story and then press one button.

Moving through this world can be frustrating. Every building can be climbed in a variety of ways that can sometimes pose quite a puzzle, and there is always more than one way to reach one's objective. *Assassin's Creed 3* follows the same control scheme as previous games in the series, so experienced players should have no problems picking it up. For new players, however, controlling one's avatar can be a bit tricky to master especially in certain missions, such as timed chases. While the idea is to avoid British soldiers in your path, the biggest obstacles are actually trees, branches, and roots. If you hit a tree, because of the collision detection issues noted above, chances are you have to restart the entire mission to beat the clock so you can move on. Similarly, the mechanics of combat can distract from the narrative of the game. One of the main features of combat in *Assassin's Creed* games is the ability to perform stealthy assassinations. It would seem that your main goal might be to silently slip past heavily guarded fortifications to quickly eliminate your target and then vanish into the shadows without a trace. While there are missions where this is a viable tactic, all too often you are forced into hand-to-hand combat situations against overwhelming numbers of foes. Piling on the enemies in a

brute-force approach seems to be a cheap solution to maintaining the game's difficulty level. Another example where the game falls short of player expectations concerning combat sophistication is the way in which the game engine targets enemies based on proximity and the directional positioning of the avatar. You attack the closest enemy in front of you, and when you find yourself surrounded by attackers, which happens regularly, combat frequently devolves to little more than frantic button mashing.

In spite of these limitations, millions of people have purchased Assassin's Creed 3, and the story this game tells will shape what a generation thinks about this period. In many ways, the broad strokes of the game are more successful than its execution. One of the real strengths of the game is its un-whiggishness. We do not have a narrative of an American hero who fights the British and wins. Instead, Ratonhnhaké:ton/Connor's Native American identity complicates his relation to the unfolding political events. Much of the action takes place along the margins of the war, and identities and allegiances are quite fluid. The ongoing struggle between Assassins and Templars does not map neatly on to the sides of the Revolution, but instead complicates the network of allegiances of the characters. The game invokes "the frontier" as a location where some of the action takes place, but portrayal of this place owes more to Richard White's *Middle Ground* than to Frederick Jackson Turner's Frontier Thesis.

Colonial Boston, New York, and the land between them may not be as exciting visually as, say, Constantinople, but it's hard not to be awed by the level of detail in recreating this world. Many players will move on to the next game when they finish Assassin's Creed and the scenery will just be scenery. However, we have to imagine that the richness of the world that is conjured here will generate further interest in this period in some fraction of the people who play this game. Centipede did not inspire many of its players to become entomologists, but we suspect that a few of the 12.5 million players of Assassin's Creed will become early Americanists. At the same time, early Americanists curious to see what it is like to navigate a world like Cooper's *The Spy* for themselves may follow the narrative to the next installment, which will feature Connor's grandfather aboard a Caribbean sailing ship. We can hope that the sequel does more to deliver on the potential of this medium to bring the past to life.

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