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## **Counter-Hegemonic Commemorative Play: Marginalized Pasts and the Politics of Memory in the Digital Game Assassin's Creed: Freedom Cry**

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### **Abstract**

In this article, I argue that digital games hold the potential to influence processes of cultural memory related to past and contemporary forms of marginalization. By bringing cultural memory studies into dialogue with game studies, I account for the ways through which digital games and practices of play might influence historical discourses and memory politics pertaining to marginalized identities. In order to demonstrate this, I conduct an analysis of *Assassin's Creed: Freedom Cry* (Ubisoft Québec 2013), a digital game which includes representation of the eighteenth-century transatlantic slave trade and its racist systems. This analysis is then contrasted with statements by two critics, Evan Narcisse and Justin Clark, about how *Freedom Cry* highlights specific marginalized identities and represents the past through the game form. These statements, coupled with my game analysis, make the case for a concept that I term 'counter-hegemonic commemorative play'. This makes visible a form of potentially cathartic power fantasy within a historical struggle, alongside emphasizing a form of designed recognition of marginalized identities within contemporary historical discourses and memory politics.

**Keywords:** cultural memory, historical games, marginalization, racism, commemoration, hegemony, Assassin's Creed, digital games

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## **Notes on Contributor**

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## **Producing the Past in the Present - Cultural Memory, Hegemony, & Digital Games**

As Erlil (2011, 9) asserts, collective and individual pasts are re-enacted and reconstructed across cultures and societies through commemorative dates in the calendar, discussions on reconciliation and historical trauma, public memorial spaces, museum exhibitions and through media like film and literature that depict historical events as entertainment or documentary. These ways of remembering point toward “the interplay of present and past in socio-cultural contexts” (Erlil, Nünning, and Young 2010, 4) that takes place through engagements with various discourses and artefacts. The purpose of this argument is not to dismiss historiography or to claim that cultural memory studies is oppositional to history (Erlil 2011, 44) but rather to widen the possibilities for thinking about how the past is constructed in different cultural contexts, such as through historical films, literature, and games.<sup>1</sup> Likewise, it is important to note that neither fictional cultural expressions, such as entertainment media, nor allegedly factual ones, such as historiographic documentaries, reflect historical realities as such.

Instead both offer representations of the past – “the events, persons, languages, values, etc. they are in fact first creating” (Erll 2011, 114). This does not mean that historical media constructs are necessarily unreal or fabricated, but rather that they represent the conditions for how cultural memory emerges (Reading 2011, 115). An image of the past is therefore dependent on the articulation of certain selected variables and the exclusion of possible alternatives. This is exemplified in the case of historical game development, where multiple pressures and aims decide what does and does not go into a game, which in turn determine the opportunities for meaning-making and discovery offered to players (Chapman 2013, 62).

Working from this broader position as to how the past is represented in light of the present, narratives become a significant element of historical discourse. In line with White’s arguments (1984, 11), narrative and discourse serve as constitutive elements of history and it is through these that individuals and collectives form their understanding of the past. For example, Sturken (2008, 73) posits that films and literature frame how audiences recall and/or form understandings of the two World Wars, the sinking of Titanic, or the Vietnam War. Rosenstone (1995) similarly argues that media representations of the past, films in particular, give rise to a residue of knowledge within contemporary historical and political discourse. Likewise, amongst popular digital games are certain genres that use historical settings and references to allow users to simulate or perform within what is marketed as a “playground for the past” (Kapell and Elliott 2013, 13).<sup>ii</sup> Media representations of the past, whether through fictional or non-fictional narratives, articulate certain understandings of the past, which in turn hold meaning potentials that are activated and negotiated by their users.

Because these cultural constructions of the past are produced and disseminated in the present, existing power relationships in the form of hegemony also affect who gets represented and recognised in the construction of the past (Reading 2011, 383). Originally introduced by Gramsci (Femia 1987), hegemony refers to the “production of meaning as a key instrument for the stabilization of power relations” (Jørgensen and Phillips 2002, 32). How social groups are positioned in these power hierarchies can become naturalised to the extent that questioning their positioning becomes incredibly difficult. For example, through a hegemonic process of constructing a national history, people in a specific geographical area might develop a sense of sharing similarities with past groups of people in the same area, irrespective of actual cultural and material differences (ibid. 32). Thus, hegemony as used here refers to the process through which the dominant ideology is reproduced in political and discursive processes, subordinating others and granting consent to the dominant ideology. (Laclau and Mouffe 2001, 105). Hegemony does not appear as an opinion imposed by ruling producers of culture upon the subordinated but as a process that is unknowingly inscribed to temporarily stabilize order. It is through hegemony that marginalized groups are typically either left out of mass-cultural depictions of the past or are at best relegated to banal representations of their culture and identity (Hall 1999, 20), thereby precluding the marginalized from being recognized in processes of cultural memory.

Given the relatively homogenous demographics of the dominant digital game industries in Europe and North America (Edwards et al. 2014, 7-15; Weststar and Legault 2016, 8-12), where the intersecting identities of young adult White heterosexual men are in a clear majority and the representational hegemony related to race, age, ethnicity, class, sexuality, nationality, and gender (Gray 2014; Shaw 2015b; Fron et al.

2007), it is perhaps not surprising that meaning potentials of digital games offer hegemonic articulations of history. As Chapman (2013, 62-63) emphasizes, game developers make decisions in relation to technological possibilities, what perspective of history is being applied, economic interests, and genre conventions. If this decision-making process is predisposed by the hegemonic structures in digital game industries, I argue that it is useful to acknowledge what is excluded or left out in the attempt to create historical believability in games, which in turn determines a game's opportunities for historical meaning-making offered to players. This is further qualified by the fact that contemporary digital games hold significant social, cultural, and economic currency in the societies in which they proliferate (Sinclair 2015; Brightman 2016). Considering both their prominence as mass entertainment and their hegemonic articulations, it is therefore important to investigate how digital games construct, disseminate, and reinforce processes of cultural memory through their own medium-specific features. It is for this reason that *Freedom Cry* serves as a rich example for analysis of how historical games offer representations of the past for players to activate, negotiate, and perform. This is particularly the case because, as I will argue, the game allows for counter-hegemonic commemorative play.<sup>iii</sup>

Accordingly, the three aspects outlined above motivate the focus for my article; the nature and function of cultural memory; the importance of digital games as mass cultural entertainment devices offering certain understandings of the past; and the existence of hegemonic power relationships affecting the recognition, or lack thereof, of marginalized intersecting identities in processes of cultural memory. The upshot of these three positions is that digital games have the potential to reinforce or subvert cultural power hierarchies related to identities and processes of cultural memory. It is

therefore pertinent to understand what hegemonic and counter-hegemonic mechanisms are articulated through digital games provide meaning potentials that subordinate and/or recognize marginalized groups in the construction of cultural memory.

### **History as Entertainment Commodity - Freedom Cry & the Assassin's Creed Series**

*Freedom Cry* is a digital game released in 2013 on five different computer platforms, Windows PC, Sony PlayStation 3, PlayStation 4, Microsoft Xbox 360 and Xbox One, both as a standalone product and as a supplement to the associated main entry in the *Assassin's Creed* series, *Assassin's Creed IV: Black Flag* (Ubisoft Montréal 2013).

*Freedom Cry* uses the eighteenth century Caribbean and West Indies Sea as its historical setting and it situates players in the role of Adéwalé – the player character of specific interest to this article.

*Freedom Cry* is an entry in the *Assassin's Creed* series (2007- ), which is published and developed by the multinational game company Ubisoft. Like many other historical cultural expressions, the series uses allegedly historical settings as a convenient background for a commercial entertainment product that lets players take the role of a character within the time-period in question. For example, the first entry to the series used the Holy Land during the twelfth century Third Crusade as a setting, the following sequel trilogy of games used Renaissance Italy and sixteenth century Constantinople, the third entry used the American War of Independence, while the fourth used the eighteenth century Caribbean. The 'time-traveling' aspect of *Assassin's Creed* is justified in the overarching narrative of the series as a sort of virtual simulation enabled by the information stored in ancestral DNA sequences. This means that the narrative focuses on the reliving of ancestral memories, which in turn rests on the

assumption that history has already taken place. Thus, players are only able to execute certain actions and witness certain events in correspondence with purportedly established historical facts.

What makes *Freedom Cry* stand out from a memory-political perspective is the fact that it centres on the historical trauma of the transatlantic slave trade and the Caribbean slave system. This setting and the game's narrative employ the same basic genre conventions of the series, in terms of controlling a historical agent with the general actions of traversing the environment, killing characters, and sailing. Yet *Freedom Cry* is also a noteworthy intervention into the White male hegemony of mainstream games (Leonard 2003; Williams et al. 2009; Brock 2011; Shaw 2015b; S. Murray 2015; Nakamura 2012) by featuring a Black male protagonist as the core of its narrative.

Ubisoft, a multinational company, prides itself on its use of historical settings to the extent that employees and marketing materials often emphasize that the company consults various historians or relies on historical sources to ensure the authenticity and believability of each game (Kamen 2014; Chapman and Linderoth 2015). The games also endeavour to highlight their adherence to historical knowledge through the inclusion of in-game textual encyclopedias written by Ubisoft's own employed historians (Kamen 2014; Plante 2012; Kotzer 2014; Saphieha 2015). Seemingly, these encyclopedias, alongside the detailed representation of tangible material architecture, fashion, technology, landscape, flora, and fauna, seek to constitute what Köstlbauer refers to as a "claim of historical realism and authenticity" (2013, 170). This invites players to accept the authenticity of the games' simulations of historical, events,

cultures, and geography. This allows Ubisoft as the curator of the *Assassin's Creed* brand to utilise a double-binding mechanism - a reliance on correspondence to established historical fact, while being concurrently able to claim that the narrative is purely fictional with made-up characters and events. This leaves the game to conveniently both be marketed as alluring for its so-called historical authenticity and simultaneously not bound to criticisms of its depictions. Similar to other historical settings appropriated for entertainment purposes under the guise of creative license, the *Assassin's Creed* series uses history and the notion of historical believability, and yet, through its diegetic justification of 'reliving ancestral memories', the series provides creative license to construct a sort of speculative fiction and include various historical locations, architecture, persons, and events for the player to play with or consume.

### **Playing the Past through Representation & Procedures**

The *Assassin's Creed* series not only represents the past via audio-visual means, but also by allowing players to perform within the constraints of the game. In addition to conventional representational means of memory-making, digital games also offer procedural and performative ones (Galloway 2006; Chapman 2012; Pötzsch and Šisler 2016; Uricchio 2005). Players configure a procedural system that reacts and responds to the input of players. Chapman (2012) argues that focusing only on the historical content of a digital game is therefore insufficient to capture the meanings produced by *playing* a digital game. As digital games are experienced through both audio-visual and procedural means, it is imperative to look at how "the particular audio-visual-ludic structures of the game operate to produce meaning and allow the player to playfully explore/configure discourses about the past" (ibid. para 4). Concurrently, this produced

meaning is only potential and can be actualised or subverted differently in different contexts of play. (Sicart 2014, 7)

To conceptually encapsulate both these aspects of games, I examine what I refer to as the layer of representation and the layer of mechanical system. These layers are derived from the cybermedia matrix, as suggested by Aarseth and Calleja (2009), between mechanical system, representational layer, and finally the decoding role of players as interpretative subjects bringing their own contexts and backgrounds into play. The representational layer in digital games refers to the ‘interpretable’ representational elements that “players read or observe in order to be able to use and play the game” (ibid. para 6.1). Colloquially, it could be termed as the ‘surface’ or ‘skin’ of the game or as the layer that constitutes the audio-visual content through representational means in a spatially simulated world that players interpret. The mechanical system is understood as the machinic operations that predispose the possible frames of play. These possible frames of play can be divided into what is referred to as the rules (Juul 2005, 5) and the mechanics (Sicart 2008). Rules are the formal qualities that structurally contextualize player action insofar as they frame player behaviour, while mechanics are the “methods invoked by agents, designed for interaction with the game state” (Sicart 2008, para 1), colloquially called the ‘verbs’ of the game. These layers are not exhaustive of what constitutes a digital game, but they are sufficient to explore the formal aspects of how *Freedom Cry*, as a digital game, contributes to processes of cultural memory and offers instances of counter-hegemonic commemorative play.

### **Rising up against Slavery in a Virtual Caribbean**

*Freedom Cry*'s narrative of rising up against slavery finds its point of departure in the player-character, Adéwalé. He is an adult black man from Trinidad who in his

childhood escaped slavery to join forces with seafaring pirates in the Caribbean. With not much mention of his social class except as being an ex-slave, the game depicts him as muscular and physically strong and his expositional dialogue signifies intellect, cunning, and ambition. The game's narrative begins with Adéwalé's ship sinking during a storm, and he is washed ashore on Saint-Domingue (today known as Haiti) near the town of Port-au-Prince. In the course of the subsequent narrative events, Adéwalé encounters the oppression of Black characters under French colonial rule. This motivates him to join forces with the local resistance in order to fight back against the slave system. Through his quest to dismantle the slave system, Adéwalé realizes the futility of acting against a colonial power. The more he fights, the more French colonial power increases its violence towards the enslaved population. Some non-playable characters, such as the Maroons and a local businesswoman by the name of Bastienne Josèphe, are prominently positioned in the narrative with relatively high levels of expositional dialogue and agency, which fosters character dynamics between them and Adéwalé. This allows Adéwalé's fight against the slave system to be challenged and complicated by these characters. For example, Bastienne points out the futility of fighting against the French colonial power as a single individual. As such, the narrative of *Freedom Cry* offers players a fictional representation of eighteenth century Haitian characters who grapple with an oppressive slave system that in the end proves impossible to dismantle through sheer individual strength. This theme is also in accordance with the series' premise of history having already taken place and therefore unable to be altered by the actions of player-characters. The transatlantic slave trade and Caribbean slave system continue regardless of the player's actions in *Freedom Cry*.

Through the narrative contextualization of rising up against slavery, the game's mechanical system allows players to free slaves, intervene in the punishment of slaves, capturing slave ships, kill slavers and guards, liberate large slave plantations, rescue imprisoned slaves or buy slaves at slave auctions. The game can largely be divided into two different mechanical systems – one in which the player controls the body of Adéwalé, which affords the methods invoked by players to kill, climb, jump, and walk, or run, and the other in which the player controls Adéwalé's ship, its direction, sailing speed, cannons, mortars, and boarding capabilities. In this way, *Freedom Cry* adheres to the usual basic conventions of the *Assassin's Creed* series – the playable character is able to traverse the landscape and buildings within the confined virtual environment, and hide away from or kill other hostile characters while fulfilling the goals posited by the game. By offering players these methods through its rules and mechanics, *Freedom Cry* grants players considerable power and allows them to overcome the hostile opposition reproduced by the mechanical system and thereby progress through the structure of the game and towards the conclusion of its narrative.

### **A Holistic Understanding of Representation & Mechanical System**

In *Freedom Cry*, the representational layer and the mechanical system work in conjunction to frame the meaning potentials that structure how players might understand the past. When traversing the virtual environment, the playable character of Adéwalé is exposed by virtue of his racialized body in the context of eighteenth century racial and gendered hierarchies. The game's mechanical system includes both the ambient presence of non-violent characters that audibly comment on his appearance as a Black body and explicitly hostile characters that will actively search for and attack Adéwalé on sight. In this way, the relationship between the virtual spaces of *Freedom Cry* and the depicted player-character simulate an oppressive system and its responses

to non-hegemonic identities. Danger, vulnerability, and fear of being attacked are explicated in playing Adéwalé within this hegemonic virtual space.<sup>iv</sup> Although the mechanical system affords players opportunities to overcome these hostile challenges with violent ease, the opposition is still endlessly reproduced. Thus, the game not only represents the player-character as a non-hegemonic identity through its audiovisual layer, but also through the simulation of a marginalized power position found in its mechanical system.

In return, the narrative also contextualizes the mechanical system and appeals to the player to engage morally with the rules of the game. Whilst previous entries in the *Assassin's Creed* series required players to collect arbitrary items or help characters with trivial tasks, such as collecting feathers, fetching and delivering items or safely escorting other characters, *Freedom Cry* asks players to free slaves from brutal plantations or slave ships. If slave overseers detect the player or if the player directly attacks the slave ships, the amount of slaves freed is lessened because overseers start murdering the helpless slaves in the plantation or in the case of the ships the slaves are inadvertently killed by players. This contextualisation seems to attempt to appeal to the player's morality. For example, the developers state that "players responded to this in a very visceral way [...] the next time that players approached a plantation they tended to choose to do [*sic*] a stealth approach" (Murray and Giard 2014, 09:51-10:10). Although there are many different modes of involvement in gameplay, as seen in Calleja's (2011, 181) player involvement model, *Freedom Cry* motivates moral engagement by making players accountable for the loss of enslaved virtual characters. As such, this sort of narrative contextualization of the mechanical system invites the moral engagement of the player while concurrently conveying the brutality of an oppressive slave system.

It is also significant to note that the game never characterises enemy opposition beyond being one-dimensionally evil perpetrators of an abhorrent system. Adéwalé, understandably so, never engages in respectful dialogue with slavers, so the narrative never allows for a characterisation of the individuals reproducing the slave system. This lack of characterization is in line with Hartmann & Vorderer's concept (2010, 94) of moral disengagement factors, where a digital game's portrayal of hostile opposition can engage or disengage moral reflection upon players' own actions in the game world and the characters they respond to. In this sense, *Freedom Cry* does not humanise the perpetrators of the slave trade beyond their deplorable actions against enslaved Black characters. As such, whilst *Freedom Cry* seeks to engage the moral reflection of players in attempting to free slaves, it simultaneously fails to explore the background of the transatlantic slave trade and how individuals might commit immoral actions by virtue of the structures they are acting within. A selective conflict filter that seeks to make the game's central conflict uncomplicated to players (Pötzsch 2015, 5-6) is apparent here. As such, it would appear that Ubisoft Québec does not necessarily prioritize multiplicity and complexity in characterising the slave system, instead favouring a simplistic morality that subsumes the wider historical social, cultural and economic context of such systems.

This said, it is perhaps also important to note that whilst the mechanics grant the player many abilities in overcoming the hostile characters and ships, the mechanical system reproduces these challenges *ad infinitum*. No matter how many slave ships players board, no matter how many plantations they liberate, no matter how many slaves they free, the game system will constantly renew and reproduce this opposition to

the assigned goal of 'rising up against slavery'. This means that the game refuses to offer a counterfactual narrative of the transatlantic slave trade, as players are not able to rewrite history and dismantle the slave system in the Caribbean.<sup>v</sup> By doing so, the mechanical system in *Freedom Cry* frames the historical event through a procedural rhetoric that demonstrates how unassailable the structural and systemic nature of the slave trade was if one chose to resist as an individual. The game's larger narrative also reinforces this point, as Adéwalé learns at the end of the plot that his ambition to dismantle the atrocious slave system will never be enough and his violent means only serve to escalate French atrocities against the oppressed and enslaved Black bodies in the game. This is epitomised in a scenario in which French escort ships sink their own slave ship due to Adéwalé's resistance. While the slave ship is sinking with its entrapped slaves on board, the player is forced by the mechanical system to board it and attempt to free up to fifteen entrapped slaves before the ship is completely sunk. This tragic experience results in Adéwalé laying down his arms at the request of his allies, due to revenge measures by French colonial powers, thus concluding the narrative. As such, the slave system is both mechanically and representationally confined to being indomitable and players are not allowed to rectify the historical trauma of the Caribbean slave trade.

In the game's refusal to provide a catharsis to players, it avoids falling into the trap of complacency by returning to the past only to assuage White guilt in the present. The game sets in stone the actual historical events that still to this day affect nations and their citizens for good and bad, so that players who want to escape the historical injustices of the transatlantic slave trade are denied achieving this catharsis through the game. At the same time, *Freedom Cry* offers an empowerment of a marginalized

identity without falling into the trap of giving the impression that the transatlantic slave system could only continue because of the lack of resistance by these identities in the past. Instead, the game's procedural message and narrative theme remain concentrated on the fact that the change had to be systemic.

Alternatively, this return to history could also be argued to invoke a 'tyranny of realism' (Shaw 2015c, 21). This particular criticism is levelled at historical games, like the *Assassin's Creed* series, that remain complacently within the grand hegemonic narratives of history. Shaw argues that such designs "close down emancipatory possibilities by refusing to imagine history otherwise" (ibid.). In *Freedom Cry*, neither the player nor the player-character possess narrative agency in the grand scheme of history and the game thus perpetuates the same hegemonic history. Shaw maintains that counter-historical experiences "can be much more powerful and critical when they allow players to imagine "what if"" (ibid. 20). This emancipatory imagination is restricted in *Freedom Cry*'s broader narrative, as its ending returns historical events to the status quo and history remains the same.

### **Simulating Race & Historical Trauma within Hegemony**

As I have shown above, the mechanical system of *Freedom Cry*, in relation to its representational layer, makes a meaningful argument about the socio-structural nature of slavery and White hegemony in the eighteenth century in relation to the possible frames of play. These design features go hand in hand to frame scenarios that convey meaning to players that might help to explore or understand discourses about the past in their present. However, it is also important to consider the critical aspects of how the game reproduces problematic meaning potentials in relation to its protagonist's racialised identity due to contexts of contemporary oppression in entertainment media.

Amongst other things, the game has been criticized for how it instrumentalises and quantifies the liberation of slaves as a resource to upgrade Adéwalé's mechanical abilities: The more slaves that players liberate, the more abilities and power Adéwalé is granted. Writing on the games criticism website *The Ontological Geek*, Dawson argues that

“to then turn Adéwalé's personal relationship to the institution of slavery and his fight against it into essentially a resource collection minigame feels hypocritical at best; at worst, it undermines the game's message that slaves are not just a resource, but thinking, feeling human beings.” (Dawson 2015, para 6).

This criticism fits within Chapman & Linderoth's (2015) analysis of the 'limits of play', which examines games' potential for generating controversy due to fear of representational and ludic characteristics clashing with one another. Controversial, sensitive, and politically charged topics in games risk the possibility of being perceived as trivialised by the ludic nature of play due to the potential for them to become treated as only game objects by the player and thus less respectfully than the theme of their representational aspect is perceived to demand (ibid.,149). This fear seems to be at the root of Dawson's criticism of slaves as a resource. By ascribing the representation of slaves a functional gameplay characteristic, the design of *Freedom Cry* runs the risk of being perceived to contradict itself by trivialising slavery.

In addition to this risk of trivialisation by utilising slaves as a resource, *Freedom Cry* also depicts the brutality of the slave system in a highly sanitized manner. The pain and the hardships of the slave system are barely identifiable in the expressions of the

enslaved characters. Racist language is also removed from the game, perhaps to maintain “its modern, polite sensibilities” (Narcisse 2014a, para 13). Ubisoft Québec’s choice to selectively filter out uncomfortable history is in line with other popular entertainment media that include certain aspects, yet exclude others. For example, Köstlbauer (2013, 169) criticises certain historical war games for using the design of landscapes, machinery, architecture, weaponry, documents, and enemy designs to fulfill claims of realism and authenticity, while at the same time excluding other aspects of war, such as civilians, the trauma of warfare, the social and economic consequences of warfare, and so forth. The subject of transatlantic slavery and how oppression is depicted in *Freedom Cry* is uncomfortable, but it is never *too* uncomfortable. Its mechanical system and representational layer motivate an emotionally charged experience, but it is nevertheless still encoded for pleasurable mass consumption. As Mukherjee notes on games depicting non-hegemonic identities, amongst them *Freedom Cry*, “The images [...] are always being manufactured and only represent things that colonial imperialism wishes to show and see. This is what influences how maps are charted and identities fixed” (2016, 12). As some players may wish to play a game for its ludic properties and as easy-to-consume entertainment, the events in *Freedom Cry* are perhaps to an extent only included when they do not risk making the experience too uncomfortable. In writing on his blog about *Assassin’s Creed III* (Ubisoft Montréal 2012), Patton criticizes such fictional depictions of historical trauma because they are merely “a ploy to sell more units, or just a kneejerk emotional response” (Patton 2014, para 51). He adds, “It’s not that they’re wrong, it’s that they don’t go far enough.” (ibid, para. 52).

The character of Adéwalé in *Freedom Cry* can also be interpreted as invoking the problematic stereotype of the ‘angry violent Black man’ often found in hegemonic White media. This has been argued to negatively contribute to the collective image of Black masculinity (Hall 1997, 262; Winant and Omi 1994, 56). Even in Ubisoft’s marketing, Adéwalé is referred to as of “imposing stature” (Ubisoft 2015), thereby unintentionally echoing the many instances of U.S. police justifications for why police officers were ‘forced’ to shoot and kill Black American men (Garfield 2016, para 2). While strength and agility would obviously be preferable in fighting against a brutal slave system, representation of black masculinity “has been forged in and through the histories of slavery, colonialism and imperialism” and “through such collective, historical experiences black men have adopted certain patriarchal values” (Mercer and Julien, 1994, 136). As such, Adéwalé, as a Black male character, runs into the paradoxical double logic of what Hall calls the “binary structure of the stereotype” (Hall 1997, 263). Like contemporary Black masculinity, Adéwalé has to resort to a sort of ‘toughness’ against the oppression and violence of White supremacy, while concurrently this ‘toughness’ is encoded as lethal and menacing in hegemonic media narratives. However, to the credit of *Freedom Cry*’s writers, the game’s narrative allows for a deeper and more nuanced characterization of Adéwalé in his interaction with the non-player character Bastienne Josephine. Here his character is able to show compassion, humor, and kindness, which further the depth of his character beyond one-dimensional hegemonic masculinity (Connell and Messerschmidt 2005, 854). Unfortunately, this is only in expository non-playable narrative sequences, while the mechanical system still prioritises violence and domination over others.

The weapons at Adéwalé's disposal also have different connotations when compared to those available to the previous player-characters in the *Assassin's Creed* series. This weaponry casts Adéwalé as the exotic 'Other' (Said 1978) - while the White male player-character in *Black Flag* uses neatly decorated European swords and flintlock pistols reminiscent of European technological progress, Adéwalé is granted the exoticised machete and the roaring, unsophisticated 'blunderbuss'. The weaponry thereby echoes the more brutal and less refined stereotype of oriental identities, in which the sophistication of European, industrial high culture and technology cannot be obtained or possessed by the marginalized, the implication being that they are not as 'civilized' as European societies, thus echoing Giroux's (1994) description of Whiteness as "[...] a universal marker for being civilized and in doing so posits the Other within the language of pathology, fear, madness, and degeneration." (ibid. 75)

These issues are also exacerbated by the fact that violence is the only means through which players can fight the slave system in *Freedom Cry*. It is not mechanically possible to appeal to empathy, use diplomatic communication, or other non-violent means that would allow Adéwalé to display less physically intimidating behaviour towards the characters taking part in the slavery. There are instances in which the narrative depicts Adéwalé as intelligent and cunning in the ways in which he seeks to dismantle the slave system, yet mechanically this is not seen beyond certain stealth scenarios in which players should avoid being seen by slavers and eavesdrop on conversations to find out important information. Again, this unfortunate reliance on violence as conflict resolution also ties into the stereotype of Black masculinity as physically fearsome but intellectually weak (Hall 1999, 21). This mechanical limitation is perhaps not surprising given the *Assassin's Creed* series' genre conventions and the

mainstream games industry's predictable reliance on selectively filtering violence as one-dimensional (Pötzsch 2015, 3). *Freedom Cry* has to meet consumer expectations of the established brand as an entertainment product, while also relying on asset reuse from previous entries to save production costs. Yet the re-contextualization of the same mechanics seen in the previous entries alters the reading of them.<sup>vi</sup> While there is now a non-hegemonic player-character, the abilities are still in line with hegemonic masculinity, in terms of how this character dominates others through pure strength. The stereotype of Black masculinity therefore hangs over this potential interpretation and the intersecting characteristics of gender and race seem to inevitably inform this decoding. Of course, one might counter this criticism by arguing that violence is the only appropriate short-term solution to abolishing a racist slave system aimed at oppressing and eradicating Black bodies. Regardless, it is important to consider how conflict is resolved in *Freedom Cry*, since such a constraint affects not only how players decode the chosen characters and theme, but also how players express themselves through their situated practices of play within the possibilities enabled by the mechanical system.

The game could also arguably be seen to suffer from failing to explicitly relate the past to the present. It is generally held as important to understand how the past and its representations causally affect or relate to us in the present. In some cases, media fail to provide a historical perspective on how the structures of oppression and past atrocities depicted still affect contemporary societies and postcolonial hierarchies, contributing to the problematic and complacent notion that former colonial societies now live in post-racial societies. Given that many social groups and countries have benefitted from the historical conditions of the slave trade, there does seem to be a missed opportunity for *Freedom Cry's* narrative to comment on how the events of the

transatlantic slave trade depicted in the game affect nations to this day, particularly given the opportunities opened up by the games simultaneous usage of a present-day narrative by way of the ancestral DNA science-fiction premise. The game does hint at the Maroon resistance and the later Haitian revolution that gave the country its independence from French oppression, but it filters out how France boycotted and blackmailed the independent Haiti to force it to re-pay potential lost profits from the lack of a Haitian slave industry (Phillips 2008. 4-8). Nor does *Freedom Cry* remark on how France has still not repaid Haiti's historical debt, despite calls for debt cancellation in the wake of the Haitian earthquake catastrophe in 2010 (Hay 2015). There seems to be missed opportunities in relation to framing both how individuals and collectives understand the past through the present and how the past affects the present. *Freedom Cry* lets players take on the mantle of fighting against a historical slave system, but it fails to address how this has factored into the state of societies beyond the game itself.

### **Decoding & Situated Play**

The above analysis of *Freedom Cry*'s design features only identifies the dominant frames that could potentially guide player interpretation and activity, but these are only potentials. How players actually decode and actualize these representational and mechanical elements can also provide beneficial insights. In playing digital games, and thereby configuring and interpreting both the representations and the mechanical system, players bring their values, dispositions, experiences, etc. to the game through the framed activity of play (Sicart 2014, 62).

As such, the performances afforded by the game are influenced by the preferences and intentions of the players. This is highly relevant to potential engagements with processes of cultural memory, as players work in dialogue with the

game not only to understand the past as it is presented in the game but also to bring their own understandings and predispositions to bear. That is to say players decode through differing discourses the meaning potentials encoded in the game in question (Shaw 2015a, 109). As the accounts by Evan Narcisse and Justin Clark will demonstrate below, player perspectives are significant in understanding the meaning potentials produced by *Freedom Cry*.

The following accounts are from critics Evan Narcisse (who used to write for the online pop-cultural publication *Kotaku* and now writes for *io9*) and Justin Clark (who publishes articles in similar publications, such as *Slate*, *Gamespot*, and *Paste Magazine*). I perceive these accounts to be significant in the sense that they highlight how playing historical games can influence processes of cultural memory related to one's identity. Both Narcisse and Clark give their perspectives on how their own racialised identity as Black men participating in US pop culture factors into the playing of *Freedom Cry*. Their situated play experiences are particularly valuable in this regard since their accounts are not only personal, but also highlight past and contemporary forms of oppression perpetuated through mass-cultural entertainment. It should be noted that I do not claim that their statements in anyway represent what it means to be marginalised in mass-cultural entertainment *in total*. Instead, their accounts of playing *Freedom Cry* illuminate areas related to race, marginalisation, mass entertainment, and processes of commemoration in their own specific ways.

In one instance, Narcisse writes about how the setting of *Freedom Cry* reminds him of his relation to his own family and culture:

Part of it happens in Haiti, where my parents were born. Characters talk in Antillean Kreyol, the mosaic tongue made of French and West African words that I heard while growing up. But, mostly, it reminds me of going to church with my mother. It makes me happy and sad at the same time. [...] It hits on some real feelings that swirl around in the Haitian diasporan soul. [...] Never in a million years did I ever think I'd hear Haitian Kreyol in a video game. And yet, there it was in *Freedom Cry*, as lilting and percussive as when my mom spoke it. For the few hours I steered Adéwalé through his saga, I didn't feel horribly under-represented or taken for granted in the medium I write about. It's a feeling I could use more of. (Narcisse 2014a, para 1)

The game's lead writer, Jill Murray, echoes this sentiment during a conference presentation dealing with the production of *Freedom Cry*:

It's heartbreaking to hear that expectation that people don't expect to see themselves, so what we really did was set out to try to make a game that would make people feel they are seen. [...] we are really going to focus on what do these people who want to be seen [*sic*], what do they see in themselves and what would they like us to communicate of their spirit, of their community, of their history. I think that's important, it's a natural human instinct to want to see yourself and your history in stories. (Murray and Giard 2014, 17:10-17:59)

The attempt by Ubisoft Québec to make the virtual setting believable and feature a conscious acknowledgement of non-hegemonic identities ensured that the game ascribes cultural status to the Kreyol language by including it for implied players such as

Narcisse who can activate this encoded meaning potential. Similarly, in an interview with the online publication *Giant Bomb*, Narcisse addresses a particular instance in *Freedom Cry* where it is possible to free slaves off an auction block by simply purchasing them from slave traders. However, it is also possible to kill the slave auctioneers. Narcisse states in the interview;

*Narcisse*: “Right, right, so, you know, it’s funny, you mentioned, like buying the slaves off the auction block...uhm...I never did that. I always killed the guys who were selling them...”

*Klepek*: “Wow, really?”

*Narcisse*: “Yeah, I never once, like, bought them their freedom, it was always bloody for me, and again, you know that’s probably my own personal background dropping into that [...]” (Narcisse 2014b, 00:01-00:28)

Narcisse’s statement demonstrates how players bring their own background and moral values into play, especially when confronted with personal involvements like this instance. It shows a form of resistance against the virtual characters who are enacting the slave trade and being actively complicit in the diaspora and genocide of Black virtual bodies. Whilst the game’s representation does respond to the player’s decided action, the game does not react dynamically to the player’s decision, in the sense that these actions do not explicitly matter in the broader context and progress of the game. However, these decisions clearly still have the potential to be meaningful and one might, for example, argue that by paying the slave traders, the player becomes complicit

in the slave trade and enables the slave system. By refusing to do so on principle, Narcisse actively negates the reproduction of a racist capitalist system in the game. This shows how it is possible for players to appropriate agency within the game by refusing to enact one set of potential actions on the basis of one's own moral convictions (Sicart 2008). This experience points to the inherent difference of historical games compared to other forms of historical media in that players are required to activate and configure meaning potentials, often by inserting their own values and perspectives. Clark also highlights this quality of games:

This is not an experience that can be had anywhere else on the planet. This is more than power, this is more than the elucidation of pain. This is catharsis. It's catharsis beyond the one gamers usually think of, of having a shitty day, taking it out on virtual puppets with extreme prejudice. It is having your racial identity, the large scale identity as a minority validated, and given the freedom no slave ever did. *It is the ability to exert power over a cultural past that has and continues to affect us to this day.* It is not begging for someone to give us, us free [*sic*]. It is taking it by right and force. (Clark 2014, para 11, my emphasis)

This is exemplary of how games hold potential to influence and engage processes of cultural memory, particularly in relation to marginalised groups. In recounting his feelings about and experience of playing the strong and capable Adéwalé in a power fantasy against virtual White supremacy, Clark pinpoints how digital games can allow for a certain type of ludic performance that not only commemorates the oppression tied to marginalized identities and groups but also allows the active reworking and negotiation of this memory in potentially progressive ways. Clark continues,

It's a power fantasy with a purpose. It serves the same purpose that [Quentin Tarantino's film] *Inglorious Basterds* serves for Jewish people, and that white people get to find in hundreds of other pieces of media every year. But most importantly, it's validation. *It means that black people, their experiences, their ancestry exist outside of the encyclopedia.* (ibid. para 16, my emphasis).

Once again, Clark invokes processes of cultural memory related to how marginalised racialised groups are obscured and relegated through a form of historical amnesia. As a mass-cultural digital game, *Freedom Cry* allows for a specific form of negotiation and performance that validates the existence of a marginalised identity beyond esoteric historiographical encyclopaedia in the processes of remembering the past. By having a game with a representational layer and a mechanical system that simulates the historical trauma of the transatlantic slave trade, whilst representing and allowing players to act as a Black protagonist and engage in a historical struggle, the game enables a particular form of awareness and produces a symbolic significance in relation to the collective cultural memory in the player's present. *Freedom Cry* therefore stands as an example of how the representational layer and mechanics can work together to form an experience that commemorates the oppressive systems of the past, whilst providing opportunities to resist this memory in the face of being an exposed identity in hostile spaces. Both of Narcisse's and Clark's statements highlight what the game meant for them in their situated play experiences. Despite its flaws detailed earlier, *Freedom Cry* accentuates a mass-cultural way of simulating marginalised existences in both the past and present, giving inclusive acknowledgement to underrepresented cultures and identities. *Freedom Cry* is not without its problems in its racial dynamics in the context of contemporary

White hegemony, but it also points towards the ways in which digital games can open up for a recognition of marginalized past and present experiences.<sup>vii</sup>

As such, *Freedom Cry* has the potential to influence processes of cultural memory related to marginalized identities and contemporary and past forms of oppression through practices of play. I term such activation of critical meaning potentials ‘counter-hegemonic commemorative play’. By this, I mean instances where a game’s design features allow players to playfully negotiate, and perform against, contemporary hegemony thereby influencing processes of cultural memory. As such, counter-hegemonic commemorative play does not only recognize the past in a symbolic manner through representational means, but also allows players to perform and actively resist the depicted past hegemony in a potentially cathartic way. While Clark’s mention of the catharsis of *Inglorious Basterds* is comparable, it is not equivalent – the film does not allow individuals to perform and actively resist the historical trauma of Nazi oppression, whereas *Freedom Cry* offers performative counter-hegemonic experiences through its mechanical system. This is one of the essential aspects of counter-hegemonic commemorative play, where players are able to virtually act out struggles against past and contemporary oppression. *Freedom Cry* strikes a rather clever balance between allowing cathartic moments of counter-hegemonic play by providing opportunity for individual resistances and yet still emphasising the structural nature of oppression and the difficulty of individual resistance against such hegemonic structures. Despite potentially problematic aspects, arguably in large part due to the capitalist and White hegemonic contexts in which they are created, my analysis, coupled with the statements by Narcisse and Clark, demonstrates how digital games are potentially able to progressively contribute to processes of cultural memory associated with oppression

and marginalisation. Narcisse summarizes both the success and failure of *Freedom Cry* as popular cultural product thusly:

What Adéwalé [...] can represent is a placebo for those historical voids. It's a placebo made out of popcorn, sure. But these [...] characters' collective existence manages to soothe nonetheless because it's evidence that creative people see value in an ancestral line like mine. (Narcisse 2013, para 12)

### **Counter-hegemonic commemorative play - Recognition of identity & memory**

In total, counter-hegemonic commemorative play is a playfully enacted, mediated form of commemoration that emphasizes the memory politics of marginalised identities and groups. It follows the politics of recognition (Taylor 1994; Galeotti 2002) in affirming and acknowledging other ways of life by highlighting non-hegemonic differences and identities.

As illustrated in the statements by Narcisse and Clark, digital games hold the capacity for this sort of recognition, particularly in regards to how media are able to reinforce or question symbolic power hierarchies related to identities. I maintain that historical games possess the capability to enable the legitimacy and acceptability of marginalised identities in the same manner as hegemonic identities (Galeotti 2002, 100-1) by offering counter-hegemonic commemorative play. Given that narratives influence processes of cultural memory through various cultural artefacts, such as monuments, museums, calendar dates, documentaries, films, literature, and games (Erl 2011; Assmann and Czaplicka 1995; Sturken 2008; Landsberg 2015; Reading 2011), it is important to analyse them in order to draw out the ways in which their meaning

potentials motivate specific understandings of the past in the light of the present. It seems clear that digital games are able to meaningfully engage, or even challenge, understandings of the past. Engaging a digital game can potentially hold deep mnemonic significance to some players, as demonstrated by Narcisse and Clark. There are certain encoded elements in digital games, such as virtual spaces, character representation, mechanical systems enabled by the software code, and a broader narrative, which all go together to simulate a historical experience that potentially informs and relates to processes of cultural memory, and, importantly, lets players playfully activate, negotiate and perform these processes. Additionally, it is significant to understand how marginalised identities are encoded in these artefacts, if at all. As Young (1990, 59) states, asymmetrical power relationships and oppressive structures between different social groups and certain identities are reproduced and reflected in media. This makes it imperative to understand how games, as a wide-reaching entertainment medium, reinforce or subvert these ideologies, especially with regard to how the past is remembered or forgotten in the present.

It is equally central, however, to note that this symbolic recognition of identities in processes of cultural memory does not necessarily lead to material benefits, as argued by Fraser (1987, 131), i.e. being represented and recognized in an entertainment product like *Freedom Cry* does not make up for postcolonial effects on Haitian society and culture, or the African diaspora caused by the slave trade, or racially and gendered oppression writ large. This does not mean that aspects of recognition should be discounted, but rather that discussions on hegemony and inequality should keep both material and symbolic wealth in mind. As Butler (1997, 33) has argued in relation to symbolic wealth, recognition and acknowledgement of non-hegemonic identities do

matter in addition to material considerations. Thus, since games allow for playful performances through their design features, it is fruitful to understand how they can serve as inclusive, empowering and cathartic playful objects for marginalising conditions, both within and outside of media representation. My analysis of *Freedom Cry* and the personal accounts by Narcisse and Clark highlight the mnemonic potentials for such performances related to marginalisation in the present through the form of digital games.

## **Conclusion**

By enabling a form of potentially cathartic power fantasy within a historical struggle, along with the symbolic representation of non-hegemonic identities, the developers of *Freedom Cry* open up for players to activate counter-hegemonic commemorative play. The game therefore enables the recognition of marginalised identities and histories within larger frameworks of cultural memory. The decision to contextualise its genre conventions within a historical trauma as a non-hegemonic identity allows the reconfiguration of how players can relate to and play with specific processes of cultural memory. As such, by providing frames in which players are able to potentially negotiate and appropriate their understanding of the past through practices of play, game developers can design for counter-hegemonic commemorative play. Given the historical and contemporary oppression of the groups and identities in question, I have argued here that digital games have the ability to contribute to processes of understanding the past in the present in their own media-specific way as simulations. My conclusions also imply that game developers are not only able to utilize this aspect to their creative advantage, but they also possess the ability and power to rectify or nuance the reproduced memories of historical oppression and marginalization through counter-hegemonic commemorative play, i.e. they are able to provide structures that allow

players to activate, perform and recognise marginalised identities in the present. As Sicart states,

Creators who are invested in the aesthetic and ethical possibilities of games should care about the design of the spaces of play where appropriation happens. (Sicart 2013, 66)

These conclusions also have implications for historiography, as they demonstrate how digital games allow for media-specific configurations of historical discourses, in which players can actively bring their own values and experiences to bear. Digital games allow performances within the constraints of both the representational layer and mechanical system and this can feed into processes of cultural memory and thus how players actively remember the past. Given these conclusions and the fact that contemporary hegemonic power hierarchies, processes of cultural memory and mediated cultural expressions intertwine in how collectives and individuals remember the past, it therefore seems that the media-specific affordances of digital games have the potential to play a significant part in these processes.

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i “Memory studies is therefore not an exercise in nostalgia, but can be a method to discover and reflect the mechanisms and potentialities of cultural change and renewal. Most importantly, it helps us to realize when and how the present and future are shaped by memory” (Erll, 2011, 173).

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- ii Note that this genre of games engages history in many different ways, but I restrict my focus to those “wherein a player is in direct control of a historically situated agent” (Kapell and Elliott 2013, 10).
- iii It should be noted that I am analysing matters of white hegemony, colonialism, and transatlantic chattel slavery, aspects of which I benefit from as a person belonging to dominant identity categories (as a white, male author with Danish colonial heritage). This might blind me to some matters of race, gender and class oppression. It needs to be made clear that in addressing issues of oppression, my own lived experiences and access to material and symbolic wealth affect my capacity to fully analyse oppression. The purpose of my article is not to speak on behalf of marginalized groups, but to analyse and uncover racial and gendered hegemonic aspects of cultural memory as symptomized in historical digital games.
- iv It should be noted that an earlier entry called *Assassin’s Creed: Liberation* (Ubisoft Sofia 2014) offer up similar procedural simulations of oppressive historical spaces in the intersection of class, gender, and race. For a discussion on this game and its identity politics, cf. (S. Murray 2015)
- v One might counter that this is merely a method for the developers to fill the game with opposition that never runs out, thereby always engaging the player with an experience. However, previous entries normally have the same amount of content that is not constantly reproduced, has end-states and is therefore possible to finish.
- vi ”By changing the perspective from Edward to Adéwalé the mechanics seemed to be taking on a new meaning and we found that by tweaking them just a little bit, we would be able to craft a new story and raise some very different stakes.” (J. Murray and Giard 2014, 8:30-8:55). Here the level designer at Ubisoft Québec touches on the altered player experience entailed by employing the same mechanical system from the previous entries in the series to a different representational layer in *Freedom Cry*.
- vii This echoes Browne (2014) analysis of the *Assassin’s Creed* series as “both a ‘Game of Empire’ that deploys the strategies of the colonizer, while simultaneously being a ‘Game of Multitude’ that valorizes the deeds, agency, and cultural richness of an often-subjugated group.” (ibid.)

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