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Becoming Bayek: Blackness, Egypt, and Identity in *Assassin's Creed: Origins*

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Abstract

This article is an exploration of one of the bestselling single player RPGs from the Assassin's Creed series, 2017's Origins, as understood through a framework of cultural race and identity theory. This article relies on theories of identity and how we experience gameworlds as players, and how our sense of self is represented in virtual bodies. The article also considers and closely analyzes the game on its historicity—the franchise is one which is often touted as being extremely accurate, but as the article shows, there are inherent flaws and longstanding tropes which remain. This approach is an interdisciplinary one, using cultural history drawn from both an Africanist and a Classicist perspective alongside more recent theories, in particular those of Stuart Hall, to interpret the power of the immersive single player game.

Keywords

identity, cultural theory, historical games, Assassin's Creed: Origins, African history

Introduction

Africa and Africans have been significantly under-represented within video games, with the continent frequently ignored in mainstream games. Exploring a modern, bestselling game set in classical Africa such as Ubisoft's *Assassin's Creed: Origins* (Ubisoft, 2017) through theoretical frameworks and historical analysis therefore demonstrates how ideas of identity add to the persuasive power of the medium particularly

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with respect to Africa and African identities. Because games permit players to share experience through immersion and identification, theories of race and cultural hegemony may need to be refined, and questions of history more closely explored when analyzing a game set on the African continent. *AC: Origins* represents a game offered by a major game studio and framed within a lucrative franchise which is situated within a storied African past. On its face, this is a radical and exciting example of representation for Africa and Africans which bypasses the historical traumas of the trans-Atlantic slave trade. Representation is not enough, however. It is not only important that game developers represent non-white characters within their gameworlds, but it is how they represent them which demands consideration. Responses by fan communities can vary widely when diversity is done correctly, but avoidance of complicated issues of race and social injustice within the ludic framework ultimately serves to weaken a game setting. As Lisa Nakamura points out, applying a neoliberal "color blindness" is fundamentally harmful, and increasingly conflicts with the visual immersiveness that is part of the digital sphere (Nakamura, 2008, pp. 5, 174). Far from inaccurate or falsely "color-blind" representation, research and historical accuracy by a given game studio has a clear economic benefit by representing a broader population and potentially attracting new players to a successful franchise. This visibly played out with the 2017 release of *AC: Origins*. Players of African descent were pleased to experience a precolonial African chronotope, while notoriously, a portion of the playerbase accused Ubisoft of "blackwashing" history. This is intriguing and reminiscent of the discourse around Egypt during the colonial period, as nineteenth-century white European conquerors insisted that relics of ancient glory could not possibly have been the doing of Africans. As a result of its complex history and the assumptions applied to its past achievements, the study of Egypt was shaped by contrasting dialectics and it was historically analyzed as if separate from the continent of which it is manifestly part.

Africa, Egypt, and African identity as they have been conceived of by outsiders are sites of contested memory. Stuart Hall argued in *Old and New Identities, Old and New Ethnicities* that a central element of modern identity formation is the construction of self as we are judged by the Other. In this context, the Other is drawn from both a historical and an anthropological system of the in- and out-groups. Who we are as a group is often as much informed by who we are not as by who we believe ourselves to be. Historically, this manifested in rituals, body markings, or group-specific behaviors which explicitly demonstrated the Us-Them dyad. It is a central theory to apply to games, especially historical games such as *Assassin's Creed*. Hall describes this idea of self as "the self as it is inscribed in the gaze of the Other," (Hall, 2019 [1990], p. 69) and when we apply his theory to the kind of game where the player explicitly experiences the events of the narrative through the eyes of a virtual avatar, the Other may well be the avatar him- or herself. Understanding how identity might transform or be challenged through the course of one of the bestselling games of its kind is useful therefore not only for historical purposes but especially in the social climate of the present. To that end, I will use Stuart Hall's ideas of identity and culture

as a central analytical tool. Hall asserts the importance of popular culture in establishing alternative traditions and social narratives. Hall's reading of Gramsci highlights the tension between high culture and popular culture, and the importance of popular culture in developing a sense of authenticity and a collective identity (Hall, 2019 [1992], p. 88). Popular cultures can develop into group identities at least in part through resistance to dismissal by the gatekeepers of "high" culture; they are then shaped in strategic contestations from within and can be contradictory. Dialectics of cultural tension in this context revolve around issues of authenticity/inauthenticity, experiential/formal, homogenization/opposition as well as the problem of popularity flattening out nuance and becoming commodified. As Anna Everett argued in 2009, there is a tense landscape for Black players within games, and the narratives and spaces challenging with respect to Black identities (Everett, 2009, pp. 112–115). While early games often attempted something developers evidently imagined was adequate representation, Everett describes how players instead saw stereotypes and caricatures on display. Stereotypes are part of the fundamental shorthand within gaming and are not of themselves intrinsically malign, but implicit biases within games are undeniably cause for concern. The issues lie in what messages are being conveyed through these shorthands, and the historical origins of stereotypes at play here. White gamers have never faced the systemic oppression which has been the history of Black cultures, especially in former slave societies of the Americas. At the same time, the ongoing backlash against multiculturalism which Hall observed in the early 1990s is ongoing, and narratives of cultural hegemony and white nationalism are a steady drumbeat among gamers, making further exploration into these complex identities an important matter. Grand narratives of history form a part of this cultural dialectic and serve as a central reason to apply Hall's ideas to how Blackness is represented within *AC: Origins*—as I will demonstrate, Egypt has been a battleground for centuries both literally and culturally, with contested ideologies attempting to lay claim to history and heritage in the region. If the game as a medium of popular culture represents a particular expression of identity in the global North, then analysis of what is being represented as players experience the game may be productive. While Everett rightly critiqued games which served to perpetuate dangerous and misleading stereotypes around constructions of Blackness which have their origins in the hierarchies of the trans-Atlantic slave trade, *AC: Origins* is reaching toward a more distant time and place well before the trans-Atlantic slave trade altered how Africa and indeed Blackness was seen by the outside world.

Identity is a fluid construct, perpetually in motion and generally understood as a dialectic of the relationship between ourselves and those whom we are not (Hall, 1990). The self is reflexive, judging itself in relation to other social categories or relationships (Stets & Burke, 2000). We organize ourselves into kin groups and associations, and we articulate our sense of self through behavior, ritual, or explicit identifiers. In the virtual environment, many of the traditional means of locating ourselves are absent, and our identity has the potential to shift as we follow a developer's story through someone else's eyes. We find ourselves immersed in the narrative, engaged in the actions we imagine our digital selves

performing. This is a fundamental part of why games can be so powerful. Katherine Isbister notes that:

> If we hear (or form a mental picture of) a person experiencing feelings in a social setting that we, too, are immersed in, our brains are "tricked" into believing that a real social experience is taking place. Of course we engage this delusion willingly—it allows us to experience alternate situations and ways of being human, which in turn informs our own experience of being human. (Isbister, 2016, p. 8)

Games in the single player RPG (roleplaying game) genre represent the pinnacle of this experience—we have no other players against whom we can define ourselves, and in some cases, we are not even able to select the outward appearance of our virtual avatar. We rely wholly on the narrative, the appearance of our virtual avatar, and the chronotope around us to provide us with the immersive experience. There is a danger here, however, which lies in the identities of the developers themselves in relation to the player's identity. Many studios are dominated by a cis, white, male leadership team, and as Ergin Bulut points out, there is an inherent subjectivity in the desires of both developers and players alike (Bulut, 2021, p. 333). Ubisoft Montreal, where the *Assassin's Creed* franchise is developed, was recently the center of an industry scandal around sexist, abusive and openly misogynistic practices directed by white male developers towards others in their team, which should be noted as a factor demanding a closer critique of the series (Schreier, 2021).

Blackness in Gaming–A Review

Considering many of the important past examples of how non-white characters have been represented within games may be instructive. In the 2018 collection *Woke Gaming*, a number of chapters engage with elements that relate to this article's topic, but Robbie Fordyce, Timothy Neale, and Thomas Apperley's points are particularly cogent. In their chapter "Avatars" they grapple with the question of how white players can "play race" when they are situated within a non-white avatar (Fordyce et al, 2018). This question is one which leads to an often-disappointing conclusion; far from facilitating more nuanced perspectives, all too often, games permit players to "wear" Blackness temporarily, putting it aside when it is inconvenient. David J. Leonard similarly called this issue out in his 2006 article which emphasized the importance of race-based Game Studies (Gray and Leonard, 2018). Other writers have explored this idea critically, including David Deitrich, who added metrics to the point in 2013 by looking into which games permit non-white avatars and which do not.[1] Many high-profile games within the RPG and MMORPG genres have historically limited players in the ethnicity they are able to represent, with a high proportion either making it impossible to play as a non-white human character (*World of Warcraft* was guilty of this issue for a considerable length of time, only permitting comprehensive non-white avatars in 2020), or building gameworlds which were bereft of NPCs of color. This

has the effect of digital worlds that serve ultimately to reinforce whiteness and the dominance of whiteness as a presumable default (Deitrich, 2013). Adrienne Shaw's work emphasizes the importance of representing Blackness entirely within a non-white chronotope. This forms an element of her arguments around identity and identification, and why diverse experiences are important particularly within games (Shaw 2014, ch. 4). Within another collection concerning gender and race in games, TreaAndrea Russworm explored how Blackness was represented in the *Walking Dead* (Telltale Games, 2012) and within *The Last of Us* (Naughty Dog, 2013). Her analysis highlighted the trope of Black anguish or suffering in dystopian settings, emphasizing the historical apocalypses which inform Black experiences as one reason for the association of non-white characters with end-time scenarios. She also critiques the narrative of a sacrificial Black character in many media representations and delves deeply into the complex histories and meanings of Black fatherhood as it is shown within games (Russworm, 2017, pp. 112, 117–119). Kishonna L. Gray's work on this topic is extensive and informs elements of this present study. In 2018, she explored perspectives on Black protagonists in popular games, critiquing elements of their presentation from the viewpoint of the Black community. She notes how there exists a dialectic within that community between Blackness being represented as hypercriminal, or existing within hegemonic narratives. She notes that Black characters are portrayed as inherently criminal or associated with the shorthand of criminality, or as accessories and facilitators of white heroism. She also explores the *Walking Dead* and its representation of Lee Everett's Blackness in particular, before turning to the buffoon-caricature she sees in Augustus "Cole Train" Cole from *Gears of War*, and then offering guarded praise to the *Assassin's Creed* franchise for the character Adéwale in *AC: Freedom Cry*, as his seminal killing of white slavers references white anxieties and dominant visual paradigms (Gray, 2018).

Ubisoft's Egypt, circa 49 BCE

After launching *AC: Origins*, the new player begins with a cutscene and with violence. You find yourself playing as Bayek of Siwa, a Ptolemaic-era Egyptian Medjay, or elite guardsman, locked in mortal combat with a masked, anonymous enemy and his henchmen. Over the course of the first few levels, you gradually reconstruct the events which left you in Sneferu's Bent Pyramid, killing a man you are told goes by the alias of the Heron. Your character, Bayek, was a member of an elite order called the Medjay and was forced by five masked members of a secretive and powerful cult to murder his own son Khemu—as he lunged at the men holding the boy, they redirected his strike to impale his cherished child's heart. The damaged heart would prevent Khemu from reaching the Egyptian afterlife, and the quest to wreak vengeance for the crime he was forced to commit is the primary reason behind Bayek's killings throughout the game. Religion and ritual as they might have been understood by a rural Egyptian permeate the game design and the ludic world, and evidently were developed in close consultation with Egyptologists and historians.

The conceit of the *Assassin's Creed* series is that the player is explicitly stepping into the historical life of an ancestor. The franchise relies on the narrative device of the player's avatar using an advanced virtual reality mechanism to vicariously experience the long-gone life of a subject through their DNA. Your avatar is themself experiencing all the meaningful events of a long-dead individual's past, which you are in effect experiencing *through* them. It is a meta-ludic framework, which succeeds to a greater or lesser extent in weaving the various titles together into a larger whole, depending on the player's individual interest in the broader franchise narrative. In *AC: Origins*, the player avatar is a modern woman who was born in Egypt but raised in America, named Layla Hassan. She is manifestly not a white woman, and codes as either mixed ethnicity or, to an eye more familiar with North Africans, as Egyptian. The central protagonist for the ancient era sequences, Bayek, is dark skinned, with a thick wiry black beard and half dreadlocked black hair which is otherwise fairly straight. His nose is aquiline, and his eyes are hazel, and he is noticeably darker-skinned than many of the characters the player will meet. His features are consistent with those of an Egyptian, as some players have asserted in forum posts. He is voiced by Abubakar Salim, a television and theatrical performer from England. The modern-day avatar, Layla Hassan is voiced by Chantel Riley, a Canadian-Jamaican actress who has worked in film as well as voice acting, with *AC: Origins* as her first work as a voice actress. She reprised her role in the 2018 sequel to *AC: Origins*, set in ancient Greece, and entitled *AC: Odyssey*.[2] Both voice actors for these major characters are people of color, playing characters whose homes are the African continent. The player is not given the ability to customize their avatar but must instead invest in both Layla and Bayek as the narrative shifts between each of their lives and experiences. A third option emerges toward the mid-game: Aya of Alexandria, Bayek's wife. She is half Egyptian, half Ptolemaic Greek, and is voiced by Alix Wilton Regan, a white English-born actress and model. Aya has freckles, lighter skin than Bayek's, and braided black hair which falls on the left side of her face. She wears heavy kohl, and has dark eyes, and her aesthetic largely resembles the skin tone and facial features of the majority of the non-player characters encountered throughout the ludic world. The developer team at Ubisoft present a vision of Ptolemaic Egypt circa 49 BCE that never once flinches away from the diverse but decidedly northeast African demographic of the region and period. Even the ever-contentious Cleopatra is represented as a woman of color, although her voice actress, Zora Bishop, is a white Englishwoman. There seems to be a consistency in using English voice actresses to represent Ptolemaic Greek or Greco-Egyptian female characters by Ubisoft in this game.

Bayek's voice actor Salim has written about his engagement with race growing up; this draws an open and important connection between ethnicity and characterization: "I'm black and growing up was tough due to the racism from not only the area I lived in, but also from school.. I'm a working class black boy from a council house in Hertfordshire" (Salim, 2018). Salim not only provided the voice for the character, based in part on his father's and in part on earlier voice acting done for the franchise, but also provided motion capture—in effect, players were stepping into a character

who was without question a Black man both in voice, motion, and especially, in history and aesthetic. This is important, especially given the conflict which arose upon release of the game. This representation and effort to voice major characters with Black actors is important—*AC: Origins*' Bayek was listed as one of the respectful representations of Blackness in gaming by *Game Informer*'s Jason Guisao, who wrote that:

> Leading up to Assassin's Creed Origins' release, Ubisoft received backlash because of their choice to portray ancient Egypt through a Black lens. While scholarly debates about the complexion and exact ethnicity of Africa's early civilizations have thrived for considerable spans of time, Bayek's Blackness (and the inherent Blackness of Origins' world) is important. (Guisao, 2019)

Representation in games and in popular culture is essential for players who share the ethnic background or culture with the protagonist, without question. For players who are themselves Black, or identify as such, Bayek is a caring, loving father figure in his characterization, defending his people and moving through a chronotope of Egypt which celebrates a non-white past. While this is no longer as uncommon as it was in games, as TreaAndrea Russworm points out in her analysis of dystopian game settings, like the characters she considers, Bayek's warmly paternal interactions must be balanced with his anguish and loss, making their positive representation also a bittersweet one (Russworm, 2017, pp. 121–123). Bayek is important not only as contrast to negative portrayals of Black father figures in more modern settings, however, but also because his is a historically correct representation. Egyptian historical accounts suggest that unlike the Greeks and Romans, Egyptians were very protective and loving toward their children—the upshot being that while Bayek's characterization may be an accurate historical representation, it is also an empowering symbol in the context of modern Black culture.

Blackness and Ideas of Egypt

This demands a moment of exploration beyond the ludic narrative. What, after all, is Blackness? Isn't that a central issue which a white player might wonder, and one predisposed to outrage might protest, as more than a few did at the release of the game. Upon the release of *AC: Origins*, there was a considerable backlash from the player base at finding themselves situated within ancient Africa. News articles from 2017 demonstrate a sense of the flood of racist elements of the player base, who emerged to protest the inclusion of a major release from the franchise which would feature dark-skinned protagonists and major characters, set in a region which the game developers clearly intended to represent with a degree of accuracy.[3] Players claimed that Ubisoft was "Blackwashing" ancient Egypt—the idea seems jarring when one recalls that Egypt is, after all, within Africa. In this game, Blackness is not only omnipresent, but it is also situated in a historically contested space where it is inarguably authentic. This is not the urban landscape described by Everett and Watkins (2008, pp. 143–147)

in earlier games—although as they note, *GTA: San Andreas* (Rockstar Games, 2004) similarly experienced a backlash from its community when its main character was represented as a non-white person despite the complexities around representation in that franchise. Instead, what is seen within this game is African historical fact. But it is also part of an ongoing ideological conflict reaching well back into the colonial period. There are a few ways to approach this concept, and I will begin with the purely historical to articulate both the chronotope of *AC: Origins*' Egypt, and the theories which now define what Blackness is understood to mean. A great deal has been written about Egypt, and whether historical people such as, for example and in particular Cleopatra, were "white" or "Black."

Since the mid twentieth century and Frank Snowden's work, classicists have argued that the dyad of Black/white is impossible to apply to the ancient world (Snowden, 1970).[4] Understanding ethnicity in the ancient world is considerably more complicated than defining someone as "white" or "Black." The two words would have had very little meaning as we use them if applied to a Ptolemaic Greek or to a Roman. For one, Greeks and Romans did not use color words as we do today, often using a color-word to encompass a broad range of meanings including hue, motion, as well as signifiers of gender or status (McCoskey, 2012). A word such as *leukos* may indicate whiteness in the sense of hue, or fairness when applied to a mythological figure such as Adonis or may indicate the pallor of death or horror. The word *argos* may also mean whiteness, but also means lightning and a racing dog. What this ultimately means is that even words which may have been understood to describe skin colors are problematic in translation. The color-words serving as descriptors are, without further explanations serving to suggest ethnicity, considerably more complex than words used now to define ethnic origins through skin-color. Historical figures like Odysseus might be described in epithets or words which modern constructions of race will wholly misunderstand, according to classicists. The dark skin he is given by his divine patroness is a gendered matter; to be paler skinned was a feminine trait drawn from living largely indoors, while masculinity was associated with hard work outdoors, under the Greek sun. Calling him "fair" within that gendered framework would be to associate him with attributes which the ancient Greeks deemed feminine, while dark skin implied a rugged and healthy life appropriate to his rocky island kingdom. While the Greeks certainly saw differences aesthetically, attempting a simplistic parallel of color-based language would be erroneous according to modern classical scholarship. Greeks and Romans simply did not see the world in terms of skin-based racial divisions, and as groups, also did not classify themselves as having the same skin-tones as northern Europeans when they chose to use color word comparatives (which again, are already challenging).

Further, while Greeks and Romans were certainly aware of African origins (the Greeks called them "Αἰθίψ," and the Romans "Aethiopes"), they did not attribute any positive or negative connotations to them. To a Roman, identity centered on being *Roman*—they observed differences, but by no means saw paler skin as a benefit. It might code someone as being of Germanic origin, after all, and Germania was a barbaric land beyond the frontiers of civilization (Thompson, 1989;

Whitmarsh, 2018). Both lighter and darker skin if included within an actual origin beyond the Roman world was simply seen as a peripheral origin, and thus lesser. Egypt presents a special case, however. Ptolemaic Egypt was a colony to Greece, and Egypt's colonization by Alexander the Great has been variously understood by classical scholars as beneficial or negative depending on the era. Alexander's visit to the Temple of Ammon in Siwah (interestingly, Siwa is where the player for *AC: Origins* begins the real game and is Bayek's home) began a concerted effort at syncretization by the new ruler. Alexander adopted ram's horns in his official coinage, claimed to be the son of Ammon from that point onward, and embarked upon the restoration of many ancient ruins and temples. This has been read as either a liberal attitude toward racial diversity or as Alexander's vanity depending on the historian (McCoskey, 2012). Importantly for the actual historical makeup of Egypt, and for its replication within the chronotope, Ptolemaic Egypt was a space of contesting authorities and narratives. The Ptolemies were intent on establishing Alexandria as a clear heir to classical Athenian literary glory and collected texts from around the ancient world for the Great Library to solidify that inheritance. What is notable, as McCoskey points out is how "the invisibility of Egypt and Egyptians in many forms of literature from Hellenistic Alexandria is striking" (McCoskey, 2012, p. 133). This reflects the complicated relationship between the colonial Greek rulers and the Egyptians who were subject to their rule. That tension is indeed articulated in Ubisoft's narrative architecture, with Bayek overhearing the plight of everyday Egyptians faced with dispossession, exploitation, and starvation under the guise of imposing civilization upon them.

Identity and the Diasporic Self

The language of colonial missions to impose order was hardly unique to the Ptolemaic rulers of Hellenistic-era Egypt. Africa was seen by the racist scholars of the nineteenth-century colonial period as a continent without civilization—a place suitable for conquest and partition. This was a central justification for imperial expansion and exploitation, but archaeological finds in Egypt created an ideological problem for colonizers intent on "spreading civilization." That problem was solved—as were later, similar issues such as the arrival of British explorers to the ruins of Great Zimbabwe in what is now Zimbabwe—by inventing a fictional white empire in the distant past to which all examples of civilization in Africa might be attributed. Multiple explorers and archaeologists relied on this "Hamitic Hypothesis" to explain the wonders they saw throughout Egypt and the Nile valley as well as in southern Africa. Egypt became the central battleground for competing ideologies and constructions of identity. For educated Blacks in the nineteenth century during the abolitionist struggle, Egypt represented a well-known ancient glory situated on the African continent. For white colonial explorers, Egypt had to have been the product of vanished white peoples, justifying colonial expansion and control. With translations of hieroglyphics available upon completion of the decipherment of the Egyptian language by 1836, new

information was soon made accessible for historians of Africa concerning ancient Egypt. Previously, ideas of Egypt had relied upon Greek historians and writers, whose descriptions were often biased and flawed, and finally, scholars and the public could read something of how ancient Egyptians saw the world and themselves in it.

Through the twentieth century, Afrocentric historians and scholars like Cheikh Anta Diop explicitly engaged with Egyptian history and with tomb images to reimagine an ancient Africa where African accomplishments were rightfully celebrated. Those accomplishments were inherently Black for Diop, and his thinking was shaped by the legacies of racism which had marginalized Africa and the diaspora, necessitating a fierce defense. The majority of Diop's *African Origins of Civilization* is concerned with establishing the similarities between Egyptian imagery and modern photographs of Africans; he uses as justification for the "Blackness" of ancient Egyptians the colors used by them in representing their deities, identifying Isis and Osiris as being painted Black (Diop, 1974). This analysis serves to flatten out actual historical diversity in ancient Egypt, and the many ethnic origins which were present in a region which had been conquered by so many different peoples over centuries. Egypt to the Afrocentrist represents a lost glory, and importantly, a stolen legacy claimed by white usurpers, but by reducing Egypt and the broader ancient world to the Black/white dyad, Afrocentrists similarly apply a wrongheaded conception of "race" to the past (Snowden, 1997). Doing so reduces Blackness to a kind of strategic essentialism if we return to Hall's theories of cultural identity, and such essentialism of differences ignores the nuances that exist in individual relationships to culture. Identity to Hall in the modern context must be layered—not either/ or, but *and*—when applied to multiple simultaneous identities such as Black, British, Jamaican, and so forth (Hall, 2019 [1992], p. 91). I would suggest that this same complexity must be applied to ancient Egypt, and this is consistent with the contentions of modern Classical Studies.

These ideological arguments around Egypt originate in the generations of trauma stemming first from the trans-Atlantic slave trade and then from the forceful colonization of an Africa which had lost an estimated quarter of its total population through the slave trade.[5] For Stuart Hall, a part of the civil rights movement was the flowering in the 1960s and 1970s of "Black" identity. Blackness had been used as a pretext for enslavement and abuse from the trans-Atlantic slave trade onward. Reclaiming skin color became the clarion call for emergent postcolonial identities. As Hall points out, for a society in which everyone is non-white, skin-tone is evaluated in a thousand shades and differences. It is only in the colonial environment or in a slave society in the Americas that these differences are flattened into a singular "Blackness," and it is a Blackness which exists in the mind. Hall defines this Blackness as a political category which was created out of a historical moment of self-actualization. "It was not politics legitimating culture, it was culture legitimating politics," in Hall's words (Hall, 2019 [1990], p. 75). Blackness became a new way to articulate individual identity situated within a group consciousness defined by history and shared experience.

For historians like Paul Gilroy, Blackness hinges upon shared tradition. It creates a sense of close kinship within the paradoxically diverse forms of Black experience. This encompasses the tension between a kind of racial solidarity and recognition of profoundly different lives. Tradition and importantly, historical continuity, becomes a fundamental shorthand for transmission and preservation of Black culture within Gilroy's model. This is a defiance levelled against a virulent racism which exploited and abused Blackness for generations—racisms, to use Gilroy's phrasing, "work insidiously and consistently to deny both historicity and cultural integrity to the artistic and cultural fruits of Black life." (Gilroy, 1993, p. 188). Defying them therefore requires a cohesive historical narrative to legitimize Black political culture. Modernity in this framework is identification both with the traumas of surviving the slave trade and all that went with it, and the need to reassert a sense of historical recognition. It is entirely unsurprising that Egypt became the battleground that it did for identity and ideologies of Blackness —no one could deny the material evidence of Egypt's glory. Faced with archaeological examples of a civilization which even the ancient Greeks saw with awe, establishing an authoritative claim to its legacy holds a lasting importance. Unfortunately, the debate has largely been articulated within the framework of a racialized post-Atlantic slave trade language, which as we have touched upon, is ill suited to the ancient world.

Sub-Saharan Africans in Ubisoft's Egypt

Given the debates within culture over authorship of the glories of Egypt, representations of Blackness by Ubisoft demand further attention. They have situated this game within that contested space and history, and how they represent the characters within it is important. This was not the franchise's first attempt at representing Africa or Blackness—in the fourth installment of the enormously successful series, *Assassin's Creed: Black Flag* (Ubisoft, 2017), a side character, Adéwalé, was a former slave born in Trinidad who featured not only in the 2013 game but in a standalone game where the player experiences his memories exclusively, and later he appears again in *Assassin's Creed: Rogue* (Ubisoft, 2017), the seventh installment of the franchise. Voiced and acted through motion capture by Tristan D. Lalla, a Canadian actor of Trinidadian descent, Adéwalé's own story in *AC: Freedom Cry* (Ubisoft, 2017) engages explicitly with the complex and charged history of the trans-Atlantic slave trade and in particular, the Haitian Revolution. Lalla also voiced one of the villains in *AC: Origins*, the so-called "Scarab," Taharqa, a driven and complex character whose death deeply troubles the protagonist.

Within *AC: Origins* a number of characters are presented who clearly hail from further south and are inarguably of sub-Saharan origin. The character Taharqa is one of them, but in his representation, Ubisoft has unfortunately replicated a trope of sub-Saharan Africans and Blackness which privileges north African lives over the lives of those from further up the Nile. Taharqa shares a name with one of the members of the Kushite Twenty-Fifth Dynasty, which may indicate an origin within the Kingdom of Kush, a powerful and ancient polity which developed

south of Egypt and successfully conquered and ruled it from roughly 744-656 BCE. He is not differentiated from any other Egyptian whom the player meets, save that his features are clearly unlike those around him, and he is a driven man determined to achieve glory. The character has a wife and children and is a prominent and well-respected authority figure. In this aspect, the game writers have done an excellent job representing the diversity which would have been typical in Egypt. Unfortunately, he is also one of a small number of darker-skinned Egyptians who are either written as villains or whom the player is forced to kill, and this is where the game's representations of Africa and of Blackness become problematic.

Ubisoft does not offer players information for Taharqa's birthplace, although they do provide it for another very dark-skinned antagonist, Khaliset, who like Taharqa is a member of the villainous faction, and similarly uses a pseudonym. In her case, it is "the Hyena," and she is described as having been born upriver in Thebes. Khaliset is voiced by Mouna Traoré, a Canadian actress of color who has worked in film and television, and has gained prominence in Canadian productions. The character of Khaliset is overdrawn as a desperate parent, nearly mad with grief, who will do anything, no matter how heinous, to bring her dead daughter back from the dead. Told that this is impossible by Bayek, himself wrestling with the same pain, she rejects his empathy in favor of violence. Khaliset's narrative is one of someone trying to use advanced technology which she believes is magic that can bring a dead child back to life—in this, there are problematic nuances and hints at tropes of the "savage" misusing something they cannot comprehend. She wears stark white streaks of face paint when the player confronts her, suggesting a rejection of societal norms or an embrace of "primitive superstition." This representation of a primitivist aesthetic and narrative, like orientalism, is a caricature of actual beliefs. Shoved into a grab-bag of stereotypes, it's an easy Eurocentric narrative to fall into and one which Hall roundly and rightly criticizes as one which is too often applied to Blackness. Worse, the trope of the user of witchcraft is one which European theorists and Eurocentric popular culture have misrepresented and misunderstood for centuries, turning complex beliefs and internal contradictions into cartoons (Li, 2006). Khaliset is coded very much in line with tropes of mysterious African witch-women who seek to control what cannot be controlled, but she is also written as a tragic figure. Salim in his Reddit AMA commented twice that of all the characters Bayek assassinates, he felt the greatest interest in Khaliset, and that she was easily his favorite character. Her agony at losing her child made her sympathetic and horrifying simultaneously, due to the lengths to which she went to try to achieve the impossible. Of the various characters met through the series, only Khaliset and one other use the white face paint, visually flagging them for players. This face paint may be a nod to the body painting of the Nuba people, which has been recorded well into antiquity, but it lacks the complexity which is typical of Nuba patterns.

One of the more troubling representations offered in *AC: Origins* is that of Kensa, the other character we see wearing face paint. Sharing a name and backstory with Khensa from a tie-in novel entitled Desert Oath (Bowden, 2017), Kensa/Khensa is

described as someone from a tribe which is dying out. She is the darkest-skinned character seen in the game, and her features are clearly intended to be sub-Saharan. She is also one of only two characters in the game to wear scarification—the other is Taharqa, and there is another unfortunate parallel in that both such characters are eventually killed by Bayek. Kensa is voiced by the Canadian actress Nicole Stamp, who is a woman of color, and Kensa offers a complicated and important narrative within the main plotline. The character Kensa is a would-be gladiator, exuberant and excited, and an excellent archer. This could be a reference to Kush's renowned archers (Edwards, 1998), and Kush is indeed mentioned within the game through artifact names and frequent historical references. At the ending of the arc within which Bayek and Kensa together battle through a series of gladiatorial games to the point of revealing a major villain, Kensa confronts Bayek about his deceiving her—he had sought her aid to enter the gladiator games, and she felt duped. While in other contexts, Bayek shows consideration for other characters, here he leaves her and rejects her understandable feelings of alienation.

This point is one where *AC: Origins* fails to offer nuance or respect to the ways in which dark-skinned African women have been othered historically. Kensa is represented as "tribal" in a number of troubling ways—she daubs her face with white paint before combat, and she wears prominent animal tusks dangling about her face along with scanty hide clothing in a clear reference to the Mursi people of Ethiopia, though she identifies her origin as Siwa or its surroundings. She is one of very few voiced characters to speak of having been enslaved, hinting at an attack on the starting point for the player, Siwa, without any room for punishment of the wrong done to her, or at Siwans as enslavers. Combined, she fulfills a number of tropes around sub-Saharan Africans, including how her body is displayed, her naïve enthusiasm, and ultimately, in her ugly fate as a disposable hired mercenary whose death goes largely unremarked-upon. Kensa is present in the game to be boisterous, to be used, and ultimately, to die. Bayek mentions a brief sorrow for her fate, but he does not dignify the feelings of betrayal articulated by an old friend alongside whom he's fought in a number of gladiatorial combats, and he also does not hesitate to kill her. Upon engaging with her in combat, the following dialogue is heard:

Kensa: I knew you'd come, old friend. Perhaps I was always meant to die at your hand.

Bayek: I do not want to kill you, Kensa. But look who you serve now.

Kensa: Who else did I have left?
Bayek killed Kensa:

Bayek: I'm sorry it had to end this way, old friend. May you find peace in Ma'at's embrace.

At no other point is she discussed or mentioned, and that is all Bayek mentions of her, where in other cases, he has raged or mourned for lost innocent characters or the

griefs of old friends. Kensa serves a narrative function, and when it is over, she is forgotten. Some players reported attempting to find ways to save her character by assassinating her employer, a Ptolemaic Greek and the nomarch of Faiyum, named Berenike, whose alias was the Crocodile. In doing so, they consciously worked to avoid engaging with Kensa, hoping that doing so would spare their avatar's friend and comrade-in-arms. They found that it was impossible to save Kensa, and that she would attack until killed, prompting the above dialog from Bayek.[6] There is an echo here to what Achille Mbembe grapples with in *Necropolitics*. After all, in his analysis, power and sovereignty is delineated by the ability to define who lives and who dies (Mbembe, 2019, pp. 66, 68). And within *AC: Origins*, it is the three most Black-coded characters who are disempowered, and ultimately who must die in the course of the narrative, whether or not the player wishes to kill them.

Scarification and Identity

Both Kensa and Taharqa are portrayed with facial scarification and seem to be sub-Saharan Africans in their character concept. That they along with the Theban-born but Black-coded Khaliset are present within Ptolemaic Egyptian culture is an excellent nod to the historical diversity of the region, but that all unavoidably turn on the protagonist is a problematic trend. Moreover, the facial scarification on both Kensa and Taharqa is inaccurate, which is a nuance the developers at Ubisoft may well have been unaware of. Taharqa's scars are linear, curving around the bottom of his eyes along his cheekbones. East African scarification patterns are either linear or formed of a number of raised bumps. Among the Dinka seen in present-day Sudan, parallel lines are found around the forehead and scalp, but few such linear patterns are seen, and none appear along the cheekbones as Taharqa's do. Far more common are the raised shapes seen among the Datooga, Nuer and various others. That Kensa is represented with Hamar patterns along her arms, but long radiating lines from the corers of her mouth to the outer corners of her eyes is clearly a design decision rather than a historically accurate choice. The early concept art for Kensa emphasizes these longer lines, and there is no clear pattern along the line of her eyebrows—vertical lines form a pattern of sorts, but it's unrelated to any known ethnic group of the region. Scarification historically has served as a major marker of identity in Africa and beyond, and to the trained eye, a pattern may be "read" as clearly as a passport to situate an individual within his or her appropriate birthplace and community (Keefer, 2013; 2019). Scarification in Africa is most commonly seen in sub-Saharan peoples, and when inscribed on the face, it tends to indicate the kin group or community from which an individual hails. Marks upon the body more commonly indicate either life events such as initiation into a male or female Society (Keefer, 2017), or accomplishments such as successful childbirth or slaying an enemy. The Hamar pattern, called *pala* ("hero's scars"), which Kensa is represented with along her upper arms is one which typically indicates success in battle—each row marks a slain enemy (Krutak,

2013). Among the Hamar, women's marks either are given for beauty, or because a woman's warrior husband's body has no more room left to mark his victories. In her character design, Kensa's neck adornments do not emulate the Hamar women's heavy iron neck-rings, or *esente*, but instead bear a resemblance to Maasai bead decorations. Her headdress is a clear reference to the Mursi people, but she does not wear the lip plate that is part of that ethnic origin. This garb emphasizes the design choice which codes Kensa as homogenously "tribal." It is a blending of different cultures whose admixture entirely reduces encoded cultural meanings to incoherence, abandoning real-world marks of identity for a symbolic primitivist Other.

Using these body markings to visually distinguish the two antagonistic sub-Saharan Africans is an interesting design choice, and it also serves to create a delineation aesthetically. A sub-Saharan woman must be tribal in the ludic narrative, and she can be used and betrayed as the protagonist requires, with little anguish or thought. Her death goes unremarked upon, and she is the only such character to be acknowledged as a former slave. This narrative is not a historical one—and because we are considering an otherwise well-researched and plausible chronotope within a game intended to produce immersion and relation, this characterization demands a closer analysis. So much is well done that a player is able to relax into a sense of trust in the developers' vision, which is if anything further enhanced by the reputability and effort of the bundled *Discovery Mode* for the game. The easy assumption is that while it is without question a fantasy, it is as accurate a fantasy game as one could ever find. To therefore see sub-Saharan Africans represented as "savage," with all the aesthetic decisions made to support that trope, or darker-skinned Egyptians as treacherous and antagonistic is a problematic decision by the developers. Both characters with these identification markers are presented without context or histories within the game—we do not really know where they come from or who they are, and the marks of identity inscribed on their bodies hold no historical meaning to be read. Identity itself is treacherous in the case of Taharqa, who goes by the pseudonym "The Scarab" in his sadistic and villainous alternate self, referencing poisonous betrayals. We do not hear of Kensa's family origins or people—only that she, like Bayek, was from Siwa, but was taken as a slave. No outrage arises from this statement, and no other characters can be found in Siwa who resemble her. Kensa is a character without any anchor, and despite consternation from a fanbase who clearly enjoyed her and were upset by her death, Kensa cannot be spared or ultimately befriended—she is trapped within a narrative which resists player choice.

Ramifications

Assassin's Creed is, overall, an important series in its effort to situate narratives within researched historical periods, and the attention to detail in the most recent releases is admirable. These historically rooted worlds demand interrogation, however, and while on their face, the representation of examples like Ptolemaic Egypt or indeed any historical period in digital form seems admirable, the devil, as they say, is in the details. We cannot ignore the ways in which identity, constructions of race,

Blackness and indeed whiteness intertwine in bestselling franchises. Contested spaces of memory like Egypt force a re-evaluation which is rooted in scholarship from Classical Studies and from African Studies alike if it is to be truly authentic. As recent news has shown us, game studios are all too often rife with racism and misogyny, demonstrating that the developers responsible for these narrative worlds are bringing a variety of problematic assumptions to bear during development. We must consider how gaming culture is replicated and fostered, which in no small part is due to the lack of diversity among so many game studios (Paul 2018, p. 141). Even a game as reportedly well researched as *Assassin's Creed: Origins* has implicit tropes which differentiate sub-Saharan Africans in ways which perpetuate colonial stereotypes and stigmatize Blackness in complex ways. As we experience these narrative architectures, immersing ourselves in ludic worlds we trust will be carefully crafted, and we invest ourselves—our *selves*—into digital alternates, it becomes crucial to do so critically, and to analyze just what it is that we are consuming.

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Notes

1. I informally asked a similar question in 2019 purely within the realm of curiosity-driven gaming, and in collaboration with a friend, a gamer of color. We wondered at the issue with no knowledge of Deitrich's work, and we built a chart which mapped out a similar question. We explored which games permitted player characters of color, which games included meaningful non-white NPCs, and which games normalized non-white NPCs in the everyday, thus avoiding tokenistic representation. Of the 56 MMORPGs we analyzed, only three major titles stood out which prevented players from approximating an avatar of color: *Lord of the Rings Online*, *Dark Ages of Camelot*, and *World of Warcraft*. *Ragnarok Online*, *Silkroad Online*, and *Ragnarok Online 2* also did not permit non-white avatars but have comparatively small playerbases.
2. *Assassin's Creed: Odyssey* (Ubisoft, 2018) is a topic for interrogation as well, particularly in how it rarely engages with aspects of slavery which were the fundamental basis of the Greek societies the player moves through. That the player can "acquire" previous characters from earlier games, including Bayek, as playable skins, is interesting, but in my estimation, the echoing silence of the huge enslaved demographic of both Athens and Sparta is one of the

more deeply problematic elements of that game, and beyond the scope of this article to fully address.

3. Reddit was flooded with posts both attacking and defending the developer and gameworld, the authenticity of its vision, and many of the posts have since been removed, although the thread titles may still be visible through a Google search. The central meme used to flood Ubisoft's Steam page was a reference to Afrocentrist ideas of tradition and African history. Called "We Wuz Kingz," it seeks to denigrate African claims to earlier pasts. For more, see www.gamerevolution.com/news/347075-assassins-creed-origins-racist-backlash-forces-ubisoft-take-action (Accessed March 2021).
4. There is a massive body of work on this subject, ranging from Mary Lefkowitz's *Not Out of Africa: How Afrocentrism Became an Excuse to Teach Myth as History* (1996) to Stephen Howe's *Afrocentrism: Mythical Pasts and Imagined Homes* (1998) which in part both react not only to the wider Afrocentric narrative which seeks to reposition African accomplishments within the ancient world, but to the contribution of Martin Bernal in *his Black Athena* trilogy (1987, 1991, 2006). In large part, Lefkowitz was attacking Bernal's contentions, which assert largely unfounded claims around African colonies within Greece, and while her first volume was polemical in its approach, her second, *Black Athena Revisited* (1996), an edited volume written with Guy Maclean Rogers is more thoughtful. The lengthy debates around Blackness in the ancient world are too extensive for nuanced treatment here, but I side with both Frank Snowden and with recent scholarship on the matter which renders the discussion largely irrelevant. The ancient Greeks and Romans did not understand their world as one comprising Black/White dualities and attempts to recast historical figures or events within that dyad are ahistorical. After all, there are many more extraordinary historical figures within African history who should be highlighted and examined within the modern consciousness rather than perpetuating endless debates over the color of Cleopatra's skin.
5. With roughly 12.5 million Africans sold between 1550 and 1890 into the Atlantic system, and a further estimated 12.4 million into the trans-Saharan system of trade, the result was not only a crime against humanity but a vast demographic shift and a depopulation of the continent. Historians such as Paul E. Lovejoy, David Eltis and others involved in major digital humanities projects to map the scope and scale of the trade have established a forced migration which seriously affected all subsequent interactions with the continent's kingdoms. For more, see slavevoyages.org. It would be impossible to reproduce the extent of the scholarship on this subject since W.E.B. Du Bois's early estimates of the trade's scale in 1895.
6. There were a number of threads around this topic on Reddit, with players discussing strategies they attempted and their annoyance at the way Kensa's narrative was so suddenly ended. For an example, see https://www.reddit.com/r/assassinscreed/comments/7wwop0/about_kensa_and_what_happens_to_her/ (Accessed March 27, 2021).

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