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 December 4, 2012

Mission Failure, Gamic Death: A Close Reading of *Assassin's Creed III*<sup>1</sup>

Boston, 1775. (Gelardin, 2012?) Haytham Kenway. (Or is it me?) Though I am unsure who the "actant" (Adams) is (or could it be both, as Juul suggests?), the objective is clear: eavesdrop on the Redcoats without being detected. The nondiegetic words flash across the top left corner of the screen. I can see them, but Haytham is unaware of the mission. However, he cannot pass through the game narrative without completing the objectives set out by the nondiegetic machine instructions. Though it seems that the game unfolds diachronically and in real time, with multiple actions occurring simultaneously in the *mise en scene*, the larger scope of the game is primarily synchronic: I must perform diegetic operator actions through the Xbox controller to complete the given task before the next nondiegetic instructions appear onscreen. I am confined to the present and must complete the current task before I can advance in gameplay.

I am eager to find my targets, who appear on the nondiegetic map as red circles, so I press buttons on the controller to make Haytham fast walk; I am not familiar with the button combinations, so onscreen, a natural action such as walking quickly appears stilted and awkward. The nonactionable grass ripples as Haytham walks through it; though he cannot interact with it *per se*, it reacts to his movements caused by me pressing the controller.

As Haytham clumsily fast walks through the rural setting past pigs and peasants, I swivel the bottom joystick, panning the setting for my targets, and see intertwined iridescent threads floating horizontally across the screen: the sound waves. As Haytham unknowingly enters the radius created by the visual sound waves, the Redcoats' dialogue becomes audible in the game and Haytham begins to eavesdrop, crouched behind a wooden pushcart.

The sound waves present a conundrum because they are not definitively diegetic or nondiegetic: they are both in and outside of gameplay. Auditorily, the sound waves are part of the game because the Redcoat characters are speaking to each other; however, visually, the glimmering threads are not part of the revolutionary setting, nor can they be seen by the characters. The threads are enabling objects provided to me by the machine because they allow me to be certain that Haytham is eavesdropping and therefore completing the objective. The Redcoats begin to move, and I move the top joystick, causing Haytham to follow them. However, he approaches too closely, and the Redcoats realize that he is eavesdropping on them. A **WARNING** sign flashes onscreen, and I sigh audibly — Haytham has been detected, and I have failed at the eavesdropping objective.

However, there is no time to chide myself further that I will have to seek out more red-dotted targets on the map and begin the eavesdropping process anew because — arms at the ready — the Redcoats have doubled back and are aggressively accosting Haytham. I pause the game to pull out my knife, performing a nondiegetic operator action, and return to gameplay ready to defend Haytham and have him eradicate the threats so I can move forward with the eavesdropping objective.

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<sup>1</sup> This close reading analyzes a mission of Haytham Kenway once he has reached Boston in the narrative. However, it is important to note that the protagonist is actually Desmond Miles, who is transformed into his ancestor, Haytham, in the Animus. The entire action-movie sequence that appears to take place during the Revolutionary War actually occurs in the Animus in the present day.

I quickly press B,A,X on the controller, and Haytham stabs the nearest Redcoat, whom the machine nondiegetically outlines in that same iridescent glow so that I know he is my current target. Suddenly, Haytham jumps on the Redcoat's back and rips his knife across the enemy's jugular, spilling red blood down his similarly colored garb. (Hang on — I don't remember learning that move in training ... ). The machine performs a diegetic ambience act that "emanates outward" to me, "the operator," as the game cuts away to a cinematic interlude (Galloway 11). This movement from active gameplay to cinematic sequence "[disconnects] play time from event time" (Juul) and I, too, feel as though I am disconnected from both event time and from the character who, in the game, is supposed to represent me.

Changes in framing and camera angles let me know that "[the] machine is put at the service of cinema" (Galloway 11): the machine decides which camera angle will show me what it thinks I need to know; I do not have the freedom or the necessity to pan the setting and actively search for the optimal angle. The medium or mid shot employed in this cinematic fight sequence forces me to concentrate more on the details of the characters and their interactions because the camera zooms in on the upper half of their bodies, whereas in active gameplay, the long shot leads me to focus on the entire setting rather than specific features (Dima).

Lost in the cinematic interlude, I passively watch Haytham decimate one Redcoat after the next, first stabbing then suffocating his enemies; the controller lies limply in my hand. Suddenly, a pulse from the controller lets me know that Haytham has been hit. The machine diegetic action is over and I must return to active gameplay and fight off the remaining Redcoats with my button mashing.

Flashbacks of the training run through my mind's eye, but I cannot remember which buttons the nondiegetic words had instructed me to press to counter the attack, or even deflect it. Again, an action as simple and natural as defending oneself is made awkward and complicated by the necessity of working through the unfamiliar medium of the controller. My anxiety mounts as Haytham takes another stab from a bayonet to the stomach; beads of sweat begin to form at my hairline as blood spurts from Haytham's spleen. A translucent red film undulates across the screen, nondiegetically letting me know that within the game, Haytham's vitals are fading. The flashing-red, rapidly depleting health bar next to the game map furthers this conclusion.

Though Haytham cannot know this, I see from the yellow triangles above the remaining Redcoats' heads that they are locking in their guns on Haytham and are preparing to shoot. There is no time for me to react, to nondiegetically or diegetically pull out Haytham's gun to shoot first, to fast walk Haytham's way out of the threatening situation, even to pan the setting for a means of escape. The undulations are coming faster now, the film is more opaquely red, and I know the end is near. I frantically press one button and then another, performing random operator combinations that have no diegetic effect whatsoever on the characters.

**Please reconnect controller.** This nondiegetic, disabling act pops up at the top of the screen and momentarily removes me from the stress of the game situation. In my zeal to remove Haytham from the enemy and his impending game death, I must have virtually detached the wireless controller from the console. I take a deep breath and reconnect both the controller and myself to the game, which unpauses and returns to the active fight. Fast-paced and ominous nondiegetic music emanates from the machine to my ears, and I watch as Haytham's health bar diminishes to nothing as the Redcoat diegetically strikes the fatal blow to Haytham's cranium.

**Desynchronized.** The nondiegetic machine act spells out Haytham's "gamic death" in a final disabling act (Galloway 28-31), the mission has failed, and Haytham is dead.

At least it's only a game. (Right?)

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### Close-Playing: *Super Mario Bros. 3*

For my close reading of *Super Mario Bros. 3* for NES, first, I want to focus on some of the more basic technical elements of the game and then move to more dynamic and ambiguous aspects which lots of close playing has revealed. When turning on the console, immediately a title screen pops up, showing the title of the game, a background including bushes, and an option to select “1 player game” or “2 player game” by pressing “Start” on the controller. This start menu fundamentally serves as a nondiegetic element of the game, which Galloway defines as “those elements of the gaming apparatus that are external to the world of the narrative action” (7). The pressing of “Start” can be classified as a nondiegetic operator act, in that the operator configures the machine to start the game by pressing that button (Galloway 12).

Next, the game brings up a map of the first world, which is an element that seems to have aspects of both nondiegetic and diegetic aspects. The map is composed of numbered levels (although you do not have to go in order) that can be played by moving Mario over them and pressing “A.” The world map also contains a nonactionable background of bushes, rocks, and water. This map is nondiegetic in the sense that it serves as a sort of navigation tool between the narratives of each different level in a world. However, this map also plays a key role in the narrative of the game as a whole, as it provides different possible routes of levels that the operator can follow to get to Bowser’s castle and to the flying ship that is the ending challenge of each world. Galloway states “the diegesis of a video game is the game’s total world of narrative action” (7). When considered in the sense of the “total” narrative, the world map can be considered diegetic, because the way that the operator navigates this map affects the progression of the narrative in the game as a whole. In these ways, this map serves a role in both the nondiegetic and diegetic realms of the game.

When pressing “A” on a particular level, the game moves into the actual gameplay narrative of each level, where the goal is for Mario to make it to the end of the level without dying. Each level in itself is diegetic; the levels are narratives within the game. As the protagonist, Mario can be considered the main actant in the game, acting on objects primarily by running and jumping on them. In slightly different terminology, Mario can be considered an existent, along with the other characters in the narrative, such as the enemies that Mario must jump on to kill in each level. Existents also include the setting, which would include things like pipes the Mario can slide down, boxes that Mario can jump on, and water the Mario can swim through. Furthermore, the act of Mario sliding down pipes, jumping on boxes, and swimming through water are termed events, which are essentially instances in which one existent acts on another (Eskelinen). In another sense, all of these actions require the player to press buttons (normally the directional pad and the “A” button) and therefore can be considered diegetic operator acts, “because they take place within the world of gameplay [...] and are perpetuated by the game player rather than the game software or any outside force (Galloway 22).

However, with respect to the setting, it is important to further distinguish between existents that are actionable objects and existents that are nonactionable objects. The existents that have been previously mentioned are actionable objects, which are capable of being acted upon. There are also other existents, such as the ground and the clouds, which are part of the visual setting, but cannot be acted upon with any button or combination of buttons, and therefore termed nonactionable objects (Galloway 24). Finally, with respect to setting, the sounds of the game must also be considered. The background music is nondiegetic sound, and the sounds produced within the level narrative such as when jumping on an enemy or an object are diegetic sound.

Furthermore, the actions within each level can further be classified. In addition to the diegetic operator acts discussed previously, the game contains a clear nondiegetic operator act: pressing “Start” at any time during a level pauses the game (Galloway 12). Also, some actions of enemy characters and some obstacles that individual levels produce can be considered diegetic machine acts, in that they are generated by the game, but still within the context of the narrative (Galloway 18). A good example of this type of diegetic machine act would be a flower emerging from a pipe attempting to eat Mario. At some points, the player can direct Mario to a spot where such flowers or other obstacles can be observed without causing Mario to die, so in a certain sense, a player could watch the diegetic machine acts unfold, but not really to such narrative complexity of more modern games. If the flower were actually to eat Mario, he would die and spend a few seconds falling off the screen, in which the player has no control over Mario. Although this action would occur because the operator directed Mario into the flower, it is considered a nondiegetic machine act, more specifically a disabling act, because the machine is causing Mario to fall off the screen (Galloway 28-31). Likewise, Mario receiving a boost after jumping on a mushroom also would be considered a nondiegetic machine act, but more specifically an enabling act (Galloway 31). The power-up from the mushroom would be a machine act, but because jumping on a mushroom is part of the level narrative, it does not seem to really escape from the diegesis. Galloway incorporates the term “metaphorically patched artifacts” to describe such enabling objects that are seamlessly worked into the narrative of the game (31-32).

In every level, a nondiegetic menu at the bottom of the screen tells player what world and level they are playing, how many lives they have left, the score, the accumulated money, and how much time is remaining to complete the level. When I was playing, this countdown timer intrigued me. I intentionally let it go down before completing a level. As the time ticked away, the tempo of the background music accelerated: it gave me a sense of purpose. The timer indicated that I was not supposed to just jump around aimlessly, but that Mario needed to get to the end of the level before all the time elapsed. To me, this created a very interesting conception of game time. Game time represents the duality between play time and event time, or time in real life and time in the game world (Juul). In the case of *Super Mario Bros. 3*, it seemed that play time and event time were one in the same. This sense was further reinforced by the fact that this game was without a “save” feature. Although when Mario loses all of his lives, some aspects of his progress are carried over on the world map if the player chooses to keep playing, there was no option to “save” at any point between levels. Time in the game seemed to be very equal to time in real life: if a player wanted to beat the whole game, he or she would not only have to devote much event time in the game world but also spend equal as much play

time in one session of playing the game. Some would view the lack of a “save” feature as a primitive element of this game, but I think this lack of a “save” feature might actually make the game feel more immediate. However, there are some disruptions to this game time in the narrative, in the form of cut-scenes, otherwise termed cinematic interludes (Galloway 11). Although the graphics are just as rudimentary as those of the actual gameplay, these interludes are instances when after reaching the end of a world, another character speaks to Mario in a cut scene in the form of speech bubbles. These interludes move along the plot of the narrative about saving princesses from Bowser, but also seem to represent a lack of narrative control for the operator. Whereas in the levels the operator has the clear goal of steering Mario to the end of the level without dying before time elapses, in these cinematic interludes the operator simply reads the speech bubble and does not even have any control over what is being said.

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Video Game Assignment: Close Playing, Close Reading  
December 2, 2012

### Close Playing: An Examination of Fallout 3

Fallout 3, a video game for the Xbox 360 platform, begins with a cinematic interlude that introduces the game's narrative, positioned in a post-apocalyptic setting of Washington, D.C. and the surrounding areas, devastated by nuclear war. The majority of the game's opening play sequence is comprised of cinematic interludes, cut-scenes, and establishing shots interspersed with open sequences of events in which operators can choose their character's gender, race, specify the particulars of their appearance, alter numbers of points that correspond to the ability to execute specific skills within the game's narrative (such as bartering, proficiency with small guns, or conversational charm), and interact with nonplayer characters through varying dialogue choices and subsequent responses. Despite such open sequences of events in which operators are provided narrative flexibility, operators are limited by certain causal relations dictated by the plots of cinematic interludes and cut-scenes. The inability to leave a room without correctly sighting and hitting three BB gun targets after receiving a gun during a cinematic, cut-scene birthday party is one such example of causality in which operator action is dictated by the game's narrative parameters. In another such causal relation, the operator is forced out of his home – sealed Vault 101 – into D.C.'s nuclear wasteland after his father leaves the vault and the operator is assigned the objective to find him. Radroaches, radiation-exposed cockroaches, and other nonplayer characters, through stinging and shooting, dictate the direction in which the operator can travel until remaining in the vault is no longer feasible, and gameplay moves into the larger map of D.C. In this way, the game determines what can and cannot be done in the larger operation of the narrative, but provides an open sequence of events when it offers the operator choices and responses (what could be seen as sub-narratives), for operator-to-nonplayer character interactions.

Concerning Fallout's spatiality, the game's map attempts to blur the division between static and dynamic spatiality through diagetic operator action. In a dynamic sense, the game's spatiality can be changed by a diagetic operator act in which the player physically moves their character to a new location by using the nondiagetic Xbox controller interface; Toggling the right and left buttons and pushing the right trigger, the operator adds newly discovered locations to his personal map, thereby expanding his spatiality within the game. However, Fallout's map of D.C. and the surrounding areas is still limited in its scope, restricting operator ability to traverse sections of the map. Often, the map appears to be bounded by nonactionable objects like rocks and boulders. Actionable objects – like the nonplayer characters the operator can choose to converse with or the door locks that can be picked with hairclips – are frequently located in the map's interior regions, serving as incentives that keep operator gameplay in the more-actionable regions of the map. Some objects in the map also change their actionable status. For example, the operator can interact with most nonplayer characters while they are alive, defining them as actionable objects. However, when these nonplayer characters are killed, they become nonactionable objects, but their previously nonactionable weapons and clothing become actionable objects available for operator use by pressing "A" on the Xbox controller. Fallout's map is further enhanced by a constellation of nondiegetic machine enabling acts – including



medical kits, called “stimpaks,” that improve an operator character’s health – that augment the operator’s gaming experience.

The operator can choose to view his gameplay in two different ways: through a point of view perspective, in which the operator views the map as if he were the character himself, or in a long shot perspective, in which the action and the character’s body are shown in full. However, when the operator’s character dies in point of view perspective, the shot immediately zooms in on the dead body, and then shifts to a long shot in a diagetive machine act similar to an ambience act. The operator views their dead character in a long shot, and can see nonplayer characters moving around the body despite the ended diagetive operation. The loading of another game, or a re-spawn into a previously-discovered location, involves a nondiagetive machine act that is signaled by a timer that loads the operator’s most recent saved progress. Alternatively, an operator can pause, save, or end gameplay through the nondiagetive operator act of pressing “Start” on the Xbox controller.

The “Pip-Boy” (“Personal Information Processor”) and “V.A.T.S.” (“Vault-Tec Assisted Targeting System”) are narrative functions in *Fallout 3* that blur the division between nondiagetive operator acts and diagetive operator acts. Initially, the Pip-Boy – a device that contains information concerning a player’s health, an inventory of weapons and other actionable objects, perks, and the attributes assigned to the player – appears to operate in terms of a diagetive operator act. The operator’s character receives the Pip-Boy in a cinematic interlude during his birthday party, making the device a narrative-bound, diagetive object. An operator can access the Pip-Boy by pressing “B” on the interface of the Xbox 360 controller. However, though the Pip-Boy contains character information, maps, and inventories integral to the gameplay’s diagetive narrative, viewing it suspends diagetive action. For example, if the operator’s character is being shot in gameplay, viewing the Pip-Boy pauses the diagetive action of shooting, and allows the operator to change weapon classes or view the map without dying or experiencing impaired health, therefore operating like a menu act in a nondiagetive operator relationship. Similarly, V.A.T.S., a targeting system activated by pressing the right button on the Xbox 360 controller, allows an operator to choose a specific region of an opponent’s body to shoot. Though V.A.T.S. is intertwined with the diagetive narrative (evident in the device’s very name, which is tied to the narrative location of Vault 101), it also suspends diagetive action when used, and thus functions more like the nondiagetive operator act of a menu. Employing either the Pip-Boy or V.A.T.S. also alters operator perspective. Pressing “B” to view the Pip-Boy transfers the operator from a point of view perspective to a full-frame focus of the Pip-Boy’s interface. Pressing the right button to initiate V.A.T.S. results in a zoomed-in perspective in which the operator’s opponent is the focus of the shot.

*Fallout 3*’s narrative is predicated upon a karmic system, in which operator decisions in open sequences of events with nonplayer characters have positive or negative consequences as dictated by the game itself. This karmic system obfuscates the distinction between purely diagetive operator acts and diagetive machine acts. Diagetive machine acts are moments in gameplay in which the operator, to borrow Galloway’s term, “submits” to the game, and the game is essentially played by the machine instead of the operator. Such a diagetive machine act is most apparent in the aforementioned V.A.T.S. Using this targeting system, an operator is presented with the percentage probability of successfully shooting an opponent in a particular region, and the operator can select multiple regions to target. However, once a body part is selected, the machine (not the operator’s character) fires the operator’s gun, either hitting or missing the selected target. The operator, by selecting V.A.T.S., forfeits the voluntary diagetive operator act of

shooting. Furthermore, the game itself appears to examine the machine's participation in the action, changing operator perspective from point of view to a pull focus shot in which both the opponent and the operator's character are shown in full in a panning view. The operator is separated from the usual digetic action of firing his weapon, signaled by the machine's control and this visual shift of perspective.

Gameplay in *Fallout 3* appears to experiment with the blurring of divisions between digetic and nondigetic, machine and operator actions. The game is simultaneously built upon open sequences of events and causal relations, static and dynamic understandings of gameplay spatiality, and machine action and operator acts of volition, creating a gaming experience that is nuanced and intellectually-enthralling. The application of literary criticism to this modern medium yields a provoking investigation into the supposed "literariness" of video game culture.

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### Timing is Everything

In real time, the date is December 4, 2012, only seventeen days away from the approaching “ominous date” of December 21, 2012, or the supposed apocalypse (*Assassin's Creed III*). William Miles, the first character introduced to the player, establishes this impending date as the temporal setting of *Assassin's Creed III* in the opening cinematic interlude, which is reminiscent of the opening credits in a movie. His son Desmond Williams is the protagonist of the video game who is sent on a mission back to the American Revolution prevent the initiation of the apocalypse; a solar flare that will destroy the world.

The prologue, an introductory cinematic interlude, merges the real-world time of the player with the time of the game world. The real world and the game world are set contemporaneously, mapping the player's realm onto the game realm. Released on October 30, 2012, two months before the predicted apocalypse, gameplay occurs during the same period of time both in reality and in the game, as the objectives and missions are intended to be completed before December 21, 2012. Real-time strategy is literal in this video game as the player's world and the game world are temporally parallel, but only for seventeen more days.

There is a sense of immediacy between the real world and the world of the game. Even when the player places the disk into the Xbox console, expecting to enter a virtual reality, he or she is swept up into a temporal reality identical to that of 2012 and plagued with the same contemporary anxieties about the end of the world. The game's diegetic machine acts also contribute to this sense of immediacy because they employ full screen cinematic interludes instead of widescreen scenes with bars at the top and bottom of the screen to offset the cut-scenes. After the operator successfully completes a mission, the machine rewards the operator with a cinematic interlude that takes up the same spatial realm that the play time screen uses. This spatially locates both diegetic machine acts and diegetic operator acts on the same plane as the cinematic interlude of rowdy crewmembers on the ship to Boston (diegetic machine act), who are provoking and taunting Haytham, is blended with an ensuing fight scene (diegetic operator act).

The first seven minutes of gameplay consist of zero diegetic operator acts. The diegetic cinematic interlude establishes the physical and temporal setting of the game during this sequence with a narration by William Miles that includes an “interactive flashback” to both the two previous *Assassin's Creed* installments and to the American Revolution, which will remain as the temporal setting for the rest of the game (Juul 6). Desmond must paradoxically travel back in time to prevent the apocalyptic event. The only way to save the future is to go back and rewrite the past, so the “time machine problem” is a major part of game's narrative and player's final goal of preventing the initiation of doomsday in *Assassin's Creed III*.

The first instance of diegetic operator acts is during the training sequence, called the “Refresher Course.” This sequence maps the operator onto the game world directly. Animus, the machine that allows Desmond to access the lives of his ancestors and see history as it actually happened, instructs him in a series of diegetic machine acts. The machine simultaneously gives directions to the player through nondiegetic text at the bottom of the scene, which guides the player through certain controllers actions, prompting him or her with which buttons to press. Both Desmond and the player are aware of their training and their future mission, as the temporal relations between play time and event time as well as the real world and the world of the game exists in a 1:1 ratio (Juul 3).

Nondiegetic machine acts “permanently agitate” this temporal immediacy (Galloway 26). Instead of transporting the operator directly into “event time,” the software cycles through a nondiegetic introduction that flashes “Ubisoft,” the publisher of the video game, and the title of the video game, *Assassin’s Creed III*, on the screen, reminding the operator of the interface in an act of hypermediacy. As Desmond goes on missions, a white loading screen acts as the transition between cinematic interludes and diegetic operator acts. The cut-scenes frame each mission and the nondiegetic loading screen acts as a barrier that disconnects the cinematic interludes from active moments. The white loading screen with only a flashing exclamation mark warns the operator that its time to pick up the controller again and prepare for combat, “B,” “A,” “X.” Combat. Disarm. Kill.

The interface has the potential to disrupt the synchrony of play time and event time through nondiegetic machine acts. Wireless Xbox 360 controllers used to play *Assassin’s Creed III* and manipulate the protagonist can produce disabling acts that interfere with gameplay. The message “Please reconnect the controller” flashes as the controller loses its wireless signal and connection with the console. The player is pulled outside of the world of game and prompted to attend to the interface in present time. When using the B, A, X fight sequence, the diegetic operator acts desynchronize play event time. B (the command to combat) is a nondiegetic machine act that slows down event time (Haytham is unaware of this slow-motion mode) while play time goes on normally. This gives the operator ample time to choose how Haytham is going to kill the Redcoat.

The video game is “fixated” during the American Revolution (Jul 5). This temporal fixation is a diegetic machine act that predetermines the configuration of the protagonist Desmond. The configuration of Desmond occurs independently of operator acts during the prologue and again before Desmond’s first mission when he is transformed into Haytham Kenway, one of his ancestors. As the operator completes training, Desmond morphs into Haytham in a single fluid motion, donning a preprogrammed Patriot uniform with a dark blue coat, black cloak, white cravat, white trousers, and a blue hat. A door magically appears out of nowhere opening onto the Royal Opera in 1754; the entryway is a physical link between the present and the past.

The American Revolutionary War setting is a temporal restriction on the “existents” of the game. The player lacks a nondiegetic ability to configure the protagonist’s appearance, name, or sex. A female fighting for the Patriots would not be historically realistic. Haytham is also set as a Patriot. It is unclear as to which side of the Revolutionary War is evil, although Desmond is working for the Assassins.

To travel back to the American Revolution, Desmond must enter the Animus. Nondiegetic machine acts throughout gameplay function to remind the operator of the game-world present time in Animus. The white loading screen distinctly contrasts with the American Revolution scenery full of deep red blood that stains green grass and gray cobblestone pathways. Its blank whiteness is reminiscent of the whitewashed space of the Animus machine. Haytham Kenway, whom present-day Desmond incarnates through the Animus, is periodically encapsulated in white, geometric lines. The web of what looks like linear points connected on an invisible graph symbolize his good health, or synchronization with the Animus missions. Animus locations, which are nondiegetic machine acts, are also stationed throughout the game as save stations or “metaphorically patched artifacts.” They exist to preserve the operator’s progress if he or she dies, which occurs when the character in the game becomes “desynchronized” with a mission.

Inevitably real time and game time will also become desynchronized. After seventeen days, December 21, 2012 will no longer be future event but relinquished to the past as history. No longer an apocalypse now, the game times and reality do not sync up, leading to a temporal change and an entirely different gameplay experience.

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Video Game Close Reading:  
Assassin's Creed

During the training scene, the video game seemed like it was shot in the sci-fi genre, with genre codes like an alternate universe and strangely futuristic setting. Eventually, during the opera scene, the game moved into a historical genre, with the historically appropriate diction, language, costumes of an eighteenth-century British opera house. Both segments depend on the player's suspension of disbelief.

That beginning sci-fi scene featured constant shifting and movement. Dots, lines and other vague shapes floated around my character as he turned, materializing into his surroundings as they came into view. These surroundings were largely non-actionable. When the character moved into the opera house, surroundings were in some ways non-actionable and in other ways actionable. The sound of cocktail party socializing filled the air, even though my character was not directly involved in it. He could not climb into undesignated balconies and was not seen even when he was obviously in the line of vision of other characters. Backstage, my character was able to swing from suspended props and ropes, moving them. Murmurs and jokes were whispered in the darkness around him, suggesting a universe of which he was not a part. Later, when the character fled the scene of the crime, he was able to shove people out of the way as he ran. They even responded by falling and making disgruntled noises.

To borrow some terms from film critique, the player controls the camera angle at times when the character is moving. This means that the player can create a high angle or a low angle, whichever is preferable for the game play. During cinematic scenes, the shots varied from establishing shots, long shots, mid shots, close ups, dolly shots and occasional point of view shots. The camera frequently swivels to tilt these shots. In between scenes, fading and dissolving techniques were used.

The initial training scene seemingly featured non-diegetic sound, as the supposedly female narrator's voice was disembodied in a voice over. She gave instructions that my character had to follow, so presumably she was somewhat involved in the plot. There was continued non-diegetic music throughout this scene, as well as the diegetic sounds of the character's breathing and stumbling. In the opera scene, there was diegetic music and dialogue, in the form of the Beggar's Opera, which repeated until the challenge was complete.

A high key of lighting was employed during the initial training scene. This strategy removes shadows, and thus creates a stark, modern air. During the opera scene, low-key lighting was used in the dark opera house as the action was subdued and

the brief cinematic segment was played. When my character began to make his way backstage, three-point lighting was used for a more realistic image. A vaguely grainy filter was used during the opera scene, potentially meant to evoke nostalgia, and in contrast with the sharply scientific filter used during the training scene.

There were non-diegetic clues sprinkled throughout the game. Letters flashing in the corner of the screen let me know which buttons to press on my controller, to perform new actions like hanging from a bar or scaling a balcony. A circular map, representing the field in play, occupied the upper left corner, with an illuminated green dot that signified the goal. This green dot also floated in the actual scene of play, guiding my character at critical moments in a non-diegetic form of “hot and cold.” Once I passed the training stage, the narrator was quiet for long periods of time, and instructions were instead given to the character of Haytham by fellow characters in the story. However, non-diegetic textual clues took over on trickier parts of the challenge, telling my character to whistle, among other things. The actions were not necessarily my strategy—for example, I didn’t know what the whistle was for—but I followed instructions anyway.

The video game programmers had embedded causal relations into the training session and the first challenge. “That’s a constraint,” a non-diegetic voice told my character at one point. “You cannot do that.” During the opera scene, my character could not climb into other balconies or enter the stage.

I was aware of the interface at different moments throughout the game. The controller in my hands shook at several points. In one instance, it shook when my character stumbled or scrambled to stay upright during a fall, making me feel his jerky movements. In another, it shook to signify that my character had touched on the right spot during a lock-picking challenge. After the shaking with the pin in the lock, there was a vibrating tension in the controller before it gave a little bit, apparently imitating the actual lock-picking process.

I noticed that the machine takes over for the player by moving the character at moments as well. At least in my initial stages of the game, there was not a lot of finesse. I would press a button on my controller and the game program interpreted that action in the way that best served my character. For example, when I pressed A for jump, I was not thinking about how long or hard I should press the button for how far I wanted to jump. The program merely took note of my intended motion and fine-tuned my actions to the next landing point. In another example, I would make my character run up to a fence, but the machine seemed to make him hoist himself up and balance on the top rung.

Additionally, I became physically and emotionally involved in the game. After 10 repetitive minutes trying to finagle my character’s way out of a square pen, I smiled and high-fived my friends when I managed to get out. I felt a strange sense of accomplishment and relief. I noticed that also I winced repeatedly when my character killed other people, or even when my character fell from high places.