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Touring the Animus: *Assassin's Creed* and Ludotopical Movement

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Abstract

The *Assassin's Creed* videogame series, developed by Ubisoft, is known for its representation of historical places and eras, such as Jerusalem during the Crusades and Paris during the French Revolution. This article takes an interest in the games' chronotopic appropriation of touristic attitudes; the ways in which the gameplay and game world involve a specific collocation of time and space within which touristic enactments can take place. Such a procedurally enacted chronotope is conceptualized here as a 'ludotope'. In *Assassin's Creed*, players are at once invited to admire and ultimately conquer the historical space they traverse. In order to do so, they are provided with a set of rules, behaviors, and narratives that fit in with a contemporary attitude in the Western travel industry—namely, that of anti-tourism.

Author Keywords

Assassins Creed, chronotope, locomotion, ludotope, tourism

Introduction

In 2008, after the city's population dropped below 60,000, residents of Venice staged a 'funeral' for the city, involving a three-gondola cortège carrying a red casket through the canals. The goal was to raise awareness about population decline: day-trippers now outnumber the locals, as the growing lack of jobs outside the tourism sector and rising housing prices have been driving Venetians away for over a decade.[1] The tourists themselves are not happy about this development either; on the TripAdvisor page of an arbitrary gondola ride we can find familiar forms of criticism that tourists have of the city they are flooding: the canals are brown and dirty; the rides are shorter than advertised; the gondoliers talk too loudly. One user, tellingly, writes: "I thought the people running the rides were quite rude. I almost felt like they had contempt for the tourists."[2]

Most holidaymakers are familiar with these stereotypical inconveniences of mass tourism. They are a 'part of the deal'. But visiting Venice physically is only one option the prospective visitor has. One can also switch on the console or PC and engage in something of a virtual tour of the Italian city. A popular meme, surfacing in 2013,

showed the unlikely image of a couple of grandparents playing *Assassin's Creed 2*, simply rowing around in a gondola (see *Figure 1*).

Figure 1. Assassin's Creed gondola meme[3]

The user's grandparents are portrayed here as the unlikely players of a popular and rather violent videogame. It reveals that the game serves another goal as well: that of virtual tourism.

Assassin's Creed is a series of action-adventure video games developed primarily by Ubisoft Montreal. With "history is our playground" as its official tagline, the series provides a remarkable amalgam of historical tourism, action-adventure gaming tropes, and a Dan Brown-esque narrative. Each iteration of the series attaches to an overarching story about a battle between assassins and Templars as it unfolds throughout history. The player assumes the role of an assassin who is set loose in a semi-accurate and 'open world' rendition of some historic city-, land-, or seascape. The game also includes historical characters in each of its iterations, ranging from Cleopatra to Karl Marx, who are fictionalized to fit the game's fantastical narrative (Marx, for instance, can be found suggesting at one point to the player they "light a factory on fire"). This article will not

engage with this narrative, or the representation of the game's historical characters. Rather, I focus on how *Assassin's Creed* enacts a specific form of tourism. The series demands such a perspective. One can already find '*Assassin's Creed* pilgrimages' on travel forums such as TripAdvisor[4], as well as YouTube comparisons between tourist sites as they are rendered both inside the game and outside of it.[5] Photographer Damien Hypolite produced a series of pictures on which printed screenshots of the game's representation are matched up with the physical space represented in them.[6] The most recent game in the series, *Assassin's Creed: Origins,* is even slated to include a 'Discovery Tour' mode that removes the game's characteristic combat mechanics and instead offers guided tours and information on ancient Egypt.

It is this thread of gaming *as* tourism that is picked up in the current article. Play, as Alexander Galloway (2006) notes, is often a symbolic stand-in for larger issues in culture (p. 16) — in this case, issues of contemporary mass tourism. These issues are worked through within the confines of the game, offering a controlled and controllable environment for enacting touristic movement. Through its production of *historical* cities through which the player roams, the *Assassin's Creed* series offers a procedural enactment of a contemporary anti-touristic attitude, which involves a double orientation in which touristic space is both claimed and rejected. I analyze these negotiations through the concept of the chronotope (Bakhtin, 2008), arguing that due to its sociospatial and temporal enactments, the game is characterized by a specific type of chronotope that I propose to conceptualize as 'ludotope'. The essay will restrict itself to home console entries in the series: see *Table 1* for an overview of these games and the major places that are represented in them. This list shows the breadth of historical cities that the series has reconstructed. Within these cities, most attention is typically given to the tourist hotspots.

Game	Major place(s) visited
Assassin's Creed	Jerusalem, Acre, Damascus
Assassin's Creed II	Florence, Venice
Assassin's Creed Brotherhood	Rome
Assassin's Creed Revelations	Constantinople
Assassin's Creed III	Boston
Assassin's Creed Black Flag	Havana, Nassau, Kingston
Assassin's Creed Unity	Paris
Assassin's Creed Syndicate	London
Assassin's Creed Origins	Alexandria, Memphis

Table 1. Assassin's Creed games and represented places

Upon closer inspection, the creators of *Assassin's Creed* took liberties with the touristic sites they included. For instance, in order to give the game a more recognizable visual appeal, the architecture of *Assassin's Creed: Brotherhood* is that of the late 16th century

Baroque period, while the game takes place in the beginning of that same century. The Roman Colosseum in *Assassin's Creed II*, to give another example, has a circular rather than an elliptical shape, as rendering elliptical shadows would have been significantly more difficult.[7] Taking note of these anachronisms and distortions, Douglas Dow (2013) argues that, despite its immersive and realistic environments, *Assassin's Creed II* should still be seen as "a simulacrum, a version of the city that purports to be a true representation . . . but that presents a false likeness instead" (p. 219). However, because these minute alterations are not easily spotted by the untrained eye, the historical accuracy of the tourist site remains unaccounted for (p. 220). Dow relates the degree of immersion to be had when experiencing the virtual environment to that environment's historical veracity. Yet 'immersion' is, of course, a social effect as well—it is not just about historical veracity, but also about the recognizability of the things one can do and see within that context. As Westland and Hedlund (2016) have claimed, the transformation of historical sites in *Assassin's Creed* also serves to render them immediately recognizable to the series' wide audience. A friction arises between the archaeological record and the popular imagination of certain places—a phenomenon the authors call 'polychronia'. Beyond this catering to cultural memory, this article claims that *Assassin's Creed* represents historical cities as playgrounds, in which the specific sociospatial mode of engagement is a *touristic* one. This implies that not only the touristic sites are revised, but also the ways players move through them.

Games as Chronotopical Practices
Sybille Lammes (2008) has followed Johan Huizinga and Bruno Latour in emphasizing that games can be considered sociospatial practices. The experience of game space, she notes, can be best conceived as simultaneously separate from daily life and part of it. To conceive games as such, she borrows Huizinga's notion of the magic circle—the confined space of games in which the normal rules and reality of the world are suspended and replaced by the artificial reality of a game world, within which special rules are established and identities can be altered. Lammes suggests that games should be considered a series of 'magic nodes' in order to be appreciated for the experiential intensity they foster, as well as the enchantment that 'entering' a game world entails: "As such, digital games offer us playgrounds, where gamers can find an intensified space to express, and give meaning to, spatial regimes and spatial confusions that are part of our daily life" (p. 264).

Moving from here, we can add that these spatial regimes the player engages in are not merely couched in the 'real time' of the present, but also in historical time. The latter two terms are Mikhail Bakhtin's (2008), and through his work we can raise the point that games like *Assassin's Creed* offer an organizing principle in their spatiotemporal enactment: that of the chronotope. While the chronotope, like many other Bakhtinian concepts, has emerged as an immensely productive tool in literary research, the term is still relatively unexplored in the field of game studies (cf. Guschwan, 2014). The concept implicates the "intrinsic connectedness between space and time" (Bakhtin, 2008, p. 84), and this configuration is of great importance to the construction of fictional worlds, as it accommodates the type of story that might be told within them. In Bakhtin's famous words, "[t]ime, as it were, thickens, takes on flesh, becomes artistically visible; likewise,

space becomes charged and responsive to the movements of time, plot and history" (p. 84). Bakhtin's attention to the physical properties of timespace is telling; more than a formal element, the chronotope is a lived, experienced, and practiced narrative force.

This is of acute relevance to the player experience, in which time and space congeal through the act of embodied play. Matters are complicated by the convergence of the body of player and avatar; both become part of the same phenomenological compound. Instead of knowing the avatarial body through visual perception alone, players are aware of themselves *as* avatars through their corporeal-locomotive actions (Nørgård, 2011, p. 6). By extension, the space-times in which player and avatar are situated are fused as well. This adds another dimension to what Bakhtin (2008) himself has noted in the concluding remarks of his work on chronotopes, namely that they are polysemic and may signify different potentially conflicting motifs within a story that co-determine the work's overall structure (p. 252; see also Borghart et al., 2010, p. 6). The chronotopical contexts of both avatar and player are interlinked in the act of play.

The interlinking of player and avatar firstly involves the spatial environment itself, which as we saw is a simulation of well-known tourist places. As Dow (2013) notes, this falsely reinforces the ideology that in the offline world, these sites are 'the real thing', while they are a staged, fictional image as well. Secondly, to reiterate, space in games is also a procedural enactment—that is to say, it arises through systems of locomotive gameplay, as well as the avatarial relationship to the environment that is propagated by a game. In *Assassin's Creed*, the avatarial movement seems a difficult fit for the historical framework of its represented content. As a free-running assassin, the locomotive mechanics of the game are predominantly the kind of kinetic power fantasy that dominates most modern 3D action-adventure games. While some entries in the series do provide a 'historical' mode of transportation, such as the horse carts in *Assassin's Creed: Syndicate*, the overriding type of locomotion in the game is still that of an a-historical superhuman. What this implies, in chronotopical terms, is that two spatio-temporal imaginaries intersect in *Assassin's Creed*: the fictionalized historical site and the contemporary tourist site, which due to its staged and showcased nature could be considered a fiction as well. The reason Venetians organized a funeral for their city was that it had become a touristic site first, at the cost of the lived place it once was. This is a city in which touristic images have started preceding and mastering the reality on which they were once based (cf. Eco, 1986). The tourist in Venice *knows* what to look for, because it has been seen a thousand times before. It is within this twofold fictionalized environment that *Assassin's Creed* embeds an idealized form of movement of the player-character.[8]

Bart Keunen (2010) has argued that in Bakhtin's theory, the reader engages with the chronotope only when their literary imagination becomes involved; that is, "when [the chronotope] shows something, when it brings to mind an image that can be observed by the mind's eye" (p. 35). Crucially, in gaming, the chronotopic experience unfolds not just as an imaginative reconstruction but as a virtually embodied, interactive process. Literary imagination, for our purposes, might be replaced with 'procedural imagination', referring to the aesthetic experience arising from ludic, procedural systems of gameplay,

representing space and time. We can call this playful performance of spatio-temporal relations in a designed fictional world a 'ludotope'. Here, the process of procedural representation doubles the temporal context as both historical and contemporary ideologies of spatiality come into play. These temporal particularities of video games are worthwhile to elaborate on.

In games, the ludotope is predominantly constructed in lived time—which Bakhtin (2008) called "real time" (p. 31). When engaged in the act of the play, temporal duration (the progression of time within the work, see Genette, 1980, p. 86) is relatively steady, palpable and concrete. Of course, players can pause and replay segments of the game's temporal construction. Like readers, they experience mechanics of interruption and repetition. Yet the temporal flow of games is different to that of literature in that, when playing, it strongly resembles that of lived reality. Like works of video, video games reflect movement. Deleuze noted that, of all media, cinema stood the closest to everyday experience because its aesthetic set of instruments is all about movement, and thus strongly resembles the way in which a human observer interacts with the experiential world (Keunen, 2010, p. 36). This is true for games yet more than for cinema, as the player interacts physically with the medium. We can add to this a different meaning of 'real-time': the game's graphics are processed and rendered on the spot, and the player's control preferably involves as little input latency as possible.[9]

Assassin's Creed as Touristic Locomotion

The first thing to note is the type of game space that is constructed in *Assassin's Creed*, and the types of locomotion it allows for. This means to divert attention from the game's overt combat mechanics, and instead regard its accommodated types of movement as a primary function of power that the player has over the environment. *Assassin's Creed* can be placed under the moniker of *open world* or *sandbox* games, which are connected to a set of spatial mechanisms. The player-character in a sandbox game is 'set loose' in the virtual space and can roam around in a delineated playing field (semi-) freely, instead of moving through a relatively fixed and more tightly scripted space.[10] Sandbox games typically share a lower amount of 'invisible walls' or loading screens compared to their linear counterparts. Their players are given a larger degree of freedom in regard to how to approach game objectives, and therefore open world games might thus be considered closer to a simulated reality. Yet, the kinds of gameplay fostered by an open game space are constrained. We might say that the more freedom a player has, the more problematic the instances become in which this freedom does not carry over. For instance, if one can roam about a city freely, not being able to jump over a fence or enter a building may seem superlatively estranging. Moreover, the sandbox nature of *Assassin's Creed* varies during different segments of the games; certain sections involve tightly scripted tasks in more restricted spaces while on particular missions. The sandbox metaphor itself thus invites a comparison to touristic practices, in which 'the world is at your feet'. We need to ask *whose* sandbox this is.

On a narrative level, *Assassin's Creed* frequently introduces the player-character as an outsider. The games' protagonists, which the player inhabits, are strangers to the city they are visiting on a mission to assassinate their enemies. Player and avatar have an important

thing in common here, namely what John Urry (2011) called the 'tourist gaze': the socially patterned and systematized way of looking at tourist sites. Urry notes that the contemporary tourist gaze especially is fashioned by media technologies through which images about the trip are circulating. These images co-construct the touristic anticipation of the trip. *Assassin's Creed*, in this context, anachronistically extrapolates the modern tourist gaze to an often pre-modern context. The player-character is often 'shown around' the city by a knowledgeable local, visiting the locations they are likely to be familiar with through modern popular media[11]. Several trailers to the series' games, meanwhile, mirror tourist advertisements.[12] This is a common process in virtual worlds, which have for decades now been presented and experienced as exotic travel destinations for 'online tourists', making extensive use of metaphors and imagery from travel and tourism, as well as incorporating in their virtual world things like tourist kiosks, billboards, and other signifiers (Book, 2003, p. 2).

The concept of the tourist gaze exposes how *Assassin's Creed* constructs consumable touristic spaces. This is perhaps most evident in the series' use of maps. Sybille Lammes (2008) talks about environments in top-down strategy games like *Civilization* or *Age of Empires* as spaces that "have to be explored, claimed, and mastered", as the player is asked to "delineate, appropriate, and colonize environments" (p. 266). She refers thereby to the exploration of the map, which in these games start off as a blacked out 'terra incognita' that has to be traversed by the player in order to be revealed. While *Assassin's Creed* is of a different genre altogether, Lammes' point resonates. All of these games embed maps in their interface, which are copiously filled with points of interest, side-quests and treasures. *Figure 3* shows the map of *Assassin's Creed: Unity*, taking place in Paris.

Figure 3. Assassin's Creed: Unity, map icons[13]

Navigating virtual space is thus, as Lammes rightfully points out, also always an issue of mapping, and the cities rendered in *Assassin's Creed* are always partly mediated through the 'minimap' in the corner of the player's screen, showing how to get to nearby places where a mission or side-quest[14] may take place. These side-quests, in a way, are more important than the main storyline, constantly communicated to the player on the map, and constituting the vast majority of the time to be spent in-game. Interestingly, the game's developer, Ubisoft, has in the last years developed a number of other highly popular games that follow a similar gameplay script involving an open world that is accessed via mapping practices—examples are the *Far Cry* or *Watch Dogs* series, and *Tom Clancy's The Division*.

This continuous spatial specification is substantiated through augmented reality features on the screen. The game's user interface, for instance, shows pointers to targets that the player has selected on the map, noting how far the player is removed from the target, its name, et cetera (See *Figure 4*).
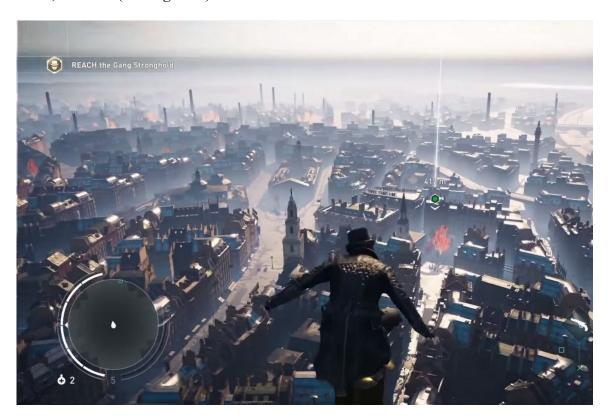

Figure 4. Assassin's Creed: Syndicate, augmented reality features ("412m to target").[15]

Lammes (2008) notes that the kinds of maps we find on modern screens are interactive and co-produced by their users, who can "modify trajectories, dimensions, markers, and cartographical appearances" (p. 269). She goes on to offset these maps from their historical predecessors, which offered closed and fixed representations and perspectives, often serving particular ideological needs (think only of the central position of Europe on its world maps). Yet as we can plainly see, the use of maps in *Assassin's Creed*,

interactive as they may be, is nothing if not ideological. In fact, we may understand it as a touristic logic of space. The series' ludotopes are accommodating acute and continuous entertainment, and foster a state of psychological *flow* (Csíkszentmihályi, 2009)—there is, as in many a touristic exercise, 'something to do around every corner'. The player-character moves across a map that is constructed for 'ticking off' its dots and areas, and ends up clean and emptied out after all of the quests have been completed.

Lammes (2008), too, takes note of the bird's-eye perspective that characterizes the strategy-games she is interested in. The player, in these games, does not act out of a mode of "individual experience" but takes on the role of a "cartographer on tour" (p. 267). It is this view from above, associated with the gods, which to Lammes constitutes the player's claim to space. A similar observation has been made in the realm of tourism. Giannitrapani (2010) analyzes the different predefined types of gazes that travel guides offer, and distinguishes between the partial and the global gaze. The former pertains to a horizontal line and denotes a personal relationship between the gazer and the tourist space. The 'topographic gaze', which is systemic, unfolds primarily along a vertical line and is based on the strategy of the map (cf. Francesconi, 2014). As a static approach, it conceptualizes the tourist location as an abstracted and, to the tourist, impersonal space. *Assassin's Creed*, as a form of touristic play, negotiates between these two spatial orientations. The player-character can claim certain areas of the city in an archetypical phallic fashion: by climbing to the top of a region's tallest building. Towering above the city results in a panoramic view, distancing players from the city and turning it into an object of pure spatial possibility (see *Figure 4*). The player-character can then at once return to the partial, touristic gaze through what is perhaps the series' most iconic moment, leaping off the tall building into a conveniently placed haystack, accompanied by the iconic sound of a screeching eagle.

Tourism/Anti-Tourism

We ought to note that the aforementioned form of locomotion is not simply touristic; it also provides what in tourism studies is sometimes called an anti-touristic sentiment. Anti-tourism, while as old as tourism itself[16], typically refers to an identity concept that arises amidst the social relations in contemporary mass tourism – it revolves around the desire to be "separated from the perceived commonalities of crowds" (McWha, Frost, Laing, & Best, 2015; Pearce, 1982; Buzard, 1993; Dann, 1999, 2012). Anti-tourists have an aversion to the superficial experiences that are associated with traditional tourism, instead preferring off-the-beaten-path destinations (e.g. Fussell, 1982; Porter, 1991; McCabe, 2005; Week, 2012). This is not to say that the anti-tourist refers to any class or type distinct from the tourist; the very 'language of tourism' is one of sentiments about distancing oneself from the other tourists (Dann, 1999, p. 160; see also Culler, 1990, p. 3).

Assassin's Creed occasionally performs an anti-touristic attitude through missions focused on hospitality and tourism. In *Assassin's Creed II*, for instance, an important side-mission consists of funding the renovation of the protagonist's hometown, Monteriggioni, through purchasing and upgrading shops, houses and sites. By investing in the rural Italian town, the player-character overcomes their tourist status and becomes something of a 'local' in the process. Owning these properties has the advantage to the

player of gaining passive income as a local landlord, for once the town is refurbished tourists start visiting and spending money there. The player transforms from a tourist into a local. The touristic self-annulment in these missions is reminiscent of contemporary tourist services such as Airbnb, which under the slogan of "Live There" promises tourists they can move beyond their status as tourists, and instead act out "living" somewhere during their holidays.[17] Touristic practices, here, have the status of a game, a playing-as-if, which underlines their suitability of being represented within discrete video game contexts.

More importantly for the point being made here, however, *Assassin's Creed* enacts the anti-touristic stance through forms of locomotion. The movement 'above and beyond' the perspective of the tourist, as discussed above, is a fitting first example of how the game proceduralizes anti-touristic behavior. The series' stealth mechanics form a further means to distinguish player-characters from their surroundings. As the titular assassin, players are required to sneak up on enemies and move through the city undetected. The game's procedural loop consists of assassinating targets followed by an escape sequence in which pursuers have to be evaded by making use of the city's infrastructure. This can mean escaping the city streets by climbing on rooftops, hiding in the aforementioned haystacks, or moving surreptitiously among a group of citizens, rendering the player-character invisible to the guards. Locals, in these dynamics, are part of a nameless crowd whose presence is commensurate to their capacity to assist or stand in the way of the player-character.

The instrumentality of the crowd is underscored by the game's narrative, in which the historical scenarios that are played out exist as a virtual reality. The framing device for the game's historical tourism is formed by a fictional technological device developed in the present day by a company called Abstergo Industries. It is called the 'Animus', and it allows the game's protagonists to enter a virtual reality constructed from the memories of their long dead ancestors. The historical environment that the player-character enters is graphically 'assembled' at the start of every new scene to remind the player of the frame narrative. Further, the use of virtual reality as a narrative device offers a diegetic reason for the existence of the game's HUD, such as the life bar and lit-up target areas. The etymology of the word 'Animus' is telling here: it refers to "a usually prejudiced and often spiteful or malevolent ill will".[18] It is also famously used by Jung as the archetype of an inner masculine part of the female personality. The term, as such, internalizes the relation between the player-character and the world of *Assassin's Creed* as a neo-colonial, traditionally masculinist, and essentially hostile one.

As noted above, one function of what we called the ludotope is the asymmetrical relationship between the represented chronotope and the representation *of* the chronotope. *Assassin's Creed* offers a condensed experience in that the game space represents only specific streets and sights of a historical city—its touristic *eidos*—and the duration of traversing that space is cut short in myriad ways. At first glance, *Assassin's Creed*'s chronotopical relation to the past—embodied by the player-character as the involved but simultaneously excluded and rebellious observer, the privileged city dweller who moves fluidly both *through* and *past* the crowds—brings to mind Walter Benjamin's figure of

the flâneur, strolling under the arcades of the modern city to see its many spectacles, its buildings, and its inventions. As Simon (2006) notes, this is certainly not a new connection. It is rather evident that games can be considered a form of cyberspatial flânerie (or indeed, its contemporary corollary of tourism) in that they both involve the gaze of a privileged, mobile class of libidinous pleasure seekers: "Like a tourist visit to Club Med, the gamer owes nothing to the source of the representations that satisfy his desire" (p. 63).[19]

This perspective, however, means to set player and avatar apart again. A focus on the chronotope shows that player-characters are never completely disconnected from the game space they traverse. Moreover, it does not account for the anti-touristic locomotive capacity of *Assassin's Creed*'s player-character. As a tourist, one acquiesces into giving up degrees of freedom and personal space. One waits in lines and has to get used to walking in the frame of other tourist's pictures. Yet the faux-historical environments in the game are quite literally designed to accommodate the player's locomotive abilities, which involve free running and parkour—a popular sport that makes use of a city's architectures for athletic and explorative running. The game's city-, land-, and seascapes are littered with architectural signifiers: arcades, chimneys, aprons, branches, arches, finger pockets, edges, balconettes. All of these architectural particularities are 'tells' to the player-character and accommodate the city-as-playground. Further, many of the series' iterations involve the player entering iconic churches, cathedrals and other buildings. In these spaces, a specific parkour path is set out as a type of puzzle, where the player has to find out which route to take to the goal.

A tactile dimension comes into play here, as the free running gameplay is of course only enabled through certain controller input. In video games, players set their avatars in motion through what Nørgård (2011) calls 'handsight'; that is, they navigate the operation of vision through their hands (p. 7). In *Assassin's Creed*, pressing down one single button and moving the control stick in the direction one wants to go, activates the 'free run mode', which means the avatar automatically scales buildings, jumps between building roofs or pushes away obstructing people.[20] The handsight involved in this wide range of movements is notably simplistic, involving a prolonged holding of the right trigger (tellingly, this trigger is typically used in racing games to accelerate, and in first-person shooters to fire the weapon). This activates an all-purpose mode of locomotion that allows the player-character to continuously thrust forward. In fact, most of the architecture in the game constitutes an expressive mechanism, rather than an obstacle. Game scholar Ian Bogost (2015) notes about free-running mechanics: "like the skate-boarder, the free runner sees the world differently, as a set of affordances for previously unintended means of locomotion" (p. 74). This alternative locomotion through the city involves an effortless continuity, Bogost notes, and its successful operation produces a sense of physical mastery for the player.

Yet, it is relevant that Bogost is talking about a different game when speaking of these gameplay elements, namely EA DICE's *Mirror's Edge*. The difference is that *Assassin's Creed*, as a mainstream title intended for wide audiences, is decidedly more forgiving to its players when they make mistakes in their parkour movement (Bogost also offsets the

two games in terms of their difficulty). While the city in *Mirror's Edge* resists being mastered, *Assassin's Creed* offers a partly automated form of movement that often requires minimal effort on the player's part. The game's historical tourist sites are traversed by means of a touristic rationality, that is, one that involves as few inconveniences or roadblocks as possible, and in which hitting those roadblocks implies only a minimal disruption of flow. Player defeat in *Assassin's Creed* is forgiving: the game employs an auto-save function that ensures players do not have to retry sections they previously completed. Games require a degree of uncertainty to hold our interest (Costikyan, 2013), and here the uncertainty is touristic; the main risk, for the player, is the possible breakdown of locomotive flow.

The importance of touristic flow is further underscored by its absence throughout specific sections in the series. The use of the Animus establishes a *mise en abyme* in which the anti-touristic procedures of the player-character are encapsulated in a virtual reality, which itself is couched in the video game form. This opens up the possibility of a metacritical perspective on the touristic procedures in the game's virtual reality gameplay. In the first *Assassin's Creed*, the current-day protagonist Desmond Miles is kidnapped by Abstergo due to his genetic heritage and is forced to relive his ancestors' experiences inside the Animus. While his ancestors move through the middle eastern landscape with ease, he is confined to the Abstergo building, slogging back and forth from his living quarters to the VR bench in the adjacent room. A similar dynamic is offered by the inclusion of first-person segments in the series since *Assassin's Creed Black Flag.* In this game, a present-day player-character is introduced who is hired by Abstergo as a research analyst. These sections play out in a first-person perspective, in which the fourth wall is repeatedly broken as the player-character is directly addressed by the company's employees. The muteness of the player-character further aids the identification between the two. At any time, the player can exit the Animus and start exploring the building of Abstergo Industries. In these segments, the player has a limited first-person perspective and moves around at a realistically slow pace. This all serves to further idealize the flow of movement that the player-character enjoys in the third-person segments in the game's historical, touristic sites.

Narrative versus movement

Tourism, to reiterate, involves a problem of sameness; the degree to which one may self-identify as a tourist is based on one's willingness to see oneself as partaking in the social and economic structures of the touristic system. In that context, anti-tourism is the refusal to implicate oneself in those structural terms—but as we noted already, it is an epiphenomenon of the structures of tourism all the same. The rationality of anti-tourism is one of waywardness and *freedom* from touristic structure, but in fact many types of anti-touristic behavior involve a self-absorbed and even neo-colonial claim to space (cf. Week, 2012). *Assassin's Creed* quite effectively imbricates these two perspectives; the player-character's tourist gaze is routinely activated *through* the logic of anti-tourism. This happens, again, through the forms of movement the player is endowed with, but also through the type of body they inhabit. As a form of touristic play, it is thus unsurprising that several of the *Assassin's Creed* games include protagonists who, in their particular

narrative embeddedness, serve as a counterbalance to the locomotive domination of space they engage in.

Assassin's Creed III, for instance, plays out in the American Revolution, which creates a spatial opportunity to represent a form of anti-touristic travel that goes 'across borders' to unexplored territory. A large part of the game is spent at the American frontier, the terra incognita of current-day Massachusetts, New York, Pennsylvania, and New Jersey. The frontier is a space of forest, cliffs, and rivers, in which the player-character can self-subserviently hunt for animals and collect resources. Hunter-gatherer mechanics commonly associated with the 'native' are combined with the series' archetypical forms of fluid movement—this time across trees, over rocks, and so on. The spatiotemporal environment here is related to a notion of authenticity and belonging – the player-character is a half-Mohawk, half-English assassin, born from a brief romance between an English settler and a Native American woman. Half Other, half westerner, the historical protagonist bridges the familiar and unfamiliar for the player. This character is then couched in a narrative replete with signifiers indicating the chronotopical authenticity of the Americas' original population. The language spoken by the natives is 'authentic' Kanien'kéha, and the development team was reportedly assisted by a Kahnawà:ke Mohawk community near Montreal, while also contracting some of its residents to help translate, sing and voice act for the game (Newman, 2012). The team further hired a Mohawk cultural consultant to help prevent *faux pas* and factual mistakes, who in an interview noted that the game's creators hired him because they likely "wanted to have a real, authentic product that stood up" (Newman, 2012). Investments were made to ensure an aura of authenticity around the representation of native Americans. It is noteworthy that these copiously signified 'authentic' local inhabitants also serve as the 'good guys' in the game's narrative, as in the game's fiction the British conquerors are secretly assisted by the Templars. A defiant, against-all-odds rebellion against colonial rule thus becomes the player's goal. This also means that the mechanics of claiming space as we just described them are paradoxically compounded by a narrative that highlights the very subversion of a claim to space. We could classify this paradox as a form of ludo-narrative dissonance, a term used by Clint Hocking (2007) to explain the friction between a game's mechanics ("what it is about as a game") and its narrative ("what it is about as a story"). However, we should note that it is precisely this kind of double orientation—claiming space while rejecting the claim to space—that characterizes the anti-touristic attitude.

The proceduralized form of 'freedom', the domination of space that operates under the narrative guise of sabotaging that same freedom, returns in *Assassin's Creed: Black Flag*. Here, the player assumes the role of a pirate, the grandfather of the protagonist in *Assassin's Creed III*. Set during the Golden Age of piracy in the Caribbean Sea, the game features a gamut of historical stereotypes pertaining to the pirate identity - "prosperous and free", as one of the protagonist's compatriots calls it while drinking ale on a beach, accompanied by an instrumental sea shanty. By connecting the pirate-as-underdog to the just cause of the assassins, and against the reign of the British and Spanish empires, the game ludotopically employs a historical figure to justify the touristic types of movement on offer. That is, the player-as-pirate sails the seas, explores uninhabited, paradise-like islands, and extracts all the 'collectibles' and treasures until the map is emptied out of

icons. The player gets to enact neo-colonial and anti-touristic attitudes yet remain the underdog all the same.

Conclusion

The *Assassin's Creed* series, both narratively and mechanically, encapsulates the paradoxical anti-touristic sentiments that belong to the age in which the game is designed. The game series offers a veritable touristic power fantasy; the smooth and streamlined movement through is environments stands out due to the opposition with the bodily touristic experience, which most of the game's players will be familiar with. There is no queueing, there are no insistent salesmen or inconvenient closing hours, and every nook and cranny in the game world exists to aid the player in dexterously trailing it. We have proposed to call the negotiation of spatio-temporal imaginaries that is involved in this process a 'ludotope', implicating both the historical and the contemporary tourist site, and both historical characters and contemporary players. Through these procedures, the game series provides the player-character with a set of rules, behaviors, and narratives that fit in with a contemporary mindset of global travel. This involves a focus on escaping the tourist role, and a need to become one with the locals while simultaneously remaining an outsider—with all its phenomenological advantages.

It has been noted that chronotopes in fictional genres correspond to real-world chronotopes that prevailed when that genre first emerged (Lawson, 2011, p. 389; Clark & Holquist, 1984, p. 278–279). Such real-world chronotopes inform certain literary genres—the emergence of the modern city as a new spatiotemporal surrounding, for instance, means that fictional narratives can start involving the urban dweller as a character. Similarly, the genre of historic tourism that *Assassin's Creed* belongs to sheds a light on contemporary anti-tourist attitudes and ideologies. These attitudes are marked by a series of paradoxes. There is the desire to become a part of the crowd, to move through the crowd undetected—the desire to 'become a local', much like one does through contemporary touristic services such as Airbnb. There is the need to have a constant, real-time overview of the geographical situation, evident in the mobile maps and navigation systems that permeate current-day travel. And there is the crossing off items on those maps—the touristic relation to the world that, as Zygmunt Bauman has noted, is geared toward the consumption of pleasurable sensations (in Franklin, 2003, p. 208). It is this crossing off of items that is one of the main draws of playing the game, and it is what keeps 'completionists' playing until the map has been emptied out.

Considering the locomotive mechanics in *Assassin's Creed* as touristic forms of movement means to underscore a broader point: locomotion is an immediately recognizable way of relating to the world. No matter the visual accuracy of the simulation, the speed and scope of one's movement through space-time engender ways in which the player may imagine, perceive or experience the world at large. Jesper Juul (2013) has argued that video games typically "represent a mirror of our performance in their fictional worlds" (p. 27). The player's own, first-person goal of mastering the game is typically aligned with a narrative in which one needs to 'make things right' in the game

world. This means-end pact between player and character, however, obfuscates the already mentioned ludotopical overlap of the two through the locomotive ideology that undergirds the game. The player's goal of *Assassin's Creed* is not just to master the game, but also to work through and with their own touristic inclinations by playing the anti-tourist and mastering the spaces they are interjected into. Beyond this function as a historical simulation of contemporary cultural pursuits, video games such as *Assassin's Creed* need to be read as practices that, while often reinforcing and extending colonial ideologies, have the potential to offer an alternative.

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[1] See for instance http://www.newsweek.com/why-are-venetians-fleeing-venice-76751. All websites were accessed January 19, 2018.

[2] See https://www.tripadvisor.com.au/ShowUserReviews-g187870-d4224219-r252519362-Ente_Gondola-Venice_Veneto.html#or24.

[3] See http://memeblender.com/2013/06/28/grandparents-row-gondola-through-venice-in-assassins-creed-2/.

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[4] See https://www.tripadvisor.com.au/ShowUserReviews-g187895-d2181488-r181628319-Guided_Tours_of_Florence-Florence_Tuscany.html

[5] See, for instance, an official marketing video of *Assassin's Creed: Unity* (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EaA7i8C9194), in which a series of picturesque shots from Paris is shown, alternating between the game space and physical space.

[6] See http://tidamz.tumblr.com/.

[7] See http://www.livescience.com/8945-renaissance-scholar-helps-build-virtual-rome.html.

[8] The hyphen here indicates a synchronicity between player and character; I follow Nørgard (2011) in emphasizing their phenomenological overlap.

[9] Latency can be defined as the time delay between the cause and the effect of some physical change in the system that is being observed.

[10] Such linear movement we can find, for instance, in otherwise comparable action-adventure games like Epic Games' *Gears of War* series.

[11] In *Assassin's Creed II*, for instance, the protagonist is shown around Renaissance Venice, together with Leonardo da Vinci, past San Giacorno di Rialto and the Palazzo della Seta. In *Assassin's Creed: Syndicate,* the protagonists are shown around 1800's London, running into an "odd-looking" Charles Dickens (dixit the protagonist) in the process.

[12] See for instance https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uC-FSEdPW-c.

[13] See http://www.forbes.com/sites/insertcoin/2014/11/12/congratulations-ubisoft-youre-the-new-ea/#b061f0254625.

[14] A side-quest is an optional objective that the player may follow. Such quests often encompass a self-enclosed narrative thread, which is used to provide non-linearity to the player in the otherwise linear narrative of the game.

[15] See http://www.wired.co.uk/news/archive/2015-07/21/assassins-creed-new-gameplay-features-video.

[16] Anti-tourism can be traced back to the popularisation of Rome as a touristic destination the 18th century. Romantic writers such as William Wordsworth and George Gordon Byron, during this time, started explicitly disassociating themselves from what they considered the vulgar forms of experience that accompanied it; authors such as Charles Dickens, Henry James and Edward Morgan Forster would draw similar conclusions (Buzard, 1993; Fussel, 1987).

[17] See Airbnb's "Live There" advertisement: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LaxJar8rksI.

[18] See https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/animus.

[19] Yet only focusing on tourists and players as nodes of power, however much merit may reside in that perspective, is insufficient. The two types are also similar in regard to their insecurity: Bogost has called the player's anxiety about what the simulation they engage in chooses to include and exclude; what rules, in other words, are in place. Following Derrida, he calls this simulation fever (2006, p. 104), and we may well link this to the semiotic unease of the tourist in a strange land. Tourists have to learn what the 'rules of the game' are, what they can and cannot do in the place they visit.

[20] This 'button hold' mechanic was first implemented in *Assassin's Creed II*; in the first game in the series, tapping button toggled the free-running or 'high profile' mode.