



Philosophy and History from a Cross-Cultural Perspective: Learning Based on the Assassin's Creed

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Abstract. Gamification and Game-Based Learning is an important studying theme in the field of Computer Science & Education, and Assassin's Creed, a series of historical games, facilitate social education. This paper will first evaluate the historical and educational significance of Assassin's Creed of Assassin's Creed, illustrate that Historical Comparisons, Civilization Diversity and Role-playing are three types of cross-cultural activities working to help education when students playing Assassin's Creed and finally recommend some innovative strategies for Assassin's Creed to improve its social education function while keeping its playability. I hope that more producers can co-operate with scholars to design games with their advanced computer technology to achieve the goal of education.

Keywords: Assassin's Creed · Computer technology · video games · social education · cross-cultural perspective

1 Introduction

Assassin's Creed is a series of computer games produced by Ubisoft Montreal. The summary of their games is "Play your way through history in the award-winning video game series. Assassin's Creed immerses players in the memories of Assassin Ancestors, fighting to protect free will at pivotal moments in human history." Different from other video games, Assassin's Creed allows players to experience philosophy and history while enjoying the entertainment, which leads to a positive social education based on computer technology. From the first Assassin's Creed in the era of the Crusades and Assassin's Creed: Unity whose historical background is set during the French Revolution to Assassin's Creed Origins describing Ancient Egyptian civilization and Assassin's Creed Odyssey based on Homer's Epics and Greek mythology, the series of games show the public its ability to reproduce historical Scenarios. As its slogan goes, "History is your playground."

Thanks to the advanced computer technology of Ubisoft, players have the opportunity to appreciate Assassin's Creed and utilize it academically. Articles from previous scholars will be cited to illustrate the historical and educational significance of Assassin's Creed.

Although the research on Assassin's Creed is very rich, which forms the second part "the historical and educational significance of Assassin's Creed", scholars have not found possibility to explain how students learn philosophy and history in computer games from a cross-cultural perspective. This article will classify three types of cross-cultural activities that influence students' learning: Historical Comparisons, Civilization Diversity and Role-playing.

Finally, some recommendations will be proposed for Assassin's Creed. To work better as a museum or encyclopedia of philosophy and history, it should innovate in some aspects. While keeping its advantage in gameplay and attraction, Assassin's Creed can optimize the voyage of discovery in the sea of knowledge.

2 The Historical and Educational Significance of Assassin's Creed

Assassin's Creed, as a well-known and well-accepted video game, has shown great significance in education. With its realistic restoration of history, it helps students to cultivate certain abilities in the field of education.

2.1 A Realistic Restoration of History

Assassin's Creed has paid attention to historical fact [2]. So all the world it has constructed can be verified. The most famous news about Assassin's Creed is its outstanding contribution to the reconstruction of the Notre Dame de Paris. In 2019 the architecture caught fire, but luckily the government could use the game data in Assassin's Creed: Unity as an archive for the Notre Dame de Paris. From this event people can perceive the realistic buildings in the games [8].

Besides architecture, Ubisoft also focus on details of special norms of different civilization. For examples, in Assassin's Creed Origins, players can appreciate the whole process of mummification near the temple of the Egyptians. The professional first disemboweled the body, and then filled the abdominal cavity with frankincense, cinnamon and other spices, and then stitched the body to cover it with dried natron. Then after 35 days, players would see them wrapped in linen, filled with spices, coated with resin and made into a mummy. For another example, in Assassin's Creed Valhalla, players could see the interesting Viking tradition, duel by verses, which means players should pronounce the next verse to fight back another person's banter. The player can do better only when they are familiar with linguistics and rhythm. Unexpectedly this kind of duel appears often in the game, and sometimes players can even have that with Thor.

It's natural that players could neglect these details, and Assassin's Creed is helpful for players at all levels of knowledge [3]. No matter how encyclopedic or naive the player is, they can always find correspondent experience in the series of games.

2.2 The Abilities it Helps to Cultivate

Students can expect various abilities from Assassin's Creed rather than mere knowledge [1]. Just as the author has said, conception and understanding matter more than historical knowledges. The philosophy and historical events of the ancient times can be perceived

again by modern people without limit. The most famous thought of Assassin's Creed is its conspiracy theories, which encourages questioning historical events or great historical figures. It describes many great conquerors or officials as hypocritical and dirty men. Though it contains fiction and the personal explanation of history, Assassin's Creed provides us with a thinking model to get insight into seemingly simple cases. Thus the ability to form a dialectical historical view is developed subtly. The facts are important, but the ability to evaluate facts matters more.

Besides training students to be historians, playing Assassin's Creed promotes students becoming more qualified citizens in modern world [4]. In the fictional clash between modern and ancient experiences, students can think their own role in the world, the pattern of the world and the future of the world. Knowing about the past is a good step to know the future, and Assassin's Creed offers opportunities to contact this kind of education at a low cost with advanced computer technology.

2.3 The Practical Applications and Cases in the Field of Education

In recent years many institutes have actually tried to utilize Assassin's Creed academically [1]. Educators think that an immersive experience in video games really helps students to learn philosophy and history, especially when they are asked to make a choice as the protagonists in historical stories. Similar to the time machine that could transport modern people to old times, video games can achieve that goal easily. That's maybe one of the major benefits when computer technology assists independent learning.

Ubisoft also emphasizes its social values in education [2–7]. Along with the Assassin's Creed Origins, teachers can unfold an Egyptian world in front of their students vividly, which is a practical experiment of computer technology applied in the field of education. In Assassin's Creed Odyssey [2], their effort will lead to more cases where Assassin's Creed can guide students to get a sight of ancient times.

3 Three Types of Cross-Cultural Activities When Experiencing Assassin's Creed

An unforgettable experience is provided when players choose to enjoy Assassin's Creed, which paves a way for further understanding of past philosophy and history, because role-playing games as a cross-cultural activity can attract students to the maximum. Then diverse civilizations pictured in Assassin's Creed assure that players can contact traditions, norms and values that they have never imagined in their life, which subtly encourages students to be familiar with unknown knowledge. And finally historical comparisons and profound reflections are possible. Deep thinking and education can be achieved when students compare the present and the past. The above are three types of cross-cultural activities when experiencing Assassin's Creed, and detailed explanation of each will be provided below.

3.1 Experience Role-Playing and Enjoy Vivid History

Previous study pointed out that role-playing is not only good for teachers, but also for their students [9, 10].

Video game is one of the most popular for students to roleplay with computer technology for its low cost and high reduction. Some researchers say that “although graphical realism is not of primary importance in games, it can still offer a rich sensory experience that heightens the player’s pleasure” [1]. They pay attention to the realistic experience that Assassin’s Creed can bring to their players. The essence of this is actually a kind of role-playing, which means students can acquire a novel identity and make choices in a fictional world as the protagonists. Especially in historical games like Assassin’s Creed, students can immerse themselves into the cross-cultural activity. In other words, they “become” other people in history, and understand the past and the present better.

For example, the background of Assassin’s Creed 3 is set in the mid to late 18th century on the American continent. Players will play the role of an assassin named Connor, embarking on adventures throughout the United States during the Revolutionary War and experiencing various important events during the Revolution. His father was a white man but his mother was an India, which carries a foreshadowing of what is to follow later on in the story. In the opening stage of Assassin’s Creed 3, players will experience Connor’s father, and in Chapter 4, they will experience Connor’s life when he was raised by the Mohawk tribe (a Native American from New York State). Connor finally stood on the side of the Native Americans, Indians, and opposed British colonizers and tyranny.

In this game, students have the opportunity to live as an Indian and role-playing provide possibility to perceive that period of history from the perspective of Native Americans. In the past years people often studied history based on existing literature describing what had happened and why, and now they have more ways to research from the perspective of ethnic minorities. Actually this marks the progress of civilization. People encourage a more diverse society, support minority groups to speak for themselves, and advocate for people to experience history and culture as their brothers and sisters. Undoubtedly Assassin’s Creed has made an example for video games that role-playing can help education.

The truth is the Ubisoft has implemented the concept of role-playing in all works. In the modern plots of Assassin’s Creed, the protagonist can experience the memories of their Assassin Ancestors with a special device, Animus. They lay inside the device, after a series of specific operations they can synchronize with ancestral memories. In the memories, they can’t kill civilians or they will get out of synchronization, because their Assassin Ancestors had never done that injustice. So Assassin’s Creed is essentially a role-playing game, and has played an essential role in broadening its players’ horizons.

3.2 Experience Diverse Civilizations and Have Better Cognition

Apparently when students play Assassin’s Creed they contact exotic flavors from different civilizations. They bear various cultural identifications and national thoughts that many players have never experienced personally, which generate opportunities for students to deeply understand civilization diversity. For example, in one mission of Assassin’s Creed Odyssey when the protagonist rides a horse and follows the mother on the land of Sparta, they will see a Spartan child holding a spear in the wilderness fighting with several wolves. Obviously there’s little chance for the child to survive that mortal combat, so the protagonist advises a helping hand. However, the mother disagrees that

thought. She says it is a tradition of Spartan warriors to face death-fight from a young age, and only in this way can Sparta have qualified warriors in the future. At this time if the player chooses to walk away, this encounter will end and undoubtedly the child will die, and the player will never know what will happen afterwards. But if the player still determines to save the Spartan child, after the battle with wolves, he will be disappointed because the child was fatally injured. However, when the protagonist sympathizes with that kid and calls for help, the parents of the kid are seemingly cold and uncaring. They say that the child has failed to pass the test, and it's naturally that he can't live as a glorious Spartan warrior in the world. So it's better for him to leave. The protagonist, full of humanistic care, is extremely shocked by this civilization. But then what the child says makes the protagonist accept and understand their culture and spirit. The child thanks the protagonist for saving him bravely, and he confesses to disappointing his parents and the whole nation. Finally, without painful moans emitted the child dies calmly.

Such a case seems contradictory to the philosophy at the present time. In most countries Juvenile Protection Law or Child Protection Law have been established for a long time, and it will be illegal if parents make their kids face mortal dangers. But in different civilization the situation may change. Modern world has been based on the technological and moral revolution since many hundred years ago, but the historical period in which Spartans lived requested them to develop martial or even barbaric national spirit. Overall it's beneficial to contact different civilizations, and sometimes a heavy shock in cognition from foreign countries or old times can urge students to think and become global citizens.

For another example, in *Assassin's Creed Origins*, the protagonist, Bayek of Siwa, was originally one of the guardians of all Egypt, possessing badges symbolizing duty and the high reputation. But after some years he found a potential cult gradually rise intending to control the entire Egypt. Unfortunately his son was killed by the cult. In order to save common people from the Ptolemy's Rule which was already contaminated by the cult, he had tried to connect with Cleopatra, the Egypt Queen. But finally the queen formed a union with Caesar to satisfy her own interests, and Bayek found it was all a scam. No ruler or conquer really cares for and protect the people. To achieve his lifelong goal, Bayek eventually established his Assassin organization to save common people from tyranny and endow them with precious freedom.

Freedom is something that people have longed for since ancient times, and many civilizations embody this concept. Previous studies also focus on this commonplace of different civilizations [6]. The author in his article supposes that *Assassin's Creed* is a "counter-hegemonic commemorative play" which produces a lot of thoughts about politics. Politics come from civilizations, and due to objective requirements, inevitably many civilizations have undergone the period when they ignore freedom and the welfare of ordinary people. Through learning these past civilizations with the assistance of advanced computer technology, players would have a better reflection on today's issue and a better understanding of how to build a more civilized world nowadays.

3.3 Make Historical Comparisons and Have Profound Reflection

There was a study to explore the connection between video games and students' historical reflection [5]. Actually the study is essentially related to cross-cultural activities. People

can expect them to compare or reflect on something only when they can give students different experience. And inevitably when modern people produce historical games they may add some modern elements to evoke our consciousness to compare.

In Assassin's Creed Valhalla players can experience Nordic Spirit and History. The background of this work is set in the Viking era, which refers to the period from 790 to 1066 AD. During these three hundred years, Vikings who believed in the Nordic polytheism plundered Europe. The term "Vikings" comes from ancient English poetry, meaning pirates, and in modern times, it mostly refers to pirates from northern Europe. The story took place in the 9th century AD. The protagonist, Avril, plundered England along the monsoon. His opponent was Alfred, the first great emperor in English history. This work can help us understand the England in Anglo-Saxon age and what kind of culture has worked to shape today's Britain. Thus comparisons and reflections are possible.

Assassin's Creed Odyssey, for example, could evoke players to compare the status of women in ancient and modern times and thus emphasizing the female power. In the game, as a free mercenary, the player can choose to join Sparta or Athens to get reward from participating in the war. In the game world the player can also find other mercenaries wandering, but many of them are females, who account for 50% of the total amount. Although according to historical research female warriors had been around in ancient world, the proportion of them in the game was an effort Ubisoft has made for the advancement of women and feminism. The meaning of figures is more important when Ubisoft modify history from a modern perspective while the original history remains unchanged.

In Assassin's Creed Odyssey one might encounter the great philosopher Socrates and his unique method to enlighten people's wisdom. Socrates and the player, a renowned mercenary in the game, were friends and to some extent became the latter's life mentor. During their journey Socrates often provided suggestions generously. During the Peloponnesian War, Socrates and the player successively came to the Silver Islands. During his stay on the island, he once posed a dilemma to the player, "Should a rebel army who killed for freedom be punished by law? Can this be considered the extension of 'justice'?" Similarly he also guided the player to think about the conflict between morality and law. In one mission the player needed to save a poor man who was arrested for stealing others' horses. But after the player released him, Socrates would question the player whether the poor man should be punished. If the player thought that he should get away with punishment because he had no other way to support his family, the question from Socrates to the player was "Do you think a person should be punished for killing more people for the sake of someone?" However, if the player thought that even if he was trying to support his family, he should be punished by the law, the question from Socrates to the player was "Do you think a person should be punished for killing someone for the sake of more people?"

In the game his questions are always philosophical and hard to answer. The player can acquaint himself or herself with his repeated rumination on group interests and personal interests, truth and public opinion and whether it is worth dying for the truth. It's a valuable experience for students to communicate with a great philosopher in history.

Socrates accompanied the player the whole journey, and finally he still stuck to his life-long wisdom and belief. After the rebellion overthrew Athens' rule over the archipelago, Socrates joined the local people's celebration and happily talked to the people who were interested in his ideas. During the Great Plague of Athens, Socrates always closely monitored the situation of the city and its people. He also witnessed the death of Pericles with his own eyes and decided to stay in Athens to confront the crafty new leader, Cleon. Thanks to Assassin's Creed with the assistance of advanced computer technology, this kind of communication with great ones really educates students nowadays.

4 Recommendations for Assassin's Creed

In the past years, the Assassin's Creed has harvested a wave of positive reviews, and is now preparing for its sequel. However, some still question whether the popularity of this old series can be sustainable. Its playability has been challenged in gaming communities that require diverse experiences and gameplay. To make Assassin's Creed more effective in fulfilling its educational function, three suggestions have thus been proposed.

First, Assassin's Creed should try to innovate itself as a whole. Undoubtedly, Assassin's Creed has formed a fixed game process, such as tracking, eavesdropping, infiltrating, assassinations, dialogue selection, etc. Or in the three ancient works, Assassin's Creed Origins, Assassin's Creed Odyssey and Assassin's Creed Valhalla, the Ubisoft encourages players to try a frontal combat. However, the basic concept and gameplay have never changed, which is essential in the rapidly changing gaming community. The Ubisoft should try to avoid excessive repetition in its works.

Second, the combination with newly advanced computer technology, VR, would be promising for Assassin's Creed. VR, or Virtual Reality, is a technology designed to make the user feel immersed in a virtual world. It's a distinctly different feeling than playing a game or navigating a 3D environment on a static 2D monitor, giving a real feeling of presence in the virtual space. This is typically achieved with a VR headset that places one or two displays very close to the user's eyes, whilst tracking the user's position so that it can be translated into the virtual world. Its basic implementation method is mainly based on computer technology, using computers and other devices to create a realistic virtual world with various sensory experiences such as 3D vision, touch, and smell, thus creating an immersive feeling for people in the virtual world. Assassin's Creed can design a set of devices and sites to attract players to participate in a new world, especially in its online museum program. After all, as a series of video games, only by ensuring playability can producers deliver educational content, or otherwise the game will become a boring and empty sermon.

Third, we believe the cooperation of scholars and the Ubisoft would lead to better designs of historical games. Due to the development of computer technology and the gradual maturity of game production technology, students have the opportunity to learn about the past, the world, and themselves through them. A promising future is absolutely opening for video games if they can combine unique playability with social education, and we believe scholars and game-designers can co-operate to realize this future.

5 Conclusion

Assassin's Creed has gained a sound reputation for its playability and unique game concept, and displayed great potential in influencing education considering the historical and educational significance the game brought to education. Role-playing, Civilization Diversity and Historical Comparisons make this game a good channel for students to have better understanding and deeper reflection of history and philosophy. These cross-cultural activities work effectively when a player chooses to spend his time traveling to the ancient times in Assassin's Creed, a good example for computer games. And finally considering the new requirements of the gaming community and the challenge from other games, Assassin's Creed is suggested to make continuous efforts in terms of innovation, combination of VR and cooperation between scholars and game-designers so that it could contribute more to education.

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