Making Antiquity Resonate in Assassin's Creed: Origins, Odyssey & Articulated Resonance

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Keywords

Assassin's Creed, Resonance, Simulation, Blockbuster Games, Orientalism

EXTENDED ABSTRACT

As the Assassin's Creed franchise celebrates its 15th anniversary, games scholarship on specific installments has flourished across a range of fields including history (Chapman, 2017), education (Gilbert 2017, 2019) and cultural studies (Shaw, 2015; Murray, 2017). The wealth of game studies work on the series is considerable and for every installment, there has been a commensurate and focused engagement from specific disciplines. As it concerns the franchise's titles set in antiquity, *Assassin's Creed Origins* and *Odyssey* (Ubisoft, 2017, 2018), the games have specifically drawn attention from the fields of archaeology (Arbuckle MacLeod, 2021; Bondioli et al., 2019; Casey, 2018, 2021; Politopoulos et al., 2019), classics (Clare, 2021; Rollinger, 2020) and gender studies (Draycott & Cook, 2022). However, the specific requirements of each game, and the resulting case study approaches have generally avoided a broader franchise study. Likewise, certain classicists have argued these two newer installments as simply too massive to analyze at a macro scale (Clare, 2021).

However, there is a key case study for considering *Assassin's Creed*, as producers do, from a brand perspective (de Wildt & Aupers, 2019). Approaching multiple games as contrasting case studies would allow researchers to attend to a broader systematization of cultures for brand marketability (Guesdon, 2018). Research and corporate presentations on the idea of the brand have so far expounded the idea of franchise cohesion, audience expectations, historical authenticity, and pop culture constellations that overdetermine what *Origins* and *Odyssey* would depict as, respectively, Egyptian and Greek. Ubisoft developers internally ask themselves how to represent a culture, in all its complexity, in line with the established rules and narrative of the series. The oversimplified answer is by dogmatically relying on what already resonates with Western audiences. This form of reliance on perceived pre-existing audience resonance, and deliberate narrative and ludic design toward that goal, is here theorized as articulated resonance, building on previous theorization of resonance (Apperley, 2011; Chapman, 2017) and articulation (Grossberg, 1992; Hall, 1986; Slack, 1996).

This presentation discusses the construction of articulated resonance in both *Origins* and *Odyssey*, as mirroring cases that are indicate of broader trends across the fifteen-year span of *Assassin's Creed*. *Origins* and *Odyssey* are positioned as quintessential

examples of articulated resonance that is built for Western audiences to accept the core narrative premises and cultural construction of both titles (Ryan, 1980, 1991) as proximate to their sensibilities. Briefly, in the case of *Origins*, this occurs through an intensive focus on Egyptological tradition, museum logics and mummy tropes that are as a form of useful culture (Bennett, 2013, 2018; Day, 2006; Wang, 1995). Conversely, in *Odyssey* the formation of resonance privileges notions of Hellenistic excellence, democratic legacy, architectural wonder, and Homeric heroism, often masking any modern problematization of Greek antiquity (Cartledge, 2011; Gehrke, 2009, Politopoulos et al. 2019). In short, *Origins* and *Odyssey* restructure the inclusion and exclusion boundaries of orientalism to produce playable worlds for Western audiences (Said, 1979).

Concretely, this analysis structures a macro-level view of each game, as a construction of culture at the conjuncture of cultural hegemony, game technology, and corporate business (Williams, 1965, 2015; Bhabha, 2004; Grossberg, 2019). The data presented here comes from an interdisciplinary mixed methods approach. At a practical level, data was collected using a hybrid game studies (Bogost, 2006; Consalvo & Dutton, 2006; ; Daneels et al., 2022; Fernández-Vara, 2015; Mukherjee, 2017) and semiotics (Bakhtin, 1986; Barthes, 1972; Eco, 1978) approach to consider the complex and coherent whole each title, formed by game maps, activities, characters, music, topography, architecture, historical framing and player framing (to name a few). This data is then contextualized with a focus on the industrial goals and language used by Ubisoft developers (Acland, 2020; Caldwell, 2008; de Wildt & Aupers, 2019) to further articulate how the game construction serves corporate brand goals. Lastly, the construction of both games as resonant products is discussed with respect to their space in a broader continuum of pop culture and legacy media references (Clare, 2021; Day, 2006; Rollinger, 2021).

A limitation of presenting this form of macro-level systemic analysis is that it is impossible to fully expand on the several hundred hours of analysis conducted on both titles, which would themselves constitute other presentations. Rather, the purpose of this abstract is to provide a cultural studies approach to these two games, and the broader *Assassin's Creed* franchise, as it expands to virtually every culture that is part of the zeitgeist (Johnson, 2013). Further, the presentation is intended to convey how blockbuster game companies position such series as transmedia juggernauts, extending much farther than the games themselves, which are consistently reliant on stereotypical pop culture constructions of real-world cultures. In other words, this is an attempt at grappling with games industry construction of articulated resonance and franchising that other games, film and cultural scholars can use in their work going forward.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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