

“Constellations” of Vocal Expression: A Time Traveler’s Examination of Vocal Performance in *Assassin’s Creed: Origins*

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

In the English language version of *Assassin’s Creed: Origins* (2017), three main avatar characters are presented for players to physically embody throughout various moments of the game. The character you inhabit for most of the game during Hellenistic-era Egypt (~49 BCE) is named Bayek of Siwa, voiced by British actor Abubakar Salim. The other two characters you can embody at various times include Bayek’s wife Aya, who is voiced by British actress Alix Wilton Regan, and Layla Hassan, a more contemporary character voiced by Jamaican-Canadian actress Chantel Riley. Of note, Bayek is an Egyptian character from the Siwa region (near Egypt’s modern-day western border near Libya), Aya is a Greco-Egyptian character, and Layla is a naturalized American who moved to Queens, New York from Cairo, Egypt with her family when she was two years old.

We must ask, do any of the above character traits necessarily determine what a video game voice actor’s performance will sound like? What about the personal characteristics of the actors themselves (age, race/ethnicity, gender presentation, class, etc.)? More directly, how might our assumptions surrounding these characteristics impact what a vocal performance “should” sound like according to our own personal tastes, expectations, and socio-cultural-temporal contexts? When attempting to achieve some measure of vocal “authenticity” in the realm of video game voice acting, questions surrounding representation, player/character identification, entertainment, and historical accuracy ultimately arise.

In *Speaking Into the Air: A History of the Idea of Communication*, John Durham Peters reflects on the “historicity” of communication practices. Siding with Walter Benjamin from his work in *Illuminations*, Peters does not align his investigation on the side of historicism, where history was “regarded [as] preconstituted and given, a continuous chain of causes and effects existing in a homogeneous space-time continuum,” but engages with its simultaneity from a constructivist lens, where “the past lives selectively in the present. History works not in a solely linear way but by being arranged into various *constellations*,” (Peters, 1999, 3).

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With *Assassin's Creed: Origins*, it becomes increasingly difficult to parse out what a Hellenistic-era Egyptian accent might have sounded like, and whether it would even be possible or desirable to recreate such a performance. As an actor and first-generation Briton of Kenyan descent, Salim's performance of Bayek requires him to carefully nuance his vocals into a version of an ancient Egyptian accent that is meant to *represent* someone from that culture and time in history. An average English-speaking player's understanding of the "authenticity" of Salim's performance within such a fictionalized historical narrative is mediated by a variety of subjective frames. These include: the player's contemporary familiarity with Egyptian history, their current mode of interaction with the character's vocal performance, and their relationship to the gameplay of the *Assassin's Creed* franchise and other gaming experiences as a whole.

From the text *Thinking with An Accent: Toward a New Object, Method, and Practice*, scholar Michelle Pfeifer explains in her chapter titled "*The Native Ear*" *Accented Testimonial Desire and Asylum* how "accent and voice become framed as stabilized indices of identity" and that it is the "listener" that reproduces "the racialized and gendered dimensions of accent in the speaker." (Rangan et al, 2023, 195-196). Furthermore, theater scholars like Angela C. Pao in *False Accents: Embodied Dialects and the Characterization of Ethnicity and Nationality* detail how an actor's performance of an ethnic group's "language and speech [...] becomes the dominant material indicator of cultural identity," (Pao, 2004, 355).

It is evident that accent characterization goes far beyond essentialist limitations of embodied, physical identity, and listener perception plays a key role in how identity is heard and created from accented, performative speech. Scholarship in a variety of areas (voice/game audio/ludomusicology studies especially) can help us to assess the power dynamics at work in a game player's interactions with vocal performances, but it is in the simultaneity of perception as it happens interactively within historically-relevant gameplay that makes the concept of constellations so useful for game studies.

Feminist scholars such as Karen Barad have provided frameworks that call attention to how "the past [...] is not closed [but rather] is open to change", which helps us to understand "what responsibility entails in our active engagement of sedimenting out the world in certain kinds of ways and not others. [...] The past and the present and the future are always being reworked. And [...] phenomena are diffracted and temporally and spatially distributed across multiple times and spaces." (Dolphijn, van der Tuin, 2012, 67-68). It is here where we can begin unpacking the intertextual, reflexive, and malleable nature of history as we construct it for ourselves, and interact with it during gaming experiences. Our direct and spatiotemporally-specific gameplay moments have significant impact on how such constructions happen, and are rendered important to us.

The constellation concept in game studies underpins the entanglements of "spacetime mattering" (Barad, 2007, 179) and meaning-making that occur in real time during our perception of vocal performances within dynamic, historical narratives - especially the kinds of narratives like those in the *Assassin's Creed* franchise that offer plot themes that discuss the limits of simulated time travel, and technologically-mediated historical replication. As such, the franchise has also become a popular subject for history and media studies scholars alike, and the limitations of historical representation within the franchise has been noted by scholars such as Emil Lundedal Hammar in *Counter-Hegemonic Commemorative Play: Marginalized Pasts and the Politics of Memory in the Digital Game Assassin's Creed: Freedom Cry*. Even so, the constellation framework helps us to analyze how our perception of vocal performance across the video game medium is deeply impacted by our place and time in history, as well as the social, cultural, linguistic, and media contexts that we come from.

In order to carefully identify how such perceptions are concurrently affected by a multitude of interrelated contexts that may shift at any moment, we must engage with these questions in a multi-layered, and simultaneous way: recognizing how our very own stars align across time, space, and history.

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