

Shifting Patterns of Female Representation Across *Assassin's Creed*

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Since its first release in 2007, the *Assassin's Creed* franchise has seen 28 installments, spanning several game platforms and genres. Likewise, the games have portrayed several dozen protagonists over this period, though relatively few have been women. The quantity and quality of scholarship on individual titles have closely matched the series evolution, and each game's cultural focus (El-Nasr et al., 2008; Westin & Hedlund, 2016; Sepinwall, 2021; Mukherjee, 2017). Within this broad engagement with *Assassin's Creed*, there has also been a recent wave of scholarship attentive to the role of women in individual titles, with work discussing *Liberation* (Murray, 2017; Steenbakker, 2021), *Origins* (Bondioli et al., 2019) and *Odyssey* (Draycott & Cook, 2022).

However, to date, there has not been a franchise-wide engagement with the issue of gender representation that tracks advancement and stagnation. This is a particularly pressing issue because, while the industry has seen some progression in terms of gender inclusion, that inclusion has remained fairly thin in terms of representational depth (Bruin-Molé, 2020). Likewise, this slow movement towards better representation has not yet reached parity between women in the audience and women in production spaces, and in particular leadership positions (Bailey et al., 2019). To date, only there has been only one multi-title study, dealing with the representation of religion (de Wildt & Aupers, 2019), though it does provide a first approach for Ubisoft's colossal slate as a whole. Our goal is to provide a similar analysis focused on the gender dynamics of the franchise, contextualized within the broader production culture at Ubisoft and the gender dynamics in that space.

In conversation with broader work on the representation of women in video

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games (Bruin-Molé, 2020; Cassell & Jenkins, 1998; Consalvo, 2012; Kafai et al., 2008), we situate this presentation, and the study on which it reports, in a broader constellation of games scholars tracing the evolution of representational practices. Moreover, this project operates by considering gender construction from a broader cultural perspective (Butler, 1990). We argue that the *Assassin's Creed* franchise has provided an exceptionally limited number of female protagonists throughout its 28 installments. Further, gender representation has seen a rapid and uneven shift following the scandal of 2014 regarding the animation of female avatars in the series (Farrokhmanesh) and the broader context of post-Gamergate attitudes (Mortensen, 2018). Lastly, we argue that this inclusivity push has been met with internal resistance at the company (Schreier, 2020; Yin-Poole, 2020) which has shaped all post-2017 series titles in ways that map onto the characters and game mechanics, producing incongruities between narrative and ludic elements.

This presentation covers all 28 games broadly but specifically focuses on all titles that feature playable female protagonists, either exclusively or as an option. The general method of analysis dovetails with the DiGAP protocol (Daneels et al., 2022), while incorporating methodological transparency (Jørgensen and Aarseth, 2022). For the titles that center a female protagonist, each game has been analyzed following close-play and netnography methods (Bizzocchi & Tanenbaum, 2011), while also attending paratextual promotional material (Fernandez-Vara, 2019). The research team covered all relevant titles with in-depth playthroughs, ethnographic notes, screenshots and video recordings, in addition to cataloging digital storefronts, trailers, trade show presentations, video documentaries and developer interviews.

Concretely, we discuss the representation of female protagonists in 7 games, with respect to the rollout of the game in the context of the franchise's history at that specific time. Each protagonist is discussed in terms of narrative connotations and mechanical composition, as well as in the manner that it is possible for them to interact with other female characters in the game, or in contrast with the representation of these non-player characters. The result is twofold. First, we produce a timeline of *Assassin's Creed* protagonists, installments and platforms that highlights a general marginalization of women, that is exacerbated by a push of the only solo-lead titles onto spin-off titles. Second, we visualize the representation of female protagonists, and the complexity of female representation in which they figure, in a grid that foregrounds an uneven evolution that is still very recent. Third, we discuss the representation periods of Ubisoft's franchise as four distinct eras: 1) Only Male Protagonists (2007-2011), 2) First Female Protagonists (2012-2015), 3) Female Protagonists Defined by Male Protagonists (2015-2017) and 4) Player Choice (2018-2023). This timeline moves from a total lack of inclusion to a central corporate focus on player choice as an innovative direction. Lastly, we briefly turn to the current move back to the older formation of the series as a form of nostalgic invocation that may recontextualize our findings as a reaction to broader inclusion initiatives.

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