

# ***Assassin's Creed Syndicate* and the Depiction of Female “Britishness” in Victorian London**

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## **INTRODUCTION**

*Assassin's Creed Syndicate* (Ubisoft Quebec 2015) is the ninth action-adventure title in the *Assassin's Creed* franchise. Set in Victorian London, the game mixes historical fiction with real-world historical events, people, and environments. This research utilizes an analytical framework developed by the authors (2020), to examine the setting and the backdrop of significant political and social change in nineteenth-century Britain, including the role and agency of women in Victorian society. This study explores the depiction of lead – and supporting – female characters within *Assassin's Creed Syndicate* and its reflection of Victorian “Britishness” (traditional, cultural, and social values embodied within Britain in the nineteenth century).

How Britishness is presented in British videogames has been explored from the perspective of national identity (Webber 2020). This paper takes a different perspective, examining how a French owned, Canadian developed game perceives

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Victorian London. Firstly, the paper will explore the dual-protagonist (Evie Frye) and dual antagonist (Lucy Thorne) and their portrayal of female independence, education (Hughes 2014, Demir 2015, Hadingham 2016), religion (Luckhurst 2014) and place in society (Gordon and Nair 2003; Kay 2012; van Lieshout et al. 2019). Through their characterization, Evie and Lucy embody polarizing values to the “woman-like” perception of women in Victorian Britain: as independent women driven by greater ambitions beyond subservient accomplishments of the time, such as artistic talents, languages, and household skills (Hughes 2014).

The presentation will also discuss the representation of female characters within the wider historical game world, most notably as members of gangs and organized crime. Gangs are populated with female leaders and members that reflect the role of women in organized crime. The role of women in gangs serves partly as a commentary of women’s role in society, both in Victorian London as well as contemporary subjugations on gender beliefs (Fishburne 2018), yet organized crimes from female-led and female-only gangs existed well before, significantly during, and long after the Victorian era. However, considering the earlier *Assassin’s Creed* games, audiences may perceive this as tokenistic and over-compensating for the sake of gendered representation. While the placement and role of violent female characters can feel strange in comparison to the perceived values of women in the nineteenth century, their situation and actions within the game context are not wholly far from the understood realities of the period, with reported engagements in violence and murder (Hysell 2007; Williams 2016) befitting of the contextual in-game environment. As such, feminist film studies theories will be applied to the audience perception of violent female characters, namely Laura Mulvey’s theory of the male gaze and female “to-be-looked-at-ness” (Mulvey 1975) and Linda Williams’ theory of the female body in erotic films (Williams 1990).

The purpose of the presentation is to contribute towards discussions on the historical representation and reception of women’s role in Victorian Britain and their inextricable link to female representation in games. It is arguable that the representation of women in *Assassin’s Creed Syndicate* is paratextually linked to previous criticisms of poor female representation towards the *Assassin’s Creed* franchise (Huntemann 2014) but also to the games industry more generally (Malkowski and Russworm 2017). Despite this, historians contemplate the sanitisation of gender roles within the game and questions whether the inclusion of such social constructions of crime – including historical figures – “enable an analysis which doesn’t enter into that same problematic process of fetishizing crime, and gendered violence” (Nielsen 2015). To explore this, we will utilize theories that explain the way women are viewed on-screen as fetish objects and apply this to historical games spaces. The presence of female representation in *Assassin’s Creed Syndicate* – as central characters and in leading roles in encountered gangs – represents a different agency of women beyond the emblematic ‘servants’ of men in nineteenth century Britain.

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