

## **ORIENTALISM IN ASSASSIN'S CREED: SELF-ORIENTALIZING THE ASSASSINS FROM FORERUNNERS OF MODERN TERRORISM INTO OCCIDENTALIZED HEROES**

*Abstract.* The article delivers an analysis of the first of Ubisoft's long and popular franchise *Assassin's Creed* (2007–) in order to show how it conforms as well as how it distinguishes itself from similar cases of Orientalism in video games. If Orientalism traditionally depicted a negative picture of the Oriental Other in general and the so-called Assassins in particular (seldom associated with extremism and terrorism), then in *Assassin's Creed* we find at work a certain self-orientalistic subversion that mediates a positive identification, rather than disqualification of this privileged Arabo-Islamic Other. Thus, the article proposes a close examination of the orientalistic and self-orientalistic elements in the selected video game from a cultural studies approach in order to answer the question of how is it possible that the Assassins, traditionally understood as forerunners of modern terrorism, became the heroic protagonists of a western video game.

**Keywords:** *Assassin's Creed*, video games, cultural studies, Orientalism, self-orientalism, Bartol, Alamut

### **Introduction**

On first glance Ubisoft's *Assassin's Creed* (AC) from 2007, the first of a long and popular series, presents itself as yet another example of Orientalism in video games; but although fruitfully exploiting the Arabo-Islamic Orient in terms of landscape, its peoples, their cultures and their cities, the game distinguishes itself by an intriguing self-orientalistic character.

The legends about the infamous Assassins are first and foremost an imaginative fruit of the Oriental world itself, where in medieval times hostile images were grown by historical accounts and folktales alike. After being exported to Europe during the Crusades they were given great currency through the works of classical orientalists of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, and despite

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the serious intellectual endeavor of 20<sup>th</sup> century scholars to deconstruct the orientalist imagery, the Assassins apparently remained so fascinating that they acquired an almost autonomous existence in western popular culture from literature to cinema: most recently they appeared as demonic murderers in the Hollywood blockbuster *Prince of Persia: The Sands of Time* (2010), while in literature the whole novelistic tradition can be tracked back to Vladimir Bartol's *Alamut* (1938) from the interwar period and then moving along the historical line up until our own post-9/11 era to works like James Boschert's *Assassins of Alamut* (2010) and Scott Oden's *Lion of Cairo* (2010). Last but not least, the Assassin made many appearances in the rapidly developing media of video games, but nowhere on such an enormous scale and with such popularity as in the AC franchise.

The popularity of the AC franchise is reflected in the continuity of the video game series, which stretches from 2007 to 2012 and includes: *Assassin's Creed* (2007), *Assassin's Creed 2* (2009), *Assassin's Creed: Brotherhood* (2010), *Assassin's Creed: Revelations* (2011) and *Assassin's Creed 3* (2012). Moreover, besides the main video game franchise a considerable number of tertiary products emerged on the market: novels, graphic novels, comic books, short movies, animated movies, action figures, clothing, etc. Because of its living textuality, its completely furnished world, and the detachability of its elements, it really seems that AC gained nothing less than cult status among gamers. Vivid forum discussions emerged, not only praising the game's quality, but also debating its more intriguing and problematic aspects: at the heart of the discussions we find the Assassin's mythology, the content of their Creed, and especially allusions to modern imperialism/terrorism ideologies, all topics that will be of our particular concern here.

We will focus on the first game of the series and, more specifically, on its narrative; despite AC's novelty in terms of game-play and graphics, it is precisely its storyline that represents a continuation of Orientalist discourse in the media of video games. By contrast, inside the parameters of Orientalism, a potentially subversive element can be detected, namely a certain self-orientalistic identification with – rather than disqualification of – the Arabo-Islamic Other: if most cases of Orientalism in video games represent the Muslims as enemies and threat, and especially if we take into account the common orientalist misbelief that the Assassins were the forerunners of modern Islamic fundamentalism and terrorism, then AC presents itself as a distinctive self-orientalistic subversion of such an ideology.

The task of this article is therefore not only to analyze the various ideologically problematic orientalist elements saturated in the game, but also to measure the extent of the subversive potential inherent in its distinctive self-orientalistic character.

## Video-Game Orientalism and the Arabo-Islamic Other

The idea of Orientalism as a neutral description of the Orient started to crumble most notably due to Said's (1978/2003) *Orientalism* where it is demonstrated that it implies an asymmetrical perception of the West that pictures an inferior and irrational Orient not only as an object of scientific knowledge or aesthetic pleasure, but also of colonialist domination, thus linking imagination and domination into a specific form of cultural imperialism (Schiller, 1973; Smith, 1987; Tomlinson, 1991).

Orientalism entered a new phase after the geopolitical shift in the relations of power in the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century between Europe and the United States: "The Arab Muslim has become a figure in American popular culture, in the academic world, in the policy of the planner's world, and in the world of business." (Said, 1978/2003: 285-286) With the taking over of the old colonies in the Middle East the US inherited also the European tradition of Orientalism and re-shaped it in a culturally specific way henceforth known as neo-Orientalism.<sup>1</sup> One of the most distinctive features of this neo-Orientalism is its massive connection with the entertainment business, boosted by a cultural industry where ideology can easily disguise itself as a neutral non-ideology (Adorno, 1944/2001), especially when it comes to the question of representing the Arabo-Islamic Other in cinema (Shaheen, 2000; 2001; Khatib, 2006) or other entertaining media such as video games (Šisler, 2008; Höglund, 2008).

The analyses of *Digital Arabs* made by Šisler was based on qualitative research and content analyses of more than 90 European or American and 15 Arab video games, all of which are set in the Middle East and in which the representation of Muslims and Arabs plays a key role in the game-play. In a section concerning Orientalism in the digital age, Šisler (2008: 207) described how most of the analyzed games of Western provenience ended up either constructing a fantastical Orient as ambient with a fictional Oriental Other as the main character using quasi-historical elements - the emblematic examples being the franchise of platform/action games *Prince of Persia* (Broderbund, 1989-) and the role-playing game *Al-Qadim* (TSR, 1992) - or using a contemporary or historical Middle East as the setting, while stereotypically representing its native population as fanatic extremists and terrorists, often with little or no civil population at all.<sup>2</sup> Höglund (2008) developed

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<sup>1</sup> Mc Alister (2001: 12) gives a precious historical insight into the development of Orientalism between 1945 and 2000 in American culture, stating that the latter presents a new version of the former, "a new version of Orientalism, one that revitalizes, in a more subtle form, the insistence that fixed cultural differences must structure the organization of political power."

<sup>2</sup> In such video games the player controls American or NATO or similar coalition forces, while the computer controls the non-playable enemy units, which are depicted by schematized attributes often refe-

the results of Šisler's analyses further in *Electronic empire* by focusing on a specific genre of video games: the first-person military shooter. Employing the concept of neo-Orientalism with a series of games set in the Middle East (*America's Army*, *Close Combat: First to Fight*, *Full Spectrum Warrior: Ten Hammers*, etc.); the author's main effort was to show how the construction of this specific location in the game space, as well as the ideological representation of its peoples, function as a correlative of the American post-9/11 imperialistic policy in the Middle East. Regardless of whether the games in question take place in a fictional or a supposedly authentic Orient, they all purport to be both realistic and real; the former means that the game environment and its physics appear authentic, while the latter claims the anthropological, sociological, and historical accuracy of the game narrative.

Our qualitative analysis of Ubisoft's AC as a case of Orientalism is far more modest in terms of empirical data, as it focuses on a single case study, i.e. only on the first of the four games in the complete video game series. The events of game are set within the historical background of the Crusades and located in a realistically depicted Middle East, but the characters and plotline do not claim to be real. Quite the contrary, as we are told at the very beginning of the game in the preliminary disclaimer: "Inspired by historical events and characters, this work of fiction was designed, developed and produced by a multicultural team of various religious faiths and beliefs." In this context, it is quite telling that most of the orientalist western games mentioned above (especially the military shooters) do not warn us beforehand of their fictitious character, but rather pretend to be a faithful reconstruction of the real Middle Eastern reality in the virtual space of video games. Moreover, if in most orientalistic games of Western production we are not allowed to play the Oriental Other if not in a fantastic environment (as in the already mentioned *Prince of Persia* and *Al-Qadim*), the sole character we can play in AC is a member of the infamous secret Order of the Assassins.

Although widely employed by many scholars, Said's conception was also criticized because of its implicit denial of Orient's own power of representation (Halliday, 1995; Niyogi, 2006). If Orientalism denotes a distinctive style of thought and the related praxis of domination exercised by the West upon the East, then self-Orientalism can be regarded as its peculiar extension. Understood as post-colonial self-exploitation or as an anti-colonialist attempt at cultural self-definition and often labelled as "reversed" or "complicit" Orientalism (Macfie, 2000; Azm, 2000), self-Orientalism presents itself precisely as a distinctive reversal of Orientalism through a peculiar process of self-othering. Apart from this version of self-Orientalism there is another

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ring to Arabs or Muslims (headcover, loose clothes, dark skin, etc); in many cases, the in-game narrative links the enemy to Islamic terrorism and extremism (Šisler, 2008: 208).

that we must consider for the purpose of our analysis, namely, the kind in which the subject of self-othering is not the Oriental Other, but rather the Occidental one.<sup>3</sup> Therefore, if the main function of Orientalism as such is to reproduce the basic ontological and epistemological distinction between the Orient and the Occident, then self-Orientalism basically fulfils the same role, but at the same time – at least in its Occidental variant – subverts the dominant ideology by operating a peculiar self-othering of the western self into the shoes of the Oriental Other.

Besides AC there are of course other games where the player is allowed to “play for the other side” and thus self-orientalize himself/herself. Toward the end of his article, Šisler (2008: 211–212) analyze shooters of Arabic production in which the usual representations of friend and foe are reversed: in games like *Al-Quwwat al-Khasa (Special Forces, Solution, 2003)*, *Tahta al-Ramad (Under Ash, Dar al-Fikr, 2002)*, or *Tahta al-Hisar (Under Siege, Afkar Media, 2005)* one can play a humanized Oriental Other, while the Zionist forces are – conversely and also problematically – depicted as an uniform enemy. Adopting the phrase “digital dignity” Šisler (2008: 215) reaffirmed the cultural meaning for the Arab player who can play “the hero who fights evil and speaks the Arabic language,” while at the same time carefully stressing the fact that, in such cases, we are not dealing with a subversion, but rather with a mere reversal of the stereotypical depiction known from similar games of western production. Moreover, these games are made in Arabic and are, therefore, not accessible to a non-educated Western player who does not know the language. There are also games of Western production in which even Westerners can take up the role of the Oriental Other in a historical or quasi-historical setting. Two examples are worth mentioning: *Command & Conquer: Generals* (Electronic Arts, 2003) and *Civilization* (Atari, 2003).<sup>4</sup>

Nevertheless, AC remains so far the only game of western production in which we can play the Assassin as the Arabo-Islamic Other *par excellence*

<sup>3</sup> *Already during the colonial era, when orientalist discourses started to flourish, one can find examples of various degrees of such a self-orientalization, mostly by prominent figures from arts and literature such as Goethe. Especially German Orientalism in the colonial era can be regarded as an exception to the rule since in contrast to its French and British counterparts demonstrates distinctive traits of self-Orientalism (Polaschegg, 2005; Marchand, 2009; Germana, 2010).*

<sup>4</sup> *In Command & Conquer: Generals the player is allowed to choose from the three sides of a fictional conflict: the US, China, and the “Arab Global Liberation Army,” but while the US has “powerful and expensive units” and possesses “superior intelligence capabilities and flexible air force,” the fictitious “Arab Global Liberation Army” is distinguished by “terrorists with car bombs and truck bombs, suicide bombers with explosives strapped to their bodies, anthrax and biotoxin delivery systems and angry mobs of Arabs wielding AK-47s” (Chick, 2003: 1). By contrast, in Civilization, a more historical and fair depiction is given, by introducing a Middle East scenario, while the Islamic civilization is depicted in a sensitive way, thus being one of the few exceptions in which “Arabs and Muslims are neither functionalized as enemies nor depicted in an Orientalist manner, but constitute a possible representation of the player’s Self.” (Šisler, 2008: 211)*

not merely as a playable other-side (regardless if it is fairly or unfairly depicted), but as the only character we are allowed to play. Moreover, the playable character of the Assassin is not a perverse negative evil-self of the player, but rather a positively self-orientalized alternative-self, depicted as an Occidentalized Oriental hero in a fictional struggle between the East and the West that is taking place in a realistically depicted Levant region of the Middle East.

*Picture 1: THE ASSASSIN ABOVE DAMASCUS (ASSASSINS' CREED, UBISOFT 2007)*



## Re-Orientalizing the Assassins in Western Popular-Culture

Western popular culture is saturated with such a veritable plague of phantasms about the legendary order of the Assassins while in fact referring the Shiite sect of the Nizari Ismailis that one almost cannot speak about one without inevitably throwing the shadow of the other.<sup>5</sup> In this regard Daftary (1994: 1-7) noted that not only chroniclers and fiction writers (Bartol, 1989/2003; Willey, 2001), but also serious scholars employed the terms Ismailis and Assassins as if synonymous – despite the fact that the latter is a

<sup>5</sup> *The Ismailis had a long history stretching over ten long centuries, starting as a small Shiite community around the 8<sup>th</sup> century, and twice even founding their own states: the Fatimid Caliphate and the Nizari state. In the 10<sup>th</sup> century, the Ismaili movement split into two main branches, the Mustalians and the Nizaris, which are the historical sect that gave birth to the Assassin legends.*



misnomer for the Nizari branch of the former – so that the Assassins at the end acquired an almost independent currency on their own.<sup>6</sup>

The very “word ‘assassin’, which the West uses for terrorist murderers in general, was originally a nickname of the sect, and had nothing to do with killing;” the word received this connotation in western languages (English, French, Italian, *etc.*) only by analogy to the “famous murders of the ‘Assassins’—whose ‘chief object’, however, was not murder, and especially not ‘to assassinate Crusaders.’” (Hodgson, 1955/2005: 1) The most common interpretation about the origin of the name “Assassins” can be found in Sacy’s (1818) famous article on the topic where one can read how the term was used as a scornful misnomer not only by Christian and Jewish, but primarily Muslim writers.<sup>7</sup> The nickname was picked up later on by Christians during the Crusades and from here there was only one step to the generalization that made assassination a specialty of the sect, which, in fact, merely lent it their name.

In medieval Europe the Assassins were either demonized or romanticized, much in tune with later orientalist traditions that depicted the Arabo-Islamic Oriental Other as an ambiguous object of fear and fascination stretching from aesthetics into the field of morals and politics; depicted in art and literature as the privileged antagonist of the Christian Knight, who embodied goodness, justice, honor, and noblesse, the Muslim Assassin was left with quintessentially evil characteristics as a sneaky and bloodthirsty cutthroat (Lewis, 1967/2003: 18–20). The classical orientalist writings of the 19<sup>th</sup> century basically reproduced the medieval portraying of the Assassins as evil, vicious, drug-addicted murderers,<sup>8</sup> and it was not until the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century that things started to change due to the endeavour of scholars such as Vladimir Ivanov, M. G. Hodgson, and later on Farhad Daftary, so that historical reality about the Nizaris gradually emerged beneath layers of legends about the infamous Assassins. Hostile stereotypes insisted nonetheless and especially from this perspective it is quite an intriguing fact that on the other end of history and in a completely new media – in the 21<sup>st</sup> century

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<sup>6</sup> *If this is understandable for travelogues and other popular literature, this usage is dubious when used by academic authorities, who employed the very term already in the titles of their books; such was the case with Marshall G. S. Hodgson’s *The Order of Assassins: The Struggle of the Early Nizari Isma’ilis against the Islamic World from 1955*; Bernard Lewis’s *The Assassins: A Radical Sect in Islam from 1967*; and even Farhad Daftary’s own *The Assassins Legends: Myths of the Isma’ilis from 1994*.*

<sup>7</sup> *The Arabic form of the name ‘Assassin’ is hashishiyya or hashishiyyun, signifying quite literally the users of the drug hashish (a preparation from cannabis), which was associated with the Nizaris as an explanation for their irrational disregarding of personal safety during their suicidal missions.*

<sup>8</sup> *The 19<sup>th</sup> century Austrian orientalist von Hammer-Purgstall (1835/1968: 72), for example, was known for being excessively disdainful toward the Nizaris, exploited all possible legends in order to give an explanation for what he considered to be the quintessential evil nature of the Assassins: “Human nature is not naturally so diabolical” but in the case of “this society of vice,” “the murderous order of the Assassins,” that explanation that is “the most horrible is the most likely.”*

video games – the figure of the Assassin transforms from villain into hero.

Considering the general historical context we can trace two important milestones that defined the imagery of the Arabo-Islamic Other in general and the Assassins in particular in contemporary western popular thought: the first was the late 1979 Islamic revolution in Iran, while the second and more vivid one the 9/11 2001 terrorist attack on US soil. In the 80s Europe (and more distantly the US) was shaken by the then omnipresent “threat from the East” that went by the name of Khomeini and who was described as the “virtual face in Western popular culture of Islam.” (Nasr, 2006: 138). The concept of “Islamic fundamentalism” was used in this context in order to explain the supposed blind support of the Muslim masses for their leaders (Lewis, 1988: 117), while at the same time being criticized because of its depiction of Islam as a monolithic entity inherently linked with extremism, fanaticism, and terrorism (Esposito, 1992; Halliday, 1995). Despite the intellectual effort of the few the many did not read learned studies but rather such novels as Bartol’s *Alamut* (in 1988 translated into French and rapidly gaining immense popularity), which was editorially promoted as faithful historical account on the allegedly “fundamentalistic” religious struggles of 11<sup>th</sup> century Persia (Kos, 1991: 11), thus linking the old sect of the Nizari Ismailis’ with the modern phenomena of “Islamic fundamentalism”.

The second milestone, the shocking 9/11 attacks on US soil, was labeled as “Islamic terrorism” and attributed to Osama bin-Laden and Al-Qaida; it was an event that had reactivated the old “clash of civilisation” (Huntington, 1996) and similar problematic ideologies that received prompt answer from critical interpreters (Beinin and Stork, 2002). And once again anachronistic transpositions of the medieval assassination techniques into modern terrorism were made (2003 the English translation of Bartol’s *Alamut* appeared,<sup>9</sup> an example followed by many novelists as the already mentioned Boschert or Oden), scholarly writings not excluded. Bernard Lewis, for example, devoted the entire final chapter of his renown book to the demonstration of the thesis that the Assassins “invented terrorism,” as he puts it: “In one respect the Assassins are without precedent—in the planned, systematic and long-term use of terror as a political weapon.” (Lewis, 2003: 129) Apart from the historically inaccurate misuse of the term “terrorism”,<sup>10</sup> the most crucial

<sup>9</sup> On the very first page of the English edition of Bartol’s *Alamut* we can find quite a few problematic quotes reflecting this mirroring: “The book once again took a new life following the attacks of 9/11/2001 because of its early description of the world of suicide bombers in fanatical sects” (editorial); “*Alamut* is a literary classic by Slovenian writer Vladimir Bartol, a deftly researched and presented historical novel about one of the world’s first political terrorists” (Midwest Book Review); “Whoever wants to understand the success of the Al Qaeda leader’s strategy should read Bartol.” (*Mladina*).

<sup>10</sup> The term “terrorism” was born in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, conceived during the French Revolution as “rule of terror” and employed only later on in order to describe almost every violent revolutionary practices



difference between the assassination policy of the Nizari Ismailis and modern terrorist organizations lies in the fact that, while the latter's privileged targets are civilians, the former struck almost exclusively political and religious leaders, which is most probably the reason why assassinations had such massive popular support during the period (Hodgson, 1955/2005: 84).

The old orientalist images of the Arabo-Islamic Other were therefore reinforced and reshaped in western popular culture so that Islam become associated with fundamentalism and terrorism, thus transforming the Muslims into the "ultimate Other" (Mamdani, 2004: 17). In this perspective the Assassins, traditionally depicted as immoral fanatical villains who are willing to die for their master, become – as an anachronistic embodiment of Islamic fundamentalism and terrorism – nothing less than the Arabo-Islamic Other *par excellence*.<sup>11</sup> While the process of re-orientalizing the Assassins reproduced the old orientalist stereotypes, it also reworked the traditional imagery and developed new meanings, so that at the end, in the video game AC, the figure of the Assassin paradoxically transforms from an anachronistic forerunner of modern Islamic fundamentalism and terrorism into an Occidentalized hero.

Picture 2: THE LEAP OF FAITH (ASSASSINS' CREED, UBISOFT 2007)



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during the 19<sup>th</sup> century, it did not become "terrorism" in the modern sense of the word until the late 20<sup>th</sup> century, when it was used to describe a wide range of groups and activities (Herman, 1998).

<sup>11</sup> Speaking about fundamentalism and terrorism Žižek's position on the undead can perhaps be of some use: he claims that the undead are in fact more alive than life itself, as they have access to life's substance before its symbolic mortification (1992: 116); however, this substance is entirely unaccessible since if one should want to articulate it, it first needs to be symbolized. Elaborating on this, Vrtačič (2012: 148) thus claims that the Other is "always already dead", a valuable point for our case as well.

## Orientalism and self-Orientalism in AC

The double-bind movement of Orientalism and self-Orientalism in AC will be considered primarily through the analysis of the following video-game elements: the game's narrative and selective accounts of in-game imagery and game-play dynamics. Besides this formal level of analysis, we will try to show how the historical and cultural context determined and evoked certain formal elements of the game that significantly shaped the gaming experience of AC.

Arguably, the two most important elements of the AC's appeal as a gaming experience are the play dynamics and aesthetic imaginary. Some reviewers praised the game for the richness of the virtually re-created open world, the aesthetically pleasing environments, the depth of details, and the architectural design (Van Ord, 2008); all of these elements were combined to produce the highly sophisticated realistic touch for which it became renown. Others focused on game mechanics, especially the experimental and innovative elements (stealth, blending in with the crowd, action, *par-cour* platform moving), while occasionally criticizing the repetitive nature of the game-play (Joynt, 2008). Most of the reviewers who focused on game mechanics and imaginary based their analyses on the premise that these are the most important factors to consider when determining a game appeal. In AC, all of these aspects are undeniably crucial; nevertheless, I would like to focus more on the narrative aspect, which is also crucial for any game in terms of engagement (Church, 1999; Jenkins, 2004; Ip, 2011), for it is here that the double movement of self-Orientalism in AC can be grasped in the most palpable manner.

The interactive narrative of AC demonstrates a higher level of complexity than is usually expected from an action-adventure game:<sup>12</sup> AC is basically characterized as an action-adventure game (or an action-driven game that combines some elements from the adventure genre), but most of the appeal of the game still derives from its narrative, as some reviews explicitly noted (Reparaz, 2007). The narrative, as one of the most complex elements in interactive storytelling, is developed through two parallel plotlines in AC, each taking place at a different time. One is in the future and the other in the past and they both gradually tell the main story of the game, namely,

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<sup>12</sup> When we are referring to the game's narrative, we tend to generalize every aspect of a complex whole into the descriptive term "a game's story." In most genres, especially action-based games, such a generalization will suffice because the storyline is simple, but when we are dealing with story-driven games, which combine a complex narrative with sophisticated forms of interaction, we need to make at least some conceptual distinctions between story, plot, and narrative: the story is "the information about an event or sequence of events;"; the plot is "the causation and links between events;"; whereas "the narrative is the unique way in which story is being presented to the audience" (Ip, 2011: 107).

the age-old conflict between the Assassins and the Templars. The two main plotlines are connected through an interesting diegetic element that reflects the gamer's interaction with the console or computer: in the meta-plotline, the player assumes the role of a bartender named Desmond Miles, who is kidnapped by the Templars and forced to use a machine called Animus to experience the memories of one of his ancestors, thus allowing the player to play the main plotline as a member of the of Assassins operating during the third crusade in the 12<sup>th</sup> century, Altaïr ibn La-Ahad ("the flying one, son of none"). As Altaïr, the player is given the task of assassinating nine historical figures, allegedly because the targets are allied with the Templars in their task of finding the Apple of Eden, one of the many mysterious alien artifacts scattered around the globe that gives the wielder the power to manipulate other people's minds. The search for the Apple of Eden and other artifacts is also the motive behind the Templar's kidnapping of Desmond in the first place, for it is with the technology based on these artifacts that the Templars plan to take control of humanity. The Assassins are generally depicted as freedom-fighters that are scattered around the world and operating like a global terrorist network, while the Templars function as a mainstream global corporation spreading its tentacles into governments and other influential institutions.

AC's main story is *per se* a typical "conspiracy theory" where the world is divided into a more and less clean cut between "the good and the bad," namely, the noble Assassins who are struggling for truth and freedom on one side, and the canny Templars who are fighting for power and control on the other. The appeal of the narrative can be understood only if we consider the appeal of the background story, from which most of the game's orientalist elements are derived. At the beginning of every game of the AC franchise the authors claim that "this work of fiction is inspired by historical events and characters," but apart from the setting and occasional historical figures, the story of AC is entirely a work of fiction, based more on legends than on any historical reality whatsoever. What I want to unveil is not so much the game's historical inaccuracy, but rather how the fascination with the game's story is derived mostly from the legendary aura surrounding the historical sect of the Nizaris. If we recall the twofold nature of the Orient as the object of pleasure and knowledge, where the pleasure of discovering a mysterious world and enjoying its exoticism is mixed with an equal measure of fear and a tendency to set it apart from the Occident, then we can see, at least considering the immense popularity of AC among gamers, that this is still and especially the case when it comes to the legendary Assassins and their master, the Old Man of the Mountain.

The main source for the spread of all sorts of fictitious orientalist depictions of the Assassins throughout medieval Europe was most definitely the

famous *Tales* by the Venetian traveler Marco Polo, who based his variant of the story about the Old Man of the Mountain, the Artificial Paradise and the suicidal Assassins upon the many legends that circulated in the Islamic world at the period of his travels.<sup>13</sup> As for the further popularization of the story the most decisive and influential work of fiction was, arguably, Bartol's novel *Alamut* from 1938, afterward translated in French (1989) and in English (2004) and many other world languages. It should therefore come of no surprise to hear that Jade Raymond herself, the producer of the game, admitted in an interview: "Instead of using Arab legends we decided to take inspiration from a book called *Alamut*, by the Slovenian author Vladimir Bartol" (Raymond, 2006). In AC the legends and other mythological accounts concerning the Old Man of the Mountain, the Artificial Paradise, and the suicidal Assassins themselves are reinterpreted in an original, yet still distinctively orientalist and self-orientalist way. The sect itself is located in Masyaf, while the Old Man of the Mountain is represented as Al-Mualim, the leader of the Assassins, who wants the Apple of Eden – which can be understood as a futuristic allegorical representation of the Artificial Paradise – for himself in order to manipulate his own people and thus betray the *Assassin's Creed* of truth and freedom. The Assassins, including the main character Altair, are presented as if they had undertaken special training and they are depicted in long white cloths with hoods over their heads, suggesting a monk-like disguise. It is historically questionable that the *feday* ("faithful" or "devotee"), who allegedly performed not only suicidal assassinations, but also death-leaps of faith down walls and towers in order to demonstrate loyalty to their master, formed a privileged rank within the Nizari organization, or that they received special training of any kind as has been suggested (Hodgson, 1955/2005: 82–83; Daftary, 1994: 105–6). Nevertheless, adaptations concerning the suicidal nature of the assassinations were made by AC's developers not for the sake of historical accuracy, but for obvious reasons of game-play. For instance, as Altair the player does not complete the mission by performing a suicidal attack (in which case a "game over" would obviously occur), but by carefully preparing the assassination in such a way to survive it; besides that there is no suicidal jumping off the wall as depicted in Bartol's novel and described by other accounts as well (Maalouf, 1984) – instead of suicidal leaps over the wall Altair regularly performs his "leaps of faith" by jumping safely from high viewpoints into carts of hay. As in Bartol's version

<sup>13</sup> *The story speaks about an Ismail who lands at Tripoli with his devotees and then houses himself at the fortress of Masyaf, where he builds a vast garden with a pleasure building in the midst, filled with luxuries and slaves of both sexes. In the evenings, he invited men attracted by his person to his residence nearby, and after telling them they are going to experience paradise, he had them drugged and taken through a secret tunnel connecting his residence to the garden of pleasures. After experiencing paradise, Ismail tells them that if they will keep the secret and serve his cause, they will be sent in paradise, thus bounding their wills to his own.*

of the story, after completing the nine assassination missions Altair returns to Masyaf to defeat his former master after discovering the truth behind his betrayal and he takes possession of the Apple of Eden. At this point of the story, the past unfolds upon the present, leaving the plot open for sequels, a commercial technique we are familiar with especially in Hollywood cinema.

Despite his white monk-like disguise, Altair's behavior and mannerisms portray him as a typical American hero, more a commando soldier than a secretive Assassin. Altair's voice acting is also plain American, as is his choice of words. Desmond, on the other hand, is coherently depicted, since he is an American of Middle Eastern origin (Altair being one of his ancestors). If we take into account that he is accessing Altair's memories through the Animus interface, we can even accept the explanation given in the game that it is actually Desmond doing the talking and acting through his ancestral counterpart. In this sense, the Animus can be interpreted as a diegetic element that reflects not only the interaction with the console or computer, but also a specific self-orientalistic self-othering of the gamer. The player plays Desmond through the console or computer, while Desmond "plays" Altair through the Animus, thus producing a double self-orientalization effect. A group of young authors who were strongly committed to multiculturalism wrote a very interesting article about the cultural dimensions of experiencing the game: "*Assassin's Creed: A multi-cultural read* (El Nasr et al., 2008). Their collective work was written from multiple perspectives and they argued that the experience of the game is highly influenced by cultural and disciplinary background: if the game experience was heightened for the "Westerners" (Simon Niedenthal and David Milam) through the "beautiful architectural detail and the use of the environment layout as a function of gameplay, such as the use of rooftops for platforming, fast movement and flying-like actions, and stealth," then for the "Easterners" (Magy Seif El-Nasr and Maha Al-Saati), the game "aroused many nostalgic feelings through its simulated Middle-Eastern cities, the use of Arabic words, accents and gesture, and the detailed Middle-Eastern architectural design" (El Nasr et al., 2008: 1). However, even if we do not consider the fact that, although the group is of Western or Middle-Eastern origin, all the writers are Westerners in the sense that they live and work in the West, one can still clearly see how self-Orientalism shaped their gaming experiences: in one case we are dealing with an Occidental self-othering, while in the other we are dealing with two separate cases of Occidental and Oriental self-othering; both instances are in final analyses only two sides of the same coin, that is: self-Orientalism.

Still, the most distinctive self-orientalistic element lies in the Creed of the Assassins that reads as follows: "Nothing is true, everything is permitted." The origin of the phrase can be traced back to Sacy's (1838/2006) *Exposé de la Religion des Druzes*, where it is mentioned that an Ismaili proselyte must

undergo nine stages, where at the end he would forfeit the yoke of any religion and become a true materialist, not recognizing any god or any moral constraint; but it is only in Flügel's (1864: 251) *Geschichte der Araber* that we find the phrase in its actual form, more precisely in the passage where it is stated that for an Ismaili student it is necessary to undergo different levels of knowledge in order to gain the supreme wisdom of *Nichts zu glauben und Alles thun zu dürfen*. If by reading Sacy's work it was Flügel who paved the road for the erroneous belief about the true content of Ismailism, then it was definitely Nietzsche who popularized the phrase as an invention of the "Assassins – that order of free spirits *par excellence*."<sup>14</sup> And it was Bartol, a fervid reader of Nietzsche, who reproduced and further popularized the error by claiming that "Nothing is true, everything is permitted" is the "Supreme Sentence of the Ismailis" (figuring prominently at the very beginning of *Alamut*), so that at the other end of history we can find it once again in the media of video games as the beating core of the *Assassin's Creed*. Due to the philosophical character of the phrase it is of course open to various interpretations during the unfolding of the whole series (in the first game with which we are concerned here Altair says to his master: "I realize now that our Creed does not commend us to be free, but to be wise."), but for the task at hand it is important to note only that the Creed of the Assassins is nothing more than a self-orientalistic projection of a culturally specific nihilistic dilemma between moral restraint and absolute freedom,<sup>15</sup> transformed into a global and pan-historical struggle between the noble Assassins, who are depicted as freedom-fighters and paladins of justice, and the imperialistic Templars whose main goal is to achieve global domination.

The Occidental self-orientalistic character of the game becomes more and more evident as the series unfolds in its many variants: in *Assassin's Creed 2* (2009) and its two sequels – *Assassin's Creed: Brotherhood* (2010) and *Assassin's Creed: Revelations* (2011) – the story is moved from a medieval Middle-Eastern setting into an Italy of the renaissance period, while the main protagonist is transformed from the Arabic Altair into the Florentine Ezio Auditor, who inherits from its predecessor the Creed and its mission of freedom; even more explicitly, in *Assassin's Creed 3* (2012) the Assassin is portrayed as Conrad, an Indian-American fighting for freedom during the American civil war and partially even triggering the events of the American

<sup>14</sup> Thus spoke Nietzsche (1887/1976: 150) in his *Genealogy of Morals*: "When the Christian crusaders in the Orient came across that invincible order of Assassins—that order of free spirits *par excellence* whose lowest order received, through some channel or other, a hint about that symbol and spell reserved for the uppermost echelons alone, as their secret: 'nothing is true, everything is permitted.'"

<sup>15</sup> The famous sentence usually attributed to the Nizari Ismailis turns out to be in fact a common slogan of the European and especially German 18<sup>th</sup> century, used in journals, essays, and other sites of popular philosophy to designate and disqualify atheism and materialism as amoral (Carr, 1992)



Revolution. Thus, as a whole, the series AC therefore presents itself as an allegorical representation of the gradual transformation of the figure of the Assassin from an ultimate Arabo-Islamic Other into a completely Occidentalized hero.

*Picture 3: GENEALOGY OF THE ASSASSIN (ASSASSINS' CREED 1-4, UBISOFT 2007-13)*



## Conclusion

Proceeding from the epistemological framework of Orientalism and self-Orientalism and considering the cultural contexts that shaped and reshaped the imagery associated with the Nizari Ismailis, we have seen how AC, the first of a long and popular series of video games, operated a double-bind re-orientalization of the legendary Assassins: on one hand it innovatively reproduced the old medieval legends and orientalist stereotypes by retouching them with realistic depictions, and at the same time enhancing them with ideological implication from their own historical actuality (the meta-narrative of the struggle between Assassins/Templars as a black-and-white conspiracy; the sci-fi transformation of the Artificial Paradise into the Apple of Eden, etc.) - while on the other hand and by playing on the ambivalence of the Arabo-Islamic Other as a fascinating and yet dangerous entity, they gradually stripped the Assassin of its negative traits in order to transform an Oriental villain into a completely Occidentalized hero (the relationship between Desmond/Altair and the quintessentially nihilistic dilemma of the

Creed), thus enabling a specific self-othering of the western subject, here labelled as Occidental self-Orientalism.

Bearing this in mind we can now finally answer the neuralgic question of how is it possible that the Assassins, the alleged “forerunners of modern terrorism,” become – throughout the *Assassins Creed* series – the emblematic representation of heroically Occidentalized freedom-fighters. If the majority of orientalist video games of western production consolidate the imperialism/terrorism ideology (where “playing for the other side is not allowed”), and if their Arabic counterparts in the video game industry merely made an inversion of the same ideology by allowing Arabic players to play the members of organizations labeled as “terrorist” by the West, then AC presents an Occidental self-orientalistic subversion of both of these positions. The black-and-white depiction of the world in AC resembles, at least to a certain degree, the world as depicted in the post-9/11 imperialism/terrorism ideology; from this perspective, one can definitely find a curious resemblance between the subjects of these two ideologies, namely, the Templars/Assassins and the US-led-West/Al-Qaida-led-Terrorists. The issue was amply discussed on a forum of the *Assassin's Creed* Wiki, in which players were trying to project the conspiracy theory of AC into their real political situation.<sup>16</sup> They began putting forward theories about freemasons and similar groups, while at a certain point they began stating their concerns about the Assassins being Terrorists and the consequences for themselves playing the game as Americans or Westerners in general. Apart from the usual orientalist misinterpretations of the historical sect in question it is the specific link between the Assassins and Terrorism that grabs our attention here. The user Shaun who started a discussion on the topic stated: “The whole concept of the assassin and ‘nothing is true, everything is permitted’ ideology can be translated into today’s terrorist groups.” To be sure, these kinds of misunderstandings are not uncommon even in scholarly writings, as attested by the already mentioned work by Lewis; and just as in scholarly writing so also in the gaming community of AC one can find players who are well aware of the difference. We can read, for example, the user Master Sima Yi, who, in a very simple reply to Shaun, posted the following: “I can see the logic, but terrorists harm innocent people, whereas the Assassins don’t.” All of the users who pointed out the differences referred to a minor, yet in our context very important game-play feature of AC, namely, that “Altair did not kill civilians” and that killing civilians would result in a game over. This is a trait of the game that sympathetically coincides with the historical reality of the

<sup>16</sup> The issue was raised subsidiarily in many posts scattered around the forum, but it was directly addressed on the forum page *The Modern Templars/Assassins* posted in December 2010; the discussion continued at least through the whole year 2012 ([http://assassinscreed.wikia.com/wiki/Forum:The\\_modern\\_day\\_Templars/Assassins](http://assassinscreed.wikia.com/wiki/Forum:The_modern_day_Templars/Assassins)).

Nizaris who, as Altair, “did not kill civilians” but rather religious leaders and head of states. Thus, to answer the question proposed above, the distinctive self-othering of the Western subject as mediated by AC is made possible by allowing the player to play an anti-imperialistic and pro-freedom character, while at the same time keeping a distance from and even explicitly opposing modern terroristic practices.

Failing to consider all of the orientalist and self-orientalist elements present in a game like AC means either falling into the typical ludic position of the gamer, for whom “a game is just a game,” or into a more intellectually elaborate, but still ideologically blind viewpoint of a simple video game study that considers games as allegedly neutral cultural artifacts. In both cases, the crucial missing element is the cultural context, which is – as critical cultural studies have shown – far from neutral and undetermined: just as a game is never just a game, culture is never just culture.

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