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A Broken Mirror Held to History's Face

On the Narrative Use of Computer Screens, Multi Screen Experiences, and a Transmedia Theoretical Console in the Popular *Assassin's Creed* Series

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ABSTRACT – This paper presents media theorist Nanna Verhoeff's concept of the theoretical console, as a popular and overt form of transmedia narrative. The theoretical console is taken to be a transmedia assemblage that draws attention to itself, as comprising diverse and meaningful media objects, that can be connected in a shared narrative. My main examples of this concept here are those popular video games that spatially juxtapose several types of computer screens and computer uses, with a narrative emphasis. With extensive references to theory on screened media and on transmedia narratives, *Assassin's Creed IV: Black Flag* is my main example case study. Specifically, this game and its series peers encourage historiographic contemplations, by assembling a theoretical console across several media forms. Other popular video games from that series provide variations of this same transmedia constellation, this "theoretical console". In its transmedia constellation, with a second screen mobile phone app, and other complementary screen media, the fictionalized history of *Assassin's Creed IV: Black Flag* implicates elements from its actual reality, across various forms of engagement. *Assassin's Creed IV: Black Flag* presents a high fidelity historical fiction, to be comprehensively enacted. It mirrors the player's use of differing computer screens diegetically within playable frame story sections. In addition, the complementary affordances of the mobile phone app, and integrated social media websites, all encourage its player to stay involved in this fictional world, even outside immediate play. With this, the game draws many activities into a single transmedial fiction constellation. Moreover, the game diegetically references online repositories for both its fictionalized history, and actual history. This use of computer screens, to form a transmedia constellation in the form of an overt theoretical console, is shown to complement this popular game's hypermediative narrative of a fictional shadow war secretly driving actual human history, which then meaningfully posits how to theorize history in our everyday lives.

1. INTRODUCTION

In this paper, I experiment with media theorist Nanna Verhoeff's concept of the theoretical console, as a self explanatory transmedia form already popular with a wide and literate audience (Verhoeff 2009, 280-296). The theoretical console is an overtly contemplative transmedia assemblage, of narratively meaningful computer hardware and software. To present this concept, I describe one of those popular video game objects that narrativizes the spatial juxtaposition of several types of computer screens and computer uses. The specific object that I describe as a case study, using extensive references to theory on screened media and transmedia narratives, is an object that encourages historiographic contemplations through its assembly of a theoretical console across several media forms. The field of transmedia studies generally seems to study those transmedia narratives, or storyworlds, that are constructed and engaged across constellations of discrete media objects. For example, a collection of films, novels, and video games that all expand on different story threads drawn from a shared fictional world, elucidating different minor aspects of some shared fictional events. The transmedia narratives listed in preceding volumes of this journal are generally of this type (Koskimaa, Maj, and Olkusz 2018). Applying Verhoeff's notion of the theoretical console, however, can aid in conceiving of those transmedia narratives that are not engaged across separate media objects, but instead across media objects that are meant to be simultaneously engaged, and which directly depend on one another to function. For this paper, that is illustrated by desktop or console videogames which provide, for example, multi player engagement, or additional maps and instructions, but only through the concurrent use of a smartphone app or an internet browser, wherein this whole constellation of screens and game modes are made meaningful to the narrative as well.

Assassin's Creed IV: Black Flag is my main example case study for this paper (Ismail *et al.* 2013). Other video games of this series provide variants of the same transmedia constellation and theoretical console. In each of the *Assassin's Creed* games, a player moves their avatar around fictionalized historical reproductions of cities and backcountry, from a different place and period in each game. They perform a series of life events for those avatar

characters, showing how they get recruited into an assassin order. This all culminates in uncovering a shadow war over the world's mystical artifacts, waged across human history, the leading members of which are to be assassinated in each time period. The actions performed involve equal measures of navigating and climbing, avoiding detection, close quarters combat, and contextually given interactions with actors and objects, all intermittently either prescribed or left to the player's discretion. Throughout the series, various playable frame stories provide fictional present day premises for all this. The player's present day avatar for each game delves into virtual reality simulations of their ancestors' lives.

In its transmedia constellation with the *Assassin's Creed IV Companion* app, and with other pieces of complementary media, the fictionalized history of *Assassin's Creed IV: Black Flag* is extensively imbricated with actual reality in everyday life (n.n. 2013). *Assassin's Creed IV: Black Flag* presents an expansive and high fidelity historicized fictional world. It diegetically mirrors the player's use of an immersive computer screen, alongside a wearable one, and others, with screen uses that are also afforded its main player characters. In addition, the complementary affordances of the *Assassin's Creed IV Companion* app encourage its user to stay involved in the fictional world of *Assassin's Creed IV: Black Flag*, outside of immediate play. With this, the game draws many activities into a single transmedial fiction constellation (Ryan 2005). This is bolstered by the ample overt references to online repositories and discussion forums, for both its fictionalized history, as well as actual historical documents (Ismail *et al.* 2013, "Shell Interface, Initiates"; n.n. 2014, "Initiates"). The search for answers to the game's mysteries, moreover, is encouraged by the fictional elements overtly woven into actual histories, recurring but inconsistent across this whole series of games. This use of computer screens, to form a theoretical console, and to reflect on how histories are experienced in our everyday lives, works to complement the game's narrative of a shadow war driving human history in secret.

In the following, then, I first briefly indicate how the *Assassin's Creed* video games prime players to consider not just the diegesis of each game, but the mediation of these stories as well. The main section that follows expands on how these games mediate their stories, with an analysis of the computer screen constellations that these games employ and reflect in their narratives. In closing, I define these as theoretical consoles, in the vein of media theorist Nanna Verhoeff, and then summarize my findings.

2. THE *ASSASSIN'S CREED* VIDEO GAMES AS PARATEXTUAL AND METATEXTUAL STORIES

The present paragraph will give a brief indication of why even to consider each of the *Assassin's Creed* video games as a popular transmedia story, that any given player would recognize as such. I would argue that each of the games in this series juxtaposes several styles of mediated narrative, which together draw attention to the artificiality of even its most high fidelity diegesis. Diegesis being any element of a work that contributes to rendering a fictional world, even paratextual and metatextual elements are referenced in these games as narratively relevant. These are respectively those elements that physically render or frame the art object, and those elements deemed outside of the object. By further juxtaposing a narrative style, different for each *Assassin's Creed* game, to emphasize the artifice of that aforementioned emphasis on artifice, these games present players with a weird narrative that directs attention both inwards and outwards, which primes its players to consider things like mediation and transmedia narrative. This juxtaposition of styles can be seen to have contributed to the consistent popularity of these games.

In the terms outlined by Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin, the *Assassin's Creed* games present players, at first blush, with something like an illusion of transparent immediacy (Bolter and Grusin 2000, 22-26). Each of the games presents its own variation on a contemporary frame story character being forced to use some science fiction contraption to delve into one of their ancestors' memories (Bélande, Désilets, and May 2007, "Prologue"; Ismail *et al.* 2013, "Abstergo Interlude 1", "Abstergo Interlude 2, CCO's Office"). This is in search of magical devices said to be hidden from actual history, by those same competing shadow organizations that imposed this treasure hunt, who will fight the player characters each time they are discovered. Playing intermittently as either the frame story character, or a given ancestor for each game, the player is then encouraged to freely explore historical sites and events, to manipulate local peoples, to clamber and fight, and to gather resources, while also performing a prescribed sequence of actions to push the story for each game to its conclusion. These conclusions generally involve the main characters escaping from their imposed tasks and bondage, leaving the time travel contraptions in ruins, with magical artifacts and historical knowledge in tow (Bélande, Désilets, and May 2007, "Memory Block 07"; Désilets, Yohalem, and Plourde 2010, "Epilogue").

The games all express a pretense to representing their given historical realities. This is left implicit in some elements, and yet made explicit at other times. Familiar forms from older media, perspectival illusions, high fidelity lighting and texturing, large scale motion capture animations and physics simulations, surround sound, are all deployed to render sites like Renaissance Florence a real seeming representation of the actual past (Désilets, May, and Puel 2009, "Boys Will Be Boys", "Sibling Rivalry"). A notably large amount of dynamic environmental elements can be manipulated, with a wide variety of player character abilities. Moreover, all these elements serve cohesive narrative functions, setting the historical stage or suggesting those actions that lead to the narrative's conclusions. As a brief example, the player character of *Assassin's Creed: Brotherhood* may have to be made to find, then climb, the highest towers in Medieval Rome, to spot possible sites for resistance against the corrupt town guards (Désilets, Yohalem, and Plourde 2010, "Man of the People"). There are events and elements that break this immersive style of narrative, however, without presenting an inconsistent narrative. For example, *Assassin's Creed III* opens inside a high fidelity historical simulation, but with characters seeming to directly address the player, who are only later revealed to have been talking to the frame story character embedded in this simulation, in the player's stead (Hutchinson *et al.* 2012, "Prologue") (*Fig. 1*).

Figure 1. – The left image shows Colonial Era New Orleans, as simulated with high fidelity and seeming immediacy, in "Assassin's Creed: Liberation", by combining familiar elements from visual arts, animation, choreography, and more. To the right, the contrasting narrative style of hypermediacy is conveyed, by characters suddenly, inexplicably addressing the player directly, in a section of "Assassin's Creed II".

These games often go a step further than the preceding, though, but still within the limits of given diegesis, by expressing their narratives in what Bolter and Grusin would call a hypermediative style (Bolter and Grusin 2000, 30-31). In between discrete sections of the historical narrative, for example, the high

fidelity visualizations and audio landscapes will often break down into distortions, pixels, untextured polygons and floating vertices (Hutchinson *et al.* 2012, "Hunting Lessons", "The Frontier"; Ismail *et al.* 2013, "Loading Screen"). This emphasizes the artificial mediation of these narratives, in a way that fits the frame story notion that these are computer simulations that the player is visiting. Further still, there are instances of hypermediation that are never explained by the narrative of these games, or which are inconsistent across iterations in the series. This happens when a player is instructed, by the end of the first *Assassin's Creed* game, to find cryptic codes and diagrams, that hint at other games in the series, no diegetic reason or result is given (Bélande, Désilets, and May 2007, "Epilogue"). The same goes for when they inexplicably control their frame story character, apparently as another character who is alien to that body, in the conclusion to *Assassin's Creed: Brotherhood* (Désilets, Yohalem, and Plourde 2010, "Epilogue").

Give all these juxtaposed styles of narration, present in every game of the series, which each pertain contrasting styles of mediation and narrative, a player is likely primed to think of *Assassin's Creed* games as not just a cohesive diegesis, but to also think of their media forms as contributing to these narratives. This points the way to considering these games as the kinds of theoretical consoles outlined in the following section. Each game in this series presents itself through a diegetically meaningful constellation of computer screens, that invoke a transmedia interpretation.

3. The *Assassin's Creed* Video Games as Theoretical Consoles

Having briefly established that the *Assassin's Creed* series of games overtly asks more from its players than just a superficial reading of its coherent diegetic narrative, this following paragraph will expand on what kind of larger media effects and constellations these games ask a player to consider. Specifically, I will analyze the use of juxtaposed computer screens by these games, to posit a theoretical console of the kind media scholar Nanna Verhoeff conceived, in her description of games for the Nintendo DS game console (Verhoeff 2009, 280-296). The Nintendo DS device, by its physical form, and through many of its games, can be seen to encourage its users to think about the history of computer screen technology. A game on this device, for example,

using its two different computer screen interfaces, might simultaneously ask a player to draw figures on its bottom touch screen, while the top screen only intermittently affords more indirect button press interactions (Suzuki and Kanasaki 2005, "Shell Interface", "Chapter 1: The Meeting With D"). That difference between its juxtaposed computer screen interfaces, enacted to serve one and the same game, promotes a consciousness of how an interactive story can differ, transmedially, across screen media. The theoretical console that I would describe in this current text can be seen to juxtapose portable and static computer screens, in both public and private spaces, all to clear narrative effect. For the most part, the computer game *Assassin's Creed IV: Black Flag* serves as the main example, in its relations to complementary mobile phone apps and social media sites (Ismail *et al.* 2013; n.n. 2013; n.n. 2014, "Initiates"). I discuss these as, respectively, the main screen experience, the second screen experience, and a paratextual or metatextual screen experience.

To specify briefly, going by Lev Manovich' conventional descriptors, screen media are taken to be framed surfaces; often rectangular and flat planes (Manovich 1995, 124-135). They're to be looked at from a static position to the marked front of the screen at such a distance that the entire surface can be comfortably observed in one glance. Computer screens are those screens that then embellish a viewer's physical agency, by allowing computer mediated manipulation of the images displayed (*ibid.*, 130-135). In most *Assassin's Creed* games, a constellation of variations on such screens conveys narrative meaning, through a contrast in their differing uses and situations. The discrete situation in which a technological device can be seen to meaningfully hold influence is described as a so-called technospace, to emphasize the contrasts between each screen. This term was conceived by media theorist Ingrid Richardson, to phenomenologically distinguish the experience of mobile phone use (Richardson 2007, 205-215).

3.1. *The Main Screen*

Within its diegetically meaningful constellation of actual computer screen interfaces, each *Assassin's Creed* game gives precedence to a similar main screen experience. The predominant screen and computer interface experience of the *Assassin's Creed* series of video games, *Assassin's Creed IV: Black Flag* being my main example for now, is the experience of sitting in front of a

seeming window onto a fictional world, surrounded by diegetic sounds, while instructed to continuously direct a central player character around these onscreen environments. This main screen experience can be described as a technospace, with certain properties and prescribed ways of engaging, made evident to a player by clear signs from the game itself.

The main screen of *Assassin's Creed IV: Black Flag*, then, presents large amounts of suggestively skeuomorphic and mostly actionable elements, along-side high fidelity audible and visual elements (Ismail *et al.* 2013, "Kingston", "West-Indies Sea"). Moreover, these are all visually composed in linear, per-spectival illusions, and audibly arranged as surround sound landscapes. Their tangibility and actionability is evoked in interrelated webs, of continuously afforded action sequences that affect further possibilities to act. Each player action influences the game's rendered environments overtly, on virtually local to global scales.

All of these elements are projected within a physical technospace that comprises some variation of a centrally staged, flat rectangular computer screen, audio speakers to its sides and behind, with a single player seated in front of the screen, looking at it uninterrupted. This technospace is action-able, through continuous and complex sets of symbolic hand gestures, taught by the game, to be practiced on physical control interfaces. These can be like the buttons on a conventional dual joystick controller, or a desktop keyboard and mouse. The high degree of detail evoked by all this, and the fidelity to lived experience expressed, overwhelms and activates a highly involved glaze, in Chris Chesher's terms, being a glazed over gaze, that continuously con-templates the required and afforded actions expressed by the game (Chesher 2004, 1-6).

This specific type of glaze, this way of being constantly stimulated to look for certain ways to act, is conventional to those games that entice players to sit still and concentrate, at length, in front of a computer screen. Players are coaxed into sustaining an embellished agency, afforded and expressed by a highly involving audiovisual spectacle. This statically localized computer screen technospace of *Assassin's Creed IV: Black Flag*, like to the other games in this series, encourages a player to relate to it, with a minimal amount of physical gestures. What Bart Simon calls gestural excess again helps to focus the player's attention to events on screen, instead of on whatever physical environment actually surrounds the player (Simon 2009, 2-3, 11-12). This game, and its series peers, explicitly create a sense of being fully immersed in a virtual world, whilst remaining motionless in the real world (*Fig. 2*).
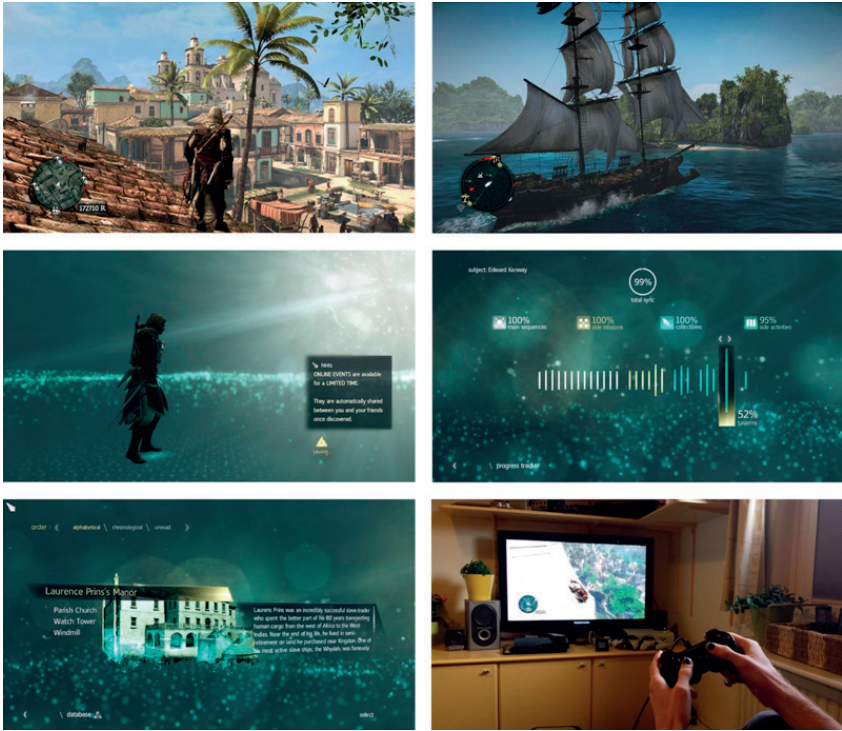
Figure 2. – From top to bottom, left to right, these images respectively show urban, naval, and overtly simulated exploration of game environments in "Assassin's Creed IV: Black Flag", as well as some complementary menu interfaces from this game. The photograph at bottom right shows the main screen technospace that is inhabited conventionally, when playing the game.

This experience of a physical space that is augmented by computer technology, this central technospace to the series' theoretical consoles, as constructed by each games' use of a computer screen, is mirrored in frame stories that are given alongside the central historical stories. In the frame story to *Assassin's Creed IV: Black Flag*, for example, with a player's minimal hand gestures, an unidentified point of view character can be made to sit in front of, or get up from, a large and statically localized computer screen, that is said to provide access to the virtual environments of the main historical narrative (Ismail *et al.* 2013, "Abstergo Entertainment, Sample 17 studio"). In this contempo-

rary frame story, that any transfixed player is likely to physically identify with, the frame story avatar is said to be a game developer who immerses him- or herself in audiovisual and actionable renderings, of the magically recorded memories of some eighteenth century pirate. The virtuality of these computer rendered memories is emphasized, whenever these renders are distorted or deconstructed. This happens in between the action sequences that comprise the explorable memory spaces. The main player character of *Assassin's Creed IV: Black Flag*, the historical pirate, is then placed impotently in an untextured environment of disconnected polygons, surrounded by digitally distorted sounds (Ismail *et al.* 2013, "Loading Screen"). In these games, contemporary game developers, unwitting research subjects, or hacktivists, are always collecting, combining, and editing the past experiences of some fictionally historical character, in search of secret histories and lost magical treasures. The fictional pirate character of *Assassin's Creed IV: Black Flag*, for example, is revealed to have been heavily involved in the third outburst of piracy during the Golden Age of Piracy of the eighteenth century, whilst he was also on the hunt for an anachronistic DNA database registering all humans across time. He was also involved in a fictional, concealed shadow war, that's said to have shaped history from the sidelines throughout the *Assassin's Creed* series (Ismail *et al.* 2013, "Sequence 10, The Observatory", "Abstergo Interlude 5").

To summarize, a player, seated in this main screen technospace, can explore a fictional game development studio as an anonymous point of view character, or they can explore the life of the aforementioned pirate avatar, by moving him around the game's expansive depiction of the Caribbean. A player can have this pirate character fight, clamber, run, and map his surroundings, find treasures based off of cryptic treasure maps, sail the seas and manage a fleet of trade ships, among many other activities (Ismail *et al.* 2013, "Havana", "Treasure Maps, 633-784 Nassau", "West-Indies Sea", "Jackdaw Captain's Quarters, Kenway's Fleet"). This fictionalized history side of the game is embellished with semi-historical encyclopedia entries, and the aforementioned frame story premise, that situates the game in a variation of our own contemporary reality (Ismail *et al.* 2013, "Shell Interface, Database"). Each game in the series stages some variety of this same story; a contemporary player character can be made to sit and engage some computer, which allows them to wander around a historical character's remembered surroundings. The glaze and gestural excess that this technospace encourages, the specific ways of looking and acting, immobilize a player, and imprison them in a sense. This main

technospace leaves a player distracted and vulnerable, maybe as much as the frame story characters in these games are said to be. This main screen experience is overtly reflected within the diegesis of each game. Also reflected in each game, though, is some variation on how getting up from the computer, to look for other avenues of engagement, can be an empowering experience (*Fig. 3*).

Figure 3. – The left photograph shows "Assassin's Creed IV: Black Flag" played consecutively with the "Assassin's Creed IV Companion" app. The image to the right shows this usage scenario reflected diegetically, with the game's frame story player character carrying a portable computer at bottom left, standing at a big screen on their computer desk.

3.2. *The Second Screen*

Most games in the *Assassin's Creed* series can link up to a mobile phone app, from which certain systems of the main game can be engaged at any time. Moreover, these supplementary play spaces often afford new ways of engaging with the main computer screen experience, even as they overtly empower a player to engage with the game's main technospace on their own terms. As in the actual constellation of screens, the player characters of the frame stories to these games can also often engage with their given historical subject outside of the main memory simulation. Within the narratives, these outside ways of engaging are often painted as a form of resistance, that in the end allows these frame story characters to end the historical search for magical artifacts on their own terms, while escaping their oppressive job, their imprisonment of some sort.

As an example, the *Assassin's Creed IV Companion* software tool can be downloaded and run on tablet and portable smartphone computers (Apple 2014; Google 2014). It requires a user to log into an online account that allows them access to cloud storage data on the progress and available actions

stored from any game of *Assassin's Creed IV: Black Flag* that's been associated with this same account (n.n. 2013, "Login Screen"). If this account has been simultaneously logged onto via the game, progress and actions from that game can be continuously transmitted to the *Assassin's Creed IV Companion* software application.

The app offers a touch screen menu interface, which a user can tap, swipe and pinch. A flat design style is consistently used to display those interface elements that can't be acted upon, whilst skeuomorphic design aspects are shown on actionable elements (n.n. 2013, "Kenway's Fleet, the Fleet"). Texts, text fields and explanatory or categorizing icons and symbols are generally displayed as colorless and flat forms, accordingly, whereas menu buttons have a glint and shading to suggest texture and three dimensional form, which invites touching. A high level of detail and audiovisual fidelity is used on those few images that invite swiping or pinching gestures. The gestural restraint required for this interface, the simple audiovisual language, the simple affordances, and the restrained narrative function of the app; these all trigger a distanced, dispassionate and superficially involved glaze in its user, which encourages use of the app alongside other activities (Chesher 2004, 1-6; Simon 2009, 2-3, 11-12). The portable technospace of this software tool, the smartphones we all likely carry around with us, further facilitates an active merging of virtual agency with other practices (Richardson 2007, 205-215).

The *Assassin's Creed IV Companion* offers compacted access to certain activities available in *Assassin's Creed IV: Black Flag*. As opposed to being spread out across an expansive possibility space, on the sidelines to the main action sequences of the game, this app collects the same supplementary activities in a compact, portable and simple interface (Ismail *et al.* 2013, "Shell Interface, World Map", "Treasure Maps, 633-784 Nassau", "Shell Interface, Progression Tracker", "Jackdaw Captain's Quarters, Kenway's Fleet", "Shell Interface, Initiates"). A user is thereby encouraged to look up from their immersion in *Assassin's Creed IV: Black Flag's* computer screen. Alternatively, they're encouraged to stay involved in the game's virtual world whilst away from the screen and involved in other activities. The *Assassin's Creed IV Companion* can be used to display a map to track and direct the main player character within the virtual environments of *Assassin's Creed IV: Black Flag* (n.n. 2013, "World Map"). The app could furthermore be used to display the cryptic treasure maps found in *Assassin's Creed IV: Black Flag*, and the statistical data and fictionalized encyclopedic information that goes along with progress made in that game (n.n. 2013, "Treasure Maps", "Progression Tracker",

"Animus Database"). The app also allows access to a trade fleet management interface and it shows news from the Uplay social network, which informs the user on challenges posed to the online community *Assassin's Creed IV: Black Flag* players (n.n. 2013, "Kenway's Fleet", "Initiates, Hot Topics", "Initiates, Progress Feed"). If virtual friends from this community are linked to the currently logged account, certain map markers can be shared with these other accounts, and the virtual trade fleets of other players can be aided and monitored (n.n. 2013, "World Map", "Kenway's Fleet") (*Fig. 4*).
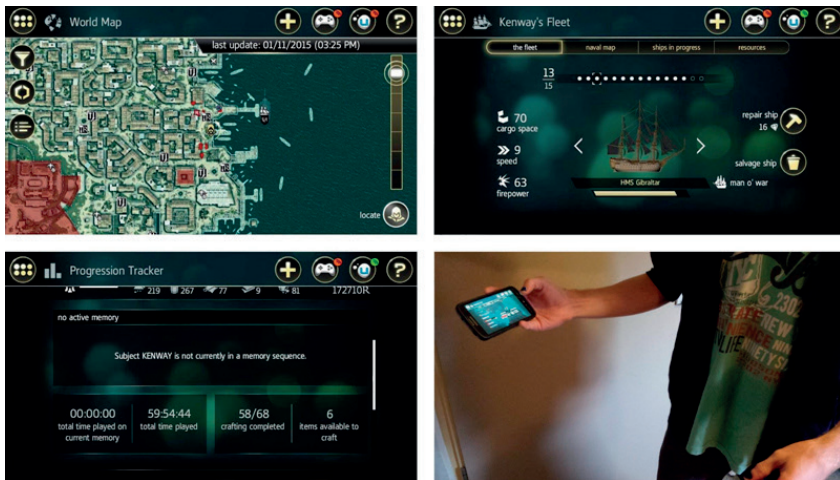

Figure 4. – These images, from left to right, top to bottom, show the map screen, the trade fleet management screen, and the progress logbook from the "Assassin's Creed IV Companion" app. The photo at bottom right shows these being accessible as a pocket technospace; accessible when away from the main screen experience of "Assassin's Creed IV: Black Flag".

The intermittent and complementary nature of these activities, relative to *Assassin's Creed IV: Black Flag*'s continuously engaging main action sequences, is emphasized diegetically. The activities afforded by this software tool require less continuous and less direct involvement from the virtual pirate whose memories are being explored. They pertain incidental management problems, or outside perspectives on these memory environments as seen by the avatar for the contemporary frame story (Ismail *et al.* 2013, "Sequence 4, This Old Cove", "Sequence 1", "Abstergo Interlude 1"). The performance

of these activities, on a bodily incorporated pocket technospace that is indirectly influential on the main narrative computer screen, is also mirrored in the frame story to the main game environments. A virtual portable computer screen complements the abilities of the point of view avatar in the frame story to *Assassin's Creed IV: Black Flag*, similar to how the *Assassin's Creed IV Companion* might complement player playing that game (Ismail *et al.* 2013, "Abstergo Entertainment, Sample 17 Studio"). This portable technospace allows the player, like their frame story avatar, to engage with the game's main activities more on their own terms, outside the oppressive technospace of the main screen. These mobile phone apps often expand the affordance of these *Assassin's Creed* games as well, in a way that mirrors the empowering shift in perspective that a frame story character experiences when getting up from their imposed task, to explore and eventually change the actual situation imposed on them. In getting out of the initial media experience in these games, to look for other options and insights, as encouraged by this second screen experience, *Assassin's Creed* protagonists are pointed to outside resources as well, and to what mysteries of their situation they might never be able to solve.

3.3. *Paratextual and Metatextual Screens*

The first *Assassin's Creed* game already used intertextual references and "alternate reality game" puzzles in its concluding narrative scene; faint wall scribbles of monumental sights, and scientific symbols that the series might include in future iterations, all to convince its single player that their actions in the game might shed new light on the actual historical record (Bélande, Désilets, and May 2007, "Epilogue"). These scribbles continue to be extensively discussed on social media websites, even as only twenty games later, the Giza plateau and chaos theory diagrams are finally addressed (Baptizat *et al.* 2017, "Ancient Tomb"). That first game in the series presented a player with puzzles and codes, that had to be solved by group effort and with knowledge from outside the game's diegesis. This drew players to online communities and analyses of actual history. In *Assassin's Creed IV: Black Flag*, such metatextual extensions of the game's own online community features, and fictional encyclopedia, are taken further than in other games of the series. Cumulative mediated references to actual history and places within these games implicate a space of intertextuality and différance in the diegesis. The shell interfaces in *Assassin's Creed: Black Flag* contains a fictionalized encyclopedia,

for example, which represents actual historical backgrounds to the game's environments and events, interspersed with subtly fictionalized elements (Ismail *et al.* 2013, "Shell Interface, Database"). The entry for the queen's staircase in the game's simulation of Nassau, for example, explicitly states that the landmark was inaccurately dated and wrongly represented within the game, for the purpose of increasing spectacle (Ismail *et al.* 2013, "Shell Interface, Database, Landmarks, Nassau, The Queen's Staircase"). These explicit reimaginings of the game's main environments, as being accurately historical, being a computer simulation, or as being a fictionalized history, are also present in the game's frame story. This frame story paints the historical environments as part of a fictional computer game, which is purportedly under development by a fictional game studio, to be completed on the date of *Assassin's Creed IV: Black Flag*'s actual release (Ismail *et al.* 2013, "Abstergo Interlude 1", "Abstergo Interlude 5"). This fictional game studio is said to be responsible for the development of the actual game *Assassin's Creed III: Liberation* as well (Ismail *et al.* 2013, "Abstergo Interlude 2, Lobby").

The lines between fictional representations and actual history are blurred all the more, with references to websites and online communities, maintained outside of the game, which contain additional information and activities, pertaining to the game's fictional world. The *Assassin's Creed Initiates* website that's linked to the game, for example, presents visitors with small scholarly tasks to perform, in its fictionalized encyclopedia and map systems, which each trigger rewards and tasks within *Assassin's Creed IV: Black Flag* (Ismail *et al.* 2013, "Shell Interface, Initiates"; n.n. 2014, "Initiates"). This website also ties *Assassin's Creed IV: Black Flag*'s fictional world in with the worlds of the other *Assassin's Creed* games. *Assassin's Creed IV: Black Flag* projects images of its fictional world outward into the player's actual surroundings, even as it incorporates elements from those surroundings into its own fictional world. All this is done explicitly, and all of these elements are sufficiently separate from each other as to clearly represent divergent, fragmented images of the same game environments. The many references to actual history, and the historicization of the game's many fictional elements, further blur the boundary between the game's contained video game technospace, the supplemental fictional spaces of connected internet websites and software applications, and the actual history and contemporary space that surround the game. The *Assassin's Creed* games, and *Assassin's Creed IV: Black Flag* especially, overtly invoke each other, and outside sources, as giving alternative perspectives and additional information regarding their own game environments (*Fig. 5*).

Figure 5. – The left image shows the player character of "Assassin's Creed III" nearing the edge of the game's environments, overtly shown while in the process of being visually rendered. This effect is never acknowledged or coherently explained in the game. The right image shows the frame story player character for "Assassin's Creed: Brotherhood", in a section where the player is inexplicably and forcibly cast as an alien entity taking control of them.

Toward the ends of each main narrative sequences of events, and at the edges of the digital environments in these games, another kind of metatextual narrative is always emphasized in *Assassin's Creed* games, which also regards their screen media form. The diegetic reason for these digitally recreated memory spaces from history is only ever inconsistently and abstractly alluded to, and differently in each game. Yet the search for these vaguely defined artifacts, that enable these magical historical explorations, are also the driving reason behind each treasure hunt. They appear to inform all the disparate historical situations and frame stories, and they are the reason each protagonist is able to break free from their imposed tasks.

At the start of *Assassin's Creed*, for example, the speculative technology that can project its frame story's player character into a historical past is demonstrated and explained (Bélande, Désilets, and May 2007, "Prologue"). In brief, there's a virtual reality interface that can decipher and render the genetic ancestry of the frame story's player character in a manipulable form. At the end of that game, however, the unexplained aspects of this technology are revealed to have been of alien origin, and a further explanation of their workings is subsequently denied to players (Bélande, Désilets, and May 2007, "Memory Block 07", "Epilogue"). In *Assassin's Creed: Unity*, the frame story avatar is said to be hacking into a video game inexplicably modelled on such memories, instead of them being extracted from the player character directly (Albinet *et al.* 2014, "Prologue"). In *Assassin's Creed: Odyssey*, conversely, these encoded memory spaces are revealed to have always been artificial mes-

sages, predicted histories from out of some untold past, with unclear meaning and to untold ends (Dumont *et al.* 2018, "The Gates of Atlantis", "Ancient Revelations", "Modern Times").

The complex, historically and sociopolitically contextualized shadow war, that informs the events of *Assassin's Creed II*, is eventually revealed to have been primarily motivated by alien, and subsequently unexplained, influences. Despite their apparent ability to simulate any historical setting, the frame story characters to these *Assassin's Creed* games are never able to reveal the origin of the alien artifacts and facilities that instigated their quests. Uncannily, these frame stories are also continuously revealed to take place under the supervision and control of the same alien beings that the player characters are always tasked with rooting out, from inside of the simulated historical spaces. In the closing narrative sequence of *Assassin's Creed: Brotherhood*, to give another example, the player loses control over their frame story player character, as he is inexplicably forced to kill one of his companions. The reasons for this are never revealed in the series (Désilets, Yohalem, and Plourde 2010, "Epilogue"). The frame story's player character is overtly manipulated in that scene, by an entity that had already appeared earlier in the game, but as part of the historical computer simulation in that instance. These science fiction objects and events contrast starkly with the largely premodern or contemporary design of the rest of these games. They are unexplained and consistently contradictory, but they apparently keep getting players to talk, theorize, and to continue playing other games in the series, which different built-in social media faculties do facilitate for each of the games (n.n. 2014, "Initiates"). These are the elements in each game, that emphasize how there may not ever be satisfying answers or clear meanings to these stories across media constellations, but they do drive theory, as much as the inconsistencies and varying combinations of computer screen constellations do for each of the games.

4. Conclusion

Games in the *Assassin's Creed* series, juxtaposing coherent diegesis with the overt limits of mediatization, prime their players to theorize, to read beyond and between the lines. Furthermore, the physical shape of these games, their constellations of computer screen technospaces, are painted as meaningful.

In conclusion, this popular series of video games playfully coaxes players to theorize not just mediatization, but to consider transmedia forms, and how stories can be stretched across artifacts.

All of these computer screens, as reflected within the diegesis of a game like *Assassin's Creed IV: Black Flag*, give their users and players a gadget-like experience. Each screen has a use and a demand, and a distinct way of composing yourself in relation to that. Used concurrently, these evoke a theoretical console. The contrast and relation between these screens, how they point to each other's uses, and each technospace situation that they set up, all emphasize specific lines of thought and theorizing, which are even diegetically evoked and emphasized in each game of the series. These theoretical consoles have an explicit narrative point to make. Starting out enthralled to the big screen spectacle, tasked with uncovering the hidden depths of these fictional histories, the second, mobile computer screen allows a player, and their frame story avatar, to just stand up and walk away. In taking some of the game's affordances with them to other spaces and situations, the player, and the game protagonists, can uncover new ways of engaging, and new frames of reference, whenever they choose to return to the main game. This process of discovery is furthered by those outside resources, by online encyclopedia and social media websites, that all bridge the diegesis of these games, for players engaging outside the main screen experience, with things to discover about actual history, as well as our ways of living in it. In all this empowering screen use, though, the player, and their frame story avatars, are painted as never fully free of the fictional conspiracies they'd sought to uncover. Moreover, even across some ten games, the weird mysteries of this *Assassin's Creed* version of history are as perpetually inexplicable as they are enthralling. And again, this holds for both the series protagonists, as for how each game entices a player to explore, and to explore beyond each game. Used in conjunction, all these computer screens reference and outline how each of them is bodily incorporated. The player is drawn to theorize the spaces between the screens of these fictional worlds.

To summarize, *Assassin's Creed IV: Black Flag*, my main example here, overtly distorts the computer screen and video game media that tell its story, directing its player to consider the actual media situation that they are engaged in. The game then blurs the boundaries between a player's engagement with these various related computer screens, and that of the point of view character within its frame story. A player is made to physically identify with the game's exploration of a fictionalized history, as a millennia old

shadow war is uncovered across these games, between assassin and templar factions in the margins of written history. Appropriated and subtly fictionalized encyclopedic information are used to render the comprehensive simulated environments in the game, as related to actual historical periods. As this fictional shadow war, and these searches for inexplicably magical artifacts, are all projected onto the game's outside reality, onto all of the history that we can engage with outside computer screens, a player is invited to theorize and think along. The same playfully questioning view that this constellation of screens affords, is painted as relevant when engaging with established histories and lived experience. This shows the game, and its series peers, to exemplify a popular and engaging use of narratives told across media, in the form of a theoretical console.

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