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A Power Shrouded in Petticoats and Lace: The Representation of Gender Roles in Assassin's Creed III: Liberation

Abstract. This article explores the gendered narrative in the video game *Assassin's Creed III: Liberation*. Using this game as its main case study, it addresses the question in which ways the game developers have conceptualized gender, race, and gender performance in the video game. It does so from an intersectional point of view. After establishing *Assassin's Creed III: Liberation* as a prime example of the trend to include more female characters in games during recent years, I will argue that this game includes a complex rhetoric that not only perpetuates stereotypical notions regarding gender, but also fails to acknowledge issues regarding its main protagonist's skin color in the historical reality the game wishes to emulate.

Keywords Gender, gender performance, video games, race, intersectionality

1. Introduction

Altaïr, Ezio, Connor, Aveline, Edward, Arno, Jacob, Evie, Bayek, Aya, Alexios, Kassandra, Eivor… this is a list of protagonists from the popular *Assassin's Creed* video game series (2007-). While looking over these names, one cannot help but notice that the number of male protagonists is much higher than that of female protagonists.

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Despite its popularity and long existence, only three games in the main *Assassin's Creed* franchise[1] have been released that feature a female playable character. These games are: *Assassin's Creed: Syndicate* (2015), *Assassin's Creed: Origins* (2017) and *Assassin's Creed: Odyssey* (2018). In 2013, a game with a female protagonist, *Assassin's Creed III: Liberation*, was already released for the PS Vita, bringing the total count of games with female playable characters within the franchise to four. *Assassin's Creed III: Liberation* (2014) has since been re-released as an HD game for PC, PlayStation 3 and Xbox 360. This can be contrasted with the number of games in the main franchise that solely feature a male assassin, of which there are seven, and the number of games that feature either both male and female playable characters or allow you to choose whether you wish to play as a male or female character, of which there are four[2].

According to Kowert, Breuer and Quandt (2017), video game content is often more suited towards male players, even though the number of female-identified-gamers currently fluctuates between 38% and 48%. With over one billion people playing video games worldwide (Yee, 2017), these numbers are significant, because they show that the assumption that video games are played by a majority of teenage boys is incorrect. Yet, the content of video games does not seem to reflect this demographic.

The notion of "the hegemony of play" (Fron et al. 2007) shows us that the underrepresentation of genders in the video game industry correlates with an idea of who the ideal imagined player might be, as does the homogeneity of the in-game representation of people of various genders and sexualities among characters. They, too, reflect this profile of the 'ideal player'. Although racial and sexual minorities begin to gain more recognition, this is often done within the context of marketing, which assumes that LGBTQ+ gamers are primarily interested in queer narratives. Thus, they are left out of the creation of mainstream stories (Shaw, 2011). Although, as I have shown previously, female gamers are not actually a minority, they are often perceived as such (Waszkiewicz, 2019).

In this article, I will pay special attention to the video game *Assassin's Creed III: Liberation* (2014) as this is the first and, thus far, only game in the *Assassin's Creed* video game series to solely feature a female protagonist. It is also the first and only game in the series to feature a protagonist who is descended from an enslaved woman and is of color. Therefore, analyzing this game, and within the wider scope of the Assassin's Creed series, is especially relevant with regards to the representation of various minorities within this game but also with regards to the video game franchise in general.

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1 This refers to video games that were released for consoles, such as the PS3, rather than handheld devices, such as the PS Vita.

2 For the male-protagonist-games only, these are: *Assassin's Creed* (2007), *Assassin's Creed II* (2009), *Assassins Creed: Brotherhood* (2010), *Assassin's Creed: Revelations* (2011), *Assassin's Creed III* (2012), *Assassin's Creed IV: Black Flag* (2013), *Assassin's Creed Unity* (2014). For the games that offer male and female characters, these are: *Assassin's Creed: Syndicate* (2015), *Assassin's Creed: Origins* (2017), *Assassin's Creed: Odyssey* (2018) and *Assassin's Creed: Valhalla* (2020).

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In my analysis, I will make use of close reading techniques (Bizochi & Tanenbaum 2011). Although originally coined in the field of literary theory, Bizochi & Tanenbaum (2011) show that these same techniques can be applied to game studies and other digital media as well, taking into account the unique aspects of the medium at hand as well, such as the immersive nature of video games and the fact that input of the player is needed for the story to progress. Moreover, due to the nature of the video game, featuring a protagonist of color, I will also be approaching my close reading of the game from an intersectional (Lorde, 1984; Crenshaw 1990; Gray 2020) standpoint as Aveline's femininity cannot be cut loose from its intersections with her race and class, for instance. For the playthrough analysis, I have played the PlayStation 3 version of the game: *Assassin's Creed III: Liberation* (2014).

In this article, I will first give an overview of the *Assassin's Creed* video game series (section 2). I will then provide a summary of the game at hand, namely *Assassin's Creed III: Liberation* (2014) (section 3). After this section, I will go into the gendered ludology (section 4) and thereafter, I will discuss the gendered narrativity of the game (section 5). This will be followed by my conclusions (section 6).

2. The Assassin's Creed Series

The *Assassin's Creed* game franchise (2007-) is a series of single-player, third-person, action-adventure games, set in an alternative historical setting, which is based on historical facts and realities, in which players become members of the Assassin Brotherhood and stealthily assassinate other (historical) characters (Shaw 2015, 8).

The games feature a complex metanarrative, which is a variation on the pseudo-scientific 'Ancient Astronauts Hypothesis' (Feder 2002), featuring an unknown Earth-bound race called 'the Isu', who became extinct around 100,000 years ago. The Isu, also called the First Civilization and Those Who Came Before, were technologically highly advanced. They were responsible for the creation of humankind, which they saw as a domestic (and cheap) work force. The early humans were not able to comprehend what the Isu were, and therefore regarded them as gods. Eventually humans rebelled against their makers, and in the process seized their most important artefacts, the 'Pieces of Eden'. The rebellion coincided with another disaster, the 'Toba Catastrophe' and caused the Isu to go extinct, only surviving in the myths and legends of the world's ancient religions and civilizations (Bosman 2016, 66). Some Isu artefacts were preserved, known as 'Pieces of Eden', although no human could understand their true meaning or potential. The possessor of such an artefact received super-human power.

Central to the storyline is an alternative interpretation of human history as an ongoing battle between two rival groups fighting one another over the possession of all the known Pieces of Eden. Both in-game organizations are based on two actual historical groups, the Nizar Isma'ilis (Daftary 1994; 1998), and the Order of the Knights Templar (Haag 2009). In their quest to gain access to these objects, both groups are responsible

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for various historic events, such as revolutions, discoveries, and disasters (Bosman 2018, 1; 3), like the murder of Julius Caesar (in *Assassin's Creed: Odyssey*), the French Revolution (in *Assassin's Creed: Unity*) or the American War of Independence (in *Assassin's Creed III*). Interestingly, in this latter example, the struggle for freedom that assassin Connor is a part of will not benefit his own (native American) people. It is, however, framed in the video games as part of the greater Assassin/Templar struggle, rather than as its own conflict. This is often the case with the historical events in these video games and will also come to the fore with regards to slavery in *Assassin's Creed III: Liberation* (2014), which is the game that I will analyze in this article.

The games feature a double narrative layer[3]. One storyline takes place in the 'present day', while the other takes place during historical events. This comes most obviously to the fore in the first set of games, revolving around protagonist Desmond Miles. These games are also known as the 'Desmond Saga'. In the first game, Desmond is trapped by the Abstergo Corporation, which is the modern-day above-ground façade of the Templar Order, and forced to enter a virtual reality machine. This machine is called the Animus and allows him to enter the body of one of his ancestors: Altaïr Ibn-La'Ahad, a 13th-century Nizari Assassin.

This is made possible through the existence of the so-called 'genetic memory' within human DNA. This is put forward as the collection of memories of one's ancestors that are passed down to the next generation in their DNA. The Animus, then, is a machine that can decode this genetic memory and thereby makes it possible for people to actively relive the memories of their ancestors, as is the case with Desmond reliving the memories of Altaïr.

The Animus creates a virtual environment in which the user of the animus can control the movement of their ancestor. If one fails to 'imitate' the movements and other behaviors of his ancestors accurately enough, he will be seen as 'out of synchronization' and therefore pulled from that memory and forced to try again at a later time (Bosman 2018).

In later games, Desmond has been rescued from Abstergo by modern-day Assassins and re-enters the Animus to use his ancestors' memories to find the secrets necessary to defeat the modern-day Templars (Shaw 2015, 8). Later on, Desmond is killed, but the animus still retains its function as a sort of *Deus ex Machina* that explains the vast amounts of historical information that the player has access to. When encountering historical figures, the player has the option, for instance, to read more about this person and inform himself on historical events. By doing this, the games emphasize their historical nature, although they are in fact set in an alternative history.

Later on, it also becomes possible, from *Assassin's Creed IV: Black Flag* (2013) onwards, to access the memories of historical figures even if the Animus user does not share DNA with them. Up until and including *Assassin's Creed: Syndicate* (2015) these games are also known as the 'Initiate Saga'. Both the Templar Order and the As-

[3] Note that there are also some instances of triple and merged layers (Bosman 2018) in the game series, but a discussion of these is beyond the scope of this article.

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sassin Brotherhood try to use the parental DNA of historical Templars and Assassins to discover the locations of the Apples of Eden. Some of these artefacts have not yet been found, while others were lost or have been hidden on purpose to prevent misuse (Bosman 2018). The games suggest an integration of the player's own game console and the in-game Helix console, the commercial version of the earlier Animus.

This story arc continues into the two most recent instalments in the series: *Assassin's Creed: Origins* (2017) and *Assassin's Creed: Odyssey* (2018), which are known as the 'Layla Saga' and are based on the same premise as the ones in the 'Initiate Saga', namely that memories of historical figures can also be accessed by using the Animus even if the user does not share DNA with that person. The difference, and hence the name, is that in the last two instalments, the games return to the idea that the player controls an in-game character – either Desmond or Layla – who controls an historical Assassin through the Animus. Desmond had to share DNA with the historical Assassin to access his or her memory, while this restriction is lifted for Layla.

The Animus and contemporary storyline are one of the main narratives that keep all the games tied together, even though they are all set in various historical periods and geographical areas, with no other obvious connection to one another.

3. Overview of Assassin's Creed III: Liberation

In *Assassin's Creed III: Liberation* (2014), one plays as the character Aveline de Grandpré. The game begins with a flashback of Aveline walking around New Orleans with her mother. As she chases after a chicken, she loses track of where her mother is and cannot find her. She is taken captive by slave masters and transported to a plantation.

As I mentioned in my introduction, Aveline is a protagonist of color within the game, as she is descended from an enslaved person (her mother, Jeanne). To introduce her in this manner is problematic, and points to racist undertones in the game's narrative. As a studio, Ubisoft has become known for its reluctance to include diverse characters and has even faced repeated abuse allegations from employees, who were forced to focus on male leads in, for instance, the Assassin's Creed video games, because 'female protagonists simply would not sell' (Su 2020).

After these disturbing first scenes, Aveline wakes up in the game's present and is consoled by her stepmother, Madeleine. As is revealed later in the game, she is the daughter of an enslaved woman named Jeanne and Philippe Olivier de Grandpré, a wealthy French merchant who lives in New Orleans. Jeanne was purchased by Philippe, who increasingly grew fond of her. So much so, in fact, that he married her and made her his placée bride[4]. The game does not offer any form of criticism of these practices and even frames Philippe de Grandpré as one of the 'good guys', thereby not

[4] A type of concubinage in which a white man takes an enslaved woman as his 'bride'. The women were not legally recognized as being married to these men (Wilson 2014).

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acknowledging the pain caused by these real-life historical practices. Rather, the game seems to employ a pro-colonial type of framing of these relations.

After his business starts to suffer, De Grandpré marries a white woman, Madeleine, with whom he eventually further raises Aveline. Although Jeanne is still in the picture at first, she now has another blow dealt to her, namely being forced to work as a handmaid for Madeleine, who has taken Jeanne's role within the household and who also started to educate Aveline. After a few years, Jeanne disappeared and Aveline was further raised by her father, Philippe, and by his wife Madeleine.

As such, Aveline is raised as the daughter of a wealthy merchant, including the social status and advantages that come with such a position. She is, after all, in every way raised as a white woman of high social ranking, with no mention of her skin color whatsoever. Again, the video game provides no criticism of this situation, which implies that Aveline's race effectively had to be made 'invisible' for her to be able to function in this society.

At the same time, she is also being trained as an Assassin by her mentor, Agaté, who resides in the Bayou, the swampy outskirts of New Orleans. Due to Templar activity in New Orleans, Aveline goes on various adventures to fight for what she and her fellow assassins consider is right. This leads her to investigate the trail of a character known as the 'Company Man'.

The search for his true identity takes her as far as the New York frontier, where she meets up with fellow Assassin, Connor, who is of mixed native American and British descent. It is important to note that the character Connor also has his own video game, namely *Assassin's Creed III* (2012), in which he is the main protagonist. In the video game at hand, however, he serves a minor role as a side character. It is here, at the New York frontier, that Aveline finally learns the identity of the Company Man. It is none other than her stepmother Madeleine.

Aveline hurries back to New Orleans to confront her and Madeleine denies nothing. Instead, she points out that she has been secretly manipulating Aveline all her life, for her to join the Templar Order. She believed that she and Aveline shared a common goal and wanted her to join her and the Order. The first ending of the video game shows Aveline being inducted into the Templar Order. However, unbeknownst to the gamer, there is also a secret ending, which can be unlocked by the gamer, that shows the real turn of events: Aveline was indeed inducted into the Templar Order, but only so she could get close to Madeleine and strike at precisely the right moment. Aveline successfully assassinated both Madeleine and all other Templars present at her induction. These different endings are possible due to the double narrative layer present in the *Assassin's Creed* video game franchise and thus also in *Assassin's Creed III: Liberation* (2014), which I have discussed in the previous section.

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4. Gendered ludology

One of the things that stood out almost immediately while playing this game in the franchise is the importance of cut scenes with regards to the way Aveline's femininity is shaped. At the end of the mission 'The Safe House', for instance, a cut scene between Aveline and her father takes place, in which her father tells her she is 'more like her father than is fit for a lady'. This sentence refers to Aveline's actions in the mission before and is worth noting, because of its historical inaccuracy.

Due to Aveline's skin color, she would not have been considered a lady at all, historically speaking. One historical example of this can be found in Sojourner Truth's speech *Ain't I a woman* (1851), in which she points out that men feel they should treat women a certain way, yet no man has ever treated her that way. In other words, the same rules do not apply for women of color that apply for white women. The video game glosses over this difference and consistently treats Aveline as though she were a white woman, when clearly, she is not, thereby ignoring the implications her skin color would have had, historically speaking.

The mission Aveline's father refers to is called 'A Slave in Trouble' and requires Aveline to help get an enslaved woman to safety. While at the beginning of the game, the full context of the remark that Aveline is 'more like her father than is fit for a lady' is still unclear, during the game it is revealed that Aveline's father purchased Jeanne, Aveline's mother, and made her his placée bride. In the video game, this action is portrayed as him saving Jeanne from the horrible fate of slavery. This condition alters the meaning and significance of the remark quite drastically.

At first, the remark simply seems to refer to the fact that Aveline acted in a heroic manner and that this defies the gender norms that were in place for women during that period of time. It is, again, important to note that historically speaking, someone like Aveline would not have been considered an 'actual woman' on par with white women. The video game portrays her as having the same rights and privileges of a white woman who was born into considerable wealth. By doing this, the video game ignores the historical realities of slavery and racism.

Once the full history between Aveline's father and mother becomes clear, the remark takes up another layer of meaning, as it now becomes imbued with the notion that acting as a 'protector' is something that can only be performed by men, rather than women. Philippe De Grandpré, Aveline's father, sees himself as Jeanne's savior. Historically speaking, this is questionable. The video game, however, frames it as such and with this in mind, it becomes clear that he does not approve of his daughter 'taking after him.'

This thought process seems somewhat counterintuitive. What this points to, is that the domains in which a woman can be allowed to have some form of freedom are limited. Historically speaking, this would have been even more the case for a woman of color, but as I have pointed out earlier, the video game does not do justice to the historical reality women of color would have faced during this period of time and rather paints Aveline as a white woman, despite her having black skin.

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Freedom in one domain, such as the family business in this case, does not guarantee a woman will also experience freedom in the other. One might even go so far as to state that this tension, between what a woman should and should not do, is present throughout the game and this is carefully construed via seemingly banal details such as outfits and the options they give the player to behave in a certain way (or not) and the cut scenes that are put in place around the various missions.

While there are some missions in the game that heavily rely on a 'female' gender performance, and which force Aveline to wear a dress instead of her more practical pant suit, for instance, most of them do not. One such mission is 'The Power of Voodoo'. In this mission, Aveline's teacher Agaté, plays an important part. It is therefore important to give some background information about their relationship and about the relationship Agaté had with Aveline's mother. Being captured and enslaved early in his life, Agaté was transported to the Americas and ended up on a plantation in Saint-Domingue. It was there that he came to know two other enslaved people: Baptiste and Jeanne. The three of them became acquainted with the Assassin, François Mackandal, who took Baptiste and Agaté under his wing as his pupils, but left Jeanne uninformed on the Assassin Brotherhood. When she found out about Mackandal's violent ways, she became frightened of him and this strained the amorous relationship that had formed between her and Agaté.

After Agaté officially joined the Brotherhood, he escaped the plantation where he had been held as a slave, together with Mackandal and Baptiste. Jeanne refused to join them and stayed at the plantation. After his escape, he fought alongside his mentor for many years, until Mackandal was captured and executed. It was then that Agaté decided to try and re-establish contact with Jeanne, only to find out that she had been sold to a merchant in New Orleans. He decided to go there as well, but after arriving in New Orleans, he learned that Jeanne had already left Louisiana for an unknown destination. He did, however, find out that she had left a daughter behind: Aveline. This prompted Agaté to remain in New Orleans and look for her child.

It was during this period that Agaté established the assassin's guild in Louisiana, all from his hideout in the Bayou – the swamp close to New Orleans. From this position, he eventually started training Aveline as an Assassin. Although Agaté cared for his students, he was also more secretive than Aveline, for instance, who had a more impulsive disposition. This caused the two to clash quite regularly and caused them to distrust each other and grow apart over time.

In the 'The Power of Voodoo' mission, Aveline has just returned from Mexico and speaks to Agaté, who has, as a consequence of her actions, lost trust in her. It is up to Aveline to regain that trust. In order to do so, Agaté tells her to kill several Spanish troops. He wants to speak to the Spaniards' superstitions and has painted several voodoo signs in the Bayou and every time the troops pass one of these signs, Aveline is supposed to kill one of them, to instill in them a deep fear of voodoo and make them feel as though they are cursed.

This connection to voodoo is problematic when taking into account that this is a well-known trope within popular culture relating to people of color that is often asso-

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ciated with violence against white people and hypersexuality and, as such, can be seen as an outlet for racist anxieties (McGee 2012). While hypersexuality is not present within this video game, the link to violence against white people can be clearly seen, as Aveline kills several Spaniards and does so while remaining unseen, to give them the impression that they are the victims of a voodoo curse. The video game does not contradict the voodoo trope. Rather, it re-enforces it quite strongly, once more linking voodoo to people of color within a popular medium.

After killing three Spanish soldiers, the mission is complete, and the objective is achieved. Here, as well as with the previously discussed mission, Aveline's clothing seems to be rather a matter of functionality rather than explicitly linked to her gender. In this mission, she wears her "Assassin outfit". This is very logical, as she needs to be able to use her poison darts and those are only available when Aveline is dressed as an Assassin.

However, these examples do not mean that Aveline's gender is totally irrelevant within the game. There are ample cases in which she is portrayed in a manner which is either a highly offensive and stereotypical representation of enslaved women (e.g. when she is wearing her "slave outfit"[5]), or in a manner which completely ignores the lived experience of countless women of color during that period in history (e.g. when wearing her "lady outfit"[6]), because she is portrayed in a way suitable for white women from a wealthy background, including all the privileges that come with such a position in society.

There are ample cases in which she is portrayed in a very stereotypical manner. This makes the game's relation rather complex not only to gender, but also to race. The fact that Aveline can even make use of an outfit which is called a "slave outfit", thereby suggesting that enslavement is something to be used to one's advantage should this be beneficial to one of the video game's missions, is highly offensive and completely ignores the gravity of the historical reality of slavery. In other instances, for example when Aveline is dressed as a "lady", the video game simply ignores her skin color and seems to portray her as a white woman, despite her black skin color, thereby ignoring the historical reality of racism as well.

One example of a mission in which such a portrayal of femininity comes to the fore is 'The Last Dance'. The mission begins in Aveline's assassin headquarters, when she speaks with Gerald and he suggests that she attend the Captain's Ball with him as her company, so that she blends in with the crowd. Aveline wants to attend the party so she can get close to the 'Company Man', i.e. the person responsible for the transports of enslaved and poor people from New Orleans to Mexico. During the party, Aveline first needs to talk with three groups of people to gain information. This is not too difficult. She is dressed in her "Lady outfit" and doesn't stand out from the crowd.

[5] This is the game's actual name for this outfit.

[6] Again, this is the game's actual name for this outfit.

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In this setting, she is simply Aveline de Grandpré, daughter of a respected merchant, rather than Aveline the Assassin. This again points to the various identities Aveline needs to adopt and can be seen as an example of the game glossing over the lived experiences of countless people of color during this actual period in history, as they would not have had access to such privilege.

However, what this might point to is the notion of code switching, which is practiced by many marginalized communities around the world in order to navigate the majority culture and survive. Employing these different outfits can be seen as a way for Aveline to live up to societal stereotypical expectations of a black woman issued by white society (Lorde 1984; Ahmed 2012).

In her role as the daughter of a respected merchant, she is treated very differently than when she is dressed as a slave and she has different opportunities as well, showing that social class has an influence on the kind of life one lives and the issues one will encounter.

Moreover, other characters in the game also respond to this "Lady outfit", as a captain asks her for a dance, for instance, and Aveline can be seen to flirt a little with male Non-Player Characters (NPCs). This becomes especially clear when she has figured out that the Company Man is sitting at a secluded table at the ball. To find out who her target is, Aveline used her eagle vision, an ability that allows assassins to quickly see who their target is, and then made her way over to the table and made contact, with a man named Vazquez. Not only is the player supposed to dance with him, but they also need to use their charm – an ability only available to Aveline when she is wearing the "Lady outfit", further emphasizing her 'feminine charm' – to lure him to a secluded area. It is there that Aveline assassinated Vazquez and as she did so learned that he was not, in fact, the Company Man she was looking for.

This mission is only playable when Aveline wears her "lady outfit". The outfit and the options it both takes away from her and as well as gives are central to how the mission can be played. Aveline is only able to charm male NPCs when she is wearing the "lady outfit". This in itself is already a very heteronormative aspect of the game, but it also points to what is perhaps more interesting: when presenting as an assassin or enslaved woman, she cannot use charm. Apparently, she is only sexually attractive to others (men), when she is presenting as a woman of high social status.

The fact that Aveline uses this to her advantage, as a means of obtaining necessary information, could also be interpreted as her making clever use of the gender stereotyping of her age, changing what appears to be a male-policed body into a vehicle of attaining her goals. It is worth mentioning here that she can only use charm when presenting as a woman of high social class, in which form her race seems all but erased from the way she is presented and the way other characters in the video interact with her. In other words, she can only be seen as a woman, when her race is taken away from the equation.

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Within this particular context, it is the racist and gendered options available to her, that necessitate the strategies she employs, i.e., because she is a woman, and moreover a woman of color, she cannot make use of the same tactics that male assassins can use.

This comes to the fore most obviously in the three outfits she has at her disposal. Of course, they are a way of blending in and thus can be seen as a vehicle for attaining her goals. Moreover, they can also be seen as an indication of the way womens' bodies are policed and forced to adhere to stereotypes regarding femininity in society. Whereas male Assassins can simply walk around in their "Assassin outfits" without an increased risk of exposing their true nature as Assassins and are not forced to wear different outfits for different occasions. A Black female Assassin is forced to dress to the occasion so as to avoid exposure. It is only logical that Aveline, as a highly skilled Assassin, will use these norms to her advantage as much as she can. This, however, does not mean that these norms are not in place and point to a highly physical and stereotypical portrayal of Black femininity.

Interestingly then, a much less stereotypical portrayal of femininity is given by Aveline's white stepmother, Madeleine, who turns out to be the Company Man, i.e., the grand master of the New Orleans Templars. Near the end of the game, when Aveline has discovered her stepmother's identity and confronts her about it, the game makers have included a cut scene, in which Madeleine gets to go into her motives for being a Templar, all the while trying to convince Aveline to join the Templar Order. In this cut scene, Madeleine utters a few statements, which can be seen as feminist in nature:

> But look at me now in the light of truth. You, who knows so well the pain of a life lived in secret, shrouding your power in petticoats and lace, pretending obedience to men who deny you the right to your own abilities. Am I really so strange to you? […] Your aims match mine. Join me, Aveline. Finish what we started.

However, the very same statement is not without its issues, because it is coming from Madeleine, who is speaking from a very different position of power and privilege than Aveline, due to Madeleine's whiteness and Aveline's Blackness. The base for Madeleine's "feminism" is white and class entitlement. This can be seen in parallel to the tendency of white feminism to ignore Black (intellectual) struggles, as seems to be the case here with Madeleine simply claiming that Aveline's aims match her own and inviting Aveline to join her (Madeleine).

The game then moves on to the scene in which Aveline is inducted into the Templar Order, which is the false ending, as I already explained, the real ending being a secret one in which Aveline actually kills all templars present at the ceremony.

In the *Assassin's Creed* video games, the Templar Order is always presented as representing the force of evil, although this 'simple dichotomy' is sometimes challenged, in *Assassin's Creed Rogue* (2014) (strongly) and *Assassin's Creed III* (more vaguely), for example. It is therefore very interesting that the game makers have chosen to have none other than the grandmaster of the Templar Order make these statements. This almost

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suggests that the rhetoric behind this choice is one of feminism being linked to the forces of evil, as it is the very personification of evil in this video game who makes the most feminist remarks by urging Aveline to break free of the rules imposed upon her by men.

Adding to this, one might even go so far as to see Madeleine as a personification of the colonial system. Madeleine's womanhood is defined through whiteness and through replacing Aveline's Black mother from the family unit, thereby reproducing what might be termed 'legitimate womanhood', as Black women were not seen as 'real' women at the time. Only white women were seen as such.

While Madeleine's remarks are very much of a white feminist nature, they are also closely linked to her status as a Templar. Feminism, here, is portrayed as a tool for a female Assassin and a female Templar grandmaster to get what she wants and – in the case of Madeleine – feel that she deserves.

From the beginning of the *Assassin's Creed* game series, there have been male and female Templars and Assassins. What Madeleine, as the primary antagonist in this installment of the series, is doing here, is to suggest that The Templar Order (although this can strangely enough also be applied to the Assassin Brotherhood) can be seen as a way for women to escape the social bonds of the societies they come from.

5. Gendered narrativity

When looking at the game's depiction of femininity through Aveline's outward appearance, the game makers have introduced an interesting mechanic that highlights the issues women would face due to the garments they had to wear during this historical period. Aveline is able to change outfits and has access to a "Lady's outfit", consisting of a luxurious full-length green dress, with a matching hat that has been accessorized with a feather, as well as a "Slave outfit", which features a tunic, a pair of brown trousers and brown boots, a blue blouse and a red headwrap, and an "Assassin's outfit". The "Assassin's outfit" has Aveline wear a pair of trousers, a leather tunic over a white blouse, leather boots and a leather hat. She also has access to various weapons when she wears this outfit, such as a sword and pistols. Each outfit comes with a set of options regarding what weapons – if any – she can use and whether she can run and climb, for instance. These outfits are not meaningless vessels. As Beasley & Standley (2002) argue, the way characters are dressed in video games carries meaning regarding their gender roles. Female characters, moreover, are often depicted in a more sexualized manner, by putting more emphasis on their bodies and having them show more skin (Jansz & Martis 2007).

Aveline's "Assassin outfit", as seen in Figure 1, gives her the most options. Wearing this outfit, the player can do anything, climb onto anything, free run across rooftops, and use all types of weapons. Climbing and being able to run are essential activities for an assassin, who will often need to enter and escape an area quickly and unseen. However, the outfit also gives Aveline a guaranteed amount of notoriety, meaning that

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guards will notice and come after her more quickly than when she is wearing other outfits. This can be seen as a clear downside of the outfit and can explain why sometimes other outfits are to be preferred over this one.



Figure 1: Aveline's "Assassin outfit". Picture retrieved from: http://www.naergilien.info/assassinsaveline. In this picture, Aveline is seen from the back. She wears a leather tunic and white blouse and looks behind her, while holding a pistol up into the air. To her left, her hidden blade is shown.

When Aveline dresses as a lady, as can be seen in Figure 2, she is restricted in what she can physically do. The women's fashions of the time were very unpractical in terms of what kind of physical movement they allowed for. It is, however, worth mentioning that what Aveline is wearing, when she is wearing her "lady outfit", is essentially an outfit of a white upper class woman. The social rules and standards were very different for women of color and the game makes very little effort to acknowledge this in both its portrayal of Aveline's background and social standing, as well as in its portrayal of the various "outfits" she has at her disposal.

While the use of the different outfits could be seen as an example of code switching, which is something people from marginalized communities often do to fit in more with the majority culture (Lorde 1984; Ahmed 2012). In such a case, a Black woman in this particular historical period in time still wouldn't have had access to a garment such as the "lady outfit", which – although the game doesn't explicate this – is quite clearly made from luxurious materials, as can be seen in the fine coloring of the fabric and the details worked into it.

She cannot free run in this outfit, nor can she climb onto things. Aveline also is not able to use any weapons when wearing this outfit, although she can use her fists to

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defend herself. However, wearing this outfit enables Aveline to use bribery and charm to achieve her goals, which can be useful, for instance, during those missions in which a sub-goal is avoiding discovery by the enemy.

Figure 2: Aveline's "Lady outfit". Picture retrieved from: https://www.deviantart.com/quidek/art/Aveline-de-Grandpre-Lady-Outfit-Render-565532168. Aveline is pictured



from the side, looking to the right. She is wearing a green dress and a matching green hat that is decorated with a feather. She is not shown to be wearing any kind of armor or carrying weapons.

Lastly, Aveline's "Slave outfit", shown in Figure 3, allows her free movement, which means that she can climb onto everything and run freely as well. However, she does not have access to her full arsenal of weaponry. Moreover, should Aveline commit an illegal act while wearing this outfit, she will gain notoriety very quickly. This outfit allows Aveline to blend in with groups of people, meaning guards will not notice her, and allows her to carry out menial tasks, such as carrying a crate, so as to look like an enslaved woman, who is working for her master.

As such, the game makers have used the everyday historical realities of countless enslaved people, to create another outfit option for its protagonist. The fact that Aveline will gain notoriety very quickly while wearing this outfit is interesting, because this points to the fact that this outfit highlights her skin color and in doing so, makes her more suspect in the game's society than any of her other outfits, which do not highlight her skin color in any meaningful way, or rather even seem to 'erase' it.

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Figure 3: Aveline's "Slave outfit". Picture retrieved from: https://nl.pinterest.com/pin/549509592005968797/?lp=true. Aveline is pictured from the front, and shown to be wearing a simple tunic, a pair of trousers and boots, a blue blouse and a red headwrap. There are no weapons shown.

This variety of outfits highlights the possibilities and limitations women had to face during this historical period. This becomes especially clear in the differences between the "Assassin outfit" and the "Lady outfit". The "Slave outfit" is, in this respect, a bit of a strange element in the mix, because in terms of what the player can and cannot do it, is in between the "Assassin outfit" and the "Lady outfit". This would suggest that enslaved people had more options as to how they could move around and carry themselves. This, of course, is not a historically accurate depiction of the period at all and again points to the idea that the developers may have glossed over the historical truth of what slavery really was like, in favor of creating a game that is appealing and 'fun' to play.

The difference between the options the "Assassin outfit" and the "Lady outfit" allow for retrospectively highlights a stark contrast between what the norms regarding femininity were during the time – and, one might argue, are to a certain extent today as well – versus the choices Aveline makes as an Assassin. I say femininity here, because the videogame does very little to acknowledge that, historically speaking, the norms regarding Black femininity were very different from those regarding white femininity. In its portrayal of the "Lady outfit", the video game completely glosses over these differences and uncritically presents a notion of femininity that is highly inspired from a position of white privilege and does not accurately reflect the historical reality of the time.

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When wearing the "Lady outfit", Aveline has the ability to charm and bribe people, in order to achieve her goals. She uses her looks to get what she wants as she has no way of achieving her goals by force when wearing the restrictive type of garment that was customary during the period. There is a stark difference, then, between using charm and using force to achieve a certain goal. Using charm is associated with the "Lady outfit" and as such is placed in a normative position as being more 'ladylike', whereas using force is strongly connected to the "Assassin outfit" and does not have the same connotation within the game.

This difference is highly problematic when taking into account that the presentation of 'ladylike' behavior in this video game is connected to a garment that, from a historical point of view, would not have been accessible to actual people of color. Moreover, as the speech by Sojourner Truth (1851) shows, Black women were not seen as actual women at the time. This means that although Aveline's skin is Black, the norms that are applied to her when she is wearing the "Lady outfit" are those that would typically be connected to a white woman of the upper social classes. This completely ignores the historical realities of the time in favor of producing a video game that is enjoyable to play and give its main character various outfit options.

The fact that bribing and using charm are only available to Aveline when she wears the "Lady outfit" models notions regarding femininity according to a patriarchal system in which women need to be seductive to survive or hold any type of status, rather than being critical of such systems or providing players with a more empowered notion of femininity.

Moreover, the fact that Aveline cannot use bribes and charm when she is wearing other types of clothing, most importantly, trousers, shows that in those outfits, the highly feminine registers of behavior are not available to her. Bribery and charm are portrayed as skills that are only available when wearing a long dress which shows ample cleavage.

It is not hard to relate these skills, then, to the parts of the body that are being shown as well. In Aveline's other two outfits, she has covered up more parts of her body and does not show a 'female' figure, because she is wearing trousers and it is in precisely these two other outfits, that she cannot bribe or use charm. These skills seem to be inherently linked to the body, or more precisely, to those areas of the body which bear a 'feminine' connotation, such as the bust and the waist. These areas are covered up in Aveline's other two areas, giving her less of an outspokenly female figure and thereby making her 'less of a woman', because she is unable to use bribe and charm while wearing these outfits, as these skills seem to rely heavily on which parts of the body are shown.

As such, the game does not challenge existing gender norms, even though it features a female Assassin. Rather, it makes sure that Aveline uses different registers, to include existing gender norms in the game. If, for instance, Aveline only had her "Assassin outfit" at her disposal in the game, this would mean a greater challenge to gender norms of the time than the current configuration allowed for, as women were expected to wear movement-restricting dresses, for instance, and Aveline could then

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be seen to actively deviate from the norm by wearing something akin of a pant suit, which allows her to move around more freely.

Including the different outfits has ensured that Aveline has to employ code switching (Lorde 1984; Ahmed 2012) to get around. However, the way in which she needs to do this does not reflect the historical reality of the time, as a fabulous gown such as is featured in the "Lady Outfit", for instance, would not have been available to enslaved women, nor would enslaved women (or any enslaved people for that matter) have been able to simply slip out of their garments when they so pleased and wear something else.

This duality between the hidden Assassin identity and the outward ladylike identity – or slave identity when this was more convenient in the game – conveys a message of Black women's bodies having to be policed for public appearances' sake, while only being able to have more freedom in secret. The question, then, should be whether this freedom, for women to dress as they please, to behave as they truly want to, and to have any profession they desire, should not have been put more boldly on the agenda within the game, rather than this being portrayed as something that can only be acquired in utmost secrecy and performed only in the shadows. The message this conveys is one of a severe policing of women.

6. Conclusion

In this article, I have set forth to analyze the gender roles portrayed in the video game *Assassin's Creed III: Liberation* (2014). This game is the first one in the franchise that features a female protagonist. It is therefore interesting to note how ideas with regards to gender and have been conceptualized in this installment in the series. I have done this from an intersectional point of view, thereby also including Aveline's race and social class in my analysis of the video game.

This can provide a fruitful avenue for further research as this first installment can be compared with later installments in the series that also feature a female protagonist, which allows for a mapping of the changes or similarities in the conceptualization of gender that the game makers have applied in the more recent games.

Through a close reading of the game, I have found that the game features a complex interplay between what may, at first glance, be interpreted as stereotypical definitions of gender, but when taking a closer look, are definitions of gender that do not take into account Aveline's skin color and rather seem to make an effort to have her fit a mold of gender that erases the experience a woman of color would have had in this historical period.

At the same time, the video game also crosses the boundaries of the gender stereotypes it creates for its main protagonist, as can be seen in the fact that Aveline has an assassin outfit at her disposal, for instance, which gives her much greater freedom than any woman, white or of color, would have had during that time.

The video game makes sure that Aveline uses different registers, to include these gendered norms in the game. These different outfits have made sure that Aveline has

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several personas, and employs a kind of code switching. This is often done by people in marginalized communities to try and fit in within mainstream society and not stand out as much. The same mechanic can be seen in this video game and is rather uncritically enforced. Rather than using a more empowering stance regarding gender norms, the game employs a rather patriarchal one in which Black women's bodies are policed and these women are required to be seductive in order to achieve their goals.

This duality between her 'hidden' Assassin identity and her ladylike and slave identities brings to the fore a message of Black women's bodies needing to be policed for appearances' sake, while only being able to enjoy more freedom in private. The game does not question this mechanic: instead, it enforces it quite rigidly and uncritically.

In recent years, more attention has been given to gender roles and equality (in the broadest sense of the word, not just concerning gender) in video game studies. This type of racial and gendered violence is not unique to game culture and can also be seen in regular society. Studying games can provide a fruitful avenue from which to discuss broader societal trends discourses and issues.

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