

Visibility Without Agency: How Gaming Audiences Read Intersectional Characters in *Assassin's Creed*

Visibilidade sem Agência: Como
as Audiências de Jogos Digitais
Interpretam Personagens
Interseccionais em *Assassin's Creed*

Cátia Ferreira

Universidade Católica Portuguesa, Faculdade
de Ciências Humanas, CECC — Portugal
catia.ferreira@ucp.pt

Carla Ganito

Universidade Católica Portuguesa, Faculdade
de Ciências Humanas, CECC — Portugal
carla.ganito@ucp.pt

Abstract

Digital games, which have billions of players worldwide, are among the most popular cultural activities of the twenty-first century, impacting how people perceive the past and create their identities. They frequently integrate historical elements as cultural environments, but they frequently contribute to the consolidation of westernized worldviews. Focusing on *Assassin's Creed III*, *Origins*, and *Liberation*, this article looks into how racial minorities are represented in the *Assassin's Creed* series. Using an intersectional qualitative approach, integrating semiotic and narrative analysis of the games with thematic analysis of user comments on Reddit and YouTube. It examines the ways in which gamers from various cultural backgrounds embrace, challenge, or reframe racialized representations. By analyzing the symbolic negotiations between creators and audiences, the article expands the critical understanding of how digital games reflect and reshape cultural memory, identity, and power.

Keywords

Digital games
Intersectionality
Cultural memory
Representation of minorities
Audience reception

Resumo

Os jogos digitais, com milhares de milhões de jogadores em todo o mundo, estão entre as atividades culturais mais influentes do século XXI, moldando a forma como as pessoas percebem o passado e constroem as suas identidades. Estes jogos recorrem frequentemente a elementos históricos como enquadramentos culturais, mas também tendem a reforçar visões do mundo ocidentalizadas.

Este artigo centra-se em *Assassin's Creed III*, *Origins* e *Liberation*, explorando a representação de minorias raciais na série *Assassin's Creed*. Através de uma abordagem qualitativa interseccional, que combina análise semiótica e narrativa dos jogos com análise temática de comentários de utilizadores no Reddit e no YouTube, investiga-se de que forma jogadores de diferentes contextos culturais acolhem, contestam ou reconfiguram representações racializadas. Ao analisar as negociações simbólicas entre criadores e públicos, o artigo aprofunda a compreensão crítica sobre o modo como os jogos digitais refletem e transformam a memória cultural, a identidade e as dinâmicas de poder.

Palavras-chave

Jogos Digitais
Interseccionalidade
Memória Cultural
Representação de minorias
Receção das audiências

Introduction

With over a billion players worldwide, digital games have become a major cultural force of the twenty-first century. In addition to altering our leisure activities, they also influence how we perceive societies, history, and identity. While game studies have traditionally focused on representational strategies—examining how race, gender, and identity are encoded into game narratives and mechanics—recent scholarship highlights a persistent gap in understanding how audiences negotiate these representations within participatory cultures. Phillips (2025) argues that gaming spaces remain deeply stratified by identity-based power structures, and that players develop complex strategies to navigate intersecting marginalizations, revealing reception as an active and situated process rather than a passive one. Similarly, Rizvi and Mukherjee (2023) critique the dominance of “single game-stories” in global discourse, calling for intersectional approaches that account for diverse interpretive practices and participatory politics. Studies of participatory fandom further underscore this shift: Li and Pang (2024) reconceptualize participatory culture as a dynamic interplay between individuals, communities,

and technologies, emphasizing interpretive agency in digital environments. These perspectives build on Jenkins' foundational work on convergence culture (2006) but extend it to contemporary contexts where audiences co-create meaning across platforms and challenge hegemonic narratives. Importantly, digital games also involve embodied, performative engagement, meaning that players enact and negotiate identity through play, not merely through interpretation. Taken together, this emerging body of research demonstrates the need to move beyond textual analysis toward a reception-oriented framework that foregrounds intersectionality and participatory practices in gaming cultures.

Interactive worlds allow players to enter knowingly designed simulations of earlier epochs and geopolitics, making (re)shaping of historical accounts possible. *Assassin's Creed* by Ubisoft is a good example of this. The settings are historically accurate, so players experience the story through characters who move through colonial, imperial, and revolutionary eras. Both the public and critics have closely observed this approach.

Notwithstanding its emphasis on historical authenticity, the series poses significant queries regarding the representation of various groups. Which histories are depicted, and how are racial and marginalized identities represented through narrative and visual elements? The demand for more diverse main characters seems to be addressed by video games such as *Assassin's Creed: Origins*, *Liberation*, and *Assassin's Creed III*, which feature a Native American, a Black French-African woman, and a North African man, respectively. However, these choices warrant deeper consideration beyond diversity. This article examines three *Assassin's Creed* games through an intersectional lens. It looks at how racial minorities are represented in the stories and how players engage with, question, or reinterpret these representations. The analysis, which builds on Crenshaw's seminal work on intersectionality (1989), examines how the intersections of gender, race, and colonial power impact players' representation and reading choices. A thorough examination of how digital narratives either emphasize or hide multi-layered identities is made possible by the application of intersectionality as a theoretical lens.

The study's methodology includes semiotic and narrative analysis of the video games as well as thematic analysis of user comments on websites like Reddit and YouTube. The online forums were selected because they are lively communities with open discussions about representation. Diverse player commentary illuminates the ways in which media representations are reframed, distorted, or appropriated. This

method is based on reception theory (Hall, 1980; Livingstone, 2015). It sees audiences as active players in creating meaning.

The article examines the complex relationship between in-game content and player engagement. It challenges the belief that digital games simply reflect current cultural stories. Focusing on the *Assassin's Creed* series, the discussion places these games within larger conversations about ideological conflicts, representation, and emotional involvement. It is claimed that games are active spaces where players shape their identities and understanding of history. This view suggests that gaming is an interactive process that helps negotiate symbolic power and cultural memory, rather than just being a passive activity.

1. Digital Games, Cultural Memory and Representational Systems

Digital games are an important media to create culture and preserve memories in the 21st century. These interactive systems mix visual design, storytelling, and gameplay. They can involve players in reconsidering historical events, social identities, and cultural grand narratives. Because digital games operate as interactive and incorporative systems, meaning is co-produced through players' embodied actions and situated practices, as emphasized in game-studies research on performativity and incorporation (Calleja, 2011; Giddings, 2009; Sicart, 2017). Rather than just mirroring reality, games act as systems that create meaning through coded choices. This aligns with what Hall (1997) describes as the "discursive production" of knowledge and identity.

The concept of cultural memory, understood as the shared symbolic resources through which communities make sense of the past (Assmann, 2011), is particularly relevant to historical and narratively rich digital games. These games often operate as "playable archives" (Kapell & Elliott, 2013), offering experiential forms of remembrance where users not only observe but enact historically inspired narratives. In doing so, games become dynamic platforms for the negotiation of memory, power, and ideology.

However, incorporating history into gameplay is never a neutral process. Games, according to Bogost (2007) and Champion (2015), are procedural representations because they use rules, objectives, and player constraints in addition to story and graphics to communicate ideologies. They are useful rhetorical devices because of their procedurality; but they can, nevertheless, also support prevailing cultural narratives. Previous research has shown that many games are

narratively rooted in Eurocentric, colonial, and patriarchal viewpoints, even in spite of their claims of authenticity or realism (Šisler, 2008; Mukherjee, 2017). Non-Western identities are often marginalized or exoticized by them. Games' representation is a politically significant act in this regard. Gray and Leonard (2018) consider that it is essential to look at how race, gender, class, and nationality are represented in digital gaming environments, highlighting that it is important to think about whose stories are told, whose experiences are simplified or minimized, and who gets to be the main character. In addition to diversity, the presence or lack of marginalized identities in storylines, playable characters, and non-playable characters (NPCs) is associated with narrative control and power dynamics (Nakamura, 2009; Shaw, 2015a).

As representational systems, digital games react to market trends, technological developments, and cultural norms. Representation goes beyond aesthetics and narrative because it influences how players engage with stories, relate to characters, and comprehend social differences (Stirling & Wood, 2021). Flanagan (2009) proposes the concept of critical play emphasizing that games may challenge the status quo and prevailing ideologies. Despite this potential, more often than not audience expectations and industry norms end up placing restrictions on this capacity. Notwithstanding, digital games are more than just entertainment artifacts; they are cultural manifestations that shape identity and collective memory. As systems of representation they encode, enact, and reinterpret historical narratives and social concepts, creating important but inequitable spaces for symbolic negotiation. To better understand the politics of representation in digital games, we must consider not only the content but also the formal structures, emotional effects, and ideological investments that influence how players experience and perceive the gameworlds.

The framework for recognizing how digital games function as symbolic spaces for cultural memory, meaning making, and identity negotiation has been laid out in this section. The following one will build on this by introducing intersectionality and reflecting on how audiences react to and reinterpret representations of games from various social perspectives.

2. Intersectionality and Digital Game Audience Reception

Digital games offer more and more diversified characters and narratives; nevertheless, it still is necessary to consider how these identities are built and interpreted. The intersectionality theoretical framework (Crenshaw, 1989) permits analysing the different overlapping layers of identity, such as race, gender, class, and sexual orientation, and how these dimensions influence media representation and reception. Applying intersectionality to digital games allows one to better observe the nuanced ways in which power, identity, and historical context intersect in playable texts and player experiences.

Intersectionality has gained a growing relevance within Game Studies for examining game content and player reactions. For instance, scholars like Gray (2014) and Nakamura (2012) have demonstrated how racialized, gendered, and queer identities tend to be stigmatized, tokenized, or underrepresented in games. They have also accentuated the ways in which marginalized players participate in re-appropriation, critique, and meaning-making activities. Therefore, intersectionality allows for a more layered understanding of how players from diverse social backgrounds interpret, resist, or find affirmation in game narratives, in addition to making more visible the structures of exclusion within game design and industry practices.

Crucially, intersectionality needs to be positioned within larger traditions of audience reception theory. Reception theory, which was first introduced by Hall (1980), focuses on the audience's interpretive processes rather than the media text itself. According to Hall's encoding/decoding model, texts are created with particular ideological messages (encoding), but audiences do not passively absorb these messages; rather, they interpret them (decode them) in ways that may be oppositional, negotiated, or dominant, depending on the sociocultural positioning of the viewer. This theoretical understanding is especially helpful when thinking about how digital games, which are by their very nature interactive and multimodal, are received. According to Livingstone (2015), digital audiences are now participants who interact with media on various platforms, frequently in critical or collaborative communities, rather than merely readers or viewers. Players now use online forums like Reddit, YouTube, Discord, and Twitch to share their thoughts, feelings, and reactions to video games. In digital games, these interpretive processes are shaped not only by players' social positioning but also by the performative nature of gameplay, where meaning emerges through embodied action

within platform-specific communities (Consalvo & Paul, 2019; Shaw, 2015a; Taylor, 2006). The variety of audience perspectives and their ability to reshape cultural meanings are reflected in these discourses, which range from critical commentary to celebratory fan practices.

Prior research has highlighted the need for accounting for situated audience perspectives in gameplay experiences. For instance, Shaw (2015a) concluded that players who are marginalized tend to bring singular perspectives to their gaming experiences, being influenced by their perspectives regarding gender, sexuality, and race. Likewise, Gray (2014) highlights the function of “gaming publics” that are based on a common identity and critique. These examples heighten issues of affect, exclusion, and symbolic violence in the gaming experience, going beyond straightforward models of identification or pleasure. Furthermore, reception is not per se straightforward, it is discursive, collective, and also individual. Moments where representation is viewed as either authentic or exploitative are frequently the focal points of the affective economies (Ahmed, 2004) of online reactions, including outrage, pride, disillusionment, or empowerment. Such audience reactions offer important perceptions into the cultural work performed by games, including how they frame agency, normalize or challenge prevailing narratives, and engage with players’ intersectional identities.

Therefore, the articulation of reception theory and intersectionality offer a critical lens for grasping how digital games operate as contested cultural media products. Players decode and renegotiate meanings taking into account their own experiences, while game developers encode specific ideological perceptions into narrative, character design, and mechanics. In addition to being cognitive, this negotiation is also affective and political, ending up influencing how games are perceived and discussed in public discourse.

These questions of identity, reception and audience positioning take on particular resonance in the context of historically framed franchises such as *Assassin’s Creed*, which have been repeatedly examined for the ways they mediate cultural specificity, memory, and representational politics. Seif El-Nasr et al. (2008) show how players’ cultural backgrounds shape their emotional and interpretive engagements with the series’ environments and narratives, underscoring the situated nature of meaning-making across different publics. Shaw’s (2015b) analysis of *Assassin’s Creed III* further reveals how negotiations of realism, authenticity and imagined audiences structure the franchise’s representational possibilities, particularly in relation to colonial histories. Scholarship on later titles highlights how gender, race and social experience are framed within these historical worlds

(Gilbert, 2017, 2019), while work on the series' narrative ecology shows how transmedia expansion shapes the interpretive labor expected of players (Veugen, 2016). More recent studies emphasize the franchise's entanglement of history, memory and cultural heritage, illustrating how its worldbuilding practices invite players to navigate multiple layers of historiographical imagination (Cole, 2022; Bello, 2023). Taken together, this body of research shows how intersectionality, affect and reception theory are deeply entwined with the franchise's representational strategies, providing a relevant foundation for examining how players respond to racialized and gendered identities across participatory digital platforms.

The following section will present the empirical study conducted, which focuses on *Assassin's Creed* as a case study for understanding how players respond to racialized and gendered representations in historical digital games, and how these responses vary across intersectional dimensions.

3. The Case of *Assassin's Creed*: An Intersectional Reading

This section presents the empirical component of the study, which builds on the theoretical foundations of cultural memory, representational systems, and intersectional audience reception. It assesses how racialized and gendered identities are constructed and negotiated within *Assassin's Creed III*, *Origins*, and *Liberation*, and how players respond to these representations across online environments. The goal is to examine not only what is represented, but how it is interpreted, contested, or reappropriated by players operating from different social and cultural standpoints.

The study adopts a qualitative, multi-method design that combines semiotic and narrative analysis of in-game content with thematic analysis of audience commentary on popular digital platforms. This approach enables a critical interrogation of both the textual (game-worlds, characters, narrative arcs) and discursive (user reactions, interpretive communities) dimensions of representation. By situating the analysis at the intersection of design and reception, the study foregrounds the complex ways in which meaning is co-constructed in digital games.

The empirical analysis is structured in six subsections. Section 3.1 details the methodological approach, including the epistemological orientation, methods of data collection, and analytical procedures. Section 3.2 introduces the research corpus, comprising selected

historical games and digital platforms chosen for their relevance to racial and gender representation and their active user communities. Section 3.3 focuses on in-game representation, using semiotic and narrative tools to analyze how identities are encoded into game mechanics, visual design, and narrative structure. Section 3.4 turns to audience reception, presenting a thematic analysis of user-generated commentary from platforms such as YouTube and Reddit. Section 3.5 presents a comparative analysis of the representational strategies and reception. Finally, Section 3.6 synthesizes the findings to reflect on the ways in which players negotiate identity, memory, and symbolic power within the interactive spaces of digital games.

This empirical investigation contributes to the growing field of critical game studies by centering intersectionality as both a theoretical and methodological lens. It recognizes that digital games are not closed systems, but dialogic spaces where representation is always in flux, produced through iterative exchanges between creators, platforms, and players.

3.1. Methodological Approach

The methodology adopted in this study is qualitative and interpretive, grounded in critical media analysis and intersectional theory. Its aim is to examine how racialized and gendered identities are encoded in three historically situated titles of the *Assassin's Creed* franchise and how these representations are interpreted, contested or reappropriated by players across participatory platforms. The approach is informed by a constructivist epistemology, which assumes that meaning does not reside inherently in media texts but emerges through sociocultural processes, historical imaginaries and the situated interpretive practices of players (Hall, 1980; Gray, 2014). From this perspective, digital games are treated as representational systems embedded in ideological frameworks (Gee, 2008; Nakamura, 2012), and audience reactions are understood as socially informed acts of negotiation in which identity, memory and symbolic power are continuously reworked (Livingstone, 2015).

To investigate these dynamics, the study combines semiotic and narrative analysis of the selected games with thematic analysis of user-generated commentary, allowing for an integrated examination of both textual and audience-based dimensions of representation. The semiotic and narrative analysis involved close readings of *Assassin's Creed III*, *Assassin's Creed Liberation* and *Assassin's Creed Origins*,

focusing on character design, visual and linguistic markers, narrative framing and gameplay mechanics associated with identity construction. Attention was given to the articulation of racial, ethnic and gendered identities through visual aesthetics such as attire, architecture, landscapes and color palettes, through narrative structures including arcs of resistance, grief and political agency, and through mechanics that encode positionality, for example the persona system in *Liberation* or culturally specific combat repertoires in *Origins*. This stage drew on multimodal critical discourse analysis (Machin & Mayr, 2012) and postcolonial media frameworks (Mukherjee, 2017; Šisler, 2008). The main analytical outputs were organized into three descriptive dimensions (identity markers, historical setting and key representational elements), which later support the comparative analysis presented in Section 3.5.

The thematic analysis examined a corpus of 90 user comments collected from Reddit and YouTube, two platforms selected due to their active gaming publics and their relevance for open discussions about representation. Comments were sourced from publicly accessible threads and videos that explicitly addressed issues related to race, gender, identity, cultural representation or historical accuracy in the selected games. The final dataset includes 46 YouTube comments and 44 Reddit comments, with 30 comments allocated to each game to ensure balanced coverage. Two selection criteria guided the process: comments had to refer directly to at least one of the focal identity dimensions of the study, and sampling continued until thematic saturation was reached, meaning that additional comments were no longer generating new analytical categories.

Coding followed Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase framework and combined deductive categories, derived from the theoretical framework (race, gender, memory, authenticity, exoticism, coloniality and symbolic power), with inductive categories that emerged directly from the dataset, including emotional resonance, frustration with narrative framing, accusations of tokenism and backlash against diversity. A total of fourteen thematic codes were generated. Comments were also classified into positive, mixed or negative categories according to their evaluative tone. Sentiment was established manually by analysing explicit linguistic markers of affect. Expressions of appreciation or recognition were treated as positive, comments combining praise and critique were classified as mixed, and comments expressing rejection, hostility or strong criticism were considered negative. No automated sentiment analysis tools were used. In instances where commenters explicitly self-identified in relation to race, gender

or culture (for example “as a Native American” or “as a Black woman”), these identifications were recorded exactly as stated; no demographic inference was made beyond what users declared.

Analytical rigor was reinforced through triangulation across the two stages of analysis. Patterns identified through the semiotic and narrative examination of the games were used to inform deductive coding categories, while recurrent themes from user commentary were compared with textual observations to identify convergences, divergences or tensions between design intentions and audience interpretations. Throughout the analytical process, the researchers adopted a reflexive stance regarding their own positionalities, in line with Rose’s (2016) recommendations. Considerations such as disciplinary background, cultural identity and familiarity with the franchise were acknowledged as potential influences on interpretive decisions. Rather than striving for neutrality, the objective was to promote transparency and reflexive accountability in the construction of analytical claims and to produce a layered, contextually grounded interpretation of how intersectional identities are negotiated within and around digital games.

3.2. Research Corpus: Games and Platforms

The research corpus consists of two complementary components: three historically situated entries in the *Assassin’s Creed* franchise and a sample of user-generated commentary from participatory online platforms. This dual structure supports the study’s intersectional and reception-oriented approach by enabling an examination of both how identities are encoded in game texts and how players negotiate these representations across digital publics.

The primary corpus includes *Assassin’s Creed III* (2012), *Assassin’s Creed Liberation* (2012) and *Assassin’s Creed Origins* (2017). These titles were selected because they mobilize distinct colonial and post-colonial contexts and center protagonists whose identities intersect with systems of racialized and gendered marginalization. Connor, a biracial Mohawk man, navigates the political and cultural tensions of the American Revolution; Aveline de Grandpré, a free woman of Afro-French descent, confronts race, class and slavery in eighteenth-century Louisiana; and Bayek of Siwa, a North African Medjay, acts within the shifting dynamics of Ptolemaic imperial power. The three titles integrate culturally specific visual, linguistic and narrative elements, offering rich material for analyzing how identity

is constructed, constrained or symbolically mobilized in Ubisoft's historical worlds.

The second component of the corpus consists of user-generated commentary collected from Reddit and YouTube, two platforms characterized by active gaming publics and frequent discussion of representation. Comments were retrieved from subreddits directly associated with the franchise, particularly r/assassinscreed, as well as from threads in r/Gaming4Gamers, where debates concerning race, gender and cultural representation frequently arise. YouTube comments were gathered from videos that include gameplay analysis, cutscene compilations, character discussions and commentary focused on narrative or representational issues in the selected titles. Only publicly accessible material was collected, in line with established ethical guidelines for internet research (Markham & Buchanan, 2012). The sample includes comments that explicitly address at least one of the focal dimensions of this study, namely race, gender, identity or historical accuracy.

These two components enable a dialogic reading of *Assassin's Creed* as both a cultural text and a site of audience negotiation. The following sections examine these dimensions in detail, beginning with the representational structures embedded in the games and then turning to the thematic patterns and affective responses articulated by players.

3.3. In-Game Representation: Semiotic and Narrative Analysis

The representational strategies observed in *Assassin's Creed III*, *Liberation* and *Origins* reveal a complex interplay between historical simulation, identity construction and ideological framing. Through a semiotic and narrative approach, these games encode racialized and gendered identities not as isolated character attributes, but as discursive formations embedded within broader systems of colonial power, cultural memory and genre convention. This reading draws on the analytical dimensions identified in the semiotic stage of the study, namely identity markers, historical setting and key representational elements, while also dialoguing with previous scholarship on the franchise that highlights similar tensions in its historical framing (Seif El-Nasr et al., 2008; Shaw, 2015b; Gilbert, 2016, 2019; Cole, 2022; Bello, 2023).

In *Assassin's Creed III*, Indigenous identity is constructed through a productive but uneven combination of cultural specificity and nationalist framing. Connor's Mohawk heritage is conveyed through linguistic choices, visual aesthetics and narrative motifs tied to kinship

and land. Although these elements gesture toward cultural authenticity, they are frequently subordinated to the dominant narrative of the American Revolution, which positions settler colonialism as a liberatory project. This tension reflects what postcolonial theorists describe as the strategic inclusion of the Other, in which minoritized identities are acknowledged but ultimately mobilized to reinforce hegemonic historical narratives (Spivak, 2010; Brydon, 2013). As prior work on the series has also noted, *Assassin's Creed III* negotiates representation through a balance of consultation and constraint, delivering meaningful cultural detail while remaining tethered to the franchise's overarching narrative expectations.

Assassin's Creed Liberation provides a more explicit engagement with intersectionality through its portrayal of race, gender and class in colonial Louisiana. The persona system mechanically encodes the relationship between social positioning and access to space, power and visibility, illustrating how identity shapes movement and agency. At the same time, this mechanic risks essentializing identity by reducing complex subjectivities to performative roles. The narrative foregrounds themes such as slavery, patriarchy and resistance, though often within compressed arcs that limit emotional depth. Nonetheless, visual and linguistic codes, including Aveline's trilingual speech and the game's shifting attires and urban landscapes, construct a rich field for analyzing how intersectional identities are experienced within colonial structures.

In *Assassin's Creed Origins*, identity is framed through imperial decline and cultural survival. Bayek's narrative positions him at the intersection of native Egyptian identity and foreign domination, articulating resistance through personal loss, mythological references and culturally grounded aesthetics. While the game offers some of the franchise's most nuanced explorations of affect and cultural dignity, elements of exoticism and a simplified opposition between Egyptian and Greco-Roman characters reproduce certain genre conventions. The result is a representation that combines emotional resonance with uneven historical complexity, a tension also identified in recent analyses of the franchise's historiographical strategies.

Across all three titles, identity encoding is shaped by the intersection of historical authenticity, genre constraints and commercial imperatives. Although the games diversify protagonists and foreground historically marginalized identities, the depth and coherence of these representations vary. Visual and linguistic markers signal cultural specificity, but narrative structures and mechanics often limit the extent of character agency or the exploration of structural inequalities.

These limits are not solely aesthetic; they reflect the broader industrial and narrative pressures that shape mainstream historical game design. The games' representational systems are therefore best understood as dynamic and dialogic, shaped by the interplay between design intention, franchise conventions and the interpretive labor of players.

This analysis demonstrates that *Assassin's Creed* titles do not function as neutral vessels of historical content. They operate as cultural texts that encode, enact and contest ideological formations, providing symbolic arenas where race, gender and coloniality are negotiated through both narrative and play. The next section examines how players respond to these representational strategies and how their reactions reflect situated engagements with identity, memory and symbolic power.

3.4. Audience Reception: Thematic Analysis

The reception of racialized and gendered representations in *Assassin's Creed III*, *Liberation* and *Origins* reveals a discursive terrain shaped by affect, critique and situated interpretation. Drawing on user-generated commentary from Reddit and YouTube, this section examines how players engage with the games' representational systems not as passive consumers, but as culturally and politically positioned subjects. Their responses reflect intersectional negotiations of identity, memory and symbolic power, illustrating the inherently dialogic nature of digital games as contested cultural texts.

Audience commentary demonstrates a wide spectrum of engagement. Several users express appreciation for culturally specific representational choices. For instance, one Reddit commenter self-identified as Indigenous, writing: "As a Native American, I appreciated the effort to portray Mohawk culture, even if it wasn't perfect." Others highlight specific design decisions as meaningful acts of cultural respect, such as the use of Kanien'kéha in *Assassin's Creed III*: "The use of Kanien'kéha was a nice touch. It made the experience more immersive." Similar positive recognition appears in comments on *Liberation*, where Aveline's trilingualism is described as "a great touch—felt very authentic", and on *Origins*, where Bayek's cultural grounding and emotional depth are celebrated: "Bayek is one of the most emotionally complex characters in the series."

Alongside such affirmations, a substantial number of comments articulate ambivalence. These responses often combine recognition of representational advances with critiques regarding narrative framing

or the depth of identity exploration. For example, a Reddit user notes that “Connor’s story was powerful, but it felt overshadowed by the American Revolution narrative,” while a YouTube commenter reflects that “the plantation scenes in *Liberation* were intense, but the game was too short to explore Aveline’s family story properly.” In *Origins*, mixed sentiment frequently centres on the balance between representation and spectacle, as one user puts it: “The visuals were stunning, but sometimes Egypt felt exoticized.” These ambivalent readings highlight how players evaluate the interplay between aesthetic representation, narrative coherence and the structural constraints of mainstream game design.

Negative responses fall into two distinct patterns. The first consists of critical reflections on narrative or representational limitations, such as concerns about tokenism, narrative simplification or stereotyping. Examples include: “The game’s portrayal of colonialism was too simplistic” (*AC III*), “The slave persona mechanic felt exploitative at times” (*Liberation*), and “Some NPCs felt stereotypical” (*Origins*). These critiques align with theoretical debates on representational ethics and the risks of reductive or instrumentalized identity work in historical games.

The second pattern reflects backlash responses, in which negativity is directed not at the execution of representation, but at the presence of diverse protagonists themselves. A clear example emerges in *Origins*: “People complaining about Bayek’s skin color clearly don’t know history,” a comment that simultaneously identifies backlash and rejects it. This type of reaction underscores how discussions of representation in digital games often intersect with broader ideological conflicts and reveals how affect circulates unevenly within gaming publics, as described in Ahmed’s (2004) notion of affective economies.

Reception is also shaped by players’ positionalities, especially when commenters explicitly disclose identity markers. For instance, the Indigenous user quoted earlier expresses both pride and frustration, noting that “Connor’s identity was respected, but the story still felt filtered through a whitewashed Revolution.” Similarly, discussions around *Liberation* often emphasize the significance of Aveline as a Black female protagonist, while simultaneously questioning the ethical implications of mechanics such as the slave persona: “It was impactful, but also uncomfortable—I’m not sure it was handled well.” In *Origins*, players consistently praise the emotional and cultural authenticity of Bayek’s portrayal, yet critique what they perceive as over-reliance on exoticism or unidimensional portrayals of Greco-Roman characters.

Across the corpus, Reddit and YouTube exhibit partially distinct dynamics. Reddit discussions tend to foreground cultural, historical and mechanical critique, frequently engaging with questions of authenticity, colonial power relations and narrative coherence. YouTube comments, while still critical, display a stronger affective emphasis, often reacting to emotional arcs, character design and visual impact. These differences reflect the platforms' divergent affordances and community norms, contributing to varied modes of appraisal and interpretive labor.

The audience responses demonstrate that players do not merely register the presence of racialized and gendered protagonists. They actively negotiate how race, gender and coloniality are framed, and what forms of agency, visibility and recognition are enabled or constrained by design. These findings resonate with recent scholarship documenting how players mobilize situated, intersectional strategies to navigate identity and power within gaming cultures (Phillips, 2025) and align with critiques of singular narrative frameworks that marginalize diverse interpretive positions (Rizvi & Mukherjee, 2023). Moreover, the platformed nature of these negotiations—threaded replies, cross-posts, affective reactions and algorithmically mediated visibility—supports an updated understanding of participatory culture as a dynamic interplay among individuals, communities and socio-technical infrastructures (Li & Pang, 2024).

3.5. Comparative Analysis of Representational Strategies and Reception

This section synthesizes the findings from the semiotic and narrative analysis of the games and the thematic analysis of audience commentary, offering a comparative perspective that highlights how representational strategies and reception practices intersect. Rather than treating textual design and audience interpretation as separate layers, the triangulated reading foregrounds the dialogic relationship between the two, showing how meaning is co-constructed across design structures, historical imaginaries and players' situated engagements.

As summarized in Table 1, all three titles foreground minoritized identities through historically situated protagonists and culturally specific representational codes. However, these design intentions lead to distinct reception patterns.

Table 1
Comparative systematization

	AC III (2012)	Liberation (2012)	Origins (2017)
Protagonist	Connor (Ratonhnhaké:ton)	Aveline de Grandpré	Bayek of Siwa
Identity Markers	Male, Indigenous (Mohawk), biracial	Female, Afro-French, free woman of color	Male, North African, Egyptian, Medjay warrior
Historical Setting	American Revolution, 18th c.	French Louisiana, 18th c.	Ptolemaic Egypt, 1st c. BCE
Key Representational Elements	Mohawk clothing, Kanien'kéha language, land/family ties	Persona system, trilingual speech, visual code-switching	Afro-Arab aesthetics, Siwa customs, mythology, emotional arc
Audience Themes (sample)	Cultural Authenticity, Narrative Framing, Language Use, Colonialism	Identity, Gameplay vs. Identity, Ethical Gameplay, Historical Representation	Cultural Representation, Exoticism, Historical Bias, Narrative Structure
Positive	19	13	17
Mixed	14	11	6
Negative	10	7	3

This comparative view reveals several key patterns. First, symbolic markers such as language, attire and mythology function as visible cues of cultural specificity, but their integration into narrative structures varies considerably, shaping the degree to which identity work is perceived as meaningful or superficial. Second, audience responses tend to be more positive when emotional depth and cultural dignity are foregrounded, as seen in *Origins*, and more critical when representation is perceived as instrumental, abbreviated or ethically problematic, as in several discussions of *Liberation*. Third, reception data suggests that players are not only attentive to what is represented but also to how it is framed, and whether these framings challenge or reinforce dominant historical narratives.

These patterns underscore intersectionality not only as a theoretical lens but also as a methodological imperative for analyzing representation in digital games. They reveal how identity is negotiated through the interplay of design choices, franchise conventions and audience positionalities, demonstrating that the cultural work performed by historical games depends as much on player interpretation as on textual construction.

The following section discusses these dynamics considering the intersectional and postcolonial frameworks introduced earlier, with particular attention to how digital games participate in the symbolic construction of cultural memory and identity.

3.6. Discussion: Negotiating Identity and Memory in *Assassin's Creed*

The triangulated analysis of three historically situated *Assassin's Creed* titles demonstrates how digital games emerge as dynamic cultural interfaces where identity, memory, and power are constantly reconfigured rather than as passive repositories of historical content. In order to shed light on the symbolic and ideological role performed by digital games, this study focuses on the intersections between particular representational strategies and audience reactions in the three cases.

The semiotic and narrative analysis revealed that each game encodes racialized and gendered identities through a combination of visual aesthetics, linguistic diversity, and historically situated narrative arcs. These strategies reflect an effort to diversify the franchise's protagonists and settings, moving beyond Eurocentric and masculinist conventions. However, the representational depth and coherence vary significantly. In *Assassin's Creed III*, Indigenous identity is acknowledged through language and cultural motifs, yet often subordinated to American nationalist mythologies. *Liberation* introduces a more explicitly intersectional framework, but its persona system risks essentializing identity through gamified role-switching. *Origins* offers a more emotionally and culturally nuanced portrayal, though it occasionally reproduces exoticist tropes and binary depictions of imperial antagonists. This variation reflects the broader constraints of mainstream historical game design, where representational specificity is often balanced against industrial expectations and genre formula.

Audience reception complicates these textual strategies. Players do not merely consume representations; they engage with them through situated, affective, and discursive practices. The thematic analysis of user commentary revealed a spectrum of responses, ranging from pride and recognition to discomfort and critique. These reactions reflect what Ahmed (2004) describes as "affective economies," where emotions circulate around moments of visibility, erasure, and symbolic tension. Players from marginalized backgrounds often expressed dual responses: affirmation of representational presence, coupled with frustration at narrative framing or mechanical simplification. This aligns with Hall's (1980) encoding/decoding model and Livingstone's (2015) reconceptualization of audiences as active agents in media meaning-making. These findings also point to the performative dimension of reception, as players' affective and interpretive stances are shaped by their embodied engagement with the game systems themselves.

Intersectionality, as theorized by Crenshaw (1989) and expanded in game studies by Gray (2014) and Nakamura (2012), provides a critical lens for understanding these dynamics. The protagonists in the selected games embody multiple axes of identity, such as race, gender, class, cultural heritage, but their narrative arcs often isolate or flatten these dimensions. Players, however, bring intersectional readings to bear on their experiences, identifying gaps, tensions, and moments of resonance. This dialogic process reveals the limits of representational strategies that rely on surface-level diversity and underscores the need for structurally embedded approaches to inclusion.

Postcolonial theory further illuminates the ideological stakes of historical representation. As Brydon (2013) and Spivak (1988) argue, the strategic inclusion of the Other often serves to reinforce dominant narratives rather than disrupt them. The *Assassin's Creed* series, despite its gestures toward cultural specificity, frequently frames resistance within familiar Western tropes of heroism, progress, and individualism. This framing risks appropriating minoritized histories without fully engaging their epistemological and political implications. The persistence of these tropes suggests that representational ambition is frequently mediated by commercial pressures and long-standing franchise conventions.

The findings of this study underscore the need to reconceptualize representation in digital games as a dialogic process shaped by participatory cultures. While the *Assassin's Creed* series encodes racialized and gendered identities through historically situated narratives, audience reception reveals that meaning is actively negotiated across interpretive communities. Recent scholarship supports this view: Phillips (2025) demonstrates that players engage in complex strategies to navigate intersecting identities, framing reception as an active and situated practice rather than passive consumption. Similarly, Rizvi and Mukherjee (2023) critique the dominance of singular game narratives, arguing for intersectional approaches that account for diverse interpretive positions and cultural politics. Li and Pang (2024) extend this perspective by theorizing participatory culture as a dynamic interplay between individuals, communities, and technological infrastructures, highlighting how audiences co-create meaning and challenge hegemonic discourses. These insights align with the reception patterns observed in this study, where players not only decode representational strategies but also reframe them through affective economies and discursive practices. Such findings reinforce the argument that digital games are not static texts but contested cultural spaces where identity, memory, and power are continuously renegotiated. They offer opportunities for cultural

recognition and historical reimagining, but also reproduce structural inequalities and ideological constraints. The intersectional reception of these games reveals both the potential and the limitations of current representational practices, and points toward the need for more reflexive, collaborative, and ethically grounded approaches to game design. Ultimately, these dynamics highlight the importance of more reflexive and collaborative design practices that engage directly with communities represented in games, moving beyond symbolic inclusion toward deeper and more sustained forms of representational justice.

Concluding remarks

This article has explored how digital games, specifically *Assassin's Creed III*, *Liberation*, and *Origins*, construct and negotiate racialized and gendered identities within historically situated narratives.

Through an intersectional and reception-oriented lens, the study examined both the representational strategies embedded in game design and the interpretive responses articulated by players across participatory platforms. Rather than generalizing across the medium, the analysis focused on three selected titles to illuminate how digital games function as symbolic environments where cultural memory, identity, and power are continuously reconfigured. This process is not only interpretive but also performative, shaped by players' embodied engagement with the mechanics, aesthetics, and narrative affordances of each game.

The findings demonstrate that while the games evolve towards diversity, their representational systems are often constrained by genre conventions, commercial constraints, and prevalent historical imaginaries. The inclusion of minoritized protagonists does not automatically produce intersectional narratives; instead, it requires sustained engagement with the structural conditions that shape visibility, agency, and meaning. Audience reception further embroils these dynamics, revealing how players decode and contest representations through affective and discursive practices.

By triangulating semiotic, narrative, and thematic analysis, the study contributes to critical game studies in several ways. First, it reinforces the value of intersectionality not only as a theoretical framework but as a methodological tool for analysing media texts and their reception. Second, it highlights the importance of audience perspectives in understanding how representation operates in practice, particularly in digital environments where meaning is co-constructed.

Third, it situates digital games within broader postcolonial debates, showing how even well-intentioned design choices can reproduce hegemonic narratives if not critically interrogated. Recognizing these tensions foregrounds the need to move beyond representational surface work toward design practices that actively contest rather than reproduce the industrial and historical constraints that shape mainstream game production.

Ultimately, the article argues that digital games are not merely entertainment products but cultural texts that participate in the symbolic negotiation of history and identity. As such, they demand more reflexive, collaborative, and ethically grounded approaches to representation; ones that move beyond surface-level diversity toward deeper engagements with complexity, context, and justice. Future research might extend this approach to other genres, communities, or transmedia practices, continuing to explore how intersectionality reshapes our understanding of digital culture.

Conflict of Interest Conflito de Interesses

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

Authors Contributions Contribuições dos Autores

Cátia Ferreira: Conceptualization, Methodology, Investigation, Formal analysis, Data curation, Writing – original draft. Carla Ganito: Conceptualization, Methodology, Validation, Writing – review & editing.

Data Availability Statement Declaração de Disponibilidade de Dados

The datasets generated and analyzed during the current study (user commentary from Reddit and YouTube) are derived from publicly accessible online platforms. The primary media texts (the Assassin's Creed games) are commercially available. The detailed coding frameworks and qualitative datasets used to support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

AI tools Ferramentas de IA

During the preparation of this work, the authors used Gemini Pro to assist with manuscript formatting, reference verification (APA 7th edition), and minor copyediting. After using this tool, the authors reviewed and edited the content as needed and take full responsibility for the content of the publication.

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Biographical Notes Notas Biográficas

Cátia Ferreira PhD in Communication Studies, Assistant Professor at the Faculty of Human Sciences, Universidade Católica Portuguesa, in the field of multimedia communication, digital storytelling, and game studies, and a researcher at CECC and CETAPS. Her research explores the socio-cultural dimensions of digital culture, focusing on digital games, transmedia, and emerging content strategies, including generative AI and eSports.

ORCID ID 0000-0002-0113-6634 | Scopus ID 55485848100

Address CECC, Universidade Católica Portuguesa, Palma de Cima, 1649-023 Lisboa, Portugal

Carla Ganito PhD in Communication Sciences and is an Associate Professor at the Faculty of Human Sciences, Catholic University of Portugal, and a researcher at CECC. Her academic research specializes in the intersections of gender, technology, and digital media cultures.

ORCID ID 0000-0002-3321-2320 | Scopus ID 55485985800

Address CECC, Universidade Católica Portuguesa, Palma de Cima, 1649-023 Lisboa, Portugal

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