

The Tyranny of Realism: Historical accuracy and politics of representation in *Assassin's Creed III*

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Abstract

Like other games in its series, *Assassin's Creed III (AC3)* is heavily invested in a well-researched, nuanced representation of historical conflicts. Yet as with any historical text, designers must be selective in their storytelling. Through their choices, we can better understand who might be the expected audience for this “speculative fiction.” This article addresses *AC3*'s tensions around realism. In it, the author addresses the politics of representation in how players are asked to identify with particular characters (constructed identification), how the game was produced (constructed authenticity), and the version of history portrayed in the game (constructed history). The author argues that the game's ludic and narrative possibilities limit its ability to critique colonial powers during the American Revolution. The article concludes by looking at what counterhistorical approach to *AC3*'s story might entail. Throughout, the author discusses how the game's expected audience, that is Ubisoft's construction of the intended player, is reflected in each of these decisions and limits the emancipatory possibilities of *AC3*.

Author Keywords

Assassin's Creed III, realism, history, representation, counterfactual history

Introduction

I confess to having a love-hate relationship with *Assassin's Creed (AC)* (2007). The stunning landscapes, architectural and historical detail, acrobatic player-character, and smooth gameplay are incredibly satisfying. Yet, there is something in the way these games represent history that always nags at me. Specifically, I find the games' claim that they offer players a critical view of history is unminded by their focus on a dominant view of history. This view of history, moreover, makes it clear that designers have constructed their imagined audience.

In this article, I focus on *Assassin's Creed III (AC3)* (2015), the fifth game in the series, which is set during the American Revolution. Climbing the stark plainness of colonial Boston and New York is a bit less exciting than navigating the first game's winding streets of the Crusades' era Middle East and the second game's rich architectural details of Renaissance Italy. Yet *AC3* maintains the series' effort to frame itself as offering a critical, well-researched history by allowing the player to see the American Revolution from the perspective of a Mohawk/Kanien'kehá:ka protagonist. The game never truly lives up to offering critique of

history from his perspective, however. It is a historically and visually realistic game, yet realism is more often used to preempt criticism than it is to reconsider the *telos* of history. *AC3* feels pulled in many different directions at once when moments that are clearly rooted in a sensitive historical and cultural dialog appear alongside others that recreate tired tropes and assumptions about who is expected to be playing the game. The constructed player is assumed to be non-Native (largely), which results in a disjuncture between who the player-character is and where the game's narrative goes. *AC3* may appear to be unique in its focus on "good" representation of Native Americans and diversity in historical narratives. But, as Sisler (2009) also argues of *AC1*, this appearance of nuance is largely aesthetic. At the level of game actions or even the overarching game narrative, it is quite clear that a white American perspective of U.S. history is still front and center. As critic Colin Dray (2015) writes, "The game indulges a cartoonishly oversimplified revisionist conspiracy history, and frequently sidelines some inconvenient truths." A dominant worldview is encoded into the core gameplay throughout the series, although scholars have argued that historical games *could* offer a counterhistorical view of colonial America.

In *AC3* we can look at how the constructed audience influences the construction of history in multiple ways. First, constructed identification refers to the way the game encourages players to identify with or as particular characters in the game and demonstrates that throughout the series Desmond (as a white male) is usually positioned as a stand in for the imagined player. Next, in constructed authenticity I analyze how the use of consultants in the design process reveals what, from a production standpoint, constitutes authenticity. Yet in constructed history I demonstrate that even if the player-character of *AC3* is an authentically rendered Mohawk protagonist, the historical narrative and ludic elements of the game assume a non-Native player. I analyze how ludic and narrative player agencies reveal more about who is the imagined audience for this realistic, critical historical narrative. The game reinforces dominant views of history, because that is the history imagined to be of most interest to the imagined player. I conclude that only by reimagining what the potential audience might want could commercial games like *AC3* actually be used to explore counterhistorical possibilities.

History games, representation, and realism

Historical games literature often focuses on the ability of these games to teach history (Squire, 2006; McMichael, 2007; McGall, 2011; Watson, Mong & Harris, 2011; Spring, 2015). This is unsurprising as scholars have written about games in education since the 1980s (Greenfield, 1984; Loftus and Loftus, 1983; Gee, 2003; McGonigal, 2011). Game scholars and historians alike argue that games can teach about history because, as simulations, they allow participants to play within the bounds of known history (Uricchio, 2005; Peterson, Miller & Fedorko, 2013). These encounters can potentially lead players to question why history played out the way it did, rather than merely learning what happened as a series of facts.

Several authors suggest that beyond being able to teach history, historical games offer insight into broader issues in doing history. Elliott and Kapell (2013), for example, map the many different approaches that scholars have taken in analyzing historical games. The literature suggests that we can look at three historiography elements that shape how historical narratives are formed: selection of facts (limited by what facts are available); the process of forming those

facts into a narrative; and who the person telling that narrative is. In all cases, prior research demonstrates that game designers' process of telling history is similar to historians' process of creating histories. It is never enough to talk about accuracy or veracity when analyzing these constructions; much more is learned by looking at who is telling the story, how they are telling it, and what that demonstrates about what they find important (Elliott & Kapell, 2013).

According to Uricchio (2005), representation in history as a text tends to be focused on accuracy and objectivity, though poststructural history has questioned this search for universal narratives. Similarly, media scholars informed by poststructural theory have questioned "true" representation. Richard Dyer (1993), for example, critiques the emphasis on stereotypes as unrealistic in analyses of marginalized groups. Rather than talk about whether stereotypes are true or offensive, it is better, he argues, to ask what purpose they serve in a text. Stereotypes are typically used as disciplinary forces, which clearly demarcate the norm from its "Other." Similarly, as media scholar Julie D'Acci (2004) argues, many descriptions of the negative effects of television representations rely on a notion of a "real" world that mediated images distort. Addressing media representation in terms of "correctness" ignores cultural production. Portrayals' relative positive or negative qualities do not exist within texts themselves, but rather the social hierarchies, disparities, and power relations to which they refer and support (Shaw, 2014).

We must move beyond just talking about group representation in games, as the texts' graphics quality and ludic possibilities also shape how games are able to represent history. King and Kryzwinska (2006) argue that although graphical realism is not of primary importance in games, it can still offer a rich sensory experience that heightens the player's pleasure. This pleasure can stem from the spectacle of those hyper-realistic graphics or from a celebration of the technological capacity of the gameplay device. It is important to note, however, that audiences have many different ways of thinking about media realism, as Alice Hall (2003) explores. In Machin and Suleiman's (2006) study of Arab representation in digital games, for example, they find that "for many computer game players naturalism is experiential rather than perceptual" (p. 18). Their interviewees engaged very different definitions of 'realistic' when evaluating war games, based on their identities, political ideologies, and motivations for playing. In my own research, individuals have very different expectations for realism in games depending largely on genre and their own reasons for playing (Shaw, 2014).

As Machin and Suleiman's (2006) and my interviewees (Shaw, 2014) emphasize, realism in games is about action as much as accuracy. Similarly, Alexander Galloway (2006) distinguishes between narrative and graphical realism in games. He argues that realistic actions can occur in graphically abstract games (such as *The Sims*) and unrealistic activities can occur in graphically rich and realistic games (such as *SOCOM*) (p. 72). He goes on to argue that realisticness and realism are not synonymous. Realisticness can be measured by visual fidelity. Realism, however, needs to be interrogated in terms of game action. "Realist games," he says, are "those games that reflect critically on the minutiae of everyday life" (p. 75). Realist games can also create opportunities to critically reflect on history as well.

As the above research demonstrates, in neither history nor games can we approach "realism" as an inherent property of texts. Rather, we can look at texts, like historical games, as products of

cultural industries whose products are shaped to appeal to an imagined primary audience. As T.L. Taylor (2009) discusses, our understanding of why games exist as they do requires taking an expansive view of the many actors that shape them. Historical games analysis has long moved beyond critiquing these texts in terms of simple realism, but only by piecing together several studies can we begin to see the entire assemblage that informs how history is constructed in these games. Some authors look at the ideological arguments embedded within the code (Mir & Owens, 2013) and affordances (Chapman, 2013). Others look at selective authenticity in the game design and the array of signifiers used to make games feel more realistic (Salvati & Bullinger, 2013). Scholars also address how ludic needs (i.e., making history playable) and a constructed audience's assumed expectations shape design decisions (Chan, 2005; King & Kryzwska, 2006; Elliott & Kapel, 2013). Although these games might sell themselves on promises of realism (Dow, 2013), they also allow players to reimagine history through counterhistorical play (Uricchio, 2005; Apperly, 2013; Chapman, 2013; Peterson, Miller & Fedorko, 2013). As Uricchio (2005) argues, historical games, at least at their most ideal, posit a "what if" to history; they allow for play within the boundaries of what is known. Yet as I demonstrate in the analysis below, it is clear that the constructed audience for the game limits the possibilities of the critical history. Using Galloway's (2006) distinction between realism and "realisticness" it becomes clear that the deployment of realism in game and marketing materials that surround it obscure some of the game's more insidious ideological arguments.

Elliott and Kapel (2013) suggest that it is unfair to critique games for inaccuracy when they offer fictionalized versions of the past. In *AC3*, historical representation is merely meant to further a fictional narrative. I argue, though, we can critique the version of the past fictional games offer. As critic Tanya DePass (2015) argues, games set in medieval Europe-inspired mythic worlds rarely have racial diversity despite the fact that historically there were a wide range of non-white people in medieval Europe: "So if we know brown folks definitely existed in *actual Medieval Europe*, why are they absent from a made-up fantasy world only loosely inspired by Medieval Europe?" (De Pass, italics in original). Whether game makers seek to be "truthful" or not, whether this is a work of fiction or not, we must always be sensitive to *how* they tell the history they do. This also gives us insight into who this history has been constructed for.

In this article, I focus on how *AC3* deploys realism in six different ways. First, I look at constructed identification, in terms of who the player is meant to identify with as they play through the game. Then I look at the way the game's production process has been described in terms of constructed accuracy. Drawing on prior research on realism in historical games, I next examine *AC3*'s constructed history by looking at the many choices designers made in balancing the historical record with gameplay. Drawing on Lindsay Joyce's (2015) distinction, I look at how *AC3*'s historical realism interacts with ludic and narrative player agency. Finally, in my conclusion I explore what a counterhistorical approach in *AC3* might have entailed and how it could offer a much more emancipatory historical critique than is currently present in the game. Throughout, I discuss how the game's expected audience, Ubisoft's construction of the player, is reflected in each of these decisions and, in turn, the game's limited critical history. First, however, it is important to orient readers to *AC3*'s convoluted fictional/historical narrative.

Backstory of *Assassin's Creed III*

Assassin's Creed is an action-adventure game series in which players stealthily assassinate historical targets on behalf of the Assassin Brotherhood. The Assassins' main enemies are the Templars, who seek to harness an ancient power to control the world. In the first game, protagonist Desmond Miles is trapped by the Abstergo Corporation and forced into a machine, the Animus, which puts him into the body of one of his ancestors, Altaïr. In the later games Desmond has been rescued by the modern day Assassins and reenters the Animus to find, in his ancestors' times, the secrets necessary to defeat the modern day Templars (Ezio in *II*, and Connor/ Ratohnhaké:ton in *III*). Though a bit cheesy, the *Matrix*-esque Animus acts as the *deus ex machina* that explains why the player can access databases full of historical information while playing as Desmond's ancestor. The Animus and contemporary storyline also provide a series through-line even as the series' temporal and geographic context shifts. It is also a key example of how narrative realism is tempered to make ludic interactions seem realistic (e.g. accessing a database is only possible through something like the animus).

At *AC3*'s start the player is transported to England in the year 1754. As Desmond's ancestor Haytham Kenway, she (the player) assassinates a target. The reason for the assassination is not given but the lack of detail, it turns out later, is purposeful. As a result of this murder, Haytham is forced to leave England for Boston. Once he settles in the colonies, the player learns that Haytham's colleagues are financially exploiting their relationships with local Kanien'kehá:ka/Mohawk tribes. He/the player assists them by rescuing Natives captured as slaves, and guilts the local tribe into leading him to the treasure he seeks. Along the way, Haytham meets Kaniéhtio, or Ziio. After much persistence she agrees to work with him. Five months later, Haytham and Ziio push the British troops back from the Kanien'kehá:ka lands. Ziio, in turn, sacrifices her people's secrets and takes Haytham to the storehouse of the ancients. This storehouse is where Desmond and his team are located, connecting the colonial and modern timelines. When Haytham's artifact does not open the door to the inner storeroom chamber, Ziio consoles him by telling him the story of the ancient forces. Ziio and Haytham then kiss, and the screen fades to black. It is unclear how they developed a romantic relationship. He saved her life, she saved his; but what led their partnership to become sexual (which it is soon clear it was) is never explained. It is one of a long list of unrealistic plot turns in a game otherwise invested in historical realism.

We next see Haytham a few days later in Boston strategizing his next move. This scene reveals that he and his associates are Templars! The next transition into the past shows us Ziio telling us about her and Haytham's son; she now speaks in her native tongue, Kahnawà:ke. When the player is once again given control over the game she plays as the son, Ratohnhaké:ton, in a game of hide and seek with his friends. He is accosted by Haytham's colleagues who threaten to kill him if he does not show them his village. After they knock him out, he awakens and runs back to his village only to find it in flames. He screams for his mother as he runs and climbs over rubble. He discovers his mother trapped under the rafters of their home. He/the player cannot free her and she urges him to leave. He is finally dragged away by another villager as the roof falls in on her.

The story picks up several years later and we find Ratohnhaké:ton, now a teenager, preparing for

a village coming-of-age ceremony. Following the ceremony, Ratohnhaké:ton goes off in search of a mentor who will train him to protect his village's secrets. This mentor is Achilles Davenport, a man of apparent African descent, whose ancestry is notably absent from his Animus record and any game dialog. Achilles record is quick to point out that: "Connor is the first Native American to actually become an Assassin." It's unclear why this is necessary to note, as the next game in the series, *AC4: Black Flag*, demonstrates there were assassins in the Americas long before Haytham and Achilles.

Constructed Identification

Before considering how *AC3* constructs history, it is important to consider how it constructs the player's relationship to the protagonists. As a game-within-a-game, *AC3*'s Animus puts the player in multiple subject positions, playing as characters not through avatars. The term avatar implies self-representation (Shaw, 2014; Klevjar, 2006; Tronstad, 2008; Waggoner, 2009). Digital game characters are entities unto themselves that players control. By controlling a pre-existing character with his own thoughts and motivations, Desmond doesn't simply inhabit the body of someone in the past as though it were a puppet. He sees the past through the actions and thoughts of his various ancestors. In turn, the player experiences the game through the points-of-view of Desmond, Haytham, and Connor/Ratohnhaké:ton as distinct characters. At the same time, the game clearly calls on players to identify *as* or *with* (Shaw, 2014) these onscreen persona's differently. As I analyze below, the game clearly wants players to feel uncomfortable with Haytham, to identify with Connor/Ratohnhaké:ton, and seems to assume its players identify as Desmond. Through this analysis, it becomes clear whose history is being told in this game and for whom it is being reimagined.

At the game's start, the player is forced to accomplish missions as Haytham, whether she wants to or not. On the ship to Boston, the player battles crewmen and agrees to stop a mutiny for the captain, who is identified by Haytham as cruel and incompetent. There is no option to support the mutiny, however. Adding this to the lack of an explained assassin, it is unclear if the player is meant to trust Haytham. Björk and Lankoski (2008) argue that in game design "successful allegiance makes players feel that what they are doing in the game is the right course of action since they buy into the goals of the [player-character]." Once in Boston it is clear from the start that he is knowingly exploiting Native people for his own ends, which is unusual for the series. When it is revealed that Haytham and his colleagues are Templars, it is even clearer that the player was not meant to feel like she was on his side. The game communicated that, moreover, even while it tried to hide Haytham's true allegiance. Gameplay and narrative communicated more than what was evident on the surface. Players were meant to feel uncomfortable siding with Haytham, but the same is not true of his son.

When we are introduced to Ratohnhaké:ton/Connor, it is clear that the designers want players to feel bad for him and possibly even identify with him. He is a carefree kid playing in the woods with his friends when a Templar accosts him. When he attempts to save his mother from their burning home, the player is forced to futilely try to save her. She has to push a controller button repeatedly to attempt to raise the beam that traps the woman, but it will never do any good. Once the boy is pulled away (in a scene the player cannot control), the screen fades to black. She says once more, "I love you," and he screams "Mother!" This pulls the player into a sympathetic

relationship with the boy, one that was not encouraged with Haytham. And as I discuss elsewhere, emotional investment is one key way audiences feel connected to and identified with media (including game) characters (Shaw, 2014). The construction of the narrative is meant to encourage identification, even if it will not automatically make players' identify with Ratohnhaké:ton/Conor.

That *AC3* actively makes players identify with a Native American protagonist immediately after encouraging the player to not identify with a white male protagonist might seem like a revolutionary act. Indeed, the series as a whole has done an admirable job at representing multiple cultures. Pierson Browne (2014) argues that racial representation, at least in the first *AC* game, does not fall easily into old racialized representation tropes. The game makers clearly care about representing groups in the game well and realistically, as recognized in Flood's (2012) description of Native American's reactions to the game on Pine Ridge Reservation. However, as Browne argues, *AC3* still positions the player as Desmond, privileging a white male gaze regardless of what ancestor she ends up playing as. Lisa Nakamura (2002) and David Leonard (2006) have critiqued this sort of "racial tourism," arguing that it allows players to engage in putting on racialized masks in the game without actually being asked to take on the perspective of marginalized groups. In the game, the player plays as and might even be encouraged to identify with Ratohnhaké:ton/Conor, but is not necessary expected to play through a game that privileges his story. Desmond might not have a big role in the game, but his subject position does define how history is told in *AC3*.

Certainly, Desmond is only a very minor character in the game, at least in terms of game play time. However, given that the Animus is meant to represent a player's relationship to a digital game, Desmond acts as a universal stand in for the player. This means the imagined player appears (phenotypically) to be white and male. Similarly, as described later on, the very history told in the game and the narrative and ludic goals of the game privilege a white, male, Western viewpoint. That is, even if the bulk of the game is not played as Desmond, the expected player of the game is still clearly constructed for someone who might identify as a person like Desmond (at least in terms of race, gender, etc.).

This expectation becomes even clearer when we consider the other non-White protagonists in the game series. Throughout the games, developers seem to have very clear ideas about who players are willing to see themselves as related to. All of the ancestor's Desmond inhabits are male. Their Europeanness also appears to be predetermined by Desmond's phenotypical whiteness. There is no inherent reason for Desmond or all of his ancestors to be white or partially European, except for expectations about who the imagined audience is willing to play as. He is not a descendent of the two non-white assassin's available in Down Loadable Content (DLC) games in the series. In a DLC sequel to *AC3* players take on the role of Aveline de Grandpré, an Afro-French Assassin in 18th century New Orleans (it was originally released on its own as a PSVita game and later included in the "America's Collection" released for consoles). In *Freedom Cry* a DLC sequel to *AC: Black Flag*, the protagonist is Adéwalé, a freed African slave from Trinidad. Neither is shown as being inhabited by Desmond, moreover. *Liberation* is framed as a game-within-a-game released by Abstergo Entertainment. *Freedom Cry* is merely a continuation of the story of Adéwalé who is a secondary character in *AC: Black Flag*. Neither is fit into the Desmond narrative arc that drives the rest of the series.

In both cases, it could be problematic to show Desmond as operating through these characters for the reasons Browne (2014) identifies. That is, the games would be just two more examples of “the white man role-playing as racial minority” tradition. Yet if the designers assume white, male, Western audiences are playing this game, “racial tourism” would still be a concern. Given the construction of the game series though, I actually suspect that these games were designed for another market. The shunting of Aveline and Adéwalé to DLC suggests that these characters are meant for people who are willing to pay for extra content and unlike the main audience for the *AC* series are perfectly happy to play history as Aveline and Adéwalé. Where player-characters are placed in the games’ narratives allows us to see just who is the assumed audience for and subject of this history presented in most of these games. That is not to say, however, that the game ignores the politics of representation. As the next section analyzes, the designers worked very hard to construct an authentic Native American protagonist. The realism of this history, however, did not lead to the critical history promised by the game.

Constructed Authenticity

It is often assumed that individuals who are members of particular groups are best suited to representing their groups “well” (Shaw, 2014). *AC3* makers are clearly conscious of this. The game begins, like all games in the series, with a disclaimer: “Inspired by historical events and characters. This work of fiction was designed, developed, and produced by a multicultural team of various religious faiths and beliefs.” One function of this disclaimer is the obvious attempt to curb representational critiques by anchoring their right to portray groups in their group’s diversity. Indeed a great deal of *AC3*’s press coverage emphasized the use of Kanien’kehá:ka cultural consultants in game design to ensure accurate and realistic portrayals (McCarter & Rivas, 2012; Plunkett, 2012; Newman, 2012; Venables, 2012). As creative director Alex Hutchinson asserted: “There are people from all over the world on our team, but we’re very aware that we’re still pretty much a bunch of early-middle-aged white guys... We didn’t want to make mistakes, even well intentioned mistakes” (quoted in Newman, 2012). Thomas Deer, cultural liaison at the Kahnawake Language and Culture Centre, is featured in many of these articles for his central role in ensuring a sensitive, accurate representation of Mohawk/Kahnawake language and culture. Scalping, for example, was a fight mechanic early in the game development that was eliminated when Deer pointed out that scalping was not a Mohawk practice (Plunkett, 2012). He ensured they did not show people wearing ceremonial masks because those ceremonies are private to the tribe (Plunkett, 2012).

The use of cultural consultants does not make *AC3* perfectly accurate, of course. Given the impact of European colonialism on the various tribes that inhabited the northeastern United States, any modern day consulting will be inevitably limited. The Kahnawake people now live in Quebec, home of the Ubisoft team that developed the game. This is a different tribe than the one represented in the game, the Kanien’kehá:ka/Ganienkeh—a contemporary group of this tribe broke off from the other Mohawk reservations and reclaimed tribal lands in New York State in 1974 (“Ganienkeh, 33 Years Later”). Some articles describe the difficulty in finding a Kanien’kehá:ka dialect to use in the game (Venables, 2012). They chose Kahnawake Mohawk, without any modern terminology, rather than the Kanien’kehá:ka/Ganienkeh, and the voice actors are from the Kahnawake tribe. It would be easy to critique the company’s accuracy

claims, moreover, by pointing out that the main game character is voiced and modeled after a Crow actor, Noah Bulaagawish Watts. The other Kanien'kehá:ka characters are modeled on Kahnawake tribe members, though one review quips that Ziio “looks like Cameron Diaz with a tan” (Flood, 2012). Are these dialect differences that important, particularly given that the modern Ganienkeh nation was founded in 1974? Does it matter which Native American tribe the main actor comes from? These are fun questions to debate, but ultimately not what I am interested in. All of these debates over accuracy reveal an oversimplified notion of realism in popular understandings of what constitutes “good” vs. “bad” representation. What Ubisoft’s explanation of the production process indicates is how authenticity is constructed in media industries. The casting, the language, the attempt to not promote offensive stereotypes while cultivating positive stereotypes (Flood, 2012), allow the game to “feel right.” They are also clearly designed to preempt critiques of the game.

Ubisoft’s attentiveness to representational politics does make critiques of *AC3* tricky. To quote Browne (2014), “The game plants itself firmly over the gap that exists between the mainstream Games of Empire that deploy racial stereotypes at present, and the hypothetical mainstream Games of Multitude that tactically recast other cultures in a fairer light.” Kanien'kehá:ka/Mohawk characters speak in their own language in many scenes, though this is not sustained throughout the game. *AC3* exoticizes Kanien'kehá:ka/Mohawk culture, but this is done respectfully. Like all games in the series it avoids monolithic representations of any group or time period. *AC3* is also one of only a handful of games to include *any* representation of Native Americans, and one of a rare few in which the player-character themselves is Native American (*Turok* and *Prey* being the only two others). Even Flood’s (2012) review and interview with Native American players reveal some appreciation for the level of effort the game makers put into making a game that offered a positive Native hero. Yet as we see below, the way history is constructed in this game presumes an audience who is more likely to identify as not-Native American, even as they are asked to identify with a Kanien'kehá:ka/Mohawk protagonist.

Constructed History

A subtler goal of *AC3*’s disclaimer is to highlight one of the series’s most compelling features: its attention to historical detail. Historical detail is indeed the underlying logic of the games’ settings. Lead Ubisoft producer of much of the series, Jade Raymond, says that the game is “speculative fiction...By grounding a story in reality, you increase its credibility” (quoted in El-Nasr, et al., 2008). As Uricchio (2005) similarly argues, historical specificity is central to historical games’ potential: “the richer the specific historical detail, the more profound and pleasurable the play with the speculative” (p. 329). The appeal of history games relies in large part upon their level of historical detail; yet as *games* they also often have to simplify those narratives to make an enjoyable ludic experience (Elliott & Kapel, 2013; Galloway, 2006). This is as true of how histories are told in general as it is of how media representations function. All representational practice is reductive, and no good critique can focus on the inability of a game, television show, or historical tome to cover everything. As Chapman (2013) argues, we can be critical of what has been left out and of what the stories that are being told say about what both the tellers and expected listeners/watchers/players find important. When Elliott and Kapel (2013) describe interviews with *AC3* designers they show how they were focused on balancing game design needs with historical accounts. Salvati and Bullinger (2013) call this “selective

authenticity” and identify three factors in the *Medal of Honor* and *Call of Duty* franchises that reflect these choices – technology fetishism, cinematic conventions, and documentary authority: “Together, these elements synthesize a historical realism—a selective authenticity—that situates immersive gameplay by satisfying audience expectations” (p. 154). They go on to argue that the games deploy realism to create a “feel” or “experience” (p. 154). Similar factors are at play in the *AC* series’s efforts to create a similar feel across the games.

In *AC* games, technological fetishism seems to be replaced by architectural fetishism. Though the accuracy of historical cities is not always perfect, as Dow (2013) points out, the proclamation of accuracy is quite central to game marketing. Cinematic conventions for Salvati and Bullinger entail newsreels, to help communicate a real “feel” of WW2. In *AC3*, news stories from the 1770s are replicated in the game to show how events were understood by journalists of the day and historically identifiable characters (like Benjamin Franklin to Samuel Adams). This helps naturalize the narrative predeterminedness within the colonial history the game tells. Finally, documentary authority in *AC3* comes largely from the Animus database, pieced together by the team helping Desmond in the later games. The database’s authorship is anchored in Shaun Hastings, a sarcastic British researcher. Shaun is an expert but critiques the American-centric view of the war. The way the game critiques colonial and European powers, also reveals a great deal about who the expected game audience is. Given the way critiques are framed, they seem to be meant to educate a predominately white American audience who has unquestioningly accepted colonial leaders as selfless revolutionaries. The game assumes that the game’s target audience believes the American colonists who fought against British rule were “the good guys” and the British were “the baddies.” The characters who offer this critique are always “other” to that constructed audience, including two Brits (Haytham and Shaun), Kanien’kehá:ka/Mohawk tribe members, and Achilles (who is literally placed outside society on his secluded estate).

Another key way the *AC* series constructs itself as a realistic historical portrayal is through its graphical detail, research, and authentic recreations of historical settings. Any inaccuracies are chalked up to the fact that via the Animus, the player is actually engaging with a game-within-a-game, as Dow (2013) analyzes in terms of *AC2*’s anachronistic representation of Renaissance Florence. That is, this time and place are created by the Animus, offering plausible deniability about the creators’ responsibility for true and exact historical accuracy. Playability also structures what historical locales are featured in the games. Philadelphia, for example, is notably absent from *AC3* save for one brief interior scene. As the site of many major revolutionary events this seems like a major oversight (and as a Philadelphian, a disappointing omission). The designers blamed the city’s flat, wide street, grid system plan, arguing that it was more visually boring than New York and Boston (Dyer, 2012). This is an important reminder of how design tempers the extent to which history is represented, even when historical representation is key to a game’s narrative and mechanics. The goal is a good game first, and accuracy second. As Nicholas Guerin, level design director of *Assassin’s Creed: Unity*, describes of the team’s approach to Paris: “It’s a better Paris than the actual Paris for gameplay...We have to build a game playground first, and on top of that make a cool city that’s visually striking and historically accurate as well” (Webster, 2014). This included using a “radial scale” of the city to spread out historical landmarks and allow for more spaced out play. Moreover, the ability of designers to “authentically” reproduce history is dependent upon existing historical archives. Paris could be more accurately rendered than Constantinople (used in another *AC* game) because the city’s

development was preserved and easily accessible to the French-speaking design team (Webster, 2014). As discussed above, for *AC3* the production team relied on consultants to reconstruct Kanien'kehá:ka culture from contemporary Kahnawake knowledge of the tribe's past (and to construct authenticity into the design). If history is written by the victors, though, then media representations of the past will always be more detailed for those whose language and archives survived intact.

Many authors have critiqued the extent to which commercial concerns affect how history is represented in games, and in turn how critical those histories are allowed to be (Elliott & Kapell, 2013; Chapman, 2013; Salvati & Bullinger, 2013). Mir and Owen (2013), for example, note that colonization's messier sides—like disease and slavery—were not included in *Sid Meier's Civilization IV: Colonization*. *AC3* actually does deal with some of these issues, but not as part of the main game action. They are typically shown in the database, cut-scenes or voice-over dialogue and usually easily ignored. The narrative that the player must engage with to get through the game, however, reflects a colonialist view. This is true *despite* the fact that for the bulk of the game the protagonist is a member of an indigenous tribe and the game critically retells the events surrounding the American Revolution. The history Ubisoft assumes its imagined player wants to engage with, play with, and potentially reconsider, is viewed from the perspective of a white, male, Western gaze.

The *AC* series is not just about the mimetic recreation of history. As series producer Jade Raymond emphasizes, the games are fiction: “there's plenty of freedom to take revisionist approach, tweak people's personalities and motivations” (interviewed in El-Nasr, et al., 2008). Part of *AC3*'s revision is offering a critical take on popularized histories. Since the start of the series, game makers sought to provide an “objective” perspective on historical conflicts. In *AC3*, the game uses the perspective of a Native American protagonist to take a hard look at both British and colonist arguments during the American Revolution. Indeed, the Animus database attempts to paint British forces in a more positive, or at least sympathetic, light. Throughout the game the Animus database critiques the history represented. After Haytham leaves for Boston, for example, the Atlantic Ocean entry briefly mentions European travellers but includes a whole paragraph about African slaves' torturous Atlantic journey. Slavery rarely appears in the game directly and African slaves are never integrated into the gameplay. Slavery and the conflicting politics of wealthy white men demanding their freedom as they enslave others is brought up repeatedly however. Yet it is dealt with problematically in the moments the game tries to validate or redeem specific historical figures. At one point, for example, Samuel Adams points out that the woman referred to as his slave is free “at least on paper.” The game seems to treat these moments as correctives, but they are offered in a manner that suggests they complicate oversimplistic views of history.

AC3 never lives up to the promise of actually critiquing history, because the game never critiques the rhetoric involved in creating other forms of oppression outside of slavery (like sharecropping or indentured labor). Moreover, throughout the game's historical critique is almost always undercut by gameplay or maladroit humor. The database's slavery entry is followed up with a joke belittling sexual molestation. Later, the game contextualizes colonists' relationship to the British Regulars (aka, “Redcoats”) with a similar mixture of historical detail, critical reflection, and cheap jokes. In the player's second interaction with him, the game dialog makes light of

Benjamin Franklin's womanizing and sexism. Much of this humor is clearly written to imply that both player and database author (Shaun Hastings) identify with a particular type of masculinity. In these moments we see most clearly that sensitivity claims are deployed via a discourse of realism but not actually via a consistent reflection on design choices (save those for which a consultant was called to review). Even as the game carefully offers one of the only, and best developed, Native heroes in a video game, so much else of how history is constructed in the game demonstrates that the ultimate audience for the game is imagined as white, male, and Western.

Playing with historical narratives

Moving past *AC3*'s construction of history, it is also worth considering *how* this game allows players to ludically and narratively experience the created history. Much has been written about the ludological/narratology divide in games studies (Mäyrä, 2008; Crawford, 2012). Elliott and Kapel (2013) argue, however, that both perspectives are necessary "in games that are *played* within a historical *narrative*" (p. 19, italics in original). Joyce (2015) posits that it is more interesting to see where the different perspectives on game objects converge rather than diverge. She uses the concepts of ludic and narrative agency to look at how interactive narratives are constructed in games. Here, I merge her concepts with analyses of the affordances (Chapman, 2013) and simulation potential (Mir & Owens, 2013) of historical games to look at *AC3*'s representational problems beyond accuracy. I look, as Elliott and Kapel (2013) encourage, not at "*whether* it is possible to engage with history in popular culture," but rather at "*what kind of engagement* this is" (p. 9, italics in original).

Ludic Agency

As Chapman (2013) writes, "historical video games afford players particular actions" (p. 62). Game designers create these affordances in relation to commercial viability, technological capabilities, genre conventions, and, in historical games, the history being represented (p. 62-63). In constructing games around history, however, designers make particular arguments about what types of interaction with this history should be possible, as Mir and Owen (2013) describe in their analysis of *Sid Meier's Civilization IV: Colonization*. Even through modification of the game's source code, players cannot really play as a Native American character in the game in the same way they can play as European characters (p. 94). All Native characters are tagged with an "isNative" code which removes functionality from them. Coded abilities also interact with representation in *AC3*. We can see this most subtly in the way Haytham and Ratohnhaké:ton/Connor interact with the game environment. As Haytham, the player can make the on-screen character climb buildings, but as Ratohnhaké:ton/Connor, the first thing the player is trained to do is free-run up trees. A poignant moment is shared between Ratohnhaké:ton/Connor and his longtime friend Kanen'tó:kon as they discuss European settlers' encroachment into their territory, a discussion they have while perched in a tree in search of feathers. Realism here, in language and other cultural signifiers, is in tension with a long history of showing Native people as somehow more connected to the land.

King and Krzywinska (2006) argue that aural or visual realism can sometimes obscure a discussion of realistic functionality in games (p. 143). As they put it, all "game worlds *are* arbitrary and limited constructions...a greater depth of functional details can contribute to the

relative degree of immersive illusion that is created” (p. 144, italics in original). For instance, the role of Achilles, as a man of African descent living isolated from society, is revealed most strikingly when he and Ratohnhaké:ton arrive in Boston on an errand. Ratohnhaké:ton is blown away by the sights, sounds, and smells of the “big city.” Achilles, however, reminds him that Boston’s opportunities are available to “only a few.” It is here that he renames Ratohnhaké:ton Connor, telling him that his skin is fair enough that he “might pass for one with Spanish or Italian blood.” Achilles follows this up with a line that attempts to encompass a long history of racial categorization: “Better to be thought a Spaniard than a Native. And both are better still than I.” When Ratohnhaké:ton/Connor replies “that’s not true,” Achilles retorts “what’s TRUE and what IS are not always the same.” Yet the game doesn’t actually engage with how race might shape Achilles’s or Ratohnhaké:ton/Connor’s interactions with others. Achilles’ presence seems to make Ratohnhaké:ton/Connor’s presence in Boston unremarkable. Notably, when Ratohnhaké:ton/Connor first enters the general store he is met with more suspicion than Haytham was in the earlier part of the game. However, after Samuel Adams teaches Ratohnhaké:ton/Connor to rip down wanted posters, bribe town criers, and get the printing press to change stories to reduce his notoriety, I’m left feeling that unlike previous games it is odd to assume such acts would in any way diminish Ratohnhaké:ton/Connor’s suspiciousness or the guards heightened alert at his presence. Visual details, like soot marks behind wall sconces or trees’ shadows on the forest floor, contrast sharply with how Ratohnhaké:ton/Connor’s visual appearance does not matter much to the gameplay. Although this gives the player a lot of ludic agency (Joyce, 2015) in terms of what they might do to reduce the chance guards will chase them down, as a historical figure Ratohnhaké:ton/Connor would not have much agency over how he was perceived. The game assumes the intended audience will not find this particularly troubling or unrealistic—it is just a game, after all.

In these moments, where Ratohnhaké:ton/Connor’s position in the colonial world is made unexceptional despite the fact that the game uses his “outsider” perspective to tell the story, it does represent the limits of representation offered in *AC3*. Gamemakers presume that the imagined player does not want to play a stealth game where being stealthy is limited by the body they inhabit. They assume the imagined player will not even realize how impossible such invisibility would be likely because they have largely never had the experience of being hypervisible because of their race. The game itself would prove impossible to complete if Ratohnhaké:ton/Connor was unable to blend into colonial cities and could not be easily trusted by the various stakeholders in the revolution he aids. Could there even be a historical game, which was still satisfying as a game (for argument’s sake, meaning that it could be winnable and fun) that could make players simultaneously question what they know about history and be confronted with their privilege? In the case of *AC3* it seems like designers found a way to avoid the question by making Ratohnhaké:ton/Connor a secondary character (narratively speaking) in his own game.

Narrative Agency

In much the same way *Colonization* (Mir & Owens, 2013) prevents a true reimagining of history because the game’s win condition assumes successful colonization, *AC3*’s design precludes really playing with history. Throughout the game, Connor helps history along, as it has always existed from the point of view of an American colonist, not a colonized person. We see this

clearly in the rare moments in which Ratohnhaké:ton/Connor is involved in stories where his Native subject position might have mattered most.

The most telling thing about the game's view of history (and in turn who is constructed as its audience) is not any issue with accuracy, it is that the game's primary conflict is between the British and the colonists. Ratohnhaké:ton/Connor assists the colonists with the presumed end of saving his village. The village, however, plays little to no role in these scenes. Take for instance the moment Ratohnhaké:ton/Connor learns that the land his village sits on is being sold out from under them by the larger Iroquois nation's agreement with William Johnson (Haytham's ally at the game's start). Ratohnhaké:ton/Connor's first stop after burying the hatchet in Achilles' porch column, a Kanien'kehá:ka/Mohawk ritual for the start of a war according to the game, is Boston where he goes through a series of missions at the behest of Samuel Adams that lead to the Boston Tea Party. What was set up as a Kanien'kehá:ka/Mohawk-centered plot line and historically reimagined revenge story, makes Ratohnhaké:ton/Connor just another piece in the Patriots' resistance strategy. The brief mission where Ratohnhaké:ton/Connor saves members of his tribe is fairly passive. He approaches Johnson secretly, assassinating his guards and finally killing him without detection or allowing any Kanien'kehá:ka/Mohawk casualties. Compared to the wonton destruction of the previous missions, this one is over relatively quickly.

When Ratohnhaké:ton/Connor is later reunited with Haytham the game explores the sides of the war in more detail. Unlike the previous games in which the protagonist is fairly neutral, Ratohnhaké:ton/Connor fights very obviously on the side of the Patriots. Haytham seeks to undermine the war on behalf of the Templars. In doing so, Haytham continues the overarching game theme of critical history, by pointing out that most revolutionaries are self-interested, wealthy, white, slave-owning landowners. Yet, given that early on the game encourages players to distrust Haytham, implicitly the game still seems to position the Patriots as "the good guys," if perhaps a slightly less shiny version of the good guys than the imagined U.S. audience will have learned about in history class. His critique seems dismissible, in much the same way the game earlier treated the fact that Samuel Addams had slaves and Ben Franklin was sexist as dismissible and unimportant.

Ratohnhaké:ton/Connor sides with the Patriots even when he learns of Washington's note to Sullivan calling for the destruction of all Iroquois settlements. He is then supposed to stop members of his tribe who have sided with the British, with non-lethal means—at least if the player wishes to achieve "full synchronization." By making this choice an option, the player is put in an interesting position. Throughout the game the player is required to kill British Regulars in a variety of ways, once again making it clear that even within the critique the imagined player wants the Patriots to win. Yet aside from one exception (discussed below), the game clearly does not want the player to be in the position of killing any of the Native characters. This likely stems from the same goals that drove designers to find Kahnawake consultants: they wanted to represent Kanien'kehá:ka/Mohawk culture carefully. They were aware of the implications of having a largely white audience assisting in the slaughter of Native Americans in the game. They also likely assumed players might rely on the ludicrously easier killing spree by incentivizing dispatching Ratohnhaké:ton/Connor's tribe with non-lethal means through the "full synchronization" reward. In offering that reward, they encouraged players to care, even if only for their game achievement stats, about the plight of the tribe.

In the back and forth between critiquing the British and critiquing the colonists, the player never really gets to choose their allegiances. Moreover, one formative kill in the game is not optional, further limiting the narrative and ludic agency of the player. In one of the game's most intense moments, Ratohnhaké:ton/Connor is forced to kill his childhood friend Kanen'tó:kon who has sided with the British and views Washington as the enemy. It is the only assassination of a Kanien'kehá:ka person that is not made optional, and recalls Kiio's formative death early on in the game (where the player could do nothing to stop it). The series as a whole regularly forces the player to watch the main assassins' loved ones die, yet in this game it seems striking because we know how history turned out in the end. We know that even if we finish the game, Ratohnhaké:ton/Connor will never truly "win" this historical narrative. To use Joyce's (2015) framework, neither the player nor Ratohnhaké:ton/Connor have much narrative agency here in part because Ratohnhaké:ton/Connor's subject position offers little historical agency. Put more humorously, Dray (2015) writes of the series as a whole: "You're essentially playing as the ultimate turducken of anti-establishment freedom fighters, always within the regimented, pre-rendered playpen that has been walled off for you, and that will only allow you to progress if you perform as it dictates." The history the imagined player is assumed to want to "win," is the one where the Patriots come out on top, which serves to reinforce the construction of the white, male, Western perspective that informs the design of the game. Even as the game series attempt to critique minor aspects of that story, it never really pushes back on the logic that the story would always end the way it did.

Conclusion: Counterfactual History and Emancipatory Possibilities

Ratohnhaké:ton/Connor almost always helps along colonial history as we know it, and is not in a position to reimagine what might have been for his people. The end of his people's story is already written. The only thing the game illuminates is the extent of the British and Patriot atrocities against them (and even those aren't represented in much detail). The designers' focus on British/Patriot conflicts reflect the values of their assumed audience. As King and Krzywinska (2006) argue:

Dominant values are likely to be structured into gameplay and representational frameworks, in games as elsewhere, simply because they are dominant, and thus familiar and often taken for granted, capable of providing what appears (ideologically) to be a relatively neutral background for in game tasks.

p. 194

AC3 assumes that players are most interested in unpacking the British-Patriot conflict. Ratohnhaké:ton/Connor as the main player-character allows them an "outsider" perspective to critique aspects of that conflict, but this means that what he is expected to do in the game always feels out of sync with who he is.

The game's final cinematic is the most telling of the tension between the narrative end goals and game actions' goals. If the player is willing to sit through the nearly twenty minute-long credit sequence, she sees one final scene. Ratohnhaké:ton/Connor stands on Boston's dock as colonists

throw detritus at the retreating British ships and celebrate their “freedom.” He then turns and sees two African slaves being sold on an auction block; his look reflects the hypocrisy of this new “free world.” He has also just found out that his people have been moved west after Congress granted their land to a colonist. The game ends ambivalently; all of Ratohnhaké:ton/Conor’s (and the player’s) work in the game didn’t accomplish much for him. The ending was most certainly realistic, but why did it have to be that version of realism?

AC3 is a beautifully rendered realistic game, and attempts to approach versions of realism, but would not in Galloway’s (2006) estimation be a realist game. At least if we take at face value the fact that we are seeing history through Ratohnhaké:ton/Conor’s eyes. As Galloway argues, a truly realist game needs to have congruence or “fidelity of context” with the players’ daily lives. He points to games like Hellbollah’s *Special Force* as an example of a realist game because it seeks to situate war’s violence within the everyday lives of hailed Palestinian players. As he puts it, “there emerges a true congruence between the real political reality of the gamer and the ability of the game to mimic and extend that political reality, thereby satisfying the unrequired desires contained within it” (p. 83). There is nothing in *AC3*’s production or marketing that indicates it was meant for an audience for whom the game would satisfy Galloway’s congruence requirement, again if we assume Ratohnhaké:ton/Conor is really the protagonist. The design choices indicate that we are not really meant to experience colonial Boston as a member of the Mohawk tribe. Rather, we are primarily meant to take on Ratohnhaké:ton/Connor’s role to look at “our” history more critically. If that is the case, then perhaps the game does reflect the political reality, and thus satisfy the congruence requirement of its imagined audience. Even using that as a starting point though, there are still make critiques to be made of the critical history this game purports to offer.

For one, *AC3* might critique history, but its critique offers a teleological view of history. As Thomas Apperly (2013) explains, “teleology legitimized the present as the only possible (thus inevitable) result of the cumulative events that constitute history” (p. 189). *AC3* does not critique the inevitableness of those historical events. If we are players with even a modest awareness of US history, we always know how the story is going to end. Kline, Dyer-Witford, and de Peuter (2003) assert that:

The games industry, like the rest of popular culture, has learned that irony is a no-lose gambit, a ‘have your cake and eat it too’ strategy whose simultaneous affirmation/negation structure can give the appearance of social critique and retract it in the same moment—thereby letting everything stay just as it is while allowing practitioners to feel safely above it all even as they sink more deeply in.

p. 277

AC3 offers critical insight into the version of the American Revolution told in much of American popular culture. Although the game has a global team and a global audience, it still seems that the target audience is an American, white, and male one (particularly if we are to read Desmond in the Animus as the stand-in for the player at the controller). The critique always feels like it doesn’t go deep enough, and the chance to make players engage in a story from a

Kanien'kehá:ka perspective while identifying with a Kanien'kehá:ka hero never lives up to its full emancipatory potential.

Another limitation is seen in the scalping example. It may in fact be true that Mohawk tribes did not regularly practice scalping. However, colonists in New England during this era *did* scalp Native peoples and offered rewards for their body parts. Indeed, there is record of one Mohawk tribe delivering a scalp to colonists in Hartford—that of Sassacus, a Pequot *sachem*, who led battles against English colonists—to help establish their own peace with the colony (Vaughn, 1995, p. 150). The game might have incorporated this to critique European colonial scalping practices used upon, rather than by, many tribes living in New England (Abler, 1992). Game makers originally included it as something Ratohnhaké:ton/Connor was to do to the English, but how much more powerful would it have been to highlight it as something often done to Natives by or at the behest of colonists. Similarly, were Ratohnhaké:ton/Connor less able to blend into colonial Boston by reducing his notoriety, the game might be able to engage with the unique subject position they have created in the game. Or better yet, if colonial Boston in the game were populated with more diverse skin tones, the game could better integrate visual representation and core game mechanics.

My critique of the game here does not dismiss the quality of the research or design. It is important, still, to recognize that the game's realism belies the fact that the game reflects a particular historical perspective. Gish (2010) and Uricchio (2005) argue that the poststructuralist turn in history was not simply about questioning what history was recorded, but how history was represented and constructed. Uricchio goes on to point out that although history games might adopt some poststructural critique they also often demonstrate “a stubborn adherence to the historiographic status quo” (p. 335). The *AC* series is invested in speculative fiction, but it might more readily offer players the chance to engage with counterhistory. This approach, as explained by Apperly (2013), “provides a legitimate historical approach to the speculation on how events might have otherwise occurred” (p. 189). History games can be much more powerful critical texts when they allow players to imagine “what if” (Urcchio, 2005; Apperly, 2013). Apperly actually counts the *AC* games as part of an “emerging popular genres of alternative history offer a substantial way of critically engaging with history” (p. 186). He only focuses on *AC2* and the DLC *Tyranny of King Washington* though, as neither follow a specific historic series of events. Both are informed by history, but do not follow a historical narrative in the same direct way as *AC3*. In the *Tyranny of King Washington* Ratohnhaké:ton is placed in an alternate world and battles alongside his people and still-living mother to free the land from a maniacal George Washington. In the main *AC3* game, which is invested in historical detail, this anti-colonial revenge fantasy is simply not imaginable. Only in a hyperfictional add-on can there be a reimagined history where Native Americans could be victorious. Even then, the end result of the story is that things are returned to normal and America stands as it always has.

According to Peterson, Miller, and Fedorko (2013), simulation games offer unique chances for investigating counterfactual history: “counterfactuals are helpful for understanding causality across the social sciences because they allow the investigator to test processes, which may explain outcomes or how outcomes would change given different choices, events, and stimuli” (p. 38). What if *AC3* was more of a simulation and less an attempt at a realistic representation of the past? What if as Ratohnhaké:ton/Connor the player were given the chance to explore what

they might do when placed between the English and the colonists in late 18th century New England? What would greater narrative agency, but less ludic agency, allow this game to communicate about being colonized? It would certainly remove some the narrative determinedness of the game, but it could be then starting point for actually reimagining the history told by the game. Yet the possibilities for creating such a counterhistory will always be tied to the imagined audience for the game. That's not to say that Ubisoft needs to start imagining a non-male, non-white audience, but rather that they would need to start by imagining an audience who *wants* to avenge Ratohnhaké:ton/Connor's tribe, who doesn't want to see the Patriots win, and who doesn't want to forgive the Patriot leaders for their sins.

In analyses of history and representation, we get farther by thinking about how these representations close down the possibility of imagining history otherwise, whether through counterhistory or by creating narratives that push players to experience histories that actually recognize different subject positions. That is the tyranny of realism. It forces game makers and critics alike to focus too much on questions of accuracy, rather than emancipatory possibility. It is also indicative of how imagined audiences over-determine the stories companies are willing to tell. If we can only imagine new ways of viewing what has been, we never get a chance to imagine what might be.

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