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LEARNING, EDUCATION & GAMES, VOLUME 3

100 Games to Use in the Classroom & Beyond

KAREN SCHRIER (EDITOR)

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ASSASSIN'S CREED (SERIES)

GABRIELE ARONI, SIMONE BREGNI, AND HEIDI MCDONALD

Game: *Assassin's Creed* (Series)

Developer: Ubisoft

Year: 2007–2017 (ongoing)

Platform(s): Console/PC game; multiplatform

Number of players: Single player; optional online multiplayer

Genre: Action adventure

Type of game: Console and computer-based digital game

Curricular connections: World history; World cultures; arts; English language learning; language learning; history of art and architecture; colonial history; piratical history; music

Possible skills taught: art and architecture appreciation; music appreciation; task-based problem solving; listening and reading comprehension (ESL, foreign languages); ethical decision-making; argumentation; empathy; analyzing moral dilemmas

Audience: 18+ (high-school seniors; college students; young adults)

Length of time: At least 10 hours

Where to play: At home; sections can be played in class

Cost: \$60 (each main chapter is priced around \$60 at launch and are discounted as each new chapter is released)

URL: www.assassinscreed.ubisoft.com

SUMMARY

The *Assassin's Creed* (AC) series is one of the most successful video game series (Gaudiosi, 2014). Currently (as of April 2018), the series comprises ten narrative-driven standard game chapters, each covering different chronological eras and locations, with a narrative arc that spans from Ptolemaic Egypt (the most recent entry) through the Holy Land at the time of the third Crusade; Renaissance Italy; the Americas in the Colonial Era; and the French Revolution. Gameplay is centered on open-world exploration, collecting hints and evidence and gathering or delivering information. The narrative centers on two secret societies, the Assassins and the Templars, who have been at war over the total control of humankind. The player engages in a quest to recover ancient “magical” artifacts

called “Apples,” which the Templars covet for their plans to take control of the world. When asked how students might use *AC* as a learning tool, the development team at Ubisoft explained that each game “does contain a Database of historical places, people and events which expands and fills out as the player proceeds through the narrative and explores the world. [Players might] stop after each story sequence and read as much of this Database as they can. It’s well researched and full of information, and apart from a few entries specific to *Assassin’s Creed*, it’s all historically accurate” (McDonald and McDevitt, 2017).



Figure 1. All of the protagonists in the *Assassin's Creed* series, 2007-2017.

Time period	Year(s)	Title	Released	Consoles	Computers
Third Crusade	1191 AD	<i>Assassin's Creed</i>	2007	PlayStation 3, Xbox 360	Windows
Renaissance	1476-1499 AD	<i>Assassin's Creed II</i>	2009	PlayStation 3, Xbox 360, PlayStation 4, Xbox One	OS X, Windows
	1499-1507 AD	<i>Assassin's Creed: Brotherhood</i>	2010		
	1511-1512 AD	<i>Assassin's Creed: Revelations</i>	2011		
Colonial era	1754 - 1783 AD	<i>Assassin's Creed III</i>	2012	PlayStation 3, Xbox 360, Wii U	Windows
	1715-1722 AD	<i>Assassin's Creed IV: Black Flag</i>	2013	PlayStation 3, Xbox 360, Wii U, PlayStation 4, Xbox One	
	1752-1776 AD	<i>Assassin's Creed Rogue</i>	2014	PlayStation 3, Xbox 360	
French Revolution	1776 - 1800 AD	<i>Assassin's Creed Unity</i>			
Victorian era	1868 AD	<i>Assassin's Creed Syndicate</i>	2015	PlayStation 4, Xbox One	
Ptolemaic Egypt	49 - 43 B.C.	<i>Assassin's Creed Origins</i>	2017		

Figure 2. *Assassin's Creed* games by year and platform (main series only).

HOW TO USE THE GAME

ESL and foreign languages: *Assassin's Creed: The Ezio Collection*

Bregni effectively used *Assassin's Creed: The Ezio Collection*, which comprises three previously published games, *AC II*, *AC Brotherhood* and *AC Revelations*, in his teaching practice to supplement traditional teaching techniques in foreign language, literature, and culture courses over six academic semesters (Bregni, 2018).

AC II was one of the key games Bregni used in *Intensive Language for Gamers*, the course he designed and taught in spring 2017. In that setting (a university-based enrollment cap at fifteen students and presented in a digital learning studio equipped with a large screen and a game console), he used the game over the span of four weeks. Bregni selected approximately 20 minutes of gameplay for each class period. He then created worksheets that included listening and reading comprehension exercises along with vocabulary and grammar expansion activities that were based on the game's dialogues and narrative. The principles of backward design (e.g., What vocabulary and structures did students need to reinforce?), scaffolding and task-based learning informed the creation of these worksheets, in a process that Bregni describes as (1) *IAC: Identify* vocabulary and structures; (2) *Acquire* them through

a series of task-based exercises; and (3) *Create* autonomous sentences in speaking and writing in the target language. Students played the game in the classroom, and completed the exercises in small groups, sharing results collectively. Finally, Bregni encouraged students to continue playing in the target language outside of class in the language lab. Through activities based on these games, as well as other games, students acquired the equivalent of two semesters of language in one semester and showed a median grade that was 4% higher than students taking two traditional semesters (Bregni, 2018).

In Bregni's Italian Renaissance courses, the in-game re-creations of everyday life, historical characters, and locations helped students understand pre-Modern Italy. For example, students explored how Florence flourished under the Medici, wandering around a culturally accurate rendition of Florence from 1476. They met and interacted with its citizens in a cityscape that is visibly thriving, thanks to an era of relative peace, commercial exchange and a healthy lifestyle (as Bregni guided them to notice the ancient Roman infrastructures that provided transportation, clean water and sanitation, and the mild Italian climate that provided plentiful crops). The students took part in the vivid cultural and political Florentine life, observing first-hand that Italian cities are built around the *piazza*, hence the plentiful opportunities for exchange of ideas. They encountered women in positions of power (Maria, Ezio's mother) interacting with cultural icons of the time, such as a young Leonardo da Vinci, who at the time was just starting to explore fields other than the figurative arts. Accurate cultural data relating to everyday life are also included, which often provided interesting stimuli and opportunities for small-group discussion (e.g., in Italy, in-game characters show familiarity by greeting each other with kisses on both cheeks, which is culturally accurate).

History of Architecture: *Assassin's Creed II*

Assassin's Creed II (*AC II*) is set in a historical period and offers a semi-accurate three-dimensional reconstruction of 15th century Italian architecture, and enables students to explore a historic environment. Aroni used the game in the first-year undergraduate course of History of Design I for fifty interior design students at Ryerson University in Toronto, Canada. The course covers the history of architecture and design from antiquity to the 18th century. Aroni used *AC II* as an interactive model to display the monuments of Renaissance Florence and the city of San Gimignano.

AC II, as the other *Assassin's Creed* games, is played from a third-person perspective, and allows the player to control the character and freely walk, run, and climb in the reconstructed environments. The instructor played the game on the projector during class as a sort of "virtual tour" of 1480 Florence. The city, and several monuments within it, underwent notable changes in the past 500 years, and thus, using a reconstruction such as *AC II* is more appropriate, than, for example, projecting current photographs or videos, not to mention the ability to be able to explore the scenery freely. The open world configuration of *AC II* allows the exploration to be conducted calmly, as the action and narration can be put on hold to focus on the "open living history heritage environment" (Chapman, 2016, p. 178).

On the other hand, there are limitations with the reconstruction provided by *AC II*. The scale of the monuments is incorrect, and some are missing (notably the Baptistery), the plan of the city is not accurate (albeit the relative position of the monuments is correct) and some buildings are chronologically wrong, such as Santa Croce's façade, which was not built until the 19th century. For

this reason, Aroni showed only some buildings from *AC II*, and he completed the lesson with the use of photographs, maps, and drawings from other sources, so as not to confuse the students and provide erroneous information.

Colonial and Piratical History, Music, and Art: *Assassin's Creed IV: Black Flag*

Several features of *Assassin's Creed IV: Black Flag* (*AC IV*) might be used to help students understand Colonial-era piracy in the Caribbean and colonial history, including maps, dates, references to actual historical happenings, weaponry and terminology, actual characters represented in the game, and narrative references to colonial life, including the exploitation of native peoples, slavery, and racism.

While several aspects of the gameplay can be used to learn about Colonial-era history and geography, Ubisoft uses narrative as its main means of explaining the difficult web of allegiances that pirates observed, including some pirates, such as Benjamin Hornigold, who remained loyal to their home country while attacking only its enemies, as others, such as Charles Vane and Jack Rackham, who openly attacked everyone, including their own countrymen. In *AC IV*, any time players meet a character with a first and last name, they might do an internet search on that name, because they will likely find that the person is an actual character from history. For example, at the very beginning of the game, as the player progresses through the tutorial, they are assigned an unusually incompetent sidekick named Stede Bonnet, who keeps messing up. One of the best jokes in the game occurs at the end of the tutorial when Bonnet thanks the player and says he's been inspired to take up piracy; this is humorous because piratical scholars often consider Stede Bonnet one of the most incompetent pirates who ever sailed (Crawford, 2007).

Music also plays a role in the game. As such, a music teacher might use the game to help explain the role of shanties in daily life at sea (Draskoy, 1993), and assign songs from the game's soundtrack as a listening exercise, along with some actual shanties and tavern music. Students could be encouraged to make observations about the genre of music and could write their own song in the same style. (It should be noted that lyrics to these songs often include mature subject matter, so educators should preview and choose the specific pieces accordingly, and perhaps discuss the problematic nature of the original material.)

Another interesting facet of the golden age of nautical piracy involves the visual language in the flags displayed on ships. Semaphore was an entire language based on nautical flags in the Colonial era (Tierce, 2016), of which the pirate flags were only a subset; each pirate designed a custom flag with specific symbolism. An art educator might do a unit on semaphore and pirate flags, allowing students to investigate these visual languages and design their own "mast displays" to communicate something specific, using that symbology. Students could take turns trying to guess what other students' mast displays are trying to convey.

TIPS & BEST PRACTICES

1. The series can be used a variety of courses that focus on various historical periods and geographical areas (ancient Egypt; the French revolution; the colonial era; etc.) across multiple

disciplines (world history; world cultures; literacy; language arts, etc.).

2. Teachers should play the game beforehand to verify how the content fits the student audience (in terms of age-appropriateness, potentially sensitive issues and the cultural content). This could take over 10 hours.
3. For game-based learning purposes, students might use the easiest game setting. This is a challenging and lengthy game that has a learning curve and requires skill and patience.
4. Teachers should learn the location map well to reach desired locations quickly.
5. Teachers may create multiple save states to re-play a specific section of a game.
6. Students could play the game on their own time outside of class and then share with the rest of the class what they have learned.
7. Because the game is so long, teachers of multiple subjects might consider collaborating to simultaneously teach a unit relating to *Assassin's Creed*, such as a history teacher, art teacher, and music teacher all coordinating their lesson plans to revolve around related aspects of the game.
8. "Let's Play" videos found on YouTube can often be effectively used to demonstrate the narrative and gameplay of a game if there isn't time to actually play the game, but these videos should be previewed and carefully selected by teachers before showing them to students because of the colorful language that YouTubers tend to use. Utilize "no-commentary" walkthrough videos whenever possible, for example: <https://youtu.be/67xgpIpFDKM>.
9. For ESL or foreign language courses, educators should use scaffolding to build upon the pre-existing skills of students, moving from listening and reading comprehension to vocabulary and grammar expansion activities.
10. Architecture or history students can keep a "journal" or write reflective papers on what they have learned from the game in terms of the architecture, art, history and society/customs of the time period and geographic zone portrayed.

RELATED GAMES & MEDIA

Assassin's Creed II no-commentary walkthrough (<https://youtu.be/67xgpIpFDKM>)

Dishonored series (<https://dishonored.bethesda.net/>)

Dragon Age: Inquisition (<https://www.ea.com/games/dragon-age/dragon-age-inquisition>)

Far Cry series (<https://www.ubisoft.com/en-us/franchise/far-cry/>)

Grand Theft Auto series (<http://www.rockstargames.com/grandtheftauto/>)

Metal Gear Solid V (<https://www.konami.com/mg/mgs5/tpp/certification.php>)

Middle Earth series (<https://www.lith.com/games>)

Pirates of the Burning Sea (<http://portalusgames.com/potbs/>)

Sid Meier's Pirates! (<http://sidmeierspirates.com/>)

The Elder Scrolls series (<https://elderscrolls.bethesda.net/>)

The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt (<http://thewitcher.com/en/witcher3>)

FURTHER READING

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