FROM PAINE TO PLAYSTATION: AN ESSAY ON *ASSASSIN'S CREED UNITY*, AND ITS PLACE IN THE HISTORIOGRAPHY OF THE FRENCH REVOLUTION

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Published in 2014 by Ubisoft Entertainment, *Assassin's Creed Unity* is the twelfth game in an ongoing series of titles under the *Assassin's Creed* banner. The central story within the series revolves around a timeless war between two fictional groups: the Assassin Brotherhood and the Templar Order. According to James Price, author of the *Assassin's Creed Unity* companion guide, "[agents] of the Assassin Brotherhood are sworn to preserve free will, and to defend this liberty with their very lives" while "the Templars fight for peace and stability through political and social machinations- [their] ultimate goal is to control the masses."¹ This duality, between Assassins and Templars, serves as an exceptional driving force for immersing the player within the French Revolution. Alex Amacio, creative director of *Assassin's Creed Unity*, has created a fully rendered, 3-dimensional world, built with resounding detail and filled with Non-Playable-Characters that breathe life into the digital landscape, and in doing so has invented a new historiographical model for understanding the French Revolution.

This is done by placing the player within the role of a fictional protagonist, Arno Victor Dorian, destined to unravel an elaborate plot set by the Templar Order. As Arno navigates the streets of Paris at the height of the Revolution, the player is able to experience what life was like in Arno's time without contradicting the historical accuracy of the events that shaped the French Revolution. This methodology uniquely enlists the work of the player, forcing Arno to engage with the virtually-created Paris, and experience the history of the French Revolution. By fitting

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¹ James Price, *Assassin's Creed Unity: Complete Official Guide Collector's Edition* (London: Piggyback Interactive, 2014), 252.

in the various interpretations of the French Revolution within the game's progress, the views of historians like Thomas Paine are recreated into experiences that the players can interact with, including, for example, the enthusiastic attack on the Bastille. Likewise, the opinions of Edmund Burke are illustrated in the debauchery of class and order at the sight of burning effigies at Notre Dame. This is all bolstered by *Assassin's Creed Unity's* Paris, which "features dozens of faithfully reproduced landmarks, hundreds of interiors and a labyrinthine underground network of sewers and catacombs" that invite the player to learn from "its expansive environments, unforgettable characters and history-rich narrative filled with secret wars and age-old conspiracies."²

To this effect, I wish to challenge normative structures of academia by presenting Amacio's *Assassin's Creed Unity* as a viable retelling of the French Revolution. However, it is important to note that the focus of this essay is not to determine whether Amacio's game is historically accurate. Likewise, I have no intention of elevating him to the likes of Paine or Burke, for the simple reason that the game's plot hangs on the creative freedom of historical fiction, and Amacio's role in *Assassin's Creed Unity* is that of a director, not a historian. Rather, I place emphasis on the process in which he and his development team have managed to immerse their audience within the French Revolution in a way that is strikingly similar to the traditional models of historiography, narratively speaking, but also capitalizes on the advantages of the virtual and tangible qualities of gaming. This essay will analyze the existing histories of the French Revolution by identifying the opinions of Thomas Paine, Edmund Burke, Alexis de Tocqueville, François Furet, and Peter McPhee within *Assassin's Creed Unity*. In doing so, it

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² Alex Amacio, "Assassin's Creed Unity and Rethinking the Core of *Assassin's Creed*," in *USGamer*, ed. Mike Williams, 3.

will isolate these historical accounts within the geography of *Assassin's Creed Unity* by presenting a timeline of events within the game's narrative. Moreover, this will prove that the game not only serves as a formidable gateway into understanding the French Revolution through the eyes of those aforementioned historians, but also demonstrate the effectiveness of simulated engagement over the unwavering pedagogy of French historiography.

Arguably the most obvious sentiment felt in *Assassin's Creed Unity* is of Paine and Burke's timeless argument on the principles and causes of the French Revolution. This is especially true in *Sequence 2-Memory 1: Imprisoned*, when the player finds Arno locked away within the confines of the Bastille during its famous occupation.³ For Paine, the storming of the Bastille in 1789 confirmed that the people of France craved liberty and justice, drawing a line between the Old and New Regime. In *The Rights of Man*, Paine describes that "the Bastille was attacked with an enthusiasm of heroism, such only as the highest animation of liberty could inspire."⁴ Here, a unique parallel between *Assassin's Creed Unity* can be drawn by two particular observations Paine made of this event: first, that the Bastille represented a metaphor for the downfall of despotism and, second, that the event marked an edifying change in the people's principles. This is a notion he emphasizes in his work as a result of his experience in the American Revolution and one that he often references throughout *The Rights of Man*.

As a firm supporter of revolution, Paine's history of the Bastille, and broadly that of the French Revolution, is partly clouded by a series of disjointed arguments directly served to dismantle Burke's opinion on the French affair. As a result, Paine's retelling of the Bastille is a universal story of revolution and one that can be shared with the revolutionary attitudes he

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³ Price, 34.

⁴ Thomas Paine, *Rights of Man*.

witnessed in America. In the *Rights of Man*, Paine writes “[when] despotism has established itself for ages in a country, as in France, it is not in the person of the king only that it resides. It has the appearance of being so in show, and in nominal authority; but it is not so in practice and in fact. It has its standard everywhere.”⁵ This universalist approach characterizes the Bastille as the embodiment of civil domination and the “castle of despotism.”⁶ Furthermore, Paine’s experience with the American Revolution molded his vision of rebellion within the confines of liberty, fraternity, and “the endless possibility of the vindication of principles.”⁷ J.C.D. Clark’s analysis of Paine is one that stresses Paine’s obsession with the principles of man and the identity of the crowd, albeit a universalist one that was likely shaped by the views of Thomas Christie, rather than his own. Clark claims that, “Paine was slow to perceive the larger significance of events in France,” and primarily credits Thomas Christie for contextualizing Paine’s view of “the mob” in a letter written by Christie for *The Morning Star* in 1791. The letter explains that Paine was almost “lynched” by a rowdy Paris mob during a National Assembly meeting.⁸ The violence was triggered by Paine losing his cockade, while wearing a hat—a sign of aristocracy where it was not welcome.⁹ Thus, “Paine was unable to placate the mob until Thomas Christie, a French speaker, established his identity.”¹⁰ Combined with his own preconceived notion of rebellion and crowd mentality, Paine’s experience in 1791 would only confirm his reasoning for the mob’s behavior: “Rebellion consists in forcibly opposing the general will of a nation, whether by a

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⁵ Paine.

⁶ Paine.

⁷ J.C. D. Clark, *Thomas Paine: Britain, America, and France in the Age of Enlightenment and Revolution*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), 218.

⁸ Clark, 219.

⁹ Clark, 225.

¹⁰ Clark.

party or government.”¹¹ This account of the Bastille and of the crowd is experienced in *Memory 1: Imprisoned*, when Arno is tasked with escaping the prison during its siege. As Arno climbs the exterior of the Bastille, droves of common folk can be seen attacking the gates, breaking the drawbridge, and laying waste to its exterior. Once the player navigates Arno to the roof, he then escapes from the prison, blends into an angry mob, while the player observes a crowd of Parisians rejoicing at their victory, with the Bastille quite literally burning in the background of Arno’s liberation. This introduction to the game is followed by a cinematic transition into the opening credits, giving the player a chance to reflect on Arno’s emancipation at the foreground of Paine’s despotic Bastille.

If the argument can be made that Paine’s historical account of the French Revolution can be found in *Assassin’s Creed Unity*’s storming of the Bastille and in the behaviour of the game’s crowds, it can also be said that these components of the game directly represent Paine’s principles as an individual—principles that Edmund Burke did not completely share. Likewise, the same can then be said of Burke, whose *Reflections on the French Revolution in France* echoes with *Sequence 11: Assassination of La Touche*, when the Templar Order’s “[conspiracies] are causing the Reign of Terror to reach new heights of brutality,” and the player witnesses the execution of the king.¹² The brutality and disorder of things is a focus point in Burke’s work and quite incredibly falls in line with Paine’s perspective when it comes to the question of liberty. According to Russell Kirk, Burke fought for his fellow countrymen, politically speaking, by “steadfastly [opposing] all policies calculated to reduce private liberties,

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¹¹ Paine.

¹² Price, 266.

to centralize authority, or to diminish the prerogatives of Parliament.”¹³ With a similar passion and attention to principles, much like Paine, Burke was determined to represent his views, and “it seemed, therefore to many of the leaders of liberal opinion in revolutionary France—[Paine included]—that Burke, more than any other English political leader, was admirably calculated to head [a radical movement of reform in Britain on] French principles.”¹⁴ How is it, then, that Burke’s judgments opposed Paine’s to a degree that inspired Paine to produce *The Rights of Man*? The answer is in Burke’s disgust with the temperament, violence, and total disregard for social class and order, a great miscalculation in the reaction French liberals expected from Burke. The fact is Burke approaches the French Revolution as an English statesman and a Christian, as Kirk explains, not a radical.¹⁵ Burke believed that the theories of French revolutionaries were “as valid against such an old and beneficent government, as against the most violent tyrant, or the greenest usurpation,”¹⁶ which dismantles the overall disorganization and frenzy within the minds and hearts of those Burke believed to be anarchists. This lack of validity was, in Burke’s opinion, the gateway to inexcusable violence, especially towards the royalty, that he felt was heinous and sinful. The means for Burke did not justify the ends regardless of the liberties it claimed to represent, and as Arno approaches the guillotine in *Sequence 11* to witness Louis XVI’s decapitation, the player is compelled to agree. The sequence plunges the player within a rowdy crowd that is mixed with Paine-like enthusiasts and seemingly Burke-like conservatives, before a stage upon which a terrified king’s cries are silenced by the sloshing splatter of blood and the unnerving removal of his head. This event in the game deeply resonates with Burke’s account:

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¹³ Russell Kirk, “Introduction,” in Thomas Paine, *Reflections on the Revolution in France* (Los Angeles: Gateway Editions, 1955), 1.

¹⁴ Kirk, 2.

¹⁵ Kirk, 2.

¹⁶ Edmund Burke, *Reflections on the Revolution in France* (Charlottesville: British Philosophy 1600-1900), 87.

“This king, to say no more of him, and this queen, and their infant children (who once would have been the pride and hope of a great and generous people) were then forced to abandon the sanctuary of the most splendid palace in the world, which they left swimming in blood, polluted by massacre, and strewn with scattered limbs and mutilated carcasses.”¹⁷

These two contemporary accounts of the French Revolution are essential to contextualizing its escalation and climax, laying the foundation for later historians to build upon the Revolution’s historiography. Since *Assassin’s Creed Unity* exists at the end of these accounts, it can be expected that the works of Tocqueville, Furet, and McPhee must also reside within the game. In respect to chronology, our first point of departure from Paine and Burke begins with Alexis de Tocqueville, who published *The Old Regime and the French Revolution* in 1856, a famous political and social account of the Revolution. While the player can experience the overall ideologies of Paine and Burke within the game’s more autonomous moments (like the crowd or ever-present violence), Tocqueville’s vision of the French Revolution is best anchored to a specific chapter: *Sequence 09: Assassination of Marie Levesque*. In this sequence Marie Levesque, a fictional character, is operating under the intrigues of the Templar Order with the intentions of stirring the population into chaos by diverting grain storages to the Palais Luxembourg instead of the people.¹⁸ “[Levesque’s plot was] to [provoke] widespread discontent by leading people to believe that the royal family [was] hoarding food, while the wider population starves.”¹⁹ This scheme was designed to target the people’s property with an attack on their liberty—quite in line with Tocquevillian rhetoric. Tocqueville was vehemently determined to isolate the concept of liberty and property within the French Revolution’s temperament

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¹⁷ Burke, 212.

¹⁸ Price, 264.

¹⁹ Price, 264.

through a pseudo-Marxist representation of the virtues of freedom and the abolishment of the feudal order of things.²⁰ The notions of liberty and property are complemented by what Furet claims is Tocqueville's attempt to compare the virtues of democracy against those of Christianity, which ultimately underpins his opinion that the French Revolution was both inevitable and intentionally evoked a radical, almost religious-like movement and spectacle.²¹ This is not to say that it aimed to "[create] a permanent disorder in the conduct of public affairs, or... [to make an attempt] at 'methodizing anarchy'" but rather to "increase the power and jurisdiction of the central authority" through effectively making the "Revolution appear even more drastic than it actually was; since what it was destroying [affected] the entire social system."²² Moreover, the game's narrative is aimed to suggest that the Templar Order, through Levesque's plan, sparked the Bread Riots in *Assassin's Creed Unity*, an event that is nothing shy of spectacle. Tocqueville believed that the sweeping disorder, like that of the Bread Riots, are part of how the French Revolution was expected to unravel, suggesting that the Revolution "was nothing short of a major operation [that] needed to excise from the [body-politic] these accretions and to destroy them utterly."²³ These accretions were equally the philosophy upon which the people defended their liberty, but also the Old Regime that produced them—arguably both are one in the same within the Marxist wheelhouse.

It would be interesting to see whether or not *Assassin's Creed Unity* could somehow be positioned as a Marxist game or perhaps be labeled as a revisionist entry into the history of the

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²⁰ Robert Descimon, "Reading Tocqueville: Property and Aristocracy in Modern France," in *Tocqueville and Beyond*, eds. Robert A. Schneider and Robert M. Schwartz (Danvers: Rosemont Publishing & Printing), 111.

²¹ Alexis de Tocqueville, *The Old Regime and The French Revolution*, trans. by Stuart Gilbert (Garden City: Doubleday & Company, 1955), 19.

²² Tocqueville, 19.

²³ Tocqueville, 20.

French Revolution. While such deductions are difficult to make since Tocqueville and Furet's views are both present in the game, an analysis of Furet's *Marx and the French Revolution* could reasonably relate *Assassin's Creed Unity* to his revisionist theory. For one, Furet begins his work with a compelling statement: "All Marx interpretations of the French Revolution postdate Marx."²⁴ In his work, Furet demonstrates the paradox between Marx's personal interest and opinions on the French Revolution, stating that "although Marx considered writing a book on the French Revolution—and, indeed, commented all his life, in various contexts, on the events of late eighteenth-century France—he never [actually wrote] the book."²⁵ Simply put, all Marxist interpretations of the French Revolution focus nominally on a predisposed formula Marx created that does not stem from a particular text, but rather a fairly broad theory. An analysis of Furet's work by Claude Langlois claims that "in the desire to break with Marx—or with certain Marxist historiography—[Furet cut the cables] from any form of determinism" and focused primarily on the politics and philosophy of the French Revolution to stake his claim.²⁶ "Politics and philosophy say it all" says Furet, for he confidently believed that the removal of noble privileges had more to do with localizing authority, with a focus on immediately breaking with the Estates General, than it had to do with a Marxist-framed defense on the people's liberty as present in Tocqueville's understanding of the French Revolution.²⁷ Langlois supports this notion by reminding the Marxist of "the Great Fear, the night of the 4th of August, the Civil Constitution of the Clergy... ..and the Kings trial"—events that can be easily credited to the localization of state power.

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²⁴ François Furet, *Marx and the French Revolution* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986), 3.

²⁵ Furet, 3.

²⁶ Claud Langois and Timothy Tackett, "Furet's Revolution," *French Historical Studies* 16, no. 4 (Autumn 1990): 768.

²⁷ Langois, 768.

To be sure, there is a Marxist undertone to the abject catastrophe of bourgeois property, the redistribution of land, and the feverish upheaval of the Old Regime. However, Furet believed that the determinism, in its essence, does little to acknowledge the sharp administrative shift in France's political philosophy and the rapid subjugation of the nobility, the king, and the feudal system. To this effect, one might be more moved to believe that *Assassin's Creed Unity* may very well be a Marxist game at heart, if not for two events: first, Arno's infiltration of the Jacobin Club and second, Arno's unexpected introduction to Napoleon Bonaparte. In *Sequence 06: The Templar Meeting*, Arno witnesses "Robespierre delivering a (now famous) speech against the death penalty," and more importantly, a Templar meeting with Marie Levesque regarding a plot to "starve France [with the intention to] fuel the Revolution."²⁸ This particular sequence hardly relies on historical accuracy. However, it does grant the player a behind-the-scenes glimpse of how quick and eager the administration was to localize its authority and centralize the power within revolutionary hands. Moreover, in *Sequence 08: Assassination of Rouille*, Arno unexpectedly finds Napoleon rummaging through Louis XVI's study in search of his famous *Armoire de Fer*.²⁹ This interaction is highlighted by a few cheeky lines of dialogue that allude to the famous scandal, including the public revelation of Louis's personal and somewhat-incriminating correspondence in 1792. While the player is forced to lead Arno throughout the King's private study, it becomes clear that the French administration (in this case, the Templar Order) wanted to hasten the consolidation of power within their political control. As Arno and Napoleon sift through the *Armoire de Fer*, one cannot help but feel compelled to observe the French Revolution from a top-down approach, much like Furet, in lieu of the

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²⁸ Price, 261.

²⁹ Price, 263.

bottom-up approach, as observed by Tocqueville. Thus, it cannot be definitively said that *Assassin's Creed Unity* is more Tocqueville than Furet, but rather one must resign to the game's virtual nature and accept that the narrative allows for players to immerse themselves in both of these historiographical accounts— just at different points in the game.

The tenor of this stalemate between the game's Marxist or revisionist identity lends a unique perspective on the duality between Assassins and Templars. Defined in large by their unwavering motives, the Assassins are compelled to fight for the people, while the Templars seek to control the masses by catalyzing the Revolution. This lack of identity, be it Marxist or revisionist, works considerably well when attempting to pull Peter McPhee's work from within the game. This is likely due to his considerably modern perspective, for McPhee's book, *Living the French Revolution, 1789-99*, was written as recently as 2006. To his advantage, McPhee was able to collect two centuries worth of statistical information and from this present a truly compelling breakdown of the casualties directly attributed to the French Revolution. To the success of his work, McPhee manages to highlight the overall hardship of the people by explaining that "towards the end of the revolutionary decades... ...[historians] estimated the total loss of life was 2,022,903, including 800,000 dead on the field of battle, 184,000 Europeans and slaves in the colonies and 900,000 in the Vendée."³⁰ Furthermore, this estimate states that "4,790 people had committed suicide 'out of terror' and that 3,400 women had died in premature labour, not to mention the 1,550 'driven mad' by the Revolution."³¹ Such statistics make it difficult to believe that the Revolution was at all meant for the people. The staggering death toll illustrates that many were either met with sullen disappointment or, in the case of most rural communities,

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³⁰ Peter McPhee, *Living the French Revolution* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2006), 201.

³¹ McPhee, 201.

a “premature death.”³² As one would have it, *Assassin’s Creed* is nothing shy of the simulation of these statistics, for the game runs rampant with violence, suffering, and murder. Upon starting the game, Arno is positioned in the player’s last known location, and, from there, they can embark on their next objective by navigating the dangerous streets of Paris. For example, the player is sure to come across an armed robbery or more commonly a thief running away from a victim. These Non-Playable Characters identify criminals for the player by hollering for help, prompting the game to produce a yellow marker above the target-in-question’s head. The player is then compelled to either stop, kill, or ignore the criminal, and go about their mission. This temperament throughout the game directly draws from McPhee’s work. As Arno walks from one objective to another, the ambient music is muffled by the shouting of protesters, with various propaganda posters floating off the walls from street-side shops and bars guarded by armed men and soldiers alike. It is through this ‘sandbox’ style of gameplay that McPhee’s vision of the French Revolution, present in his text, shines: “There [were] armed gatherings in the streets for several nights; revolutionary songs were frightening people when what was needed was the language of friendship and fraternity.”³³ The historiography of the French Revolution, through the lens of McPhee, is one that capitalizes on the hardships of the people, without falling into an exclusively Marxist or a revisionist framework. To the effect of millions, the French Revolution took a tremendous toll on the people, and throughout *Assassin’s Creed Unity*, one is always privy to a countless list of petty crimes, public abuses, and most of all death.

In an effort to make an entertaining game, Amacio succeeded in not only providing his audience with a glimpse into what France was like during the Revolution, but also managed to

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³² McPhee, 201.

³³ McPhee, 181.

include some of the most influential perspectives surrounding the event. In *Sequence 2-Memory 1: Imprisoned*, when Arno escapes from the Bastille, and *Sequence 11: Assassination of La Touche* marking the king's execution, the player comes into contact with the political and social opinions of Paine and Burke. Moreover, a direct connection can be made between Tocqueville and *Sequence 09: Assassination of Marie Levesque*, as it is revealed that Marie Levesque's plot to rouse the peasantry into the Revolution was being caused by diverting grain storages and forcing the people to defend their liberty. This Marxist approach presents a compelling juxtaposition to the revisionist undertones of *Sequence 08: Assassination of Rouille*, placing the interaction between Arno and Napoleon within Furet's stance regarding the administration's alacrity to overthrow the Old Regime. Lastly, *Assassin's Creed Unity* constructs a virtual geography between each sequence, localizing each historiographical account of the French Revolution within the game's narrative. To this effect, McPhee's work serves as the mortar that holds these accounts together within the context of the story and how the player engages its themes. Nevertheless, the association made between *Assassin's Creed Unity*, and these historians is destined to fall flat to subjective criticism saved only by the fact that it is a tangible videogame. Quite literally, *Assassin's Creed Unity* is an experience that forces the player to make decisions and navigate through a virtual Paris framed by the historiography of the French Revolution. Unlike a movie, book, or play, the experience is far from passive, but rather immersive, and the character interactions, sequences, and narrative all serve the function of delivering a convincing representation of historiographical themes—without burdening itself with historical accuracy.

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