

“And You Didn’t Even Look at It!”

ASSASSIN’S CREED’S (Self-)DISCOVERY TOUR

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PROLOGUE: NEW-OLD CHAMBERS

On 3 November 2017, a curious headline appeared on the video game website *Kotaku*: “This Week’s Giza Pyramid Discovery Was Already Built into ASSASSIN’S CREED ORIGINS.”¹ What had happened? A few days earlier, researchers had made public the discovery of two previously unknown rooms near the upper royal burial chamber of the 4,500-year-old Great Pyramid of Giza. The rooms were detected with the help of new scanning technologies. The Great Pyramid of Giza appears as a virtual replica in the action-adventure video game ASSASSIN’S CREED ORIGINS (2017). Players can explore the structure and, in addition to the burial chambers that have been known for some time, actually enter the two antechambers that were still undiscovered at the time of the game’s release on 27 October 2017.

The ASSASSIN’S CREED series is known for its meticulously designed historical settings, for which the developer studio Ubisoft consults historians, archaeologists, and other experts. In the case of ASSASSIN’S CREED ORIGINS, French architect Jean-Pierre Houdin, who has published some controversial theories about the construction of the Egyptian pyramids, was an advisor to

1 Totilo, Stephen: “This Week’s Giza Pyramid Discovery Was Already Built into Assassin’s Creed Origins,” in: *Kotaku* (2017); <https://kotaku.com/thi-s-week-s-gi-za-pyramid-discovery-was-already-built-in-1820130886>

the development team. Following Houdin's hypotheses, Ubisoft had speculatively included the two chambers in the virtual Great Pyramid of Giza.

This anecdote may be a strange coincidence; however, it illustrates the complex interplay between history as an academic discipline, popular historical discourses, and representations of history in entertainment media, i.e., forms of public history. Stephen Totilo addresses this area of tension in his *Kotaku* article:

"Players who don't know the history of the Great Pyramid, let alone the controversy over how it was built, might mistake the innards of the structure as poor game design. From a video game standpoint, climbing through the pyramid isn't all that exciting. It's far less interesting a feat than climbing through many other areas in the long-running ASSASSIN'S CREED series. But those armed with the knowledge of what's in the actual pyramid, and who understand what the interpretation presented in the game represents, might find this to be a fantastic opportunity not just for virtual tourism but for an exploration of theoretical history."²

In this way, the new-old chambers also hint at a certain dilemma of the ASSASSIN'S CREED series, which on the one hand is often praised for its detailed historically reconstructions, but on the other hand, is a frequently mentioned example of a significant dissonance between its historical story world and its gameplay mechanics.

The Ptolemaic Egypt is just one of numerous historical settings of the ASSASSIN'S CREED games: from ancient Greece to Jerusalem and Damascus at the time of the Third Crusade to Renaissance Florence and Rome to Paris during the French Revolution.³ The series' historical architectures and characters show an impressive visual detail, which increases with each new entry, not least due to the rapid technical evolution of video games. In addition, virtual reconstructions of historical buildings have been part of the archaeological toolkit for quite some time. Thus, it seems only a small step to the

2 Ibid.

3 For a detailed overview of the different historical epochs of the ASSASSIN'S CREED series cf. de Wildt, Lars: "Everything Is True; Nothing Is Permitted. Utopia, Religion and Conspiracy in Assassin's Creed," in: Beil, Benjamin/Freyer-muth, Gundolf S./Schmidt, Hanns Christian (eds.), *Playing Utopia. Futures in Digital Games*, Bielefeld: transcript 2019, pp. 149-185.

virtual worlds of contemporary games. Ubisoft was even recently a cooperation partner of the exhibition *From Mosul to Palmyra: A Virtual Journey through World Cultural Heritage*,⁴ in which museum-goers were able to 'visit' virtual reality reconstructions of numerous cities and monuments destroyed by war.

However, as (technologically) fascinating as the virtual replicas of ASSASSIN'S CREED's historical sites may seem at first glance, their combination with gameplay mechanics is often conflicting at second glance. While the historical scenario changes with each new game in the series, the gameplay remains more or less identical. Players fight and sneak their way through the game world, improving the avatar's skills in the process. This mixture of action-adventure and role-playing elements seems largely detached from the various historical settings. In other words, it hardly makes a difference in terms of gameplay whether the avatar climbs over the roofs of an ancient temple complex or a modern factory building. In both cases, the setting is primarily a "playground,"⁵ an obstacle course occasionally interrupted by combat.

Such a ludonarrative dissonance⁶ is by no means unique to the ASSASSIN'S CREED series. It characterizes most video games that make use of historical settings. History becomes an assemblage of sceneries and props that primarily serve to embellish the story world. Thus, these games do not offer "performatory challenges,"⁷ historical knowledge is not required for the successful completion of the game. History "takes place around and above

4 Bundeskunsthalle Bonn 2019; Institut du Monde Arabe: *Von Mossul nach Palmyra: Eine virtuelle Reise durch das Weltkulturerbe*, München: Hirmer 2019.

5 Schwarz, Angela: "Quarry, Playground, Brand. Popular History in Video Games," in: Lorber, Martin/Zimmermann, Felix (eds.), *History in Games. Contingencies of an Authentic Past*, Bielefeld: transcript 2020, pp. 25-45, here p. 29.

6 Cf. Hocking, Clint: "Ludonarrative Dissonance in Bioshock," *ClickNothing* (2007); https://www.clicknothing.com/click_nothing/2007/10/ludonarrative-d.html

7 Chapman, Adam: *Digital Games as History. How Videogames Represent the Past and Offer Access to Historical Practice*, London/New York: Routledge 2016, p. 205.

the players, but their experience of history is fragmented, ontological and particularized.”⁸

As a field of research in both history and media studies, the representation of history in video games has gained considerable attention in the last years, from empirical studies⁹ to detailed analyses of specific historical periods¹⁰ to memory culture¹¹ or phenomenological approaches;¹² also the *Clash of Realities* conference has dedicated itself to the topic in depth.¹³

This vivid and wide-ranging debate will not be discussed in detail in the following; it rather serves as a background and starting point for the study of a peculiar paratext: the DISCOVERY TOUR BY ASSASSIN’S CREED: ANCIENT EGYPT (from here on DISCOVERY TOUR). The DISCOVERY TOUR will be explored as a kind of paratextual confrontation of the ASSASSIN’S CREED series with its own pop-cultural status—and its complex relationship to history.

8 de Groot, Jerome: *Consuming History. Historians and Heritage in Contemporary Popular Culture*, London/New York: Routledge 2009, p. 155.

9 E.g., Schwarz, Angela: “Computerspiele. Ein Thema für die Geschichtswissenschaft?” in: Schwarz, Angela (ed.), *Wollten Sie auch immer schon einmal pestverseuchte Kühe auf Ihre Gegner werfen? Eine fachwissenschaftliche Annäherung an Geschichte im Computerspiel*, Münster: LIT 2010, pp. 7-28.

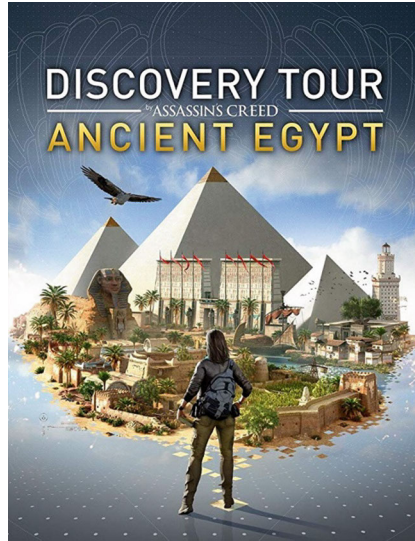
10 E.g., Heinze, Carl: *Mittelalter Computer Spiele. Zur Darstellung und Modellierung von Geschichte im populären Computerspiel*, Bielefeld: transcript 2012; Kerschbaumer, Florian/Winnerling, Tobias (eds.): *Frühe Neuzeit im Videospiel. Geschichtswissenschaftliche Perspektiven*, Bielefeld: transcript 2014.

11 E.g., Nolden, Nico: *Geschichte und Erinnerung in Computerspielen. Erinnerungskulturelle Wissenssysteme*, Berlin: de Gruyter 2019; Bender, Steffen: *Virtuelles Erinnern. Kriege des 20. Jahrhunderts in Computerspielen*, Bielefeld: transcript 2012.

12 E.g., A. Chapman: *Digital Games as History*.

13 Lorber, Martin/Zimmermann, Felix (eds.): *History in Games. Contingencies of an Authentic Past*, Bielefeld: transcript 2020.

*Figure 1: DISCOVERY TOUR BY ASSASSIN'S
CREED: ANCIENT EGYPT*



Source: Ubisoft/Ubisoft Montreal 2018;
Screenshot by B. Beil

THE DISCOVERY TOUR AS A PARATEXT

The DISCOVERY TOUR was released in February 2018 as an expansion of the main game and has also been available as a standalone version since May 2018.¹⁴ In this game mode, there are no enemies and only rudimentary parkour obstacles—and thus no typical gameplay challenges. Players can freely explore virtual Egypt, including the Great Pyramid of Giza, and experience the game world as a huge open-air museum. In addition to the game's

14 Another DISCOVERY TOUR was released in 2019 for the sequel ASSASSIN'S CREED ODYSSEY (2018) and an additional expansion has been announced for the latest title of the series, ASSASSIN'S CREED VALHALLA (2020); cf. <https://www.pcgamer.com/assassins-creed-valhalla-will-add-druids-the-french-and-the-disco-very-tour-in-post-launch-dlc/>

protagonist, Bayek of Siwa, various non-player characters are available as avatars. The expansion includes 75 guided tours in the style of a museum multimedia guide, directing the player through the world along several short stops. The tours, which last between five and 20 minutes, focus either on specific monuments (e.g., “The Secrets of the Great Pyramid,” “The Great Library of Alexandria”) or on life in ancient Egypt (e.g., “Agriculture & Seasons,” “Evolution of Pottery in Ancient Egypt”).

The categorization of the DISCOVERY TOUR as a paratextual artifact proves difficult. Is it simply an additional game mode? Is it a serious game or an applied game (and/or primarily part of an image campaign by Ubisoft)? Or is the standalone version even a game in its own right and thus not actually a paratext of the main game? Of course, the problem of a paratextual classification of the DISCOVERY TOUR points first of all to the inconsistent use of the term paratext. Even in Gérard Genette’s original work,¹⁵ different definitions of the concept can be found¹⁶—apart from the issue that Genette developed his theory for literature (and that he would probably have regarded a media genre such as the “standalone video game expansion” with a certain degree of skepticism). Jan Švelch has proposed a heuristic distinction between three different definitions (or framings) of paratexts—*original*, *reduced*, and *expanded*:

- The *original definition* refers primarily to Genette’s work: “Elements that form a figurative threshold of a text and ground it in a socio-historical context. Ideally, they are subordinate to the text.”¹⁷ This definition also includes the distinction between peritext and epitext. Peritexts are directly connected to a work (the cover of a book, the opening credits of a film, the start menu of a video game), while epitexts are spatially removed (interviews, advertisements, making-ofs). An important (and not uncontroversial) aspect of Genette’s concept is the authorship of these

15 Genette, Gérard: *Paratexts: Thresholds of Interpretation*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1997; Genette, Gérard: *Palimpsests: Literature in the Second Degree*, Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press 1997.

16 Cf. Švelch, Jan: “Paratextuality in Game Studies: A Theoretical Review and Citation Analysis,” in: *gamestudies.org* 2 (2020); http://gamestudies.org/2002/articles/jan_svelch

17 Ibid.

epitexts: "They must be created by the text's producers or their associates."¹⁸

- The *reduced definition* was coined by Werner Wolf.¹⁹ This concept only considers peritexts as paratexts, "while various promotional materials located outside of the game were redefined as other types of framings."²⁰
- Finally, the *expanded definition* is the most open of the three approaches: "Any element that forms a figurative threshold of a text and grounds it in a socio-historical context. There are no limitations on authorship or cultural status of a paratextual element."²¹ The expanded definition thus also includes phenomena such as game journalism or fan fiction and fan art, which for Genette would fall into categories like hypertext or metatext. In film and television studies, the extended definition was popularised by Jonathan Gray's widely cited book *Show Sold Separately: Promos, Spoilers, and Other Media Paratexts*;²² in games studies, the monographs of Mia Consalvo²³ and Stephen Jones²⁴ are important points of reference.

Such a conceptual differentiation may be enlightening, but it also seems cumbersome, because ultimately, the different framings primarily reflect different disciplinary cultures and different epistemological interests. While the expanded definition is useful for research on community structures, fan cultures, or game criticism, the original definition has conceptual advantages in studying discourses of authorship. Finally, the reduced definition allows for

18 Wolf, Werner: "Introduction: Frames, Framings, and Framing Borders in Literature and Other Media," in: Bernhart, Walter/Wolf, Werner (eds.), *Framing Borders in Literature and Other Media*, Amsterdam: Rodopi 2006, pp. 1-40.

19 J. Švelch: "Paratextuality in Game Studies."

20 Ibid.

21 Ibid.

22 Gray, Jonathan: *Show Sold Separately: Promos, Spoilers, and Other Media Paratexts*, New York: New York University Press 2010.

23 Consalvo, Mia: *Cheating: Gaining Advantage in Videogames*, Cambridge, MA: MIT Press 2007.

24 Jones, Stephen E.: *The Meaning of Video Games: Gaming and Textual Strategies*, London/New York: Routledge 2008.

precise terminological differentiations (or at least shifts terminological escalations into a field beyond the paratext definition).

In this way, the DISCOVERY TOUR could be examined, e.g., within the framework of the expanded definition with regard to its discursive status as an educational game (or maybe as an adverggame), from discussions in expert circles²⁵ to the actual use in the classroom.²⁶ Another focus could be the authorship question: The DISCOVERY TOUR was developed by a small team within the Ubisoft Montreal studio led by Ubisoft's in-house 'franchise historian' Maxime Durand.²⁷ And finally, the question remains whether the DISCOVERY TOUR might be better defined as a hypertext, a transformation, or an adaptation; after all, the DISCOVERY TOUR is playable as a standalone expansion separate from the main game.

PARATEXTUAL PLAY

While some of these categorizing attempts will be briefly touched upon in the following, the focus of the analysis will be a different one. Because, in a certain way, all these paratextual definitions seem somehow unsatisfactory as they largely ignore the peculiar technical and aesthetical structure of the DISCOVERY TOUR, namely that it is almost the same game as the original. The DISCOVERY TOUR uses the same game world, the same characters, and most of the gameplay mechanics; only the combat system and certain elements of the parkour are missing. Also, the story world is apparently a different one, or perhaps there has just been a slight shift in perspective from assassin to tourist or museum visitor. The DISCOVERY TOUR illustrates the possibilities of transforming game worlds to an extent that clearly goes

25 Cf. Coert, Jean: "Discovery Tour by Assassin's Creed: Ancient Egypt," *H-SOZ-KULT* (2018); <https://www.hsozkult.de/webreview/id/rezwww-174>

26 Cf. LFK—Landesanstalt für Kommunikation Baden-Württemberg: "Assassin's Creed Origins—Discovery Tour" (2020); <https://games-im-unterricht.de/unterrichtskonzepte/assassins-creed-origins-discovery-tour>

27 Cf. Reparaz, Mikel: "Assassin's Creed—Origins Discovery Tour Q&A with Historian Maxime Durand," (2018); <https://news.ubisoft.com/en-us/article/46PIC3yAeikjDI652TayLm/assassins-creed-origins-discovery-tour-qa-with-historian-maxime-durand>

beyond a Director’s Cut, resulting in a blurring or interlacing of text and paratext.

Intersections of text and paratext are also the topic of René Glas’ essay *Paratextual Play*, in which he points out a special form of game making-ofs:

“Since the early 2000s, making-of material of digital games have developed in new directions, from being a purely external objects to becoming an integral part of digital games themselves. They have become something players encounter *during* play and as part *of* play, as well as something to collect and proudly display as a form of gaming capital.”²⁸

The making-of material thus subverts its form as a ‘simple’ epitext:

“Making-of material has become a feature which has a visible presence during play, and at times can only be accessed by unlocking them, which invites players to forms of paratextual play. In these play situations, paratext and text entangle.”²⁹

In addition to paratexts as an unlockable achievement, Glas also refers to other forms of entanglement at the end of his article: to *SUPER MARIO MAKER* (2015) as a kind of “a making-of Mario”³⁰ and to the so-called museum ending of *THE STANLEY PARABLE* (2013):

“In a postmodern take on the gaming experience, *THE STANLEY PARABLE* for instance has one ending during which you enter a museum which has an exhibition of the game’s own creation process, including a scale mockup of the main level design layout, outtakes from the recordings of the game’s narrator, concept art framed as

28 Glas, René: “Paratextual Play: Unlocking the Nature of Making-of Material of Games,” in: *DiGRA/FDG '16—Proceedings of the First International Joint Conference of DiGRA and FDG*, Dundee, DiGRA 2016, pp. 1-13, here p. 2; emphasis in original.

29 Ibid., p. 1.

30 A follow-up of this idea in the form of a detailed analysis of *SUPER MARIO MAKER* can be found in René Glas’ contribution to this volume: “If making-of material aims to convey how the creative process of a game took form, *SUPER MARIO MAKER* actually presents a situation where one could try out the process oneself.” (p. 134)

paintings and early models of furniture. The museum is something you encounter during regular play and as such never feels as an additional feature or in-game reward. It is a fitting element in a game which plays with game conventions and expectations.”³¹

Similar to *THE STANLEY PARABLE*, the *DISCOVERY TOUR* performs a shift from paratext to text. *THE STANLEY PARABLE* integrates (and transforms) its paratext into the main game by exhibiting it. The *DISCOVERY TOUR* maintains the separation between the main game and the paratext, but at the same time goes a step further by transforming the entire game world³² into an exhibition³³—in two ways, because the *DISCOVERY TOUR* also wants to be an open-air museum of ancient Egypt. The question of whether this twofold trans-

31 R. Glas: “Paratextual Play,” p. 11.

32 Such transformations of a game world can also be found in certain Valve games. The *HALF-LIFE 2* episodes (2006/2007) and the *PORTAL* games (2007/2011), for instance, offer an alternative game mode in which floating speech bubbles are placed in the game world. When the player clicks on these bubbles, short anecdotes from the development team can be heard, usually corresponding to the section of the game the player is crossing. Cf. Beil, Benjamin: “‘I Love How You Can See the Bottom of the Universe from This Room.’ The Real-Virtual Architecture of Davey Wreden’s *The Beginner’s Guide*,” in: Bonner, Marc (ed.), *Game, World, Architectonics. Transdisciplinary Approaches on Structures and Mechanics, Levels and Spaces, Aesthetics and Perception*, Heidelberg: Heidelberg University Publishing 2021, pp. 169-185.

33 The fact that all these examples include exhibitions may be a coincidence—or perhaps the reason is a certain structural similarity between museums and video games, which Nicole Carpenter recently pointed out in her essay *In-game Museums Are Great Because All Video Games Are Museums*: “Most video games are built as museums to themselves—inside the menus and beyond the stories are collections of items and lore. Instead of housing a world of information in grand, historic buildings, these museums are based in code. Each is an abstract retelling of the player’s journey thus far.” (Carpenter, Nicole: “In-game Museums Are Great Because All Video Games Are Museums,” *Polygon* (2021); <https://www.polygon.com/2021/1/24/22244838/video-game-museums-the-last-of-us-miles-morales>)

formation and musealisation³⁴ succeeds will be the subject of the last section of this chapter.

ASSASSIN'S CREED'S SELF-DISCOVERY TOUR

Ubisoft promotes the DISCOVERY TOUR as "a mode that will allow you to explore ancient Egypt without being interrupted by combat or quests. Purely educational, the mode is a virtual museum with guided tours and historical sites to discover."³⁵ Apart from the interesting choice of words "interrupted by combat or quests," which almost sounds like a critique of the main game, the label "purely educational" should, of course, be taken with a grain of salt. It is certainly the case that video games have now found their way into history lessons; the DISCOVERY TOUR is indeed sometimes recommended as teaching material.³⁶ However, the didactic potential of such games is promising but not uncontroversial³⁷—apart from the point that (educational) games

34 It could be argued that every musealisation is a twofold one, following Stephen Bann, who describes the ideal museum as an *ironic museum*, a museum that reveals itself as constructed and assembled, thus realizing an equal coexistence of different presentation and interpretation layers. However, these further complications will not be pursued here. Cf. Bann, Stephen: "Historical Text and Historical Object: The Poetics of the Musée de Cluny," *History and Theory* 17/3 (1978), pp. 251-266.

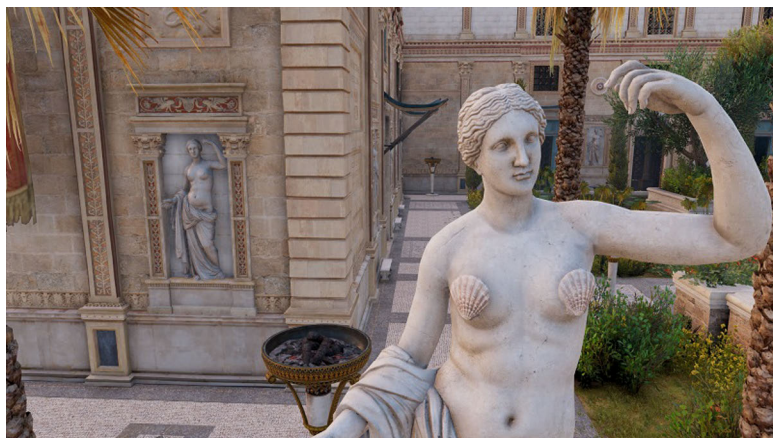
35 <http://support.ubisoft.com/en-gb/Article/000062699/Discovery-Tour-Mode-of-Assassins-Creed-Origins>

36 LFK: "Assassin's Creed Origins."

37 Cf. Bunnenberg, Christian: "Digitale Zeitreisen in die Vergangenheit? Computerspiele mit historischen Inhalten und geschichtskulturelles Lernen im Geschichtsunterricht," in: Aßmann, Sandra et al. (eds.), *Spielend lernen! Computerspiele(n) in Unterricht und Schule*, Düsseldorf/München: kopaed 2017, pp. 117-126; Kühberger, Christoph: "Computerspiele als Teil des historischen Lernens," in: Bernsen, Daniel/Kerber, Ulf (eds.), *Praxisbuch Historisches Lernen und Medienbildung im digitalen Zeitalter*, Bonn: BPB 2017, pp. 229-236; Wagner, Michael/Gabriel, Sonja: "Game-Based Learning—Computerspiele im Geschichtsunterricht," in: Bernsen, Daniel/Kerber, Ulf (eds.): *Praxisbuch Historisches Lernen und Medienbildung im digitalen Zeitalter*, Bonn: BPB 2017, pp. 337-346.

should always be didactically framed and linked to other learning media. They are not a “substitute for the textbook.”³⁸ The question of how successfully the DISCOVERY TOUR can provide knowledge about ancient Egypt cannot be answered by this chapter anyway. The following argumentation will rather highlight some of the pitfalls that arise from the transformation of an action-adventure open world to an open-air museum.

Figure 2: DISCOVERY TOUR BY ASSASSIN'S CREED: ANCIENT EGYPT



Source: Ubisoft/Ubisoft Montreal 2018; Screenshot by B. Beil

The absence of ludic challenges noticeably reduces the dissonance between the gameplay and the historical representation of the story world; the historical sites no longer fade behind ceaseless fighting, climbing, and sneaking activities. However, the change of genre to an educational game leads to some other dissonances. Unlike in the main game, in the DISCOVERY TOUR the intimate zones of all statues in the game world are covered with shells. This ‘cover-up action’ is mainly due to the regulations of the international

38 Jenkins, Henry et al.: “From Serious Games to Serious Gaming,” in: Ritterfeld, Ute et al. (eds.), *Serious Games. Mechanisms and Effects*, London/New York: Routledge 2009, pp. 448-468, here p. 449.

media markets.³⁹ While ASSASSIN'S CREED ORIGINS received an M-rating (Mature, 17+) in the United States, the DISCOVERY TOUR was approved for a T-rating (Teen, 13+). This means that the DISCOVERY TOUR can be used more flexibly in schools. In Germany, the USK (Unterhaltungssoftware Selbstkontrolle) gave the main game an age rating of 16+, while the DISCOVERY TOUR was approved for young people aged 12 and up—though the absence of fighting (and thus the killing of virtual characters) and not the covering of naked statues may have been crucial for this classification.

Beyond these adjustments, a different kind of criticism can be raised about the DISCOVERY TOUR as an educational game. The expansion, like the main game, works exceptionally well as a sensory experience, a simulation of an audio-visually magnificent, lively world. However, there are some clear shortcomings in the didactic potential, especially with regard to historiographical discourses. The historical details provided by the various guided tours are often rather brief and superficial. Additionally, these materials are usually presented as unambiguous scientific facts; academic debates and contradictions are largely ignored—or as John Walter puts it in his excellent essay *We Perhaps Need a Little Bit More Education*:

"I had been hoping for what had been promised—a delivery of the information gathered from academics, learned over the four years of making the game. [...] What I've got is something akin to a haphazard audio tour to distract tourists from how much they spent on the entry fee."⁴⁰

Historiographical debates shimmer through in some places, and the DISCOVERY TOUR becomes particularly interesting when the developers reveal that they have deliberately changed certain historical details: The Pyramids of Giza, e.g., were raised a few meters to make them more visible from a distance. As a result, they become more noticeable as landmarks and as a point of orientation within the open world. Such production notes offer small

39 Cf. Good, Owen S.: "Assassin's Creed Origins Guided Tour Mode Covers Up Nude Statues," *Polygon* (2018); <https://www.polygon.com/windows/2018/2/21/17037958/assassins-creed-origins-discovery-tour-statues-nudity>

40 Walker, John: "We Perhaps Need a Little Bit More Education: Assassin's Creed Origins' Discovery Tour," *RockPaperShotgun* (2018); <https://www.rockpapershotgun.com/2018/02/22/assassins-creed-origins-discovery-tour-review/>

but highly interesting glimpses into a design process constantly oscillating between historical, aesthetic, technical, and game-mechanical aspects. Unfortunately, they are very rarely found in the DISCOVERY TOUR.

Most of the information is presented as brief historical facts, even though in some cases a discussion of historiographical disputes would have been a perfectly suitable topic, as Stephen Totilo notes in his commentary on the ‘new’ chambers in the Great Pyramid of Giza: „a fantastic opportunity not just for virtual tourism but for an exploration of theoretical history.“⁴¹ While Houdin is briefly named in the “Secrets of the Great Pyramid” tour, his controversial position within academic circles is not mentioned.

The pitfalls of translating complex expert discourses into more accessible and popular formats are, of course, not only to be found in virtual worlds. The DISCOVERY TOUR is advertised by Ubisoft as a virtual museum, and indeed, the virtual ancient Egypt resembles an open-air museum in a certain way—however, not only in terms of its sensual qualities but also with regard to the didactic/discursive problems of this form of education.

“Open-air museums are audience-friendly; their presentation is easy to grasp. Crucial to their attractiveness is the possibility of a holistic/comprehensive presentation of areas of life. The realization of an open-air museum, however, places high demands on the detailed knowledge and scientific conscience of those responsible. In very few cases will archaeological knowledge be sufficient for a complete reconstruction. Rather, this is usually the result of scientific research, comparative observation, experimental experience, craftsmanship, and a good pinch of imagination. Archaeological reconstructions are therefore tools for thinking and approximations to historical snapshots; however, they can hardly ever claim to represent the full reality. Yet, reconstructions are undoubtedly thought-provoking, have an enormous visual impact, and remain in the visitor’s memory better than any other form of museum presentation.”⁴²

Thus, it is not without a certain irony that the DISCOVERY TOUR is problematic precisely because it recreates Ptolemaic Egypt in a particularly lavish

41 S. Totilo: “This Week’s Giza Pyramid Discovery.”

42 Höneisen, Markus: “Archäologische Museen zwischen Erlebnispark, Kunstausstellung und historischer Wissensvermittlung,” in: Fayet, Roger (ed.), *Im Land der Dinge. Museologische Erkundungen*, Baden: hier+jetzt Verlag 2005, pp. 58-70, here p. 65-66; translated by BB.

and detailed way and quickly makes players forget that it is only an approximation and ultimately a fiction. As in the case of the open-air museum, the “proclamation of an authentic place as an experience [...] makes the virtual world attractive,”⁴³ however, this “immersion in history [...] carries the danger of falling into a nostalgic rapture in a historicized Disneyland.”⁴⁴

The virtual setting of *ASSASSIN’S CREED ORIGINS* is technically too perfect and offers no room for historiographical blind spots. The *DISCOVERY TOUR* suggests that the Great Pyramid of Giza looked exactly like this. Discursive speculations and disputes do not shine through the photorealistic surface of the game world. Only very few players will have been surprised by the two ‘new’ chambers in the Great Pyramid of Giza—at least if they had not happened to read a certain epitext on *Kotaku*. So, what remains of the *DISCOVERY TOUR*? John Walker has made an interesting suggestion:

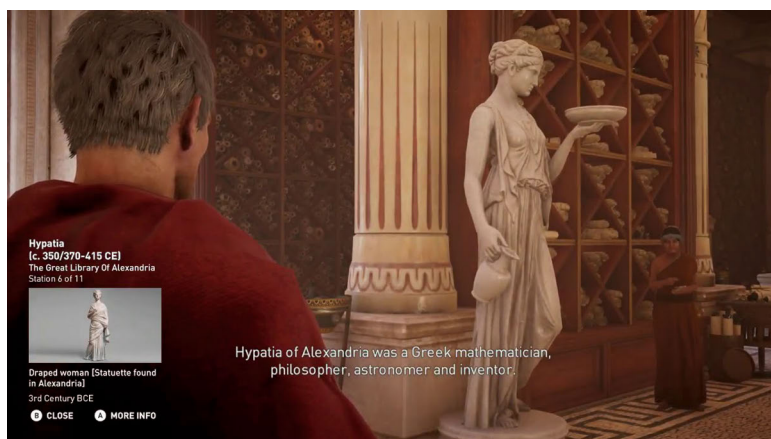
“The more I play, the more regions I visit and the more tours I follow, the more I think I understand what’s really happening here. Perhaps this is an exercise in frustration from a development team who worked extraordinarily hard to provide one of gaming’s most extraordinarily detailed places, that was then used as the backdrop for a very silly game. As I wander through the Library of Alexandria [...] what I sense from the nature of the tours is a desperation for people to know just how bloody hard the team worked to build this, and how incredibly accurate the depictions are. [...] See that statue? The one you just ran past and didn’t give a second glance, because you were trying to stab some made up man to death? That was Hypatia! And she was bloody brilliant! She was one of the greatest scientists of the day, and we made that statue based on the worn remains that still exist today, but meticulously restored it and put it in the Library exactly where we believe it would have stood! AND YOU DIDN’T EVEN LOOK AT IT!”⁴⁵

43 Scholze, Jana: *Medium Ausstellung: Lektüren musealer Gestaltung in Oxford, Leipzig, Amsterdam und Berlin*, Bielefeld: transcript 2004, p. 206; translated by BB.

44 Ibid.; translated by BB.

45 J. Walker: “We Perhaps Need a Little Bit More Education.”

Figure 3: DISCOVERY TOUR BY ASSASSIN'S CREED: ANCIENT EGYPT



Source: Ubisoft/Ubisoft Montreal 2018; Screenshot by B. Beil

Perhaps DISCOVERY TOUR's real potential does not lie in its ability to impart historical knowledge, for then it would be just another serious game, albeit a very pretty one. What remains may not be the sometimes interesting but also often quite dry or even banal snippets of historical information from the guided tours, but rather the rare production notes that show the constant struggles of the Ubisoft developers with their work, which is supposed to be a historical (story) world and an adventure playground at the same time. The historical setting of ASSASSIN'S CREED ORIGINS reveals itself in such moments as an artificial, a staged one, and the DISCOVERY TOUR comes into its own as a schizophrenic and fascinating paratext. The more interesting way to look at historical representations in video games, then, concerns their production, the question of how historical knowledge and historical materials find their way into a virtual game world, how they are formatted and assembled and fitted to (or forced into) the medium of video games—and in turn develop a paratextual life of their own.

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