

## ***Assassin's Creed, Origins and Downfall of Islamic Terrorism***

Reza Sattarzadeh Nowbari<sup>+</sup>

University of Nizwa, Oman

**Abstract.** The etymology of the word 'assassin' points to its origin in Arabic which is *haššašīn*, meaning hashish users which points to the Shia Nizari Ismailis who consumed hashish before carrying out their political killings. Under the leadership of Hassan-i Sabbah, they captured many fortresses in Persia and Syria and performed numerous assassinations, which in today world might be termed as 'acts of terrorism', from around 1080, after the first Crusade, till their downfall by Moguls in the 14<sup>th</sup> century.

In *Assassin's Creed*, we are presented with a modern day machine called 'Animus' which takes back the main character of the game, Desmond Miles, to the life of his ancestors, being able to control and view his movements which in this case turns out to be Altaïr ibn-La'Ahad, a member of the Hashshashin. Even though no mention of Hassan-i Sabbah has been made, but from the date of the game which is 1191, it could be argued that the character of Al Mualim is the same leader who becomes the last target of Altaïr, who brings an end to the sect.

Regardless of the first sentence of the game developers, which is shown at the beginning of the game, noting to the producers' lack of any religious dogmatism, it could be argued that the game has a lot of messages to its audience related to today's world. This paper is going to analyze the controversial points presented in the game like, why Altaïr (Desmond, a today, apparently, Christian) kills Al Mualim?, Who are the people after Desmond and his group?, Are they the descendants of Hashshashin (Today's Islamic Terrorists) and will we ever be presented with their leaders in the following series? The ultimate intention of the game developers will be examined by the use of dialogues taken from the game.

**Key Words:** *Assassin's Creed*, Islamic Terrorism, Video game cultures.

### **1. Introduction**

The 21<sup>st</sup> century media has been evolving on a very fast basis that the very simple video games of, say, 20 years ago, seem like a shadow. Those video games had one special stereotype, and that was their association with children's world, in which, only, a few adults entered. But this evolution within the last two decades has been so tangible that this sort of stereotyping cannot be accepted. Video games do matter as a form of media which can affect the psyche of the gamer so strongly that a part of his personality might be changed. But how exactly a video game can be interpreted and analyzed? Well, just like texts. According to Jones, Video games 'are meaningful less as narrative or symbolic "texts" to be interpreted than as complex forms for social activity.'<sup>1</sup> So Video Games, just like texts, are products of a society in which they have emerged.

This article aims at interpreting *Assassin's Creed* from a New Historicist point of view. According to New Historicism, texts (Video Games) are conceived not as mere reflectors of, but rather as active contributors to the historical, social, cultural, etc processes they illuminate. Any given event, and in this case video game, is a product of its culture, but it also affects the culture in return. In other words, all events *are shaped by and shape* the culture in which they emerge.<sup>2</sup>

21<sup>st</sup> century, and especially, the post 9/11 world has seen the clash of ideologies on an international scale, in which the USA has been seen as the power which calls for democracy in nations which are believed to be

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<sup>+</sup> Reza Sattarzadeh Nowbari Tel: +968 9725 9231  
E-mail address: reza\_s\_nobari@yahoo.com

unfamiliar with the term. Of course the scope of this research is not criticizing the US policies, but it must be born in mind that the USA controls the majority of what happens in world media, and video games is one of those media on which the effect of the US and its policies cannot be ignored. It can be seen as an efficient tool to penetrate into the psyche of the young gamers' generation of the target countries and engage them into believing things that might be difficult to understand within other types of media.

Religion has been a source of illumination as well as evil deeds for many within the past centuries. After terrorist attacks on the twin towers on 11<sup>th</sup> September, Islam's association with terrorism escalated within the western media and the Islamic nations and Muslims came to be seen as the supporters of the reign of Terror. They were stereotyped as spreaders of corruption and some westerners lost their respect for the religion they believed to be supporting the terrorists. Western media role in this stereotyping is undeniable. This condition had not been felt strongly within the realm of video games but it came to its peak with the release of Ubisoft's mostly anticipated *Assassin's Creed* which took the origins of this stereotyping to the very heart of the Crusades and implied Islam as the origin of modern Terrorism. In spite of the game developers assertion of having had a culturally divergent group for producing the game and the lack of any sort of dogmatism, which appears the first thing on the screen, it could be argued that the game is full of messages referring to the very present day and deciphering these messages can lead to a better understanding of this game.<sup>3</sup>

In the game we are taken back to the year 1191 when the third Crusade is ongoing between Muslims and Christians. Richard I of England, known as Richard the Lionheart, has captured the city of Acre and the Crusaders get ready to march for the south. The main objective is to capture the Holy Land of Jerusalem. Saladin, the defeated mayor of Acre, infuriated by the loss, hides his army in the ruins of Arsuf castle. On 7<sup>th</sup> September 1191, in the battle of Arsuf, Saladin's army was defeated severely which resulted in his army's routing.<sup>4</sup> This chaos endangers the entirety of the Holy Land which brings about some groups seeking power. One of these groups is Hashshashin which came to power under leadership of Hassan-i Sabbah. A passionate believer of the Isma'ili beliefs, Hasan-i-Sabbah was well liked throughout Cairo, Syria and most of the Middle East by other Isma'ilis, which led to a number of people becoming his followers. Using his fame and popularity, Sabbah founded the Order of the Assassins. While his motives for founding this order are ultimately unknown, it has been speculated that it was for his own political and personal gain and to also exact vengeance on his enemies. His motivation for political power probably came through what he thought to be dealings with other Muslims in the Middle East, particularly Sunnis, but because of the unrest in the holy land caused by the calling of the Crusades, Hasan-i-Sabbah found himself not only fighting for power with other Muslims, but also with the invading Christian forces.

Merriam-Webster's Collegiate Dictionary states that the English word Assassin has its origins in the Arabic word of *hashshāshīn*<sup>5</sup> which means the user of hashish. This hypothesis is not unanimously acknowledged. Amin Malouf states that "The truth is different. According to texts that have come down to us from Alamut, Hassan-i Sabbah liked to call his disciples Asasiyun, meaning people who are faithful to the Asās, meaning "foundation" of the faith. This is the word, misunderstood by foreign travelers that seemed similar to "hashish".<sup>6</sup> This group is considered to be the first Terrorist group in the world regardless of the origin of the word Assassin.

In pursuit of their religious and political goals, the Ismailis adopted various military strategies popular in the Middle Ages. One such method was that of assassination, the selective elimination of prominent rival figures. The murders of political adversaries were usually carried out in public spaces, creating resounding intimidation for other possible enemies.<sup>7</sup> Throughout history, many groups have resorted to assassination as a means of achieving political ends. In the Ismaili context, these assignments were performed by *fida'is* (devotees) of the Ismaili mission. "*Fida'i*" was the highest rank in Sabbah's order. The Assassins were generally young in age giving them the physical strength and stamina which would be required to carry out these murders. However, physical prowess was not the only trait that was required to be a "*Fida'i*". To get to their targets, the Assassins had to be patient, cold, and calculating. They were generally intelligent and well read because they were required to possess not only knowledge about their enemy, but his or her culture and their native language. They were trained by their masters to disguise themselves, sneak in to enemy territory and perform the assassinations instead of simply attacking their target outright. Their ultimate goal was to

spread peace all around the world but the method with which they followed this goal was a complete nutter. They believed that the annihilation of those who do not comply with their ideology will ultimately bring peace and tranquility.

This notion of the Isma'ili Assassin's is very similar to those of Abstergo in which, Desmond Miles, the protagonist of the game, and, who seems to be a Christian (because of his name) is placed. They are the Modern Templars. Abstergo are a company intent on world domination. Their 'aim' is for world peace, but the methods with which they wish to achieve this can be considered mad. They think that by controlling mankind, and killing those that aren't influenced by their power, they can achieve peace. Even their name betrays this secret: it's Latin for 'cleanse'.<sup>8</sup>

With the power of Animus, Miles is taken into the world of one of his ancestors, Altaïr Ibn-La'Ahad. Altaïr is one of the assassin's but not in Hasan-i-Sabbah's time. He comes to fame in the time of Rashid ad-Din Sinan who is considered to be the successor of Hasan-i-Sabbah. Altaïr Ibn-La'Ahad in Abaric language means 'Flying One - Son of no One' and Altair is also the brightest star in the constellation Aquilla which is in the shape of an eagle and that's why eagle has been chosen as the symbol of the game. In the game, no mention of a real life character is made but considering the atmosphere which surrounds the characters, it is not difficult to assume which historical character they are referring to. Al-Mualim, who is the leader of the assassin's can be regarded as Sinan and their headquarters which is a fortress located at the top of a hill can be seen as the famous Alamut from which the process of assassinations was controlled.

The game begins with Altaïr failing to assassinate the leader of The Templar Knights, Robert de Sable and recover the Assassin order's treasure. For failing to do so, Altair is stripped of his rank, skills and weapons, with an offer to redeem himself by the leader of the Assassin order, Sinan. Altaïr is told to ride into the Kingdom and assassinate nine Templar leaders who are said to be exploiting the hostilities created by the Third Crusade and to help stabilize the Kingdom, allowing Sinan to bring a new age of peace to the Holy Land. Throughout the story however, Altaïr begins to question his orders as he discovers further knowledge from each of his targets, their intensions and conspiracy stories. Having assassinated all his targets, Altaïr realizes that he is a part of a bigger plan which its intentions are far different than those he (Desmond) has been told by his masters. And this enlightenment results in his very final battle with Al-Mualim (Sinan). But the point which must be born in mind is that it is not really Altaïr who fights Al-Mualim, but Desmond Miles who is in control of Altaïr's actions. From this comparison, it could be argued that Abstergo, which has kidnapped Desmond, is a modern day group of *Hashshashin* which trains the psyche of a group of people based on *Hashshashin's* beliefs and turns them into *fida'is* and uses them for their devilish purposes which is the famous manifesto of *Hashshashin*, preventing war and keeping peace by assassinating people.

The final battle between Altaïr and Al-Mualim is divided into three sections where each section has a cut scene in which there is a dialogue between the two opponents and this dialogue has some points, which their deciphering helps a better understanding of and intention behind this game's development. The dialogue begins like this:

- T: No, what's happening?
- M: So student returns.
- T: I have never been want to run.
- M: Never been want to listen either.
- T: I still live because of it.
- M: What will I do with you?
- T: Let me go.
- M: Oh, Al-Taïr, I hear the hatred in your voice, feel its heat, let you go, that would be unwise.
- T: Why are you doing this?
- M: I found proof.
- T: Proof of what?
- M: That nothing is *true* and everything is *permitted*. Come, destroy the betrayer. Send him from this world.

Al-Mualim reiterates the manifesto behind the ideology of *Hashshashin* where you are permitted to do anything to spread the so-called peace in the world. How can this be interpreted in the 21<sup>st</sup> century post-9/11 world? Considering culture as a semiotic system and a network of signs, then it can be asserted to be

resistant to disciplinary hegemony. New Historicists are persistently aware that history is both what happened in the past (a set of events) and an account of those events (a story); historical truth arises from a critical reflection on the adequacy of the story that is told. According to Stephen Greenblatt History is, initially a kind of discourse, which is not a denial that there are real events.<sup>9</sup> It is no longer tenable to think of history as some sort of detachable background to iconic works of verbal (or other kinds of) art. History and literature (*video games*) are mutually imbricated.<sup>10</sup> In a world where Islam is constantly associated with different forms of Terrorism, How can the words of Al-Mualim be interpreted? It must not be forgotten that the person who controls the action of Al-Taïr is Desmond Miles who is apparently a Christian. Can this battle be seen as the clash between Islam and Christianity? In a video game the result of the final battle is explicitly clear, the good guy wins and the bad guy dies. Here are the final words between Al-Taïr and Al-Mualim:

- M: Impossible. The student does not defeat the teacher.
- T: لا شيء واقع مطلق بل كل ممكن<sup>11</sup>
- M: So it seems. You have won then. Go and claim your prize.
- T: You held fire in your hand old man. It should have been destroyed.
- M: Destroy the only thing capable of ending the Crusades and creating true peace? Never
- T: Then I will.
- M: We will see about that. (in the background) I applied my heart to know wisdom and to know madness and folly, I perceive that this also was a chasing after wind, for in much wisdom, is much grief. And he who increases knowledge, increases sorrow.<sup>12</sup>

The western reader is apparently confused after reading these lines since one of the most essential parts of the dialogue which carries a lot of meaning with itself is said in Arabic and not English (which is the official language of the game). The western audience of the game has been excluded from this section and this very iteration of the motto of the game from Al-Taïr can be seen as a message to the Arabic-conscious audience of this game who are stereotyped as Muslims and the person who gives this message in none but a Christian. Al-Taïr, in one way or another, double-crosses his master by using his own words in his own language to take his revenge. Is it not some sort of extremism? Are we literally on the verge of another Crusade or are we already fighting one? If in today's world Islam is seen as the religion which is pigeon-holed as extremist, what can the significance of these comments be? When extremism is addressed by another form of extremism, will not the result be the escalation of the chaos which has resulted in the spilling of the blood of many innocent people from different religions and ideologies? How far should it go? The intention behind this perception is by no means a pro-Islamist one but a pro-humanitarian. The constant re-indication of one religion's link with acts of Evil cannot be an appropriate way of disseminating peace. *Nothing is true, but everything is NOT permitted.*

## 2. Notes

- Steven E. Jones, *The Meaning of Video Games Gaming and Textual Strategies* (New York: Routledge: 2008), 2.
- Lois Tyson, *Critical Theory Today* (New York: Routledge, 2006), 283.
- As a New Historicist researcher, I believe that nothing is absolute in this world and that includes religion as well. I hope the reader would not make any misconceptions about my presented argument. I have no strong religious beliefs of any type but I believe that addressing and representing an extremist movement in an extreme way, not only does not eradicate it, but also escalates the situation.
- Helen J. Nicholson, ed., *The Chronicle of the Third Crusade: The Itinerarium Peregrinorum et Gesta Regis Ricardi* (New York: Ashgate, 1997), 241.
- *Merriam-Webster's Collegiate Dictionary* (Springfield: Merriam-Webster Inc, 2003), 68.
- Amin Malouf, *Samarkand* (New York: Interlink, 1988), 116.
- Farhad Daftary, *A Short History of Ismailis: Traditions of a Muslim Community* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2010), 129.

- For more on Assassin's Creed see <http://www.computerandvideogames.com/175552/blog/assassins-creed-ending-explained/>
- Stephen Greenblatt, *Greenblatt The Reader* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2005), 3.
- *ibid.*
- In Arabic: Nothing is true, everything is permitted. This is the motto of the game.
- Ecclesiastes 1:17-18

### 3. References

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