

Assassin's Creed III: The Complete Unofficial Guide, a Teacher's Limited Edition

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100% Synchronization

A game in the sandbox genre is typically identified by its open atmosphere, variety of challenges, and its collections of hidden objects designed to force a player to explore the world to obtain “100% Synchronization” or to beat the game in its entirety. *Assassin's Creed III (ACIII)* is no different. Set in the age of the American Revolution, the game is built upon a sprawling landscape of colonial society, with everything a gamer could want from an open-world, action adventure game: naval combat, horseback chases, gunfights, a freedom to choose your own pace, a robust, narrative-based main mission line, and hundreds of bonus achievements, challenges and collectables.

ACIII does all of this, and it goes further to embrace a massive connection to factual representations of historically researched people, places and events throughout its plotline and extras. In his review of the *ACIII*, entitled "An alternate history, with footnotes", Martens (2012) describes in detail how the historical details included in the game outshine the actual game play. He suggests that because of the abundance of references and experiences tied to factual events, places, and people, the game "could be more fun to experience as a historical fact-checker than a player". It is exactly two of those types of players who present this well played reading of *ACIII*. Licensed as social studies educators, we sought out this game for the very purpose of diving deeply into its accuracies and inaccuracies with the goal of critically examining the game. We did

so to gain a satisfaction at what content from the American Revolution it portrays accurately, and also to explore material where we could instruct youth to use the game to be critical of how history is told.

To be more precise of the position we took when we began playing this game, it must be understood that the difference between the historian and the history teacher is a difference in purpose. Both concern themselves with history and have a true passion and excitement for it. Historians, however, typically research and critique historic sources with an intent of building out a familiarity in regards to their area of expertise. Whether through writing, lectures, discussions and debates, their interactions are then shared and disseminated with peers who have both a similar interest in content as well as in the skills required to research successfully. On the other hand, history teachers, especially those in the elementary and secondary level in at-risk communities, must work with youth who might find their passion irrelevant and the skills required for uncovering historic truths unnecessary. The challenge for educators is to both study source material effectively and to resolve to replicate the research process with these youth in an innovative way. However, this is increasingly difficult for youth in an era of technology, video games, instant gratification and dissemination of information.

One solution is to approach the teaching of history in the same manner in which a large population of students is most engaged: through gaming. It is for this reason we were first drawn to *ACIII*. However, for this game to work with youth in a learning environment, it must first satisfy several criteria. McCall (2011) is an educator who has written about the effective use of historical simulation video games in the classroom, and he maintains historical simulation video games must have historical accuracies embedded deep in their core systems, and these core systems must provide “defensible models of historical systems” (McCall, 2011, p. 28).

While writing prior to the release of *ACIII*, McCall (2011) argued the

Assassin's Creed series largely misses on these two points. However, through our attempts to reach 100% Synchronization as both players and historical critics, we have decided *ACIII* does in fact deeply integrate historical accuracies into the core gameplay further than the previous titles in the series ever even attempted. Furthermore, we argue by design, the plot points and characters depicted by the game with greatest historical inaccuracies do so in moments of history where little primary evidence can be provided to their exactitude. In several interviews since the release of *ACIII*, chief scriptwriter, Corey May has acknowledged the use of unknowns and mystery in the game's design, and further continued to state he hoped players would have "the ability to explore some of the more nuanced elements of the founding of the United States (Clark, 2012).

In these moments of nuance and where historical truth is unclear, Gerwin (2009) argues youth can be critical of these moments, and consider pieces of evidence available with intent to make their own judgments about what might have actually happened. It is this application of critical judgment of the game and the history itself which makes *ACIII* a viable source to investigate. It is within this framework, which we would like to provide a close reading of the game from the experience of someone who is explicitly playing the game with a critical lens towards using it for the purpose of their own personal learning. And in an effort towards our own 100% Synchronization inside of the game and out, we will include both the tools we used to play, and our thoughts on using it as a tool for teaching youth.

ACIII: History Employed for Evil?

In *Assassin's Creed III*, the player takes on the role of Desmond Miles and engages in his battle against the Templar Knights. In order to succeed in this fight, the player (through Desmond) uses a machine called the Animus to recreate memories of Desmond's ancestors. In this story, there are two ancestors of important value to Desmond, and thus worth experiencing—first as Haytham Kenway and secondly, as his son, Connor. Hay-

tham is an English-born nobleman, a leader of the Colonial Templars, and a fictional character. Connor is introduced later in the game, and is also fictional; however, his role makes up a larger percentage of the game play, and represents the primary set of eyes through which the events of the American Revolution are presented. The use of Connor, who is part English and part Kanien'keha:ka (or Mohawk), offers the player an opportunity to view a perspective not often experienced or studied during the time of the American Revolution. This allows the player to be critical of events in the game and out, and also for the designers to introduce key plot elements which play on the player's position on the outside (1).

Prior to the introduction of Connor Kenway, the early stages of the game introduce mostly fictional game play, though there are several bursts of historical content to observe. However, it is after the player first arrives in the colonies, where the open exploration of history is introduced. Immediately after debarking the ship, which carried the Haytham across the Atlantic, the player is greeted by a somewhat wily and old Benjamin Franklin who encourages the player to run around Colonial Boston looking for lost pages to his almanac. The pages are scattered throughout the different stages, and can be collected at any time.

This is the first of many challenges where the player is asked to explore the world at their leisure, and in doing so, to find hidden objects of varying value. The most hardcore players will seek out and hope to find all of these items in order to further progress towards 100% Synchronization. Items hidden throughout the game include the almanac pages, synchronizations points, trinkets, treasure chests, feathers, and caves. While the task of locating these items offers little historical value to the critical player, the task of surveying their surroundings encourages the player to be constantly investigating everything they encounter in the vast environments of Boston and New York, as well as the frontier and naval stages. The designers *ACIII* greatly reward those players who do take time to explore their surroundings in this way. The environment itself is per-

haps one of the greatest assets the game possesses. Being able to show the expansive and incredibly detailed account of Colonial Boston, New York, and the wilderness beyond their borders is an opportunity not to be taken lightly. While an impressive environment was present in previous games, it is truly highlighted in *ACIII*. The attention to detail on the buildings, wildness throughout the wilderness, and navigation of ships across the Atlantic Ocean is incredible. The synchronization points hidden at the top of steeples and towers scattered throughout provide an opportunity to look out on panoramas and see, a near match to what the people living during that time experienced (Clark, 2012). Exceptional views the player cannot miss include the mass of ships docked in the port, smoke stacks rising above low level buildings, churches, businesses, and the sea of “Red Coats” and “Loyalists” below. For the historian, there is no greater thrill than being able to place yourself amidst the history you study. For players, these breathtaking viewpoints encourage further reason to explore and engage in the environment.

The environment presents a visually appealing and historically accurate setting for the game to take place. However, in order for the game to sincerely appease the historical critical player there must be a strong emphasis on historical content built within the missions. While the game’s major characters and storyline are fictional it is closely intertwined with historical events, characters, and details.

***ACIII*: The Official, Official Guide**

In order to complete the missions of the main storyline, and for our own quest for 100% Synchronization, we sought out the help of the accompanying guidebook, *Assassin’s Creed: The Complete Official Guide, Collector’s Edition*. Designed and published by Piggyback interactive Limited, the collector’s edition guidebook fully complimented our game play. The animations used in its pages to guide a player through a particularly challenging mission are well designed and innovative (see Figure 1).

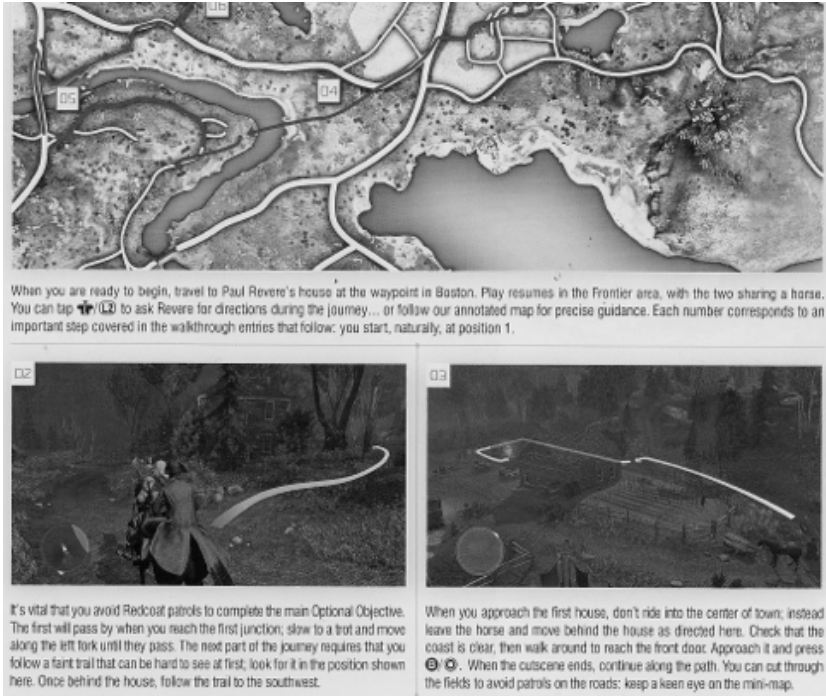


Figure 1: The use of arrows and recreated maps to guide a player to navigate Boston both in game and in history.

As an added bonus, the guide provides ample supplementary material surrounding both the design of *ACIII*, and its relevant historical plot points. There is an entire section entitled history vs story dedicated to uncovering the mysteries of the different plot points. Vetted by May, the lead scriptwriter, this section provides beautiful detail to the historical critic of this game. It is through material provided by May in this section that we were able to break down some of the most intense plot points and critical historical junctures of the game.

Charles Lee

Outside of *Assassin's Creed*, Charles Lee was a British soldier and general in the Continental Army, and these same details of his life are present in the game. *ACIII* then takes particular unknown aspects of his life and

exaggerates them to fit the story. During gameplay as Connor Haytham, the player is constantly battling Lee over a variety of issues, including control of the land where Haytham's people reside. It is also revealed that Lee is actually a Templar Knight (one of a number of characters who represent this more fictitious plotline in the game). As a Templar, Lee is implicated, along with another character Thomas Hickey, in an assassination attempt of George Washington and other plots to undermine the efforts of the American Revolution. While this plotline might not reflect historical accuracy, May acknowledged how this fits inline with some unknowns about Lee and his inability to precede Washington as commander-in-chief (Beatty & Pargney, 2012, p. 333) (see Figure 2). By using Lee as an enemy to Washington, the game exploits an unknown about Lee—that he was a poor politician and political entity, and a more aggressive military leader than Washington—to further the plot of the game. This gives historical critics an exemplary opportunity to first examine the accuracy of the game, and then to be cautious of widely held notions about Lee and Washington.

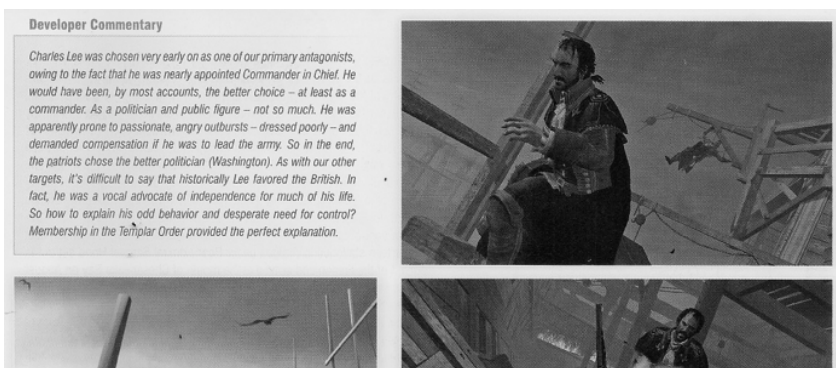


Figure 2: The Truth about Charles Lee as described by scriptwriter Corey May.

The Boston Massacre

Historical events, too, are exaggerated when necessary to intertwine with the story. The events leading up to and causing the Boston Massacre provide another unique opportunity to critique both the game and the traditional telling of the history of the event itself. Historians have wide-

ly debated who instigated the blood bath, but it is known that several civilians were killed and wounded at the hands of British regulars stationed in Boston on March 5, 1770. In *ACIII*, the massacre is triggered by Templars in order to frame Connor Haytham, though the reason for this framing is unclear to the player at the time of the incident (see Figure 3). This reflects the many unknowns surrounding the actual cause for the firing outburst, and by design, May stated in the collector's guide, the use of a fictional character like the Templar to instigate the carnage "puts an end to the discussion about 'who started it' (Beatty & Pargney, 2012, p. 322).



Figure 3: The start of Boston Massacre remains controversial in *ACIII*.

Assassin's Creed: Revelations

Assassin's Creed III, and our quest as educators to reach 100% synchronization uncovered many truths and mysteries surrounding the American Revolution. There are far more missions and characters than we can describe here which incorporate connections between fiction and non-fiction. It is the challenge for the player, and also the learning opportunity, for to focus on the analysis of these characters and events much like they would any other historical source to determine the bias and agenda behind the design of what is being studied. Players might focus on different controversial elements, and having to differentiate between historically accurate and fictional events in this way is higher order thinking that requires research and an analysis of primary and secondary documents with a focus on uncovering these biases and agendas.

Analysis on the scale provided by *ACIII* when a player attempts to reach 100% Synchronization simply does not take place amongst novice historians and researchers, especially when information is provided to the students through many other source documents and readings. Even if given the exhaustive list of primary and secondary sources used by the research team when designing this game, it would only be possible for the extreme experts of the era to uncover the details provided so plainly inside the game world to the player.

Endnotes

- (1) The research efforts put into developing Connor's character are widely discussed online, and are discussed heavily in the interview with Clark (2012). Efforts to maintain cultural relevancy and accuracy included the full-time employment of a historian knowledgeable in Kanien'keha:ka culture as well as traditional Mohawk speakers for the voice over rolls.

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