




History, design and archaeology: The reception of Julius Caesar and the representation of gender and agency in *Assassin's Creed Origins*



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In 2017, Ubisoft Montreal launched the game, *Assassin's Creed Origins*, with its historical background placed in Egypt by the time of the arrival of Julius Caesar. It is focusing on his involvement in Cleopatra and Ptolemy XIII's struggle for the throne, with the plot culminating with his assassination in 44 BCE. The main goal of this article is to make an in-depth analysis of the reception of Julius Caesar in *Assassin's Creed Origins* – a venture that, as is demonstrated throughout the article, necessarily passes through an examination of Caesar's in-game relations and attitudes towards the other historical and fictional characters around him, especially Cleopatra, Bayek and Aya. The analysis of the relationships between Caesar and these other characters reveals several decisions of the game developers that can be better understood through a gender-based examination. It is proposed here that there is in the game a clear-cut representation of men and women's activities and roles that are, in large part, structured the way they are due to current discourses and issues concerning female agency in the contemporary world.

Keywords: Julius Caesar; Cleopatra; Gender in Antiquity; archaeology; ancient history; videogames; pop culture; Assassins; creed history; Roman past; classical reception; popular culture.

Introduction

Developed by Ubisoft Montreal, *Assassin's Creed* (AC) is one of today's most successful game franchises with an estimated revenue of at least \$300 million and more than 100 million copies sold worldwide (Money Inc. 2016) since the launch of its first instalment in 2007. It has also sprung to other medias with several books, comics and even a Hollywood theatrical release (2016), establishing itself as a true pop culture phenomenon of the 21st century. Over the course of 11 years, 20 games were developed – available for multiple platforms – with the 21st instalment launched in October 2018. That being said, what makes AC a particularly interesting case of study is that beyond its economic aspect – a multi-million dollar franchise – is the idea of past societies' interactive reconstructions, which somehow allows a re-living experience of historical events.

The plots of AC games take place in a universe that mirrors our own with a few exceptions of which the most notable being the existence of a global conglomerate¹ run by a group of people who wants to literally control the heart and minds of human beings by using technological artefacts of a lost pre-historic civilisation – the Isu. Against them, and fighting for humankind's free will, are the Assassins. AC games revolve around finding these artefacts – which, as they emerged throughout history, were hidden by the Assassins and scattered all around the world – before the enemy does. To this end, the games present players with a machine called the *Animus*, which enables a person to access the 'genetic memories' inherited from their ancestors, allowing them to relive key moments² of the ancestor's life. Putting aside all the conspiracy and pseudoscience involved in this premise – depending mostly on the player's suspension of disbelief – and bearing in mind that AC is a product primarily focused on entertainment, the historical background of each game, nevertheless, becomes central to their narrative.

AC's players have thus been allowed to visit different periods and places: starting in 1191 CE with the third crusade as the historical background and walking recreations of the streets of Jerusalem,

1. Abstergo Industries is, in game, one of the world's richest companies and a front for modern Templars. It has several branches, including in a very meta-move by Ubisoft, an entertainment division that develops Assassins' Creed-like games.

2. That is moments in which the ancestor came in contact with the Isu artefacts.

Damascus and Acre (*Assassin's Creed I* 2007); 1476–1512 CE in the Italian Renaissance as the historical background and visiting Florence, Venice and Rome (*Assassin's Creed II* 2009; *Assassin's Creed Brotherhood* 2010); to the Colonial Era, passing by the American Revolution (*Assassin's Creed III* 2012); and the Golden Age of Piracy in the Caribbean Sea, allowing players to freely roam Nassau, Havana, Kingston and many other cities (*Assassin's Creed IV: Black Flag* 2013). The examples mentioned here are indeed very far from a comprehensive list of periods and places made available by the franchise, but rather an illustration of the fact that, up to its 19th instalment, there was a progressive line in the historical accounts, which changed with the release of *Assassin's Creed Origins* (ACO) in 2017.

ACO takes players further back in time, between 49 and 44 BCE, to the last years of the Ptolemaic Dynasty ruling Egypt. The game's historical background revolves around the growing influence of Rome in Egyptian affairs, particularly expressed in Cleopatra's power struggle with Ptolemy XIII, her alliance with Julius Caesar, and the story culminating with his assassination in Rome. There are two fictional playable characters in ACO, namely Bayek and his wife Aya, representing a moral authority in Egypt and some sort of police or sheriff status. Whereas Bayek is almost solely concerned with revenge for the assassination of his infant son, a quest that only incidentally takes him into contact with influential and famous historical characters, Aya, in turn, is fully involved in the political machinations of the period, devoting all her efforts to make Cleopatra the sole ruler of all of Egypt.

Considering the context of AC games, and ACO in particular, this article focuses primarily on a study of the in-game reception of Julius Caesar, presenting and analysing in detail all the instances in which he appears, speaks and otherwise acts. Considering the proper nature of the game narrative – both in terms of visuals and of written script – it would be impossible to understand these actions, and consequently, his reception, without a joint assessment of the other historical and fictional characters that he interacts with, especially, as mentioned, Cleopatra, Bayek and Aya.

In this sense, on the one hand, special attention is paid to Caesar's attitudes towards Cleopatra in which a specific dynamic can be seen – a dynamic that, in many ways, differs in tone from contemporary representations of them in classical sources and historiography. On the other hand, in Caesar's interactions with the fictional characters, these differences become sharper, revealing several issues concerning the game's development team's choices about current topics, especially the question of female agency, political protagonism and empowerment.

Theory of reception and representation: The development team and the characters

The first element that needs to be noted about ACO is that it takes place around the end of the Hellenistic period.

Historically, Rome is rising to power after centuries of military victories, and since Sulla, Rome is often interfering in Egyptian politics, especially by aiding someone to obtain the throne (cf. Shatzman 1971; Thompson 2008:310–321). During its last interference, Pompey played a crucial part in leading Ptolemy XII, Cleopatra's father, back to power in Egypt. However, Rome is not an established power within Egypt, because, as historiography points out, Octavian only conquers Ptolemaic Egypt in 30 BCE – 14 years after the game's plot occurs (Gruen 2008:148–151). The importance of these observations resides on the fact that, by all accounts, ACO is neither a game about Rome nor Romans, but rather about Egyptians and Greeks. The vast majority of activities available for the players, the characters they meet or the settlements they enter are clearly of Greek or Egyptian nature, and when it comes to language, Latin is almost never heard.³

However, when it comes to the ACO's main quest, which concerns the fictional characters Bayek and Aya, it is important to note that their plot is deeply intertwined with Cleopatra's struggle with Ptolemy XIII, which, in turn cannot be dissociated from Julius Caesar and the Roman influence. Therefore, when analysing the reception of Julius Caesar in ACO, it must be kept in mind that: (1) it represents, quantitatively speaking, a small fraction of all the playable hours the game offers, however; (2) qualitatively, it relates to the main part of the game.⁴ Bearing in mind these considerations, this article starts with the discussion of two concepts that will serve as the theoretical framework through which the characters in the game will be analysed and understood, namely the theory of reception and the concept of representation.

Reception involves, as Martindale (2006:12) has shown, the 'acknowledgment that the past and present are always implicated in each other'. It is not, however, a discussion about a simple presentist versus historicist approach to the past, but rather an understanding that present issues, worries and questions inform any gaze into the past, and simultaneously, the past informs the present. In this sense, it is an undisputed fact that different readings of historical periods were enabled by different contexts, and by the diversity of social and cultural realities of human experience through time leading up to the present. Hence, in this article, reception is understood as a means of analysing these different readings of the past, without, however, incurring a fruitless debate of 'original' versus 'distortions', or 'right' versus 'wrong' interpretations of past events and characters. Rather, as Batstone (2006) has argued, it is important to assess and analyse all the ambivalences and possible readings of the past, and raise questions about their 'meaning' and different ways of currently 'understanding' them. Such an approach is, then attentive to all the political, social and cultural issues that surface, together with these readings and demand of the

3. Literally speaking, as much of the games' inside dialogues and expressions are either in Egyptian or Greek.

4. Also called the 'main campaign' or 'official campaign'.

researcher to assess why certain elements were received in that specific manner.

When considering these aspects of reception, directly connected to a study of Classics or Ancient History, it becomes clear as Beard and Henderson (1995:107) have noted that:

Classics cannot ever be a subject safely locked away in a past, 2,000 years distant. For Classics continually finds richer texture in its works of art and literature – its meanings changed and renewed – from the multiplication of reactions and reworkings among its vast community of readers across the millennia.

It is also crucial to understand, as Pourcq (2012:224) notes, that reception always ‘refers to an *interactional* model of engaging with the (classical) past’. In fact, Martindale (2006) too, emphasises the fact that the term *reception* was chosen by classicists over others, such as ‘tradition’ and ‘heritage’, to stress the active nature of engagement by the receivers.

The active character of reception leads to the second concept mentioned in this study, namely that of representation. Representation is one of the most complex and debated concepts in humanities and social sciences, and therefore the discussion here will centre solely on the specific uses in this research, rather than a broad discussion of its uses. Spivak (1988), in her paradigmatic article ‘Can the Subaltern Speak?’, tackled the issue of representation, demonstrating that this is a concept that must be understood in two different manners: proxy and portrait, or as in Spivak’s discussion, *vertreten* and *darstellen*.

At first glance, it could be imagined that ACO is solely a representation as in the ‘portrayal’ of the past: as a videogame, it surely is a visual experience that proposes a hypothetical reconstruction (cf. Clark 2010), or at least, an educated reimagination of Egyptian settlements and quotidian life. It entails both a descriptive and symbolic form of representation that ‘stands for’ the actual objects. In this sense, considering the presence of material culture in games, archaeology has always been present for (re)creations and design; at least since Indiana Jones and Lara Croft became huge franchises. Thus, in a potential exploration of the idea of representation as portrayal in video games, especially through archaeology, it is important to recognise not only sources of inspiration, but also the potentially dangerous misconceptions (Meyers & Reinhard 2015:137–149).

Archaeology is historically understood as dealing with deep past and qualified as a discipline to document (on a rolling basis) the human experience through its materiality. If so, it is more accurate to think that the so-called archaeologists of Late Capitalism (or of the recent past) are dealing with planned obsolescence with annual typologies and seriation on a volume and scale occurring at a rate much faster than what is observed in the past. Phenomena, such as ‘Big Data’ and a globalised shared market of billions of living people, continue to make, accumulate and discard things (Reinhard 2018:3–5). Among the contemporary methods of preserving cultural heritage in archaeology during the last two decades,

videogames have proved to be an interactive visual media able to incorporate virtual heritage in a highly appealing way. Because the methods of preservation rely mostly on archiving and digitalisation as foundations for developing various virtual heritage applications, each videogame represents a valuable artefact reflecting technological, socioeconomic and historical issues of its creation (Bontchev 2015:43–58). Videogames are then an essential and integrated part of modern cultural heritage, integrating art, storytelling and digital technology.

Even games that are sold as ‘historically accurate’, including most ‘themed’ videogames, are, however, not about accuracy, but about fun. In fact, they need to be fun rather than historically accurate from a sales point of view. In this sense, it is possible to observe that the AC franchise has since its very inception taken several liberties with ‘historical accuracy’ in favour of entertainment value (The Gamer 2017). Nonetheless, mystery, exoticism and epic are ‘best-selling’ traits in which the past is viewed as a free franchise. The sense of discovery and wonder is rooted in archaeology, and visual, interactive and narrative cues are quite effective in causing a sense of awe in players. The environmental narratives of games do not need to be fully explained. Goals are clearly defined and linked to the main story and a diversity of environmental and cultural factors are added through random events. The possibility of creating a new universe with a high degree of interactivity and agency, allied to challenges based on problem-solving and non-linear narratives, helped to develop intuitive learning about dynamics, content and environments. Thus, a key finding for game design practice in archaeology is how designing through different narrative structures afforded different outcomes and perspectives on the past (Rubio-Campillo, Cela & Cardona 2012:347–356).

Therefore, games do not simply portray the past, even when considering the material aspects concerning it. They rather create (or attempt to recreate) the past in a way that may be argued that ACO also incurs the idea of acting as a proxy to the past. It speaks not only about life in Antiquity, but also – and quite literally – it tries to speak for the ancient people, giving them a voice when conveying dialogues between characters, or when showing supposed re-enactments of the quotidian life of ancient cities. In this case, Caesar and Cleopatra are not only being portrayed by the game, and their images are not simply brought as an evocation of the presence of these past characters such as images reconstructed from busts. They are also given a voice and agency: they have their own ideas, agendas and desires. They express what they want, what they think and what they know.

The in-game representation of these characters ends up replacing the historical figures not only for the fact that, as Spivak (1988) points out in her conclusion, one cannot speak for another – for there is always a problem of communication and (mis-)understanding between them – but because they are unavoidably embedded by the present readings and

discourses about them. Each and every word or action projected by characters – be it Caesar, Cleopatra or the fully fictional Bayek and Aya – will always correspond to a set of ideas and concepts about the past that the game's development team had about them; it is this set of ideas and concepts that are being transmitted to the players into the present. Hence, reception theory becomes central to understanding ACO's representations: the discourses about that past and their transmission or diffusion in the present is not here – nor ever – innocent or naïve. It ensues a connection with current discourses, intertwining itself with political and cultural issues that, as mentioned, demand to be questioned.

Julius Caesar in Antiquity: Master politician, great general and restless lover

Before starting to analyse Julius Caesar's reception in ACO, it is important to make a few considerations about how he is depicted in ancient sources both by some of his contemporary colleagues as well as some of the later commentators on his life. It should be said, however, that as explained in the last section, the goal is not to take these documents as the 'original' in the sense of the 'truth' about Caesar, and subsequent representations as possible 'distortions' or 'inaccurate' narratives. On the contrary, it is well understood that a primary source by itself is neither 'historically accurate' anymore, nor does it present a 'true narrative' about the past just because it is temporarily closer to the events it narrates (cf. Certeau 1988; Jenkins 1991). Rather, and specifically to this case, these ancient documents are the carefully thought works of Rome's intellectual elite – groups of people that are masters in rhetoric, dedicated writers with a point to prove, refute, justify or even teach (cf. Marincola 2007). Therefore, the ancient sources about the life of Caesar will not be taken as the basis for comparison, or as source material either followed or subverted, but as specific readings of the character that have greatly influenced and incited other readings and understandings over the centuries.

In this way, Julius Caesar is an interesting case when studying a historical character, for not only are there several written pieces about him from different authors and different periods such as Cicero, Sallust, Plutarch, Suetonius and Cassius Dio to mention just a few, but there is also plenty of material written by Caesar himself, specifically about his accounts on the Gallic and Civil Wars (Damon 2016; Duff 1928; Edward 1917).

Considering the specific scope of the present article, this section discusses the documents and readings that actually concern the questions later analysed about Caesar's reception in ACO. Thus, the primary sources concerning Caesar's life are here thematically organised in three categories in which it is possible to notice a positive or negative emphasis depending on the writer and his degree of animosity towards Caesar. These categories are Caesar's actions as a politician in Rome, his role as a Roman General and his many love – and sexual – affairs.

Over the course of his political career, Caesar was able to secure several positions: from a military tribune to that of consul of Rome and dictator, being elected to almost all of the key magistracies in the *cursus honorum* as well as being elected *Pontifex Maximus*. These achievements are shown as tending from several accusations of bribery and unfair practices (Rolfe 1914 – Suet. *Iul.* 12–13, 19) to the testimony of Caesar's courage and good character (Perrin 1919a – Plut. *Caes.* 7.1–3); varying in depicting him as acting outrageously, manipulative and as a tyrant (Rolfe 1914 – Suet. *Iul.* 77–78; White 1913 – App. *B. Civ.* 2.10; Shackleton Bailey 1999 – Cic. *Att.* 816) to seeing him as beloved figure, good lawmaker and the solution for some Roman problems (Cary & Foster 1914 – Dio Cass. *Rom. Hist.* 37.38, 38.1–3; Perrin 1917 – Plut. *Pomp.* 47.3; Watts 1934 – Cic. *Rab. Pro.* 8). What can be said about Caesar for certain – and particularly important for this analysis – is that he was one of the most, if not *the* most, important and successful politicians of his time (cf. Gruen 2009). He was a politician that was frequently able to turn difficult situations to his advantage (Plu. *Caes.* 1.5–7, 2.1–4, *Cat. Min.* 51.1–5; Rolfe 1914 – Suet. *Iul.* 16, 23; White 1913 – App. *B. Civ.* 2.12; Cary & Foster 1914 – Dio Cass. *Rom. Hist.* 40.59–60) and solidify important alliances. A good example being the truce he brokered with Crassus and Pompey which led to the first triumvirate and Caesar to the consulship in 59 BCE.

Caesar's success as politician, is in part connected to his military activities, especially his role as a Roman General after his consulship. Again, there are different emphases in the documentation depending mostly on the level of the personal relations between the author and Caesar. Lucan, for instance a great partisan of Caesar, wrote his *Pharsalia* almost as a mythical tale in which Caesar is a being of great deeds and legends. On the other side, writers are keen to show how Caesar's political enemies, especially Cato, would make accusations to the Senate of Caesar's improper and non-Roman behaviour during his campaigns in Gaul (Perrin 1919a – Plut. *Caes.* 22.1–4).

In turn, Caesar himself decided to take the matter of how the Roman people should see his military campaigns into his own hands, as both the *Bellum Civile* and the *De Bello Gallico* are, undoubtedly, works of propaganda and self-justification (cf. Goldsworthy 1998). As the master of his own narrative, Caesar presents himself with some modesty, employing throughout his commentaries a style of speaking of himself in the third-person. It is important to note, as Peer (2015:3) observed, that although these works are not 'tissues of lies', they present facts that were certainly 'carefully selected and rearranged' in order to show himself in a positive light. Thus, all of Caesar's actions appear quite favourably, even those less successful endeavours which are taken lightly or as no more than minor setbacks as, for example, the whole imbroglio concerning the invasion of Britain. Caesar's portrayal of the events (*Caes. B. Gal.* 4.28–36) contrasts with current views that the Roman General was unprepared for the confrontation that ensued his arrival of the first expedition, having left the island as soon as he could, and

coming back the following year with considerably more provisions and manpower (Kamm 2006:77–82).

The fact that Caesar indeed conquered Gaul, defeated Pompey's legions, managed to get the upper hand in the Alexandrian Wars (Way 1955) in which he was outnumbered and even, as it seems, could have had plans for a Parthian Invasion before his murder (White 1913 – App. *B. Civ.* 2.110), demonstrate that he was, at the very least, a seasoned general with ample support of his troops.

Finally, there is the issue of Caesar's love and sexual life. As everything else concerning this character, the ancient sources depicting this aspect, vary from the image of a 'womanizer' (Rolfe 1914 – Suet. *Iul.* 50–52; Cary & Foster 1916 – Dio Cass. *Rom. Hist.* 42.34.3) to several accusations of enjoying sexual relations with other men since his time in Bithynia (Rolfe 1914 – Suet. *Iul.* 2, 22, 49; Cary & Foster 1916 – Dio Cass. *Rom. Hist.* 43.20.4), and even that he would have seduced his own sister (Perrin 1919b – Plut. *Cat. Min.* 24). The old adage of Caesar being 'every man's woman and every woman's man' (Rolfe 1914 – Suet. *Iul.* 52) is quite representative of these different views – even if, of course, this one is derogatory. Nonetheless, the issues pertaining to Caesar's lovers or sexuality will not be discussed here, but solely an overview of his relationship with Cleopatra.

There are not many contemporary accounts on the particular nature of Caesar and Cleopatra's relationship, aside perhaps Lucan who qualifies it as intense passion (Duff 1928 – *Phars.* 10.71–76). Later commentators, such as Suetonius and Dio Cassius, are adamant in picturing it as a romantic entanglement (Rolfe 1914 – Suet. *Iul.* 52; Cary & Foster 1917 – Dio Cass. *Rom. Hist.* 51.12), although Dio Cassius also implies that Cleopatra was able to manipulate Caesar due to his weakness for women (Cary & Foster 1916 – Dio Cass. *Rom. Hist.* 42.34–35). In the continuation of Caesar's writing of the Civil War, the Alexandrian War – probably by Aulus Hirtius – there is practically nothing on Cleopatra, except that at the end, Caesar leaves Egypt with her being a loyal ally (Way 1955 – *Caes. B. Alex.* 34).

The fact that Caesar spent a long time in Egypt travelling the Nile with Cleopatra, and later receiving her and her husband in Rome with lavish gifts – to the point of setting a statue of her in the temple of *Venus Genetrix* (White 1913 – App. *B. Civ.* 2.102) – did contribute to speculation about their relationship. There is also the issue concerning Cleopatra's alleged son with Caesar, Ptolemy Caesar, known as *Caesarion*, although the story of his life and the moment of his birth are still up for discussion (cf. Gray-Fow 2014).

What the sources do tell us about their encounter, is that Cleopatra secretly entered the palace to meet Caesar (Perrin 1919a – Plut. *Caes.* 48.9–49.2) and that a while later, he instated her as co-ruler of Egypt (Rolfe 1914 – Suet. *Iul.* 35; Perrin 1919a – Plut. *Caes.* 49). The dynamic between Caesar and Cleopatra is not at all elaborated, except as said, by Dio Cassius who portrays her as a manipulative woman craving power.

Julius Caesar in *Assassin's Creed Origins*

Julius Caesar, as mentioned, is not the main character of the game, although his presence relates to the main campaign of ACO. He has around 15 min of 'screen-time'⁵ in the game, and in most of his scenes, he is with Cleopatra.

Altogether there are seven distinct scenes in which Caesar makes an appearance which have been organised and named for this study as follows: (1) First Contact and Alliance with Cleopatra; (2) Caesar in Alexander's Tomb; (3) The Queen's Throne; (4) The Lighthouse; (5) Battlefield; (6), Cleopatra's Speech and Bayek's Betrayal; and (7) The Woman who Killed Caesar.

In the first scene, Ptolemy XIII gives Caesar the severed head of Pompey in the royal palace. As they argue about it and discuss an alliance, Aya and Bayek arrive with Cleopatra rolled in a rug. Immediately, Cleopatra takes control of the situation and poses as the true and rightful ruler of Egypt, taking a condescending tone towards her brother. Caesar seems to be immediately smitten by her beauty, and perhaps, audacity. As Caesar listens to Cleopatra, a schism is created between him and Ptolemy XIII who leaves the room, enraged with the situation.

The second scene starts with joyful banter between Caesar and Cleopatra, as they behold a statue of Alexander the Great. Caesar talks about the poet, Catullus, and the verses the poet wrote about him. Cleopatra is quick to praise Caesar for how he handles his enemies. Cleopatra entrusts Aya with finding a path into Alexander's tomb, because Caesar had expressed his desire to see it. As the doors of the tomb are opened, the first words spoken are Caesar's saying: *rex immortalis*. Caesar speaks of his passion and admiration for Alexander's achievements at a young age and Cleopatra reassures him that together they can do even more. They take note of a staff that is above Alexander's sarcophagus. The solemnity of the situation is finally disrupted by news that Ptolemy has captured Caesar's emissaries. Aya steps up, asking Cleopatra to be tasked with solving the matter. Caesar and Cleopatra resume staring at Alexander's sarcophagus.

The third scene starts with Aya arriving at the royal palace to inform Caesar and Cleopatra that some men intend to trap them inside. Caesar commands his men to set fire to the harbour and change the colour of Pharos's lighthouse so the rest of the fleet will join them. Cleopatra sits on the throne, stating that she does not intend to leave, and be it her time to die, she would rather have her blood stain the throne than leaving it. Caesar explains the importance of changing the colour of the light, nods at Cleopatra – who is sitting on the throne – and leaves to wage his war. Cleopatra gives her last command to Aya: if she sees Ptolemy, she must eliminate him.

⁵The appearances of Julius Caesar can be watched in *Assassin's Creed Origins: All Caesar Scenes* (Gamer's Little Playground 2017). Note, however, that scene 6 is out of order.

The fourth scene starts with Caesar, his men and Bayek waiting for the lighthouse's fire at Pharos to change colour so they can proceed with the attack. Aya was entrusted with this task and Caesar expresses to Bayek his concern about 'letting a woman' do such an important job. As Bayek asks him to calm down, the light changes to green. Caesar is now confident, asserting that 'the die is cast'. Caesar and Bayek get on a chariot and move towards the lighthouse. Bayek states his confidence in Aya's skills and they have a brief discussion on patriotism. As they cross the battlefield with Caesar in charge, as they are getting close to their objective, an armoured elephant starts to chase them. They escape and meet up with the rest of the fleet, exchanging words of praise.

The fifth scene starts on a battlefield, indicated to be on the Nile's Delta. Caesar is shown killing several enemies with Aya and Bayek fighting alongside him. Bayek goes after the men leading the attack on the Roman forces with Caesar brandishing his sword and shouting words of encouragement (*ad victoriam*). Caesar gives further instructions to Bayek who is finally hand-to-hand with the man he believed to be responsible for the murder of his son, Septimius. However, Septimius is a Roman, and as Bayek goes for the killing blow, Caesar appears and orders him to stop so that Septimius be put on trial under Roman law. Bayek resists and is knocked down by Roman soldiers.

In the sixth scene, Cleopatra is giving a speech about the ruin of her enemies to the masses, standing on top of the stairs that lead to the palace. The staff that was over Alexander's tomb is given to Cleopatra who raises it for everyone to see it while she calls for a 'new era of prosperity'. Caesar appears briefly, standing quietly and still behind Cleopatra as she delivers her speech, smiling at her. Next to him, at the last moment, Septimius appears smiling.

The seventh and last scene in which Caesar is present, starts with Aya and two co-conspirators speaking about Caesar soon becoming a tyrant. Caesar is shown outside the Forum with Septimius as his bodyguard, saying that the people love him. Caesar, however, can only reply that the Senate will not bow to him so easily. Caesar goes on to meet the Senate. A fight between Aya and Septimius follows. The scene resumes with Aya in disguise, entering the Senate's session. It is possible to hear the debate going on between Caesar, his supporters and political adversaries. Some accuse Caesar of wanting to be a king while he answers that the people of Rome were the ones who have bestowed his titles on him. Aya comes closer to Caesar, unnoticed, and is the first to stab him in the back. Soon, several other senators do the same. In his final moments, Brutus comes near Caesar who, in turn, says 'You too, my child?', and then is stabbed again. Brutus claims: 'The tyrant is dead. You are free now.' Everyone leaves. The bloodied body of Caesar remains on the floor until the lights fade out.

Blood and politics: Gender relations and representation in *Assassin's Creed Origins*

As the scene's descriptions showed, Julius Caesar is never alone in a scene of the game. He is always portrayed with another character, be it a historical figure, such as Cleopatra, or a fictional one such as the games' main couple, Bayek and Aya. In fact, here is a summarised table of the distribution of characters appearing next to Caesar by scene:

To better understand the representation of Julius Caesar in the game, it thus becomes necessary to assess these scenes, focusing on how he acts and reacts to the other characters as well as the broader implications that can be taken from his narrative arc. In this sense, and as it will be demonstrated now, a gender-based analysis has proven to be quite useful in understanding the actions and representations of, on the one side, Julius Caesar and Bayek, and on the other side, Cleopatra and Aya, as there is a clear separation between the attributions of these male and female characters with specific roles being played by them.

The political world, for example, is one of essentially female protagonism in ACO. It is patent throughout the game that Cleopatra is the political brain of the narrative. Since her arrival in the palace – rolled up in a rug – she has showed her dominance over her male counterparts, both Ptolemy XIII and Caesar. She was capable of turning around a disadvantageous situation and asserting herself as the 'true ruler' of Egypt. Cleopatra is shown as a natural leader, a gifted orator and a ruthless adversary. Julius Caesar, in turn, is shown as a much more tractable character, especially in the presence of the queen. Cleopatra is generally the one making the decisions to which Caesar abides or interferes very little. This is particularly noticeable in the second scene, as Caesar is notified that his emissaries were captured and it is Cleopatra who arranges a solution for the situation. It is to her – and not to Caesar – that Aya offers assistance.

The exact same attitudes towards politics can be found among Aya and Bayek. Aya is almost completely concerned with politics and the future of Egypt. She approaches Cleopatra, believing her to be the better choice of ruler, and throughout the game, she is always at the service of the queen. Although Aya also craves for revenge for her dead son, it is possible to say that she is considerably more rational about what happened than Bayek is – a man completely consumed by grief. Bayek, as mentioned before, is solely focused on the pursuit of his son's murderers. He has very little interest in politics and never really enters this world; he

TABLE 1: Characters in the same scene with Julius Caesar.†

| Character | Scene 1 | Scene 2 | Scene 3 | Scene 4 | Scene 5 | Scene 6 | Scene 7 |
|-----------|---------|---------|---------|---------|---------|---------|---------|
| Cleopatra | X | X | X | - | - | X | - |
| Bayek | X | X | X | X | X | - | - |
| Aya | X | X | X | - | X | - | X |

†, Only the main characters – following the official campaign arc – were considered, because, most of the time, there are several other fictional and/or historical figures that also appear in these scenes.

is walking in its margins and only contacting political figures when they can help him further his quest for revenge. Bayek is openly distrustful of all the political figures, including Cleopatra, but is continually persuaded by Aya that helping the queen is a means to help himself.

Aya too, is a natural leader and a gifted speaker. Besides her political work for Egypt, she is shown as one of the founders of the conspiracy, that will ultimately assassinate Caesar. She is the one that speaks about freedom to the other Romans, incites the senators to rebel against Caesar and was the first to stab him in the back.

If, as demonstrated, the female world is one of politics, the male world is one of blood and battle. Caesar shines in the role of the warrior and general, especially – and perhaps, not coincidentally – when he is far from Cleopatra. Scenes four and five, taking place on the battlefield, presents a very different character than the mostly passive and acquiescent Caesar from before. Here he is brutal, efficient and finally shown as a leader with soldiers answering solely to his authority. Away from Cleopatra, Caesar is allowed in ACO a voice of his own: not only does he encourage his troops' *ad victoriam*, but his famous phrase about crossing the Rubicon is also said, a nice 'cameo', even if out of context. His role as a general is highlighted and his leadership recognised. More importantly, however, scene four is a complete contrast to everything seen before. As he had always been in the company of the queen in the prior scenes, Caesar continually demonstrated respect for and interest in Cleopatra. Now, alone with Bayek, the first thing he utters is his suspicion of a woman's (Aya's) ability to complete an important task.

In the following scene (five), Caesar's leadership and power are asserted, even over the game's main character. Bayek fails to comply with his orders of leaving Septimius alone, and Caesar orders his soldiers to knock him down. It is important to make a note of this action: Caesar is shown as committed to Roman law by which a Roman citizen should be put on trial by Romans and, above anything else, superseding any friendship ties or prior agreements.

Scene six is particularly paradigmatic of the Julius Caesar-Cleopatra dynamic in ACO: if only moments before Caesar was in charge, now he is completely silent. Cleopatra is the one making a speech to the masses, holding Alexander's staff, while Caesar stands idly in the background. It could certainly be said that, as representative of a foreign power, it would be inconvenient – to say the least – for Caesar to take an active role addressing the masses himself. However, there were different ways for the development team to represent such a moment, including one where Cleopatra could have highlighted her alliance with the Roman General – or even with Rome itself – as partnership in equal terms (as she would, in the future, with Anthony). The fact that Caesar and Rome are mostly absent in the speech, seems to serve only to emphasise Cleopatra's greatness. It is also worthy to take specific note of Alexander's staff. In scene two, when

Alexander's tomb is opened, it is Caesar who makes a nostalgic speech about the great king, *Rex Immortalis*, comparing Alexander's accomplishments to his own. Clearly, Caesar strives to be as great as Alexander – and the idea that he wants to be a king himself, reoccurs in scene seven. The fact that it is Cleopatra and not Caesar who holds the staff could symbolically imply that she is indeed the true leader and Alexander's successor.

The last scene (seven) is probably the most complex one, given the amount of detail and implications. It starts with Aya, acting as the effective (political) leader of the senators' movement against Caesar: she even orders two of them – Brutus and Longinus – to go and wait for her signal before taking action. Caesar, on the other hand, is having a conversation with Septimius. Septimius, throughout the game, was an adversary. He is part of a secret cabal searching for the Isu artefacts with a view to control Egypt, and eventually, the world. The fact that he is not only pardoned by Caesar, but even taken into his confidence – his participation in Bayek's son murder being disregarded – and becoming his 'bodyguard' is clearly a negative mark on Caesar's character. The association between the two figures denotes and connotes Caesar's aspirations for power at any cost. Their dialogue is straightforward on this issue: 'The people love you, Caesar. You are a God' are the first words Septimius says to Caesar to which he only replies: 'The Senate will not bow so easily'. The conversation ends with Septimius making a derisive remark on the Senate. Again, away from Cleopatra, Caesar finds his voice and enters the political world. In front of the Senate, he is now a gifted orator using all his rhetorical ability to convince his fellow senators to join him. It is interesting that when the accusation of him wanting to be a king is brought up, Caesar himself neither denies nor confirms it, but utterly ignores it, continuing to talk about the Senate and the Roman people.

Aya, in turn, enters the world of blood and battle. Although she had been in action before, fighting her way up to the lighthouse, this scene is different. Now she is shown almost as a gladiator pitted against a formidable enemy, entering in hand-to-hand combat against Septimius. Aya's physical prowess is tested by facing an enemy that is much larger, stronger and in possession of Isu weapons. She kills him without any aid, and continues her path towards the Senate. A new balance is formed: as Caesar is conquering the political space, so Aya is conquering the one of blood and battle. The balance, however, is quickly disrupted in favour of Aya. Caesar is murdered by her in the Senate, losing everything. Aya remains as a political and physical force to be reckoned with and becomes the founder of the Assassins.

Representation, historiography and present issues

There are two different, yet linked, questions to be made concerning the topics discussed, although their answers may prove a bit elusive: firstly, Why does ACO's development

team choose to represent these historical and fictional characters in the particular way they are?; and secondly, How does its historiography inform these representations? The answer to the first question, bearing in mind what was discussed about reception theory, could be given by starting with the fact that today's political scenery is, especially in Western democracies, one advocating for more female participation and embracing diversity.

In the past few years, different countries discussed issues about female representation in positions of power such as the last USA election in which Hillary Clinton was a candidate (Jalalzai 2018), or in Canada – home to Ubisoft Montreal – with Justin Trudeau's cabinet being formed, for the first time, by an equal number of men and women (The Guardian 2015). Several other Western democracies are taking steps to assure women's space in political positions, and even more observant of the importance that female voters are gaining in the past elections.

The discussion about female roles in society became an important research theme for historians. As shown by Joan Scott (1986), since the beginning of the feminist movement in the 1960's, such a discussion has led to a whole subject area called Women's History that has now, mostly given place to Gender Studies. The idea of Gender Studies is of particular importance: gender is not supposed to be understood as a different name for 'women's studies', but it rather focuses on gender relations, that is, understanding that there are at least two genders and that social relations, at any period, are partly constructed through and around this differentiation.

Those investigations about Women's History, especially in Antiquity, were important for a series of reasons, starting with the realisation that history, written until the 20th century, was mostly done by men and focused solely on men (cf. Richlin 2014), seen as the only vector for political, social, economic and military action. Women's History and Gender Studies allowed the reinterpretation and rewriting of several simplistic assessments about life in Antiquity such as, for instance furthering the discussion between the different aspects of agency in 'private' and 'public' spaces (cf. Arendt 1998; Trümper 2012).

The issues about agency and political protagonism in Antiquity, specifically in the Roman world, is today a highly debated topic that demands attention to different issues. From an assessment that goes far beyond the idea that politics was an activity restricted to the *forum*, as demonstrated by Brennan (2012:354–358), concerning the power exercised by elite women such as Terentia, Fulvia and Octavia, to the varied approaches to the problem related to intersectionality (Nash 2008) in which gender, class, sexuality, ethnicity and even religious participation are taken as mutually reinforcing vectors in the creation or maintenance of identities and identification. Thus, some notes on Julius Caesar's attitudes towards Cleopatra, Aya and even Bayek must be contextualised, considering their intersectional aspects.

It is clear that Cleopatra and Aya occupy very different positions in the society they belong to, and in broader terms, in the Roman world itself. In Rome, women played several roles and exercised varied degrees of influence depending mostly on three axis: whether they were single, married or widowed, whether they were Roman or non-Roman and whether they belonged to the elite or to the masses.

In this sense, different 'combinations' could be found: from the high position of a Roman matron occupied in society to that of a non-Roman domestic slave. Certainly, in between these two extremes, there were several *loci* of power and agency for women: directly, for example, through religion by some Roman (the *flamica* and the Vestal Virgins) and foreign (Cult of Isis) priesthoods; indirectly, through marriage as was the case of the wives of magistrates and senators (cf. Bauman 1994; Brennan 2012).

In this context, Cleopatra is a figure that inspired many different reactions in Rome – mostly due to the fact that she spoke from a place of power in her society that did not have a counterpart in Roman political tradition. Not only was she the queen of Egypt, but also the treatment Julius Caesar gave her – both making her co-ruler of Egypt and the honours he gave to her when she visited Rome – as well as her role in Anthony and Octavian's dispute showed her as a hands-on player in politics.

As discussed, there are not many ancient accounts of the relationship between Cleopatra and Caesar, making it hard to propose any substantiated assessment about what or how he felt about her: Was he infatuated by her beauty? By her brains? Did he respect her as politician or see her in the same light as other foreign male figures of power? These questions cannot be answered for the simple lack of reliable information in this regard.

Modern historiography, such as the chapters in Margaret Miles's *Cleopatra: A sphinx revisited* (2011), or in Sally-Ann Ashton's *Cleopatra and Egypt* (2008) analysis, highlight the prominent role Cleopatra had in political affairs not only of Egypt, but also of Rome itself. Cleopatra is thought to be educated, and indeed, an astute politician who used all the tools at her disposal – her sensuality included – achieving her goals and consolidating her power. In that sense, her representation in ACO agrees with the historiography written about her. On the other hand, Aya's agency seems to be more connected with present issues concerning female protagonism in society rather than a historical account of female lives in Egypt.

The truth is that very little is known about Aya, making it even harder to try to investigate her connections to historical women in Egypt. There is no indication about her social or economic background aside from the fact that she is presented to the players, together with Bayek, as the last of the *medjay*. The problem here is that there is no historical record to support such a position or title at the period the game takes

place: the *medjay* being connected to a police or desert-ranger force many centuries earlier during the New Kingdom in Egypt (cf. Liszka 2011).

Another good indication that Aya is connected to present issues rather than historical characters is related to the death of Cleopatra. In *Assassin's Creed II*, back in 2009, it was established that Cleopatra was killed by the female assassin, Amunet, which ACO identifies now as the name adopted by Aya after she and Bayek found the Assassins. Currently, however, the destiny of Cleopatra has changed: Amunet or Aya, does not kill Cleopatra, but rather takes pity on her situation, promises to take Caesarion with her to Rome to become one of the Assassins, and leaves Cleopatra with a flask of poison. These actions could be interpreted as a move towards a concept that is regaining strength (cf. Henry 2014; Land 1997) in several feminist discourses that is, that of sisterhood: that women should not subjugate one another and there should be political solidarity between them beyond borders or barriers.

If Caesar's attitudes towards Cleopatra in ACO are mostly of awe and respect, he is shown as sceptical and condescending towards Aya: not only does he not acknowledge her role in opening Alexander's tomb, he openly criticises Bayek because of his trust in her. Caesar suspects that Aya would not be able to complete her mission at Pharos' lighthouse. The fact that, in the end, Aya is the mastermind behind the conspiracy that will lead to the assassination of Caesar, and that she is the first one who stabs him, echo with the AC's franchise narrative as will be discussed.

The game's approach to Julius Caesar himself is considerably more problematic. Caesar's attitudes, traits and character over the period he is in Egypt, do not resemble what the primary sources or the recent historiography says about it. The first issue is the exact nature of Caesar's sojourn in Alexandria. Caesar arrived in Egypt amidst intense political turmoil between Ptolemy XIII and Cleopatra, both vying for sole control over the kingdom, and both seeking his favour. The assassination of Pompey allowed Caesar to establish his position – through his supporters – in Rome, being appointed dictator, consul and given several other powers. In Egypt, then, Caesar's public support effectively meant being supported by Rome. Hence, it was only through him that Cleopatra – who had been expelled from Egypt by Ptolemy XIII – was able to be reinstated as joint ruler with her brother – a point that is made quite clear in the ancient sources.

Therefore, there can be no doubt that Caesar's position in Egypt was one of great political power and mediation (Peer 2015:159–160). In fact, in the aftermath of the military dispute with Ptolemy XIII, it was Caesar, who confirmed Cleopatra as queen of Egypt, together with her younger brother – and now husband – Ptolemy XIV, and as mentioned, even received them in Rome. These elements are clearly downplayed in ACO. Julius Caesar's position of power is made unclear, but for the fact that he arrived with troops who

ended up supporting Cleopatra. The game almost infers that Cleopatra is quite self-sufficient and barely needs Caesar's support, and although it is not hard to establish the trope of a 'strong, independent woman' for Cleopatra, it should be clear that she did not have the military support necessary to accomplish her ambitions without Caesar.

Moreover, Caesar's personal traits are severely downplayed. Although it is true that it is not possible to assert how he 'really' was, his representation in ACO of a mostly passive and silent character contrasts deeply with the primary sources, even the ones that depict him negatively. In those documents, whether they were written by allies or enemies, Caesar is many things, but he is never silent. The current historiography on Caesar generally defines him, as shown by Stevenson (2015:132–133), as a 'powerful, charismatic and charming ... rational politician and dynamic man of action'. Caesar does not demonstrate any of his political skills in his scenes in ACO, save for the one prior to his death, arguably because he is not given any opportunity to do so. He serves more as a prop to emphasise Cleopatra's greatness.

However, Caesar's physical and martial skills in ACO might have been overplayed. Although, in the commentary of his campaigns, there are some scattered notes about him personally joining the fight – shield and sword in hand. It should be taken into consideration that, as Lendon (1999:318) explains, much of the combat descriptions of ancient authors, especially Caesar, conforms to a very specific rhetorical tradition. Notwithstanding, the extent of his participation in the frontlines of the Alexandrian War is open to debate. It should also be noted that most of the time, Caesar was sieged in the imperial palace and undermanned, compared to the Egyptian forces (Canfora 2007:194–195).

There is also the issue of ACO siding with the – highly debatable – idea that Caesar's desire (or endgame) was to become a king in Rome. On the one hand, Caesar always depicted himself as the one wronged in his struggle with Pompey and his supporters: his rights were trampled and he was fighting for the *libertas* of the Roman people (Caesar *Bellum Civile* I.85). After his victory over Pompey and return to Rome, there were occasions that caused different interpretations such as the time Anthony offered Caesar a diadem, which he refused three times and sent to the capitol (Shackleton Bailey 2010 – Cicero *Philippicae*. 2.87). On the other hand, it is clear that Caesar had dominion over Rome, putting himself in the difficult position of having to find a balance between his authority and that of the Senate, lest he be seen as a tyrant craving for *regnum* (Stevenson 2015:158–160).

Two elements can help explain ACO's stance on Caesar and the desire to be king. Firstly, the main narrative of the AC's franchise is one of underdogs fighting against superior enemies who wish to have complete control over humankind. For Caesar to occupy a place of tyrannical power, is perhaps, only too suitable for the franchise's narrative, especially when considering that

the Assassins are founded or organised as a brotherhood just after Caesar's assassination. In this sense, Aya's narrative is quintessential: an underestimated foe that strikes a crippling or killing blow against a powerful enemy. The second element that is pertinent in this case, is that Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar* undoubtedly heavily influenced the game. The tragedy, as Carson (1957) has shown, has rooted in public imagination the understanding that Caesar was a tyrant and that the conspirators were democrats fighting for liberty.

It is important to note that, in an interview (The Guardian 2017) with the historian leading the research group for the game, Maxime Durand, he mentions that the team was worried not only about the historical accuracy of the narrative, but also how popular culture had tackled these subjects before, in a way that general knowledge about the period and the characters – even if historically inaccurate – could be taken into account to create the game's narrative. In this sense, popular visions about the past, including those from the Shakespearian plays, seems to have developed an important role in ACO.

Bayek's role follows that of Caesar: the man is seen first and foremost as a warrior, a 'man on a mission' trope that is quite common in pop culture productions of the present time, especially in Hollywood. There is not much depth to him, as there is not much history either; just like Aya, he is solely presented to the gamers as the last remnant of the *medjay*, which says nothing historical about him. Bayek's actions are always aimed towards finding his son's murderer, merely reacting to other circumstances outside of his goal.

The question of why these two male characters were represented in a way that distances them from political matters is very hard to answer. Although it is certainly not necessary for Bayek to be a political figure, it is strange that Julius Caesar is not represented as one. It is possible to conjecture that – following the analysis that was presented in this study – the development team had an idea of separating and balancing gender relations inside the game, given each gender a specific role to play, avoiding overlaps or overshadowing of the different characters during the narrative arc. Their choices being heavily influenced by today's political agendas and somewhat close to, but certainly not limited by historiography or ancient sources.

Conclusion

The present study aimed at analysing the representation of Julius Caesar together with three other characters: Cleopatra, Bayek and Aya. Together, these four characters are the core of ACO's main campaign narrative arc, and as demonstrated, specific roles and attributes were allotted to them, following, for the most part, a division based on gender.

In the representation of the historical characters inside the game, there are two different movements – both regarding the ancient sources and historiography: one of convergence and another of distancing. Whereas Cleopatra's personality and traits echo the more recent studies, the same cannot be

said of Julius Caesar's who is represented far from the political figure he was known to be, and in the end, just a man obsessed with power and becoming a king.

In turn, the fictional characters, Aya and Bayek are quite in line with current discourses on, on the one side, the necessity of discussing women's rights, participation and agency in today's politics, and on the other side, the familiar trope of the 'man on a mission' that is frequently found in today's pop culture. The historical aspect of this couple is a grey area: neither are representative of any real group of people in Antiquity, serving, first and foremost, as the connection between the players and the game's narrative.

The experience of designing a game and the highlighted potential of procedural rhetoric to challenge or shape historical and archaeological theory and methods, involve ideas of multilinearity, reflexivity and agency. Creating video games adds a design and creative aspect to computing, allowing the creator to take a reflexive role and media forms to explain and evaluate the past. In this sense, ACO's development team used different strategies related to the past: from pursuing archaeological accuracy in their recreation of settlements, to a more open-ended view of historical events and characters. These are not in themselves problematic. Creating, processing and communicating through the video game media form means taking a distinctly system-based approach which allows for multivocality, multilinearity and reflexivity (Coppstone 2017:85–98). The videogame media form, in its specificity, may present a potential space for novel theoretical and methodological approaches; approaches which leverage both agency and systems as a way to explore and communicate the past outside of traditional limitations.

Nonetheless, it is important to observe that history is not rewritten simply to accommodate current social, political and cultural agendas. Rather, the past is reimagined in an environment that allows for such activity and in a way that literature has often served: ACO is a work of entertainment which is mostly based on historical accounts and may very well serve to incite and stimulate people of all ages to take a renewed interest in Ancient History, Archaeology and in the ways we interact with the past. For historians, classicists, and archaeologists, ACO – and in fact, the whole AC franchise – is an important medium by which the reception of the past in our society can be assessed, and perhaps even more importantly, transmitted to an audience that greatly exceeds the reach of historiography and general academic writing.

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Competing interests

The authors have declared that no competing interests exist.

Author contributions

M.T.B. was responsible for much of the discussions concerning Archaeology and archaeogaming in the article, while L.C.C.

was responsible for the discussions concerning the games' scenes and some of the issues concerning Reception. N.B. was responsible for the discussions on Reception and Gender.

Ethical consideration

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