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FROM THE VICTORIAN ERA TO THE AMERICAN EXPERIMENT:

Mythic Foundational Narratives in Video Games

THEMATIC SECTION

Gentlewomen, Fallen Men and Caged Birds:

Playing with Victorian Myths in *Assassin's Creed Syndicate*

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ABSTRACT: Emphasizing the “interplay between self-reflexivity and immersion”, the neo-Victorian project allows us to consider a diverse array of creative works that (re)construct Victorian myths (Boehm-Schnittker and Gruss 2011, 15). *Assassin's Creed Syndicate's* approach to immersion through a multi-layered player embodiment renders the “critical interface between the past and present” central to neo-Victorian media tangible for its audience (Kohlke 2008, 1). The game creates a self-reflexive in-between space by implementing an “implied character” as a vessel for a critical re-evaluation of Victorian myths (Aarseth and Karhulahti 2022, 269). Employing a multimodal perspective, this paper analyzes how *Assassin's Creed Syndicate* extends beyond popular myths of private and public spheres, the Angel in the House, the fallen woman, the gentleman, the dandy, and Carlyle's Captains of Industry. Through an

RESUMO: Enfatizando a “interação entre autorreflexividade e imersão”, o projeto neo-vitoriano permite-nos considerar uma sucessão diversificada de trabalhos criativos que (re)constróem mitos vitorianos (Boehm-Schnittker e Gruss 2011, 15). A abordagem de *Assassin's Creed Syndicate* à imersão, por meio da incorporação do jogador em múltiplas camadas, torna a “interface crítica entre o passado e o presente” central na mídia neo-vitoriana tangível para o seu público (Kohlke 2008, 1). O jogo cria um espaço intermediário autorreflexivo ao implementar um “personagem implícito” como veículo de uma reavaliação crítica dos mitos vitorianos (Aarseth e Karhulahti 2022, 269). Empregando uma perspectiva multimodal, este artigo analisa como *Assassin's Creed Syndicate* se estende além dos mitos populares das esferas pública e privada, do Anjo da Casa, da mulher caída, do cavalheiro, do dândi e dos Capitães da Indústria

alternating gendered perspective, the player co-constructs a neo-Victorian narrative that comments on a range of issues connected to these myths, including women's education, marriage and motherhood, male rivalries, queer identities, and father-son relationships during the Industrial Revolution. Ultimately, persisting myths of Victorian femininity and masculinity are displaced and re-emerge as imaginings of self-sufficient gentlewomen and fallen men, which, in the neo-Victorian fashion, are colored by contemporary ideas and thus reveal just as much about the Victorians as they do about their lingering influence on our twenty-first-century identities.

KEYWORDS: neo-Victorianism, *Assassin's Creed Syndicate*, Victorian gender myths, Angel in the House, Gentleman.

de Carlyle. Através de uma perspectiva alternada de gênero, o jogador co-constrói uma narrativa neo-vitoriana que comenta questões ligadas a estes mitos, tais como a educação das mulheres, o casamento e a maternidade, as rivalidades masculinas, as identidades *queere* e as relações pai-filho durante a Revolução Industrial. Em última instância, os mitos persistentes da feminilidade e da masculinidade vitoriana são deslocados e ressurgem como imaginações de mulheres autossuficientes e de homens caídos, que, à moda neo-vitoriana, são coloridos por ideias contemporâneas e, portanto, revelam tanto sobre os vitorianos como sobre a sua influência persistente nas nossas identidades do século XXI.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: neo-vitorianismo, *Assassin's Creed Syndicate*, mitos de gênero vitorianos, Angel in the House, Gentleman.

INTRODUCTION

Drawing on people's desire to engage with fictional worlds, especially in a time marked by uncertainty and unrest (Bowman 2024, 162), video games as interactive narrative spaces allow players not only to observe stories but also to inhabit them. As Janet Murray enthuses in her pivotal book *Hamlet on the Holodeck: The Future of Narrative in Cyberspace* (1998), digital media has the "ability to transport us to virtual places", which marks a profound shift in how narratives are experienced (2). The act of play creates a participatory form of storytelling, constituting what Roig *et al.* describe as a shift "far beyond the 'spectatorship' position" – a position the audience occupies in traditional media, such as literature and film – into a "playful relationship with images" (89).

Among the most prominent game franchises of the last two decades, the *Assassin's Creed* franchise (2007-present) explores this narrative potential by blending historical fiction with interactivity. *Assassin's Creed Syndicate* (2015) situates the player in Victorian London through the Animus, which, in-game, allows users to view genetic memories as simulations and integrates the game's interface into the logic of the game world. Through "synchronization", the user follows the memories of an ancestor as if they were experiencing them themselves, which binds them to the ancestor's choices. Further, the user has access to historical information regarding the simulation, as well as environmental assets such as maps. Thus, the Animus interface naturalizes the game's interface as intradiegetic to the game's narrative by establishing the player character as the Animus user ("Animus"). *Assassin's Creed: Unity* (2014) introduced the figure of the nameless Initiate as the present-day frame narrative's Animus user, who, in *Assassin's Creed Syndicate*, is tasked with investigating the genetic memories of twin assassins Evie and Jacob Frye to uncover a fictional conspiracy involving historical figures and events during the Industrial Revolution.

By including Evie, *Assassin's Creed Syndicate* is the first installment of the main franchise to feature a playable female protagonist. However, Evie remains noticeably absent from *Assassin's Creed Syndicate's* promotional material, which almost entirely centers on her brother Jacob ("Assassin's Creed Syndicate"). This, whether intentionally or not, fictionally reflects the erasure of an important aspect of history, as Victorian women often "had been left out of the great novels of the era" (Murray 1998, 4). Working through such erasure, the field of neo-Victorian studies focuses on the analysis of media that

engage with, rediscover, and rewrite the Victorian age (Heilmann and Llewellyn 2010, 4). This article approaches *Assassin's Creed Syndicate* as a neo-Victorian text that utilises interactivity, player embodiment, and procedural storytelling in conjunction with its narrative to engage critically with gendered cultural memory and myths. By examining the links between the Victorians and contemporary society, neo-Victorian media constructs a “critical interface between the present and past” (Kohlke 2008, 1), foregrounding both what we remember and how we remember. Through a multi-layered player embodiment created by the Animus, the game actualizes this critical interface ludically. I argue that *Assassin's Creed Syndicate* provides a space where dominant gender myths of the Victorian age, such as the Angel in the House and the fallen woman, or the gentleman and the dandy, can be problematized, and suggests imaginations of self-sufficient gentlewomen and fallen men. To demonstrate this, I will first provide an overview of my theoretical framework, discussing a neo-Victorian approach to video games, as well as Victorian gender mythology. Following this, I will examine how *Assassin's Creed Syndicate* represents and subverts norms and values through the playable characters Evie and Jacob. For this analysis, I conducted a full playthrough of the game and created a comprehensive video recording of my gameplay, allowing for re-viewing of specific scenes without relying solely on first impressions. Focusing on the multiple modes through which Evie and Jacob's characterization is mediated, I examined the gameplay mechanics offered for each character, employed a close reading of the cutscenes to analyze character interactions and narrative framing, and reviewed the in-game database entries for contextualization.

As interactive media, video games offer a valuable and underexplored opportunity for neo-Victorian studies by inviting players to co-construct playful recreations of historical environments. Therefore, games like *Assassin's Creed Syndicate* offer new ways of engaging with and reinterpreting the past. As Murray once predicted, the computer has not replaced the novel or film, but rather expanded the field of narrative possibility “by continuing their timeless bardic work within another framework” (1998, 9-10), and in doing so, has given players a role in shaping the ongoing fictions of history.

NEO-VICTORIANISM AND GAME SPACES AS ALLEGORIES OF HISTORY

Before approaching a characterization of neo-Victorian video games, the term Victorian itself must be critically evaluated. Used “non-chronologically”, the term exceeds the

temporal or “chronological” meaning and describes specific cultural and aesthetic characteristics as well as a stereotyped set of values and myths associated with the Victorian age. For instance, while postmodern scholarship has revised “the Victorians’ supposed sexual repression” as a particularly persistent stereotype, the term Victorian is still often used as a synonym for prudishness (Kirchknopf 2008, 55-56). Specifically, the gender roles of the period, such as the popular image of the Victorian woman as the “Angel in the House,” should also be problematized, as few women could afford to devote themselves entirely to marriage and the domestic sphere. Thus, the “Angel” is best understood as “a myth, an illusory ideal, and a far-reaching fantasy” (Chouari 2022, 2). Consequently, it is not historical accuracy that makes media that reimagine, rework, and recontextualize the Victorian age so compelling, but their ability to reflect our relationship with this past. Moreover, how representations of the Victorian age build on each other in what Bolter and Grusin describe as “remediation” adds another layer of reimaginings of the past. Especially relevant for digital new media such as video games, remediation “ensures that the older medium cannot be entirely effaced” (2000, 45, 47). Thus, reimaginings of the Victorians not only build on historical fact but also on other media representations of history, such as literature, art, or film. As Kirchknopf suggests, the diverse portrayals of the Victorians found in such media “can be read together, rather than against each other” to uncover what they reveal about our present-day notion of the Victorian age (2008, 59).

In the late 2000s and throughout the 2010s, this reflection on both the Victorian age and contemporary narratives related to the Victorians has given rise to its own field of research within Victorian studies. At its core, the “neo-Victorian project” aims to “analyse the manifold overlaps and intersections, the continuities and the breaches between ‘us’ and ‘them’”. Boehm-Schnitker and Gruss describe these works as “cultural doppelgängers of the Victorian age”, simultaneously mimicking and interrogating the period’s dominant discourse (2014, 1-2). Moreover, neo-Victorian narratives can function as vessels for “liberating lost voices and repressed histories of minorities left out of the public record”. Their overt fictionalization of the past makes these “liberatory repetitions” easier to engage with than the “potentially debilitating and crushing” reality of the historical past, which was tinged by traumatic issues such as disease, sexual exploitation, social unrest, and war (Kohlke 2008, 9-10, 7).

As the field developed, definitions of what qualifies as neo-Victorian have expanded to include a broader range of media. While the genre initially emphasized postmodern features like “intertextuality, self-reflexivity or metafiction”, recent scholarship has increasingly recognized the importance of “immersive strategies”, encouraging an “interplay between immersion and self-reflexivity” (Boehm-Schnitker and Gruss 2014, 2, 5; 2011, 15). Despite this expansion, video games have remained largely overlooked within the field of neo-Victorian studies. Yet, their interactive structure makes them especially well-suited for the kind of immersive and reflective engagement the field values. While immersion, as the “sensation of inhabiting the space represented on-screen”, is a rather basic understanding of the term (Calleja 2011, 2), it still holds value in the neo-Victorian context, which is predominantly concerned with traditional media, such as film and literature. In contrast to these, games “anchor” and “acknowledge” the player in their space through the playable character (*idem*, 23), thus the immersive strategies of neo-Victorian games may be better understood as what Calleja defines as “incorporation”. He describes the concept as “the absorption of a virtual environment into consciousness, yielding a sense of habitation, which is supported by the systemically upheld embodiment of the player in a single location, as represented by the avatar” (*idem*, 69). Thus, video games can offer new insights into neo-Victorian themes. Given their increasing mainstream popularity, it is timely for neo-Victorian studies to include them within its scope, fulfilling the initial aim to “extend [its] theoretical enquiries to other literary genres, arts and performances” (Kohlke 2008, 5).

A distinguishing feature of video games is their interactive engagement with the player, which becomes visible through incorporation. In *Assassin’s Creed Syndicate*, the critical interface between past and present essential to neo-Victorianism finds a literal manifestation through the game’s mechanics of player embodiment. The framing narrative introduces the Initiate, an “implied character” that “shows very few signs of being represented” and “comes into existence by being imagined by the player” (Aarseth and Karhulahti 2022, 269, 276). This lack of signifying properties constitutes the Initiate as a vessel for reflection, as they add an additional level of distance to the reimagined past. Brendan Keogh describes embodiment as a relation between body and world in which players “engage with a virtual world *through* [the avatar’s] body” while they simultaneously “look *at* [the avatar’s] body as an object in that world (2018, 16). In *Assassin’s Creed*

Syndicate, this embodiment is doubled through the Initiate, as the player engages with the Victorian game world through them as an implied character, who in turn experiences the simulation of Evie and Jacob’s lives. The Animus interface – including the databank that offers historical information, maps, and synchronization mechanics – functions as a space between the present-day Initiate narrative and the fictionalized Victorian past, merging interactive gameplay with a curated historical archive. This multilayered embodiment enables the player to inhabit the Victorian setting while maintaining the reflective distance central to neo-Victorian media, facilitating a critical engagement with the stereotypes and myths associated with the Victorian age.

As the first installment in *Assassin’s Creed’s* main franchise to include a female playable character alongside a male protagonist, *Assassin’s Creed Syndicate* offers two distinct perspectives on Victorian society. Following Helena Esser’s analysis of *Assassin’s Creed Syndicate’s* game space as an “interactive heterotopia” (2021, 3), I examine the game with Doreen Massey’s notion of space as a “simultaneity of stories-so-far” in mind. The game world offers players an access point to these stories and, consequently, to the values and myths associated with the time-space of the Victorian age. *Assassin’s Creed Syndicate* offers the player the opportunity to engage with the two protagonists and their gendered roles in society, both from an internal and external perspective. The player’s traversal of the game space becomes an exploration of the “essential multiplicity” of space in a time they would otherwise not have access to, where they can not only learn about but also co-create the stories-so-far that are simulated in-game (Massey 2005, 12, 71). Thus, in a broad sense, video games are not only “allegories of space”, but they can also be allegories of history (Aarseth 2001, 169).

PLAYING WITH VICTORIAN VALUES

As mentioned earlier, it is challenging to formulate a clear definition of the Victorian, which consequently complicates the notion of Victorian gender roles. In addition to the temporal span of the long nineteenth century, intersectional factors, including differences upheld by social class, race, or geographic conditions, make it impossible to speak of the Victorian woman or man in absolute terms. Still, the Victorians are frequently used as a reference point when discussing questions of “individual identity, specifically in relation to sexuality and gender”. As “multiply ‘Othered’ subjects”, which can be observed and studied from a

comfortable distance in neo-Victorian creative works, they “offer the potential space for working through ideas and concerns that still dominate social discourses today” (Llewellyn 2008, 175). Jeannette King similarly states that “[g]ender is as politically charged an issue now as it was at the end of the nineteenth century”. The sentiment that issues such as gender permeate both contemporary and Victorian society still resonates two decades later. *Assassin’s Creed Syndicate* draws on this continuity by using the Victorian past as an allegorical lens to “challenge (...) the images of women”, men, and the broader concept of gender that emerged from Victorian culture, while also examining “the values inscribed in those images, and their enduring power”. Consequently, the reevaluation of those images “can add to the modern reader’s understanding of gender” by exposing the historical influences on contemporary views on the subject (2005, 6). As these images “express some kind of cultural truth”, they align with Dom Ford’s paraphrasing of David Leeming’s notion of myth (2025, 12). Further synthesizing conceptualizations of myth by scholars such as Roland Barthes, Alan Dundes, and Frog, he discusses how modern myth(s) “undergird our society” as naturalized discourse (*idem*, 21, 29). Through intentional or unintentional cyclical repetition, then, myths permeate society – and, by extension, media – “as a way of understanding the world asserted as natural” (*idem*, 30-32, 61). Neo-Victorian remediations participate in this repetition, reproducing and reworking the myths that constitute contemporary understandings of the Victorian past.

Victorian gender mythology rests heavily on the image of a separation between private and public spheres. The household constitutes the private sphere and “is considered to be the proper place for the ideal Victorian woman” (Yildirim 2015, 2). Accordingly, the public sphere encompasses “[t]he world outside home”, specifically the workplace, which is deemed the “ideal environment for men” (*idem*, 2-3). This binary only provides a vague approximation to the actuality of Victorian society, which by now “has been challenged [...] by historians who contested the distinction” (King 2005, 11). Besides this separation, the stereotypes of the Angel in the House, the fallen woman, the gentleman, and the dandy are strongly associated with the Victorian age. The Angel in the House relates to the image of the ideal Victorian woman, who is “devoted to her family, submissive, self-sacrificing and passive by nature”. Opposing this “notion of feminine purity”, the fallen woman is described as someone “who lost her innocence or fell from the grace of God through the practice of [...] inappropriate acts, particularly sexual ones” (Yildirim 2015, 2, xii, 12-14).

The ideal Victorian man, characterized by “energetic self-discipline” and “self-mastery” that equipped him to thrive in England’s “increasingly [...] industrialized society”, is mythologized as Carlyle’s “Captains of Industry” and the figure of the gentleman (Adams 1995, 5, 9, 6). While “all masculine self-fashioning (...) inevitably makes appeal to an audience, real or imagined”, the figure of the dandy who presents himself as a “spectacle” in the “theater of the world”, remains one of the most exaggerated stereotypes of Victorian masculinity (*idem*, 10-11). Yet, these images are not accurate reflections of historical reality, but rather operate as “a tool, a set of mechanics and dynamics attributing gender-biased social roles (...) to reinforce the politics of gender that privileges men and subjugates women (...) in the industrial society” (Chouari 2022, 10). Still, these myths remain useful for how gender continues to be visualized in neo-Victorian fiction. By framing femininity and masculinity through recognizable stereotypes, neo-Victorian media allow audiences to critically engage with the cultural legacy of the nineteenth century and offer insights into the ongoing influence of Victorian myths in shaping contemporary gender discourse. While *Assassin’s Creed Syndicate* “largely succeeds in upending gendered stereotypes commonly associated with video games” (Gilbert 2016, 149), a neo-Victorian reading reveals how the game employs Victorian stereotypes and thus remediates associated gendered myths about the time. However, the following analysis of the game’s protagonists discusses how they are used in a nuanced manner.

“GUNSLINGER” VS “CHAMELEON”: POWER DYNAMICS AND GAMEPLAY

The growing belief in scientific knowledge during the mid-nineteenth century appeared as “the ‘magic key’ to the understanding of gender”, which saw women as a “homogeneous group differentiated far more from men than from each other” based on “natural” rules. This was used to justify assigning men and women vastly “different educational needs and different social functions” (King 2005, 12-13). Likewise, the rise of Positivism “urg[ed] women to renounce their wealth, their property, and their place in public life”, as their “place in society was the ‘moral authority’ of the home”. This reinforced perceived gender differences, creating a “patriarchal ‘eutopia’ for men, and a dystopia for women” (Wilson 2023, 12, 14, 21). John Ruskin’s lecture “Of Queens’ Gardens”, published in 1865, describes these different “natural” characters vividly:

The man's power is active, progressive, defensive. He is eminently the doer, the creator, the discoverer, the defender. His intellect is for speculation and invention; his energy for adventure, for war, and for conquest (...). But the woman's power is for rule, not for battle,—and her intellect is not for invention or creation, but for sweet ordering, arrangement, and decision. (...) Her great function is Praise; (...) By her office, and place, she is protected from all danger and temptation. The man, in his rough work in open world, must encounter all peril and trial;—to him, therefore, must be the failure, the offence, the inevitable error: often he must be wounded, or subdued; often misled; and always hardened. But he guards the woman from all this. (Ruskin 2010, 121-122)

Assassin's Creed Syndicate draws on similar binaries in its construction of the Frye twins, as their opposing characters become apparent in their introductory sequence. Evie, methodical and composed, declares that she has “studied the plans of the laboratory and [has] every route covered” before telling her brother not to die, while Jacob, flashing his hidden blade, claims that he has “got all [he needs] right here” and reminds Evie to “[h]ave fun” (*Syndicate*). Their respective attitudes align closely with Ruskin's ideals, as Jacob embodies a confrontational energy for war and conquest, while Evie, though more self-reliant than the ideal, still echoes the traits of careful planning and moral responsibility.

This division is further reinforced through gameplay, as the Animus interface suggests how to play each character, stating that “Evie favors a stealth approach, whereas Jacob is more confrontational” (*Syndicate*). While many games, including later *Assassin's Creed* titles such as *Odyssey* and *Valhalla*, equalize their protagonists in gameplay regardless of gender, *Syndicate* differentiates between Evie and Jacob's skill sets. The player can unlock three exclusive skills for Jacob, which enhance his close combat abilities, while Evie's exclusive skills increase her stealth abilities (Figure 1).

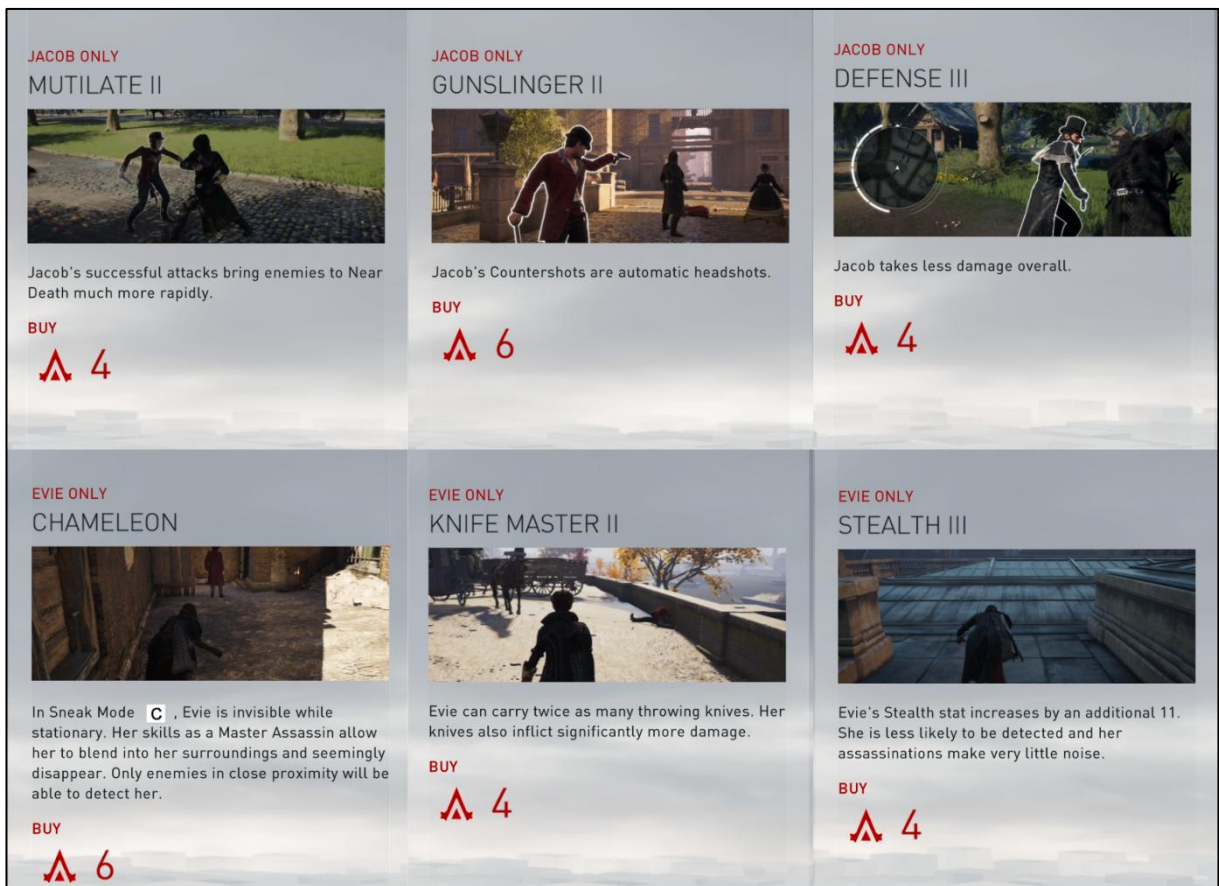


Figure 1: Comparison of Evie and Jacob's exclusive skills. (Ubisoft, *Assassin's Creed Syndicate*)

Consequently, Jacob's confrontational character is emphasized, which reflects the traditional ideals of masculinity tied to war and conquest. Evie's preference to remain in the shadows, while congruent with her role as an assassin, also recalls the social invisibility imposed on Victorian women. Beth Newman describes how "feminine display (...) was socially devalued", and women were to be "properly self-effacing, 'invisible' [and] domestic" (2004, 5). Thus, Evie's skills illustrate that, beyond the layer of her identity as an Assassin, she is still affected by the societal bounds Victorian feminine ideals imposed on women.

Narratively, Evie aims to strategically further the mission, while Jacob's actions are motivated by his desire to fight for fighting's sake, which eventually leads him to "destroy modern medicine [and] the London transportation network" among other things. Yet, he continues to deflect blame and relies on Evie to repair his mistakes, while her singular misstep of letting a Templar "walk away" is given much more weight (*Syndicate*). In contrast, despite Evie's more significant mental labor, Jacob's efforts are more overtly acknowledged. The distribution of playable content further highlights this imbalance, as

out of the game's 37 memory sequences, 11 are exclusively playable as Evie and 23 as Jacob. Similarly, Jacob assassinates seven of the ten main targets, and while the final mission is shared between both characters, Jacob's arc receives significantly more attention. Narratively, Starrick and his henchmen discuss the consequences of Jacob's actions in a dismissive but detailed manner, yet Evie is merely mentioned as "this sister" Starrick has "heard of" (*Syndicate*). Intentional or not, the game thus comments not only on the gendered power imbalance within its own narrative but also echoes broader issues of historical representation. *Assassin's Creed Syndicate* makes visible how, just as Evie's achievements are constantly overshadowed by her brother's, women's voices have been lost across history in favor of their male contemporaries' point of view. Through both narrative and gameplay, *Assassin's Creed Syndicate* constructs a gendered dichotomy that draws on Victorian myths of ideal masculinity and femininity, setting the stage for a deeper analysis of how Evie and Jacob's portrayals reinforce or challenge historical gender roles.

BEYOND THE LIBERATED WOMAN: EVIE AS AN AGENT BETWEEN EQUALITY AND TRADITION

A closer look at Evie's characterization reveals a portrayal of agency that subverts myths of Victorian femininity. As Jeannette King argues, neo-Victorian reimaginations, specifically women's writing centralizing the "female experience", can "[give] back women their place in history, not just as victims but as agents" (2005, 3). *Assassin's Creed Syndicate* mirrors this by using the Animus databank to provide access to Evie's notebook, which allows her to reflect and express opinions without her brother's interference. This echoes the life writing tradition popular during the Victorian age, which marks "[t]he 'origins' of women's autobiography [as] distinctly Victorian" and the research on such intends to "(re)discover a tradition of women's own" focusing on "the revival of lost or forgotten women's texts [and on] women's self-representation" (Peterson 1999, 3, 1). Evie's entries overtly comment on political realities as she writes in her last entry that "[w]omen are still denied education, suffrage, and property rights" (*Syndicate*). As we will see, having Evie voice this highlights the meaningful involvement of women in social reform during that time, defying the stereotype of the reserved Victorian woman. Importantly, Evie's role opposite her brother positions her as an agent rather than a victim. King continues to argue that during the Victorian age, "[w]omen were expected to fill the



vacuum left by the death of religious certainty, revered not only as the embodiment of virtue themselves, but as the guardians of male virtue” (2005, 11). Jacob’s impulsiveness repeatedly puts Evie in the position of the agent who must repair his mistakes and thus guard his reputation. For example, after he destroys the “production of Starrick’s Soothing Syrup”, Evie handles the resulting public health crisis by rescuing children, eliminating profiteers, and investing Brotherhood resources into Florence Nightingale’s sanitation reforms. In her notebook, she underscores the imbalance of labor, noting that during these efforts, “Jacob was nowhere to be found” (*Syndicate*). Yet, instead of abandoning her brother or seeking credit, she takes responsibility, which echoes the image of the woman as guardian of male virtue. However, rather than reinforcing patriarchy, this framing can be read as subtly critiquing it by portraying Evie as the one in control, who is operating with foresight, agency, and the masculine self-discipline of a gentle(wo)man.

Herself commenting on how women are still denied formal education, Evie’s scholarly endeavors reflect on the systemic exclusion of women from education during the Victorian age. Based on the assumption that “the female system could not cope with both the demands of education and the demands of the reproductive cycle”, schooling was “thought delirious to female health” (King 2005, 18). These regressive beliefs are reflected in how Evie’s intelligence is treated by her male peers, as Jacob repeatedly remarks dismissively on his sister’s research. For instance, after asking what she will be doing while he embarks on his first mission, he mockingly tells her to “[e]njoy [her] studies” while he is “out killing Templars”, evidently devaluing her research compared to his actions. Moreover, through his carelessness, Jacob complicates Evie’s research as “his interference” causes “a wealth of information” concerning the Piece of Eden to be partially destroyed (*Syndicate*). Overall, Jacob’s attitude is emblematic of the stereotype that a woman’s intellect is suited only for “ordering” and “praise”, not “invention or creation” (Ruskin 2010, 122). This is further mirrored during an interaction Evie has with Alexander Graham Bell, where he dismisses her suggestion to “just call [his new invention] a telephone” and immediately changes the subject to something “[he] was saying earlier” (*Syndicate*). This scene subtly critiques how women’s contributions to science have historically been ignored or credited to men.

Evie’s relationship with Henry Green presents a nuanced reimagining of Victorian marriage and the subsequent dependence on men. Their introduction mirrors a hierarchy,

as Evie is portrayed as standing below both her brother and Henry and thus has to look up at them. This image alludes to the traditional roles in Victorian marriages, which for women was advertised as a “means of survival” and remained “dominated by the man”, meaning that “all property, money and (...) [any] children (...) belonged” to him (Yildirim 2015, 5). This included the expectations of motherhood, which was considered “woman’s natural destiny” and ensured the continuation of the husband’s legacy, further manifesting women’s “subordination to men” (King 2005, 19, 26). Yet, despite their initial meeting covertly implying this subordination, the progression of Evie and Henry’s relationship subverts this dynamic. In the following cutscene, they are positioned at an equal height, establishing equality as a theme in their subsequent encounters. Henry supports Evie’s research by sharing his books and helping her investigation. As she records in her notebook, they “are often together” and he actively “assist[s]” in repairing the medical system, occupying the supporting role in their relationship. Evie begins to care deeply for Henry and allows herself to rely on his plan instead of her own. However, after Henry’s plan goes awry and she again finds herself in the position of the savior, this time rectifying Henry’s mistakes, she denies herself the opportunity to embrace these feelings. This caution towards emotional dependence threatening her autonomy can be read as Evie resisting the Victorian marriage ideal and positions her eventual acceptance of Henry after he regained her trust by saving their last mission as a conscious choice rather than an obligation. Moreover, their romance culminates in an optional marriage proposal unlocked only by completing a side quest, which preserves Evie’s agency and choice in the matter. Her declaration that Henry “belong[s] in the field *with* [her]” and their marriage remaining childless ultimately solidifies the reversal of the traditional dynamic of male dominance, allowing Evie to maintain her commitment to the Brotherhood without surrendering to the expectations of fulfilling her “female destiny” as a mother (*Syndicate*).

Evie’s strong sense of agency, educated nature, and equality with her partner depict her as a nuanced representation, emphasizing Amanda Vickery’s description of “Victorian women (...) as no less spirited, capable, and, most importantly, diverse a crew as in any other century” (1993, 390). Unlike many stereotypical reimaginings of the Victorian woman as Angel in the House or fallen woman, Evie’s portrayal exceeds these myths. Still, while many of the ideals of Victorian femininity are subverted by her characterization, aspects such as her responsibility for Jacob’s virtue and her eventual, if optional, marriage

to Henry suggest the limits imposed by the patriarchal structures of nineteenth-century England. These restrictions overtly manifest in the game's last memory sequence. Before infiltrating Buckingham Palace, Evie appears in an ornate red dress, and her movement is visibly altered by its restrictive silhouette, signaling discomfort and self-consciousness. This aligns with the portrayal of the "tightly-laced, corseted female figure" as "an accepted visual shorthand for the notion of the literally and metaphorically repressed Victorian woman". While it has long been debunked, the myth of the corset is still frequently used as a cultural metaphor in neo-Victorian media, likening the woman to a "caged bird", whose "sexuality and agency are imprisoned" (Primorac 2018, 97-103). What sets *Assassin's Creed Syndicate* apart, however, is how this repression is enacted through gameplay itself by employing Bogost's "procedural rhetoric", which he defines as the "practice of using processes persuasively" or "making arguments with computational systems" such as video games (2000, 3). The Animus alerts that "Evie's movements are restricted by her dress", and despite the player pressing the same buttons as before, standard mechanics are now suspended, as Evie can no longer run, jump, or climb. When she is faced with an obstacle she cannot overcome "on [her] own", Evie adapts by kidnapping a guard to continue her mission, which shows that while she is still capable, her autonomy is obstructed. Eventually, she removes the dress and lays it to rest with the Assassin's blessing "Requiescat in pace" (*Syndicate*). This symbolic killing of the repressive ideal shows Evie defying the limitations of the metaphorical cage, only to rush to her brother's aid once again in the final confrontation with Starrick and ultimately be saved herself by Henry's intervention. Overall, this portrayal of one of the most common stereotypes of the Victorian woman solidifies Evie's nuanced characterization as she is able to enact her agency in ways that subvert traditional gender norms, while the overarching limitations of the patriarchal Victorian society remain ever-present.

THE CAGED BIRD: JACOB'S QUEST FOR IDENTITY BETWEEN SELF-MASTERY AND PERFORMANCE

Portrayed as Evie's counterpart in methods and motivation, Jacob embodies what Ruskin described as the masculine "energy for adventure, (...) war, and (...) conquest". Still, he also experiences the inevitable failure concomitant with masculinity, which Ruskin acknowledges by noting that a man "must be wounded, or subdued (or) often misled".

However, by relying on Evie to compensate for this failure, he fails to “guard the woman from all this” and instead forces her to engage with his “inevitable error[s]” (2010, 121-122). He causes problems, such as disrupting London’s medical supply, ignores Evie’s warnings, and retreats from responsibility. Yet, his continuous discrediting of Evie’s achievements in comparison to his actions bolsters his brutish behavior imposed on the player by the suggested play style for Jacob. He feigns superiority that portrays him as the stereotypical “doer” Ruskin describes as the ideal Victorian man (*idem*, 121). Behind this mask, however, his rash actions paired with his unawareness of their consequences depict him as lacking “the energetic self-discipline that distinguished [a] manly ‘character’”. Rooted in the economic sector of England’s “increasingly secular and industrialized society”, the ideals of self-discipline and self-mastery spread the “prominence of male rivalries” from the world of business to the private sector of male identity (Adams 1995, 5, 15). Thus, Jacob’s subversive performance of Victorian masculinity is most evident in his rivalry with Starrick, who strongly embodies Carlyle’s “Captains of Industry”, representing the self-made, economically dominant Victorian gentleman. Jacob tries to match this image by assuming the role of the Rooks’ gang leader and attempting to overthrow Starrick’s empire, which is emphasized in gameplay by the option to invest money in the Rooks’ advancements. This frames the Rooks as a business through which Jacob attempts to attain the role of a “[master] of capital” (Adams 1995, 6). Ultimately, unable to best Starrick on his own, he is metaphorically and literally made to look up to the Grandmaster, as he forces Jacob to his knees during their final confrontation. Combined with his loss of control over the Rooks in the DLC as a business and “surrogate family structure”, this solidifies Jacob’s inability to adopt the role of a successful leader, either in the industrial or the familial setting (*idem*, 5). Thus, while Evie’s narrative allows her to subvert the feminine ideal, Jacob’s character reflects the unraveling of Victorian masculinity from within. His failure to internalize the necessary self-discipline and self-mastery illustrates the fragility of the gentleman myth when stripped of its economic and social functions.

Jacob’s brief partnership with Maxwell Roth echoes another myth of masculine identity in the dandy. As the proprietor of the Alhambra Music Hall, Roth embodies the innate “theatricality” of the dandy. He embodies this “straightforward speech and action, shorn of any hint of subtlety” covertly through his manner of speaking and overly expressive body language (Adams 1995, 10, 14), and overtly declares that “theatricality is

something of a Roth specialty” (*Syndicate*). Roth quite literally offers Jacob an opportunity to prove himself in the “theater of the world” by welcoming Jacob onto the stage of the Alhambra (*idem*, 10), where he suggests a partnership to “bring [Starrick] down” together, further highlighting the performative aspect of Jacob’s rivalry with the Grandmaster. In contrast to Evie, Roth praises Jacob’s methods and encourages him to “[t]ake the reins”, presenting an exaggerated mirror image of the destructive aspects of Jacob’s character (*Syndicate*). After initially embracing this anarchistic partnership, however, Jacob soon recognizes the implications of these parallels, and the sequence’s ending mirrors its beginning, as Jacob rejects Roth’s offer to prove himself in the theater of the world by killing him on the Alhambra’s stage, this time in front of a real audience. While Roth portrays the straightforward and active manliness achieved through theatrical self-fashioning, Jacob’s rejection of this path echoes Adams’ equation of the dandy with the image of “a fallen man”, who “[willfully abrogates his] masculine self-sufficiency” resulting in a “compromised autonomy” (1995, 54). His performed rejection of an unchallenged masculine autonomy, as represented by his public assassination of Roth, combined with his overall struggle to achieve a sense of self-sufficiency and his dependence on Evie, characterizes Jacob as a fallen man. Just as the metaphor of the caged bird is often used as a shorthand for the social constraints put on Victorian women (Primorac 2018, 97), Roth’s pet bird, which he keeps in a cage, is suggested to represent Jacob. When he ends their partnership, he receives the dead bird in a box, further solidifying his failure to fulfil the expectations of the self-fashioning performance of Victorian masculinity.

Likening Jacob to the metaphor of the caged bird recalls the previously mentioned metaphorical cage represented by the corset, “within which a woman’s sexuality and agency are imprisoned”, emphasizing “the suppressed erotic feelings and restricted social avenues available for the expression of one’s desire” (*idem*, 103). This relates to another layer of Jacob’s identity struggles, as the nature of their relationship is deliberately kept “ambiguous” yet suggests romantic undertones from Roth’s side (Loomer 01:15:30-01:18:20). He repeatedly addresses Jacob as “my dear”, is “charmed” by him according to his database entry and even after their partnership ends, regards him as “the person he cared for the most” and “very near and dear to [his] heart” (*Syndicate*). During their final encounter, Roth kisses Jacob just before dying, punctuating his feelings with a tender yet transgressive gesture. Paired with the lack of a female love interest and never overtly



80 denying Roth's advances before his final moments, this leaves Jacob's sexuality open to the player's interpretation. As lead writer Jeffrey Yohalem confirmed, Roth's sequence replaces the "love interest sequence", stating that "[Roth] is in love with Jacob, [who] may have reciprocated" (Loomer 01:15:30-01:18:20). This reading is further reinforced by the reward item Jacob receives after their falling out; brass knuckles with the description "All you need is LOVE" (*Syndicate*). Moreover, he actively denies meeting with Roth when questioned by Evie, who never learns the truth, even when encountering a troubled Jacob after Roth's assassination. This reflects the notion that "[o]ver the course of the Victorian Era (...) secrecy among men becomes the sign less of potential insurrection than of sexual deviance" (Adams 1995, 62). While their power imbalance and considerable age difference imply a questionable relationship, they remain a useful tool for reflecting on the underlying theme of Jacob's internal conflict. It underlines the difficulties of a man who, in many ways, is unable to conform to the masculine ideal of the period.

The time he spent with Roth put their father on Jacob's mind, who, as Evie reminds her brother, "never approved of [Jacob's] methods", while Roth initially embodies an anarchistic masculinity Jacob can identify with. The ambivalence of their relationship thus leaves room for also reading Roth as an idealized father figure, who, unlike Ethan Frye, supports Jacob's methods. Evie exhibits the traits their father valued, which reveals Jacob's hostile attitude towards her as a manifestation of the emotional weight he carries in failing to live up to their father's expectations on the one hand. On the other hand, it reveals Jacob's fear of becoming like their father, a fate he deems "worse than death". Beyond Ethan's disapproval of Jacob's methods, this resentment stems from being more of a teacher than a father, as he "raised his children steeped in Assassin heritage" (*Syndicate*). This echoes the "growing isolation of middle-class fathers from their sons" during the Victorian age. Moreover, this didactic rather than paternal relationship also mirrors how "men increasingly bequeathed their sons education (...) rather than property", which "[undermined] [l]ong-standing associations of manhood with independence" (Adams 1995, 5). Rejecting his father's teachings and thus never gaining his approval, Jacob was left without a male role model to shape the foundations of his identity. He is neither able to achieve the self-discipline his father stood for, nor manage the self-mastery this discipline entails. Paradoxically, Jacob deeply depends on the one person who embodies both of these traits, simultaneously resenting Evie for "[t]reating [him] like a child" while

also relying on her to amend his mistakes. This paradox also illustrates how such traits have different connotations depending on who performs them. While Ethan portrays masculine authority akin to idealized self-discipline, Evie's methodical thinking can be read as in line with the feminine ideal of the planner. Depicting Evie as a mirror to their father within Jacob's arc highlights how such qualities are not inherently gendered but gain their meaning in relation to social contexts, such as family structures, norms, and ideals. Inevitably leading to another downfall portrayed in the DLC after Evie leaves, Jacob's dependence on his sister is apparent, as she is the person to finally express his father's approval by telling Jacob that their "[f]ather would be proud of [him]" at the very end of the game. Thus, the initial lack of paternal approval in Jacob's life is at the root of his inability to form a stable identity that conforms with the masculine ideal and causes his failing attempts to assert himself in relation to others, such as Evie as his paradoxical opposition and guardian, Starrick as his rival, and Roth as a father figure and role model gone awry.

CONCLUSION: "THEM VS. US"- REMNANTS OF VICTORIAN VALUES

This paper explored *Assassin's Creed Syndicate* as a ludic allegory of the Victorian age, which offers an interactive space to reassess nineteenth-century society. Creating an "interface between past and present" (Kohlke 2008, 1), the game embodies the core element of neo-Victorianism and thus offers a valuable addition to the pool of neo-Victorian narratives, which still predominantly focuses on traditional media such as literature or film. Gender is a particularly compelling theme for neo-Victorian creative practices, as myths about Victorian gender roles are deeply ingrained in contemporary understandings of the period. Through Evie and Jacob, the player has a dual perspective on how gender is represented, while the implied character of the Initiate creates a reflexive distance from which they can reevaluate this representation. On the surface, the characterization of Evie and Jacob portrays them as stereotypes to some degree, which contributes to the nostalgic value of the game. While Evie neither resembles the Angel in House nor a fallen woman, the premise of a female master assassin with the opportunity of conquering London suggests her as a stereotypical representation of the liberated woman who overcomes her struggles, despite this being rather unrealistic for the time. However, she represents more than "the essentially modern heroine's desire to assert her

82 own agency [which] is made more dramatic by the frame of restrictive Victorian rules and limited gender roles” often present in neo-Victorian media (Primorac 2018, 141). The detailed analysis showed both Evie and Jacob to be nuanced characters that address a multitude of issues relating to the experience of Victorian gender norms and ideals. Evie represents the hardships Victorian women endured but also offers a subversive perspective on the feminine ideal of the period, which is portrayed in a liberatory manner. In contrast to these positive connotations, Jacob’s subversion of Victorian gender roles is rooted in his inability to conform to these models and highlights the pressure that accompanies the performance-focused masculinity of the nineteenth century.

As mentioned before, neo-Victorian retellings not only function as tools to critically evaluate the past but also as an encouragement for their audience to critically engage with these themes in a contemporary context. These observations highlight both the value of applying a neo-Victorian lens to interactive media and the inclusion of popular media, such as video games, in the neo-Victorian canon. Interactive media, such as *Assassin’s Creed Syndicate*, offer valuable possibilities not only to render the Victorian age visible but also to create a tangible experience for the player, as exemplified by the restrictive experience of Evie’s dress. Limited by its focus on a single game and specific theme, this analysis only scratches the surface of the potential of video games for neo-Victorian studies. Further research could also expand this analysis by studying “transmedia storytelling” to explore how gendered myths are portrayed across various media formats (Jenkins 2006, 96). Moreover, a queer studies perspective could expand on the theme of gender explored here and offer an in-depth analysis of the possibly queer aspects of Jacob’s narrative, as well as include other characters present in the game world or expand even further by establishing a queer reading of neo-Victorian games at large. To conclude, *Assassin’s Creed Syndicate* offers an allegorical experience of space as well as history, which not only engages its players as participants in the nineteenth century but simultaneously encourages them to learn about, rethink, and reflect on the Victorian age and its remnants in our own, contemporary identities.

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