Kill the Overseer!
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Avatar Trouble and Aveline

More than just moving bodies across a digital landscape, many videogames exhibit the “second person conundrum” described by Jill Walker in her essay “Do You Think You’re Part of This?: Digital Texts and the Second Person Address.” Walker writes, “In many digital texts, identification is pushed as far as possible . . . the difference between playing and being is blurred.”1

In a similar manner, in many games depicting slave resistance, the player is invited to identify with, to control, to become a slave-in-revolt in some capacities and explicitly denied that position in others. This use of the second person is exhibited, for example, in the directive mentioned above, from Freedom Cry: “Kill the overseer!”

“Kill the overseer!” is not a suggestion, or a piece of advice—it’s a command. If you don’t kill the overseer, you fail. You are “desynchronized” from the gameplay and must begin again. If you want the game to progress, you have no choice but to chase after the overseer, who in this instance is in pursuit of the female slave whose ears he threatens to cut off. When you catch him, you dispatch him on the spot with the machete and the game allows you to advance. Similar injunctions are seen in other videogames that feature slave revolt, like “Incite a riot” or “Fight the slave-masters” (both from Assassin’s Creed Liberation), and I’m interested here in how the traditional form of interactive games, with a set of directives that must be followed, takes on a deeper resonance when the subject at hand is historical enslavement and rebellion.

Game designer Sid Meier said that all games are “a series of interesting choices,” but it doesn’t always feel this way. As with the command “Kill the overseer,” some directives are not choices in a certain type of adventure game. Without completing the task at hand, the player does not advance the journey or narrative. Citing Meier’s famous line, Ian Bogost writes in *Persuasive Games*, “Interesting choices do not necessarily entail all possible choices in a given situation; rather, choices are selectively included and excluded in a procedural representation to produce a desired and expressive end.”

That is, as we’ve seen in our discussion of *Mission US: Flight to Freedom*, it is not always choice that enhances the play; sometimes, it is the lack of it. Most interesting are those moments when games about rebel slaves work subversively by *not working*: when options are disenabled, when the game seems to glitch, when the player is reminded of his or her separation from the protagonist. The game seems to subtly say, “Kill the overseer, but remember, as you’re doing it, that this is only a game, and that you are not the historical person you are controlling.”

Without the frame narrative of Desmond Miles lending to the game a Russian Doll effect, whereby the player incarnates a character incarnating another character, *Liberation* and *Freedom Cry* may seem to efface the distance between the player and the playable character, but other devices hold open that space.

A player’s identification with the avatar can be affected both by perspective and maneuverability. Neither of the Assassin’s Creed games I’m discussing here is in the first person perspective, as are many of the Underground Railroad games presented in the early years.  

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3. In this way, the games I’m looking at here seem to function like others that draw attention to themselves as games. For an example of this, see James Sweeting, “Illusions of Choice in Digital Narratives” in *Transtechnology Research Reader 2015–2017* (Plymouth, U.K.: University of Plymouth, 2018), in which he discusses the game *Spec Ops: The Line* and its strategy of embracing “ludonarrative dissonance” to encourage players to reflect upon their role in playing violent military videogames.
sections of this volume—*Mission US*, for example. But nor is it in a distant third person perspective, as in *Thralled*, a game I’ll discuss later, in which the playable character’s body is always seen, in profile, on the screen of the two-dimensional platform game. In *Liberation* and *Freedom Cry*, as in all of the Assassin’s Creed games, the perspective is set slightly above and behind the protagonist’s body so that most of the in-game action feels like a follow shot, with the player capable of manipulating the perspective with a rotating “camera.” Except for the cinematic cut-scenes, during which the player has no control over the characters on screen, the player wields control of the PC’s body, pressing buttons to advance, to run, to shoot, to throw a punch, and even, in the case of *Liberation’s* Aveline, to flirt as a subversive strategy. Yet, beyond the game’s mechanics, both Assassin’s Creed games use narrative to underline the issue of identity, subterfuge, and playing at being someone else.

Importantly, identity is a central feature of the narrative in *Liberation*. Aveline has three costumes that she wears throughout the game, each coming with different skill sets and eliciting different treatment by the community as she walks through the city in the assassin’s garb, the slave’s rags, or the lady’s gown. Aveline’s outfits, which have varied abilities, are given to the player at the start, but others can be bought with in-game currency or by accumulating certain objects in the gameplay. This aspect underscores what Stallabrass says about the role of the commodity in videogames: “Games obsequiously reflect the operation of consumer capital for they are based on exchange, an incessant trading of money, munitions or energy, a shuttling back and forth of goods and blows.” However, this takes on new importance in a game about the commodification of humans.4

In her discussion of the game, Murray attends to the fact that Aveline’s prowess and maneuverability change depending on which

persona she dons. As Murray has suggested, we might make much of the diversity of this avatar and her ability to maneuver through society in a variety of roles. Aveline’s malleability stresses the different levels of social freedom offered to whites and to free people of color in the historical setting. Indeed, the fact that pressing the same buttons on the controller will have different effects depending on whether your avatar is wearing the costume of the slave, the assassin, or the lady undergirds the themes of slavery and freedom in the haptics of the game. Sometimes, forgetting which guise I had adopted, I would frustratingly mash the button to scale a fence or climb a roof and find it had no effect because I was in the lady’s form. I’d then have to locate one of the many changing stations in the town before I could switch costumes. Somewhat ironically, physical mobility in this sense (not being able to climb or even run outright) is limited when Aveline represents the wealthy free woman of color, though it is true that wearing other guises, like the assassin’s outfit, comes with its own limitations, such as being more vulnerable to detection. The convention of having different outfits change the player’s abilities is in no way unique to this game, but it takes on important significatory work given the game’s narrative. Murray discusses the persona system alongside its “poetics of form” in a compelling way, arguing that social mobility and racial “passing” are literalized in the mechanics of this game. But one aspect we might look at (beyond Aveline’s differing abilities depending upon her outfits, which alternately provide talent in diplomacy, blending in, or combat strength) is how her changing appearance elicits varied responses from the passersby, revealing how she is perceived in the community and stressing that all three types of black bodies—free woman of color, the slave, and the rebel slave—are rendered as spectacles that play distinctly to diverse stereotypes.

The lady persona often draws lascivious comments from men of low social standing such as the sailors and dockworkers. Examples

include “Care for a dance, miss?” and “Am I not handsome enough for you?” At one point, Aveline interrogates the drunk captain of a ship, who jokes that in his inebriated state he sees three of her (a nod to her triple persona) but makes it clear that he is up to the challenge of satisfying all three sexually. Doubtless, a scholar like Kimberly Manganelli, who has written on the quadroon society of New Orleans and the “Tragic Mulatta,” would have much to say about the sexualization of this mixed race character and of the game’s portrait of mixed race society in New Orleans.⁶ One of the most problematic aspects of the game, to my mind, is the fact that Aveline’s beauty is considered a weapon. When she wears the guise of the lady, she is capable of “charming” enemies out of information and jewelry. She can shoot them with a poison blow dart that comes out of her parasol, but she can’t even climb a fence in her paniers. Liberation’s rich diversity of experience regarding a single character avatar wearing different outfits signals to the issue of participatory spectatorship, which mirrors the way that a player can don a digital guise that may be different from his or her own in terms of class, race, gender, and, certainly, time period.

Aveline’s changing appearance also therefore acts as a kind of meta-commentary on the game itself, where the player takes on an identity that doesn’t properly belong to him or her. Just as this wealthy, free woman of color pretends to be a slave in order to aid her campaign, so too, is the contemporary gamer donning a digital costume and playing at a role within the historical context of slave resistance. Such “metagaming” moments (here I mean the word in the sense of metafictional, self-referential nods to the medium itself) are prevalent throughout videogames, and they may work to interrupt the player’s absorption in the drama, underlining the

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fiction of the play. Centrally, in interactive narratives about slavery, they work to emphasize the player’s separation from the real historical lives from which the game draws. Similar to what we encounter in *Liberation*, Adewalé’s abilities in the game *Freedom Cry* are also dramatically decreased in one mission when he is dressed in the slave’s garb. Effecting a kind of “operationalized weakness” in which player characters have purposefully limited abilities, such moments can frustrate the player in a productive manner that also serves to highlight the fiction of the game, but we will turn to this topic in a later section. There’s one final point I want to make on the “avatar trouble” highlighted by the game *Liberation*.

Besides the diversity of experiences Aveline’s triple persona offers the player, there may also be an acknowledgment of the inherently plural nature of history, as is also present within the game’s emphasis on secret histories and uncovered truths. We might read this as a way the game safeguards itself from accusations of historical trespass, or, more generously, we could argue it preserves a space for considering the inaccessible history of day-to-day slave resistance, one unlikely to have been recorded in the plantation logs or masters’ journals, which unfortunately form the basis of much of our understanding of the lives of the enslaved. This gap in our record is encapsulated in a phrase graffitied on the wall of the Elmina slave fort in Ghana: “Until the lion has his historian, the hunter will always be a hero.” But unfortunately, this potentially pluralist view of history is one of the places where I would say that *Liberation* fails to live up to its liberatory promise.

There is a subplot in *Liberation* in which a hacker called Erudito contacts the player at various points in the game and offers re-

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7. See Boluk and Lemieux, *Metagaming*; their own use of the term “metagame” is broad, including games about games, games within games, and the worlds around games, to articulate a kind of ecology of play.

8. For a discussion of operationalized weakness, see Bogost, *How to Do*, 20. For a discussion on the uses of frustration in videogames, see Gilleade and Dix, “Using Frustration.”

9. A photograph is displayed at SlaveHaven Museum in Memphis.
vealing glimpses into how Abstergo Industries has tampered with or redacted Aveline’s storyline. This further distances the player and the playable character, as the player is addressed directly and thereby separated from the role he or she is playing as Aveline. In these moments, an electronic voice-over tells the player to find a character called “Citizen E” and assassinate him. If this is accomplished, the player revisits a previously seen cut-scene, this time with modifications or extra lines that reveal “the truth” Abstergo has presumably hidden. For example, the third reveal replays a conversation between Gérald Blanc (Aveline’s business associate, would-be suitor, and sometime accomplice) and Aveline (in slave costume) in which she expresses dissatisfaction that she cannot do more for the enslaved. Aveline says, “A small gesture, hardly enough. I can offer them a wage, but what good is money without freedom?” Here she acknowledges that her personal efforts in paying her own workers rather than keeping them enslaved does not undo the problems of the society at large. She also expresses feelings of powerlessness going up against the Templars, who will “never allow the slaves to be free.” Perhaps it is only these references to the Templars that are meant to be redacted, but nonetheless Erudito’s recoveries reveal more subversive content, expressing a greater scope to Aveline’s goals for the emancipation of the enslaved.

By definition, cut-scenes interrupt the player’s sense of control over the PC, as the gameplay is suspended while the player becomes an inactive spectator witnessing a cinematic interlude. But in Erudito’s reveals, in which we revisit previously seen material with new content disclosed, the PC is doubled via déjà vu, establishing a further distance between the player and the character of Aveline and destabilizing player impressions of the game. Erudito’s final “hack” comes after the credits roll at the conclusion of the game, revealing an alternate ending in which Aveline takes an oath of loyalty to the Brotherhood, administered by her stepmother Madeleine. This scene uncovers that Madeleine had been the adversary Aveline was tracking all along, dubbed “The Company Man,” and that it was, in fact, Madeleine who killed
Aveline’s father, who purportedly dies of illness midway through the game. After slaying her evil stepmother, Aveline completes the “Prophesy Disk” (a much-coveted object in the game, shards of which Aveline had collected in missions on Chichen Itza) with her locket, an heirloom from her mother. This action reveals a hologram about a character called “Eve” who will lead the people to freedom. It is intimated that Aveline (meaning “little Eve”) will go on to bring about real emancipation for the slaves. But even as this game would package itself as progressive, and Erudito’s hacks often reveal a more revolutionary narrative, the game’s construction of its own alternative history is not without complications.

As I’ve discussed elsewhere in more detail, several historical flashpoints of slave resistance in the colony of Saint Domingue are woven into the plots of both Liberation and Freedom Cry. The commoditization of the history of slave resistance in the only colony where enslaved peoples successfully led a rebellion that established a sovereign nation reeks of an incorporation and anesthetization of Haiti’s history in the form of an entertainment commodity. Most troublingly, the game incorporates into its fiction the historical personage of François Makandal, Maroon leader of Saint Domingue, whose efforts at poisoning the white slaveholding community some historians consider to be the first chapter of the Haitian Revolution. This is starkly different from the subtle nod to the historic Makandal in the game Freedom: Rebels in Darkness. A complete account of how Makandal is referenced in Liberation is beyond our scope here, but in short, the narrative implies that


the historic rebel slave François Makandal was a member of the fictional Brotherhood of Assassins in a move that is a dangerous co-option of black resistance by the entertainment industry.

In the game, Aveline battles a bayou witchdoctor calling himself François Mackandal, who is in league with the corrupt Spanish official de Ferrer seeking control of the colony. The False Mackandal, as he is called in the game—it is later revealed that his name is actually Baptiste—was formerly acquainted with both Aveline’s mentor, Agaté, and her mother, Jeanne. Aveline comes to understand the False Mackandal’s true identity and his relationship as protégé to the “real” Makandal. Importantly, the historical Makandal is referenced but never depicted in the game. The player can finish the game and attain “full synchronization” without learning much more about Makandal. However, if the player decides to collect the thirty pages of Jeanne’s diary that are scattered throughout New Orleans and reveals the “hacks” hidden in the game by Erudito, a more complete and destructive picture emerges: one in which Aveline’s mother obstructed Makandal’s plan to poison the white slaveholding population of Saint Domingue, an actual event that led to the man’s execution in the year 1758. Makandal’s revolutionary command is gelded by his mere incorporation into this game, and his legacy is sublimated. In the game, Makandal is thwarted by Jeanne, our protagonist’s mother, and his brand of emancipation is demonized. The “lord of poison” is depicted explicitly as a failure who died without succeeding at his mission. As many note, revision of history is endemic to the Assassin’s Creed series, but I feel that these tamperings in history take on dangerous resonances when it is a legacy of slave resistance that is nerfed.12

Historical people are often referenced in the Assassin’s Creed series. I disapprove of the treatment of Makandal in this game,

and I would argue that the stakes are high when the game allows a player to incarnate the historical slave and the historical slave-in-revolt. But a more generous reading might assert that, in part, *Liberation* seems to acknowledge this. By doubling Makandal, and creating a character called “the False Mackandal,” the game may point to itself as tampering with history and thus acknowledge itself as fiction. But for the player who neglects to do outside research, taking the game’s representation of Makandal at face value, any reading of the symbolism of Makandal’s doubling in “the False Mackandal” will surely be illegible. In the next section, we delve deeper into the issue of whether some moments of illegibility and player obstruction in the Assassin’s Creed series can be read as charged with productive potential because of how they separate the player from the role she would inhabit in the game.