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1. Introduction

The fascination attached to visiting a different world from our realities has always been innately human and thus for centuries we have created narratives that transport us to faraway lands filled with mythical creatures or not-so-faraway lands where only small aspects differ from this world. Used as a way to flee from the overwhelming realities of modern life or simply as an enjoyable leisure activity, escapism through fictional narratives remains a major part of popular culture. Specifically fantasy and period fiction has risen in popularity over the last couple of years, which is palpable across various avenues of popular culture. As the largest streaming service, Netflix sets the tone of this trend by releasing shows such as *Bridgerton* (2020-present) or *The Witcher* (2019-present), which both have been renewed for further seasons as well as produced spin-off series also developed by Netflix. A period drama and fantasy show respectively, these examples and their popularity demonstrate the audience's fascination with embarking on a journey to a different time or an entirely different world alongside the main characters of the series. With both series being book adaptations, this fascination is also evident in literary internet niches such as BookTok, the part of the social media platform TikTok where users share their opinions on books, which greatly influences trends as specially curated sections labeled BookTok can be found in many bookstores. After the series release, the *Bridgerton* novels by Julia Quinn were heavily featured on the platform, simultaneously manifesting users' interest in the Regency era. Even the already interactive medium of the video game reflects the desire to visit other worlds in its recent genre trends. Games such as *Elden Ring* (2022) and *The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt* (2015), which dominated the rankings and award events of their respective release years, employ role-playing elements and transport the player to vast fantasy worlds they can explore for hours on end. Evidently, popular media that offer their audience an escapist engagement within their narrative is highly valued in the current state of our society which is marked by uncertainty and unrest.

In the academic context, interactive and immersive capabilities of narratives have been part of the research on new media and their influence on storytelling from its early stages. In her seminal book *Hamlet on the Holodeck: The Future of Narrative in Cyberspace* (1998), Janet Murray enthuses the computer's "ability to transport us to virtual places". When she composed her book in the late 1990s, the computer was still regarded as "a truly revolutionary invention humankind is just on the verge of putting to use as a spellbinding storyteller" (2). This hopeful assessment is not surprising as most popular games of the decade favored platforming, exploration, combat and racing, such as *Super Mario 64* (1997), *Tomb Raider* (1996), *Doom*

(1993) or *Grand Turismo* (1997). Certainly, while the 1990s produced games with a more elaborate narrative such as *Final Fantasy VII* (1997), *Thief: The Dark Project* (1998) and *Legend of Zelda: Ocarina of Time* (1998), the full storytelling potential of the medium was far from exhausted and was mainly mediated through cut-scenes and non-interactive dialogue. Driven by the rapid development in gaming hardware and software, the last two decades saw a leap in the quality and depth of video game storytelling with studios such as Quantic Dream creating immersive and interactive cinematic experiences for their players. Their most recent titles, *Beyond: Two Souls* (2013) and *Detroit: Become Human* (2018), provide the player with an extensive number of choices that significantly influence the progression of the games' events and thus create highly personal experiences. In addition to the visual, narrative and gameplay quality of video games, access to the medium has also undergone a substantial change since the 1990s. Now more than ever, the creators of video games have access to a myriad of techniques to engage the player in an interactive and immersive story and world. Moreover, through streaming and video platforms such as Twitch and YouTube, video games have become much more accessible compared to the beginnings of game research, which in turn has increased their mainstream popularity. While gaming was perceived as a rather niche past-time activity until the early 2000s, during the last twenty years a subculture of Let's Plays has developed that enables people without access to the games or required hardware, or who simply are not interested in playing themselves, to enjoy the medium and partake in gaming culture through videos or live streams of others playing video games of all genres.

The innate desire to escape to a fictional world, be it literary or virtual, can also be attributed to the phenomenon through which, “under certain conditions, the neurological mechanisms of the brain do not distinguish between the empirical experience of everyday reality and the individual experience of fictional reality” (Mason 1110). During this experience of fictional reality, the audience “[becomes] emotionally engaged as if they were actual witnesses to the events” (Craveirinha and Roque 10). Video games specifically, alongside “other types of interactive virtual reality”, can be defined as “simulations of basic modes of real-life experiences” which mostly “consist in seeing, hearing and doing in a [simulated] [...] real-world interaction” (Grodal 130). The added dimension of doing “goes far beyond the ‘spectatorship’ position” the audience occupies in traditional media, such as literature or film, and creates a “playful relationship with images”. Subsequently, the process of “play” then constitutes the difference between how traditional media and interactive media are “consumed and experienced” (Roig et al. 89–90). The interactive structure of the video game creates a direct engagement of the player that offers them a degree of agency within the fictional

environment. As “play is a core activity of daily life” (Roig et al. 92), the ability to act out certain real-life processes in a simulated world heightens the emotional engagement all fictional realities already facilitate. Certainly, these qualities should not be taken as undisputed evidence of the video game’s superiority over traditional media, as preferences for with which medium to engage with fictional worlds are highly personal choices and depend on a person’s individual interests and abilities. However, the narrative potential of video games is still being overlooked in some fields of the humanities, as the connotations of this medium have always been predominantly those of entertainment rather than academia. While the entertainment factor does take priority in most games, the interdisciplinary perspective on narrative and audience engagement they offer is highly valuable. In many contemporary video games, the technological possibilities of the medium’s structural design are used in innovative ways to draw the player into the story and create a unique audience experience.

Having produced some of the most popular video games of the last two decades since the release of its first game in 2007, the *Assassin’s Creed* franchise encapsulates this interplay of technology and narrative experience in its core design. With the recent release of the first gameplay trailer of the franchise’s newest installment, *Assassin’s Creed: Mirage*, which is due to be released on October 12, 2023, the franchise is set to attract the attention of players all over the world again. *Assassin’s Creed: Mirage* is described as “a narrative-driven action-adventure experience” with “a modern take on the features and gameplay that have defined a franchise for 15 years” (“Assassin’s Creed: Mirage”). The franchise is described as “[immersing] you in the memories of your ancestors, fighting to protect free will at pivotal moments in human history” (“Assassin’s Creed Franchise”). For the player, this immersive effect is staged by a device called the Animus, which, since *Assassin’s Creed II* (2009), is used to integrate the games’ interface into the logic of the game world. By reading the genetic memories of its user, the Animus creates a virtual reality relaying these memories and rendering them into an interactive space in which the user can traverse important places from various points in history (“Animus”). While the first five games of the franchise’s main series portray the framing events set in the 2010s through the playable character Desmond Miles, *Assassin’s Creed IV: Black Flag* (2013) introduced the figure of the nameless Initiate, who would take on Desmond’s role until the ninth installment, *Assassin’s Creed: Syndicate*, released in 2015. In *Assassin’s Creed: Syndicate*, the Initiate is chosen to assist a team of assassins led by Bishop that strives to retrieve a Piece of Eden before their eternal rivals, the Templar Order, discover its location and misuse this powerful artifact able to control the human race (“Piece of Eden”). To find the Piece of Eden, the Initiate is tasked with investigating the genetic memories of twin assassins Evie and Jacob

Frye, who are credited with reviving the London Brotherhood during the Victorian age. Interchangeably accessing Evie and Jacob's memories, the figure of the Initiate enables the player to traverse Victorian London, encountering many of its contemporaries, such as Charles Dickens, Benjamin Disraeli, and Queen Victoria herself. Throughout nine main memory sequences, they must prove themselves against Templar Grandmaster Crawford Starrick, incapacitating his henchmen and slowly loosening his grip over London. Simultaneously, they are following the Assassins' search for the Shroud of Eden, the precursor artifact, Bishop and her team want to retrieve in the present-day, uncovering where it has been hidden away for over a century.

While the frame narrative and gameplay of *Assassin's Creed: Syndicate* remains similar to its predecessors, it introduces one specific feature to the franchise. By including Evie, it is the first installment of the main franchise to feature a playable female protagonist. However, whereas the spin-off game to the franchise's third game, *Assassin's Creed III: Liberation* (2012) was outwardly marketed with its female protagonist in mind, Evie remains noticeably absent from *Assassin's Creed: Syndicate*'s promotional material. While she can be seen in one image on Ubisoft's corresponding website, the game's trailer and description only feature her brother Jacob ("Assassin's Creed: Syndicate"). This echoes a similar discovery Murray recounts in her book. During her research on Victorian women, she "was struck by the fact that much of what [she] was learning had been left out of the great novels of the era" (4). While Murray's way of coping with this discovery was to create a proto-hypertext anthology on the lives of Victorian women (4), neo-Victorian studies, which developed from Victorian studies around the 2010s, focus on the analysis of media that engages, rediscovers and rewrites various aspects of the Victorian age (Heilmann and Llewellyn 4). In relation to the role of Victorian women, these reimaginings often come in the form of "liberatory repetitions" (Kohlke 10) that provide a space for "marginalised voices" to be heard (Llewellyn 165). By examining the links between the Victorians and us, that are made visible by the choices of what is represented in media utilizing a Victorian setting, neo-Victorian studies focus on the media's "critical interface between the present and past" (Kohlke 1). Besides its representation of Victorian women's suppressed role in history through its promotional content, other valuable information about the Victorian age is embedded within the narrative potential of *Assassin's Creed: Syndicate* and its distinctive use of the interface. As an interactive medium, the game presents an innovative addition to the predominantly literary and filmic pool of neo-Victorian media and thus serves as a valuable object of research. In this thesis, I propose that the interactive game mechanics of *Assassin's Creed: Syndicate* facilitate a critical re-assessment of the Victorian age by creating

an immersive space rooted in an adaptation of the past for the player that is situated in the present. I examine the game's interactive world as a neo-Victorian space for reimagining the past as constructed by various objects, fictional and historical agents as well as events that allow the player to participate in the creation of a fictionalized version of the Victorian age. The main focus of my analysis lies on how the game's playable protagonists allow the player to interactively reassess the aspect of gender in the Victorian age. Thus, I establish how in video games such as *Assassin's Creed: Syndicate*, history can be our "playground" ("Syndicate 1" 00:02:55-00:02:59), while simultaneously offering a space to reflect on our past, our memory of the past and the particular connections which we as present-day players have to this past, which other forms of neo-Victorian media cannot make accessible in the same way. Based on her "experience in humanities computing", Murray states that "some kinds of knowledge can be better represented in digital formats than they have been in print" (6). In this fashion, while video games will certainly not replace the novel or film and television, *Assassin's Creed: Syndicate*'s ability to allow the player to interactively wander the streets of Victorian London adds a uniquely engaging experience with the material to the field of neo-Victorian studies.

Before approaching a detailed analysis of *Assassin's Creed: Syndicate*, I will first compile a theoretical framework to lay the foundation for the discussion of neo-Victorian media, video games as immersive spaces and the interactive role of the player. The second chapter will explore the possibilities of neo-Victorian video games. In the first subsection of this chapter, I will discuss the current definition of neo-Victorianism and the role that immersion already plays here. I will also briefly comment on the place that video games have, or rather not yet have, in neo-Victorian studies to determine the research gap that I want to fill with this thesis. The second subsection will focus on some of the basic features of video games as a narrative medium, specifically the dimension of the game world, to establish how their simulated spaces can be an interesting vessel for neo-Victorian reimaginings. Finally, the third subsection of this chapter will discuss the agent that brings the game space into existence in the first place. For this, I will first review some definitions of immersion and interactivity to establish a notion of the concept that is most useful for my analysis. Following this, I will explore the dimension of the player and player character and look at how their interaction with the game space creates an immersive effect. After establishing this theoretical framework as a basis, I will provide a more detailed discussion of specific concepts alongside my analysis of the immersive world and interactive characters of *Assassin's Creed: Syndicate* in the third chapter. The first section of this analysis will be concerned with the features that make the game a very literal representation of the definition of neo-Victorian media in that it creates a critical interface for

reassessing the past. I will begin with a discussion of the transformation of a real-world space into a game world, to explore how *Assassin's Creed: Syndicate* creates a simulated adaptation of Victorian London to provide a stage for the player to access the nineteenth century. Here, I will specifically focus on the game's map and database feature that is accessible to the player and transmits most of the historical information about the Victorian age and its inhabitants. In the second section, I will examine the role of the avatar in more detail, specifically focusing on the functions of an implied character without signifiers to analyze the specific player performance by which the *Assassin's Creed* franchise encourages a high degree of self-reflexivity. After demonstrating how the game creates an immersive and self-reflexive neo-Victorian space, the third chapter of my analysis will focus on gender as a specific aspect that can be reassessed on this critical interface. I will analyze how the playable protagonists, Evie and Jacob Frye, portray and subvert gender norms, ideals and the stereotypes that we associate with the Victorians today. For this analysis, I will look at the gameplay associated with both characters, their specific quests, as well as their characterization in the playable narrative, cutscenes and database. I will also take some of the non-playable characters into consideration and add them to my discussion of the game's overall representation of gender. In the fourth and final section of this analysis, I will connect Evie and Jacob's gendered characterization to contemporary representations of gender in media to highlight the remaining traces of the Victorians within contemporary creators and audiences that neo-Victorian studies thematize before concluding this thesis.

From an academic standpoint, neo-Victorian studies encompass the interest in a bygone period and the desire to revisit the world of this distant time, which the interactive engagement of the player with *Assassin's Creed: Syndicate's* narrative and immersive world actualizes ludically. Facilitated by the franchise's specific technique of immersion through the multi-layered player embodiment created by the Animus, the game renders the critical interface central to neo-Victorian media tangible for its audience. When playing *Assassin's Creed: Syndicate*, the player is simultaneously playing the neo-Victorian interface as they switch between present-day and past events, alternately embodying the Initiate and Evie and Jacob. The distance to the fictionalized Victorian age provided by the layer of the present-day events creates a space on the player's end for a critical assessment of various aspects of the nineteenth century, such as the gendered experiences of Evie and Jacob. In the fashion of other neo-Victorian narratives, *Assassin's Creed: Syndicate's* representation of the Victorian age is heavily colored by the contemporary perception of the period and thus reveals just as much about the Victorians as it does about our twenty-first-century identities, many aspects of which

can be traced back to our Victorian ancestors. As a uniquely interactive and immersive experience, the video game as a narrative medium offers a new perspective to neo-Victorian studies that combines playful engagement with the material and critical reflection on Victorian history and life. Twenty-six years ago, Murray suggested, that not only does “the computer [promise] to re-shape knowledge” but it also comes with the “promise to reshape the spectrum of narrative expression, not by replacing the novel or the movie but by continuing their timeless bardic work within another framework” (9–10). Today, the experiences that modern video games such as *Assassin’s Creed: Syndicate* create, verify these promises by playfully enriching players’ knowledge and offering continuously innovative frameworks for narrative adventures.

2. Neo-Victorianism and Immersive Game Spaces: A Theoretical Framework

Despite the rise in mainstream popularity of the video game as an entertainment medium as well as the expansion of its narrative potential over the last two decades, it has only very recently and marginally begun to be included in the field of neo-Victorian studies. Considering the number of video games that employ the Victorian era either as a direct setting, such as *The Order: 1886* (2015) and *Alice Madness Returns* (2011) or an aesthetic inspiration, such as *Bloodborne* (2015), the possibilities for neo-Victorian analyses of the medium are vast. These diverse ludic interpretations of the Victorian age show three distinct executions of reimagining the Victorian age, which already alludes to the ambiguity that comes with defining the term Victorian. Whether as a direct setting or aesthetic inspiration, the reimagination of a historical period inevitably also involves the spatial aspects of the period as “time and space must be thought together” and “the imagination of one will have repercussions [...] for the imagination of the other” (Massey 18). Accordingly, a video game that simulates the Victorian era also includes a game space that represents the Victorian, or rather, what we understand to be Victorian through a contemporary lens. As simulated and interactive environments, video games are highly spatial and thus lend themselves as meaningful reproductions of a historical era. As important as the spatiality of a video game, is the role of the player, who initiates the act of play that constructs the game and game world in the first place. In turn, games such as *Assassin’s Creed: Syndicate* offer the player a vast and immersive environment to explore and interact with. Thus, to productively analyze *Assassin’s Creed: Syndicate* as an immersive neo-Victorian video game the temporal, spatial and interactive dimensions of video games as a narrative medium must first be determined. For this, in the following chapters, I will consider how to approach the elusive term of “the Victorian” through a neo-Victorian reading of media, how a simulated version of the Victorian age can be constructed spatially and how this neo-

Victorian space can be explored by the player to create an interactive and immersive experience of the past.

2.1. “Between Immersion and Self-Reflexivity”: Defining Neo-Victorian Video Games

Before approaching a characterization of neo-Victorian video games, the term Victorian itself must be critically evaluated. What is to be understood by the term depends on whether it is interpreted as “chronological” or “non-chronological”. As a chronological denotation, Victorian describes the period encompassing the reign of Queen Victoria from 1837 to 1901. Employing the term non-chronologically to refer to specific characteristics connotatively linked to the Victorian age, however, convolutes the definition of the term. In this way, the term is used to describe not only what is “historically” proven to stem from the Victorian era but also what is “aesthetically” commonly seen as relating to this period and the stereotyped set of morals and values connected to it. For example, postmodern discussions revising “the Victorians’ supposed sexual repression” as a particularly persistent stereotype, in contrast to the use of the term Victorian as a synonym for prudishness, shows the vastly different understandings of the notion still prevailing today (Kirchknopf 55–56). Other associations with the Victorian age, 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” should rather be interpreted as “a myth, an illusory ideal, and a far-reaching fantasy” (Chouari 2). As a consequence of these nuanced understandings of an already temporally vast historical period, it proves difficult to provide an accurate definition of what exactly is or is not Victorian. However, the resulting interpretations in fictional or factual adaptations of what is understood to be Victorian, are equally as compelling as total historical truth. Thus, the interesting aspect of media that reimagines, reworks and recontextualizes the Victorian age is not to find one true definition of the term Victorian. Instead, the different suggestions found in these pieces of media “can be read together, rather than against each other” to unveil what they propose as our present-day notion of the Victorian age (Kirchknopf 59). Ultimately, how contemporary creators produce these retellings of the past reveals much about contemporary society and thus can encourage reflections about us in the post-Victorian present. Ann Heilmann and Mark Llewellyn spotlight this by emphasizing that “Victorian literature [and by extension culture at large] still matters, greatly”, for the “(re)interpretations of the nineteenth century” through various creative forms “defines our culture as much as it did theirs” (3–4).

In the late 2000s and during the 2010s, this act of reflecting on both, the Victorian age and the contemporary creations of fiction related to the Victorian notion, has produced 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’”. By investigating the “changing purposes with which we fashion the past”, neo-Victorian studies thus examine the cultural artifacts through which the past is retold and reworked, as well as their creators and the society they stem from. Similar to the postmodern reevaluations of Victorian stereotypes, neo-Victorian media not only “mimic [but also] challenge the discourse of the nineteenth century”, and is aptly referred to as “cultural doppelgängers of the Victorian age” by Nadine Boehm-Schnitker and Susanne Gruss (“Fashioning the Neo-Victorian” 1–2). Through their preoccupation with the past, neo-Victorian media adds to “cultural memory work”, as well as to the “construction of both public and private memory”. Moreover, the neo-Victorian can be used as a vessel for “liberating lost voices and repressed histories of minorities left out of the public record”. By being overtly fictional, however, neo-Victorian media define their subject matter as a constructed version of the past, which renders their “liberatory repetitions” easier to engage with than the “potentially debilitating and crushing” reality of the historical past (Kohlke 9–10). This creates a sense of distance to the themes prevalent in neo-Victorian fiction, such as “the pervasive traumas of social ills, [like] disease, crime, and sexual exploitation” as well as “more spectacular traumas of violent civil unrest, international conflicts, and trade wars” (Kohlke 7). Evidently, these issues are still relevant today, and will always be part of society, which emphasizes the existence of “lingering traces of the past within the present” (Kohlke 9). Thus, analyzing “them” can provide more objective insights into “us”. Following Joan W. Scott, Kohlke also stresses the need to “self-critically [engage with] the analytic terms, presuppositions, categories, organizing principles and methodologies” of our knowledge of the past, so that, in addition to re-voicing those “left-out from history” we can become aware of “our own elided partialities, un-admitted personal agendas, and ideological blind spots” (13). Besides the “constructedness of the past” (Kohlke 10), the awareness of the nature of an analyzed work as a fictional object is also a central element of neo-Victorian studies. During the field’s academic manifestation, Kohlke delineated a “self-reflective, self-interrogative approach” as “one of the most urgent challenges within Neo-Victorian studies”. While researching the nineteenth century and its contemporary interpretations, one must also question the intentions behind the choices of what to retell and show and the specific ways in which the “spectres” of the Victorian age are being reanimated (Kohlke 13–14).

Similar to the notion of the Victorian, the beginnings of neo-Victorianism were tinged with the difficulty of forming a clear definition for the field. This difficulty mainly stemmed from differing opinions on the status that self-reflexivity should have within a neo-Victorian work of fiction (Boehm-Schnitker and Gruss, “Fashioning the Neo-Victorian” 2). In general, Neo-Victorianism on the one hand includes “creative works that in some way engage with Victorian literature and culture” and on the other hand “scholarly works” that investigate the “shifting relationship with the Victorian period”, mainly by analyzing these creative works (Cox n.p.). Regarding the selection of which creative works belong to the genre, divided opinions on the appropriate definition prevail, which Boehm-Schnitker and Gruss categorized as “strong” and “more specific”, and “soft” and “more inclusive” (“Fashioning the Neo-Victorian” 2). Representatives of the strong definition, such as Heilmann and Llewellyn deem the “‘self-consciousness’ about our own subject positions” as central to neo-Victorian creative works. These works “must in some respect be *self-consciously engaged with the act of (re)interpretation, (re)discovery and (re)vision concerning the Victorians*” (4–5). Thus, the Victorian setting must have a conscious purpose beyond functioning only as a backdrop, such as the aforementioned liberatory repetitions of “representing marginalised voices, new histories of sexuality, post-colonial viewpoints and other generally ‘different’ versions of the Victorian” (Llewellyn 165). However, this strict focus on the self-reflexivity of a work entails elitist connotations and, as Heilmann and Llewellyn later acknowledge, suggests the “rather selective and self-perpetuating notion of a neo-Victorian canon” (10). In a more recent effort to define the term, Jessica Cox further highlights the emerging “issues of inclusion and exclusion” from the genre as “potentially problematic” (Cox n.p.). To counteract this problematic notion, Nadine Boehm-Schnitker and Susanne Gruss offer a more “flexible interpretation” of the genre, which allows it to incorporate “a larger body of primary sources”. The soft definition of the neo-Victorian circumvents the risk of “exclud[ing] the neo-Victorian potential of media, which prove immersive, affective or nostalgic in their engagement with the nineteenth century”. This allows the inclusion of “cultural products appealing to the emotions, the senses, or a desire to re-inhabit the past” in a broader sense, which exhibit just as much potential to unveil important insights into why we chose to continuously reanimate the Victorian age and the representational choices we make during this process. Boehm-Schnitker and Gruss further assess the genre’s status as having “moved beyond postmodern concerns such as intertextuality, self-reflexivity or metafiction”, which, while still relevant to a certain degree, have given way to “practices of immersion” (“Fashioning the Neo-Victorian” 2–3). By taking up Heilmann and Llewellyn’s characterization of the neo-Victorian as “more than historical fiction set in the nineteenth

century” (4), they redefine this “more” as “not only “entail[ing] self-reflexivity, but also [...] immersive strategies” (“Fashioning the Neo-Victorian” 5). Thus, they define neo-Victorian media as creative practices that rediscover, reinterpret and revise the Victorians and our relationship with them by engaging in an “interplay between immersion and self-reflexivity” (“Spectacles and Things” 15). By ascribing both aspects equal significance and “blur[ring] the distinctions between criticism and creativity” (Llewellyn 170), this definition encompasses the critical reassessment of the historical past as well as the creative adaptation of Victorian society, arts and culture.

Despite the broadened definition introduced to neo-Victorian studies over the last decade, the field has been primarily occupied with research concerning literary adaptations of the Victorian age. Only in recent years have visual media such as theatre adaptations, films, TV series, and other on-screen media come into the focus of scholars in the field (Primorac 2). However, video games as another form of on-screen media have barely been included in neo-Victorian studies, even though their multimodal way of conveying a narrative lends itself to the neo-Victorian perspective. As mentioned before, one of the core elements of the revised definition of neo-Victorianism is the interplay of immersion and self-reflexivity, which the structure of certain video games, such as the *Assassin’s Creed* franchise, perfectly illustrates. This is not to say that video games are overall superior in mediating the Victorian age than what was previously included in the neo-Victorian canon, but the elements of play present in the “ludic experience” (Planells de la Maza 6) that the player encounters in a game bring an engaging addition to the pool of neo-Victorian fiction. As Henry Jenkins’ notion of “transmedia storytelling” suggests, “each medium does what it does best” in conveying the big picture narrative of a certain topic (96), thus, as a relatively new medium, the video game can provide a different angle on neo-Victorian retellings of the past. Espen Aarseth describes the “mode of simulation” found in contemporary video games “as an effective pedagogical tool that privileges [...] active experimentation, rather than observation, of its subject material” (“Allegories of Space” 154). Accordingly, video games call for a specific way of immersion that actively includes the player in the events of their narratives and the spaces these narratives take place in. With the rising popularity of video games in mainstream culture, it is the right time for neo-Victorian studies to do what they already stated as one of their aims during the initial conception of the field; to “extend [their] theoretical enquiries to other literary genres, arts and performances” (Kohlke 5). Just as the musical performances that Kohlke discusses as “alternative aesthetic [neo-Victorian] media”, video games can be “spaces [that] clearly produce very different cognitive, emotive, and indeed sensuous experiences” but are “just as

capable as the neo-Victorian novel of problematising, even politicising, our engagement with the Victorian past and its cultural legacies”. Specifically, the aspect of “audience [...] responses” is interesting when looking at video games, as their audience, in the position of the player, is interactively immersed in the “neo-Victorian practice” (6–7). Instead of an “[indulgence] in escapism”, Llewellyn interprets the neo-Victorian as a “different way into the Victorians” (168–169), which can help to challenge and change how we “teach, research and publish on the Victorians” (165). Pairing this with the pedagogical value of simulation described by Aarseth, video games utilizing neo-Victorian practices demonstrate a unique learning experience built on immersion and interactivity. Over two decades ago, Janet Murray already recognized the potential of “digital narratives”, as they “offer[...] us the opportunity to enact stories rather than to merely witness them” (170). She further suggests, that “digital environments” might evolve to be “as important as television currently is for the presentation of problem plays, stories about social injustice or intolerance” (172), which in regards to video games is a change that even now, twenty-five years later, is only slowly making its way into our mainstream cultural identity.

2.2. “Allegories of Space”: Ludofictional Worlds as Accessible History

Video games can be placed in the revised definition of neo-Victorian media, as the inherent immersiveness of a game is ensured by the interactivity that is required for a ludic narrative to emerge. The ability to “emulate any kind of semiotic genre” and thus adapt besides “traditional stories” (Aarseth, “A Narrative Theory of Games” 130) also historical retellings of the past, enables video games to create “cross-over[s] between the real world and an imaginary or fictional world” (Kücklich and Fellow 29 qtd. in Roig et al. 93). When this imaginary world is grounded in a reimagination of a historical period, it serves as a simulated but nonetheless meaningful connection to the past. Revisiting the definition of neo-Victorian media, this is where the connection between the reassessment of the past from the perspective of the present and the immersive qualities of video games can be made.

Similar to other media that communicate a story, video games include certain aspects that construct their narrativity. Marie-Laure Ryan outlines the defining elements of a narrative as “a world (setting), populated by individuals (characters), who participate in actions and happenings (events, plot), through which they undergo change (temporal dimension)” (Ryan, “Beyond Myth and Metaphor” 583). In “A Narrative Theory of Games”, Espen Aarseth describes the video game as a “ludo-narrative design-space” which consists of “four independent, ontic dimensions”, which partially corresponds to Ryan’s definition. Every video

game is based on a variation of a *world*, of which the design can be “linear”, leading the player from point A to point B and so on, or “open”, leaving the player much freer will in their spatial choices. The game world is populated by *characters* or *agents*, which can range from possessing “no individual identity” to “deep characters”. While the player character can also be categorized in this dimension, the question of identity is much more nuanced here, which will be discussed in detail in the following chapter. The agents also determine a game’s *events*, of which the sequence can be “open, selectable or plotted”, similar to the game world. Instead of including a temporal dimension, Aarseth’s model mentions the aspect of change in relation to the *objects* that can be found in the game world. He “categorize[s the objects] in terms of their malleability” meaning that they can be “static” and “non-interactable”, “static” and “usable”, “destructible”, “changeable” or “creatable” (130–132). In other words, a video game consists of agents that traverse a world in which they experience events that often include interactions with objects. Before discussing the notion of immersion in more detail, I will take a closer look at the dimension of space specifically, as for immersion to occur, there has to be “an expanse to be immersed within” (Ryan, *Narrative as Virtual Reality* 2 62).

In one of his earlier works, Aarseth delineates the distinguishing feature between video games and other narrative media as their “preoccupation with space” and therefore highlights the importance of the first dimension of his ludo-narrative model (Aarseth, “Allegories of Space” 161). To discuss game space, he mainly draws on the spatial theories of Anita Leirfall and Henri Lefebvre to conclude that “spatial representation in computer games as a reductive operation lead[s] to a representation of space that is not in itself spatial, but symbolic and rule-based” (Aarseth, “Allegories of Space” 163). To expand on this, simulated and thus reductively operating spaces such as game worlds depend on the player’s spatial situatedness in the real world. Following Lefebvre’s spatial triad, game space can be categorized as “representations of space”, or the “space of scientists, planners, urbanists, technocratic subdividers and social engineers” who determine “what is conceived” of the respective space. Accordingly, as the planners of a video game, the game designer determines this space by setting up certain rules of what is possible for the player to do. Additionally, a video game is a “representational space” that constructs space “through its associated images and symbols”, which are again determined by a space’s planners. Just as the “daily routine” and movements of a society, or the inhabitants of a certain space, “slowly [...] produce” it, a video game’s rule-based and symbolic space is constructed by the *spatial practice* of the game’s agents (Lefebvre 140–141). The importance of space in relation to a game’s agents and consequently also the player becomes more apparent when additionally considering Doreen Massey’s conception of space and its inhabitants as “co-

constructive”. According to her, “[s]pace does not exist prior to identities/entities and their relations” and thus, “the relationships ‘between’ them, and the spatiality which is part of them, are all co-constructive” (10). This means that without game space, there would not be anything to interact *with* for the player. Simultaneously, without the interactions of the player with the game space, there would be no game.

It was already mentioned that the player's situatedness in the real world is an important factor in the construction of a game's world. Following this line of thought, it is also crucial to add the game's relationship to the space of the real world to this discussion. The reasoning behind Aarseth labeling video games as “allegories of space” lies within the necessity for a “deviation from reality” in their portrayal of space (“Allegories of Space” 169). The ever-expanding technological possibilities of game engines make game worlds visually appear more and more realistic; however, they do not operate in the same way real spaces do. Luke Pearson agrees with Aarseth by stating that “a video game world [...] must twist and warp the real, making it pliable in order to allow its spaces to be negotiated through an encapsulated set of rules” (269). This again echoes the symbolic and rule-based nature of video games in that the spatial visuals that carry symbolic meaning for the player to decode, must be based on and be regulated by a pre-determined system of rules created by the game designers and programmers.

Then, if the player is situated in the real world and uses the sign system of this world as a frame of reference to make sense of the game world, this means that the symbolic visuals of the game world must, in a sense, exist separately from it albeit semantically related. This idea of a hypothetically existing world that is projected for the player to explore in a video game can be better illustrated using possible worlds theory. As one of the theory's main representatives, Marie-Laure Ryan describes it as “a semantic model including a plurality of worlds, and regarding one of these worlds as the one and only actual world”. The actual world is the real world that, in the case of a video game, the player is situated in and that “exists independently of the human mind”. Possible worlds depend on the human imagination as they are produced in acts such as dreaming or through fictional creation. Following this, any game world is a possible world that the player can perceive while being rooted in the “actuality” of their spatial situation in the real world. Although these possible worlds are discernibly “non-actual” from the player's point of view, the game's other characters experience them as actual, and thus “regard themselves as real” (“Immersion vs Interactivity” 115). Since the actual world of every player is different depending on factors such as their individual identities, personal lives and world views, there cannot be one singular and distinctly defined actual world. Rather, the actual world must be considered as consisting of an infinite number of “individual images of reality”

(Ryan, *Narrative as Virtual Reality* 2 71). When accessing a possible world, each reader, viewer, listener or player “bring[s their] own cognitive, cultural, and psychological templates” with them (Murray 110), which stems from their individual actual world that compose the elusive construct of human reality.

Antonio José Planells de la Maza uses possible world theory to develop a theory of “ludofictional worlds”, which he describes as “a formal system of linking together possible worlds” and “predetermined spaces for action and relationships with other fictional beings” (6–7). Games can have more than one trajectory for the player to choose from and consequently entail a plethora of possible worlds from which the player actualizes one through their interactive decision-making. This emphasizes the player’s movement through space in their process of exploring the game world, which recalls the ideas of Michel de Certeau. In *The Practice of Everyday Life* (1984), he proposes that an agent’s movements “give their shape to spaces [and] weave spaces together” by choosing different paths and creating new routes that spatially join various places (97–99). Again, as a predominantly spatial medium, the video game relies on the player’s actions and interactions to be realized. For this co-constructive relationship to work, Planells de la Maza highlights the necessity for a ludofictional world to possess “a certain space of interactive possibility” and “fragmentation and hierarchy of characters and scenarios” (14). Thus, he delineates gameplay in combination with interactivity as the distinguishing feature of ludofictional worlds (69).

However, before turning toward the role of the player in the creation of the game space, the aspect of time must be added to the discussion. In the context of neo-Victorian media, time undoubtedly plays a crucial role, as the main objective of such media is exploring a long-gone time period. Even more, the emphasis that the current definition of neo-Victorianism puts on the relationship between the past and the present highlights the importance of time for this discussion. This implies that, if considering a simulated space, or a ludofictional world based on the spatiality of nineteenth-century London, its temporality cannot be ignored, as space and time are inevitably linked. Similar to de Certeau, Doreen Massey in her book *For Space* (2005) stresses the temporal nature of space by pointing out the multiple trajectories coexisting in a space that “emphasise the process of change”. By describing space as “a simultaneity of stories-so-far”, she illustrates the capacity of space to encapsulate the multiple trajectories its inhabitants and passers-by contribute to its substance and of which traces can be found by other entities that pass through it (12–13). This characteristic of space explains why it is specifically interesting to consider the video game, a medium where spatiality plays such an important role, as a vessel for bringing history to life. What is important here and what will be part of the

analysis of this thesis, is the possibility of a video game to provide the player with the ability to access a space from a different time. By interacting with this ludofictional space, the player can choose to explore trajectories in a time they would otherwise not have access to and not only learn about but also contribute to the stories-so-far that are simulated in the game space. Thus, in a broad sense, video games are not only allegories of space, but they can also be allegories of history.

Through their realistic portrayal of the real world, video games and their ludofictional worlds seem to depict one possible answer to the complications that Mikhail Bakhtin observes concerning “assimilating real historical time and space in literature” in his essay “Forms of Time and of the Chronotope in the Novel” (1975). While Bakhtin specifically speaks of literature and presumably did not anticipate the interactive spaces and convoluted timeframes found in contemporary video games during the conception of his theory, his discussion of space and time provides a useful angle for this analysis. His proposal of the chronotope as a metaphor for “the intrinsic connectedness of temporal and spatial relationships that are artistically expressed in literature” can be transferred to the video game. It was already mentioned that the player’s processual interaction with the game space that causes change is a highly temporal procedure. Ludofictional worlds often include temporal indicators such as in-game clocks or day and night cycles and thus, like literature, render time “artistically visible”. Additionally, game space does not only “[become] charged and responsive to the movements of time, plot, and history”, but also to the physical movements of the playable characters and thus vicariously to those of the player. Interestingly, as established in this chapter so far, for video games “the primary category in the chronotope is [not] time”, but space (15). This leads back to the player’s situatedness in the real world as a necessity for the experience of a game’s symbolic ludofictional world. Similarly to this argument, Bakhtin positions the chronotope as the defining element of a work’s “artistic unity in the relationship to an actual reality” (16). Furthermore, a work’s “epoch becomes not only graphically visible [space] but narratively visible [time]” (20). If transferred to the video game and specifically one based on a historical period, the graphically visible space equates the ludofictional world with its symbolically significant visual aspects, while the narratively visible time is mediated by the gameplay through which the player generates progress. Thus, in the case of a neo-Victorian video game, such as *Assassin’s Creed: Syndicate*, the Victorian age is visually reproduced through both. Bakhtin speaks of “time markers” in relation to the chronotope’s “representability of events” (22), which is similar to visual clues, or the “visually detectable signs” of a game space that have “narrative potential” (Domsch 101). Both are useful for this analysis in that they can be utilized to delineate in what

way *Assassin's Creed: Syndicate* can be categorized as a neo-Victorian video game. For, as Llewellyn describes our real-world relationship with the Victorians as them being “the very fabric of the spaces we now inhabit” (180), *Assassin's Creed: Syndicate*'s ludofictional space is filled with time markers of the nineteenth century.

2.3. Immersion and Interactivity: The Role of the Player

Previously, it was established that the crucial distinction between video games and traditional media more commonly found in neo-Victorian studies thus far becomes apparent when considering how the dimensions of agents, world, events and objects relate to each other. More specifically, the playable character as an agent and their influence on the other three dimensions distinguish the video game from other media. As one or more playable characters allow the player to become an agent in the game world themselves, the player can participate in the game's events by interacting with objects located in the game world. In the context of reading, Ryan aptly calls the ability of a fictional piece to transport a reader from their actual world to a fictional possible world “the space-travel mode”. However, this “recentering” of the consciousness also happens when a player takes on the persona of a playable character and thus “experience[s the ludofictional world of a game] as actual” (*Narrative as Virtual Reality* 273). Following Roig et al., this process comes close to the “notion of embodiment”, which they describe as going “beyond voyeuristic pleasure [...] and vicarious identification” by allowing the player to enact “control over representations”, or in other words the avatar and the symbolic game space (96). On the one hand, these “alternate identities” can function as a way to “put on a mask by acting through a character” and channel the player's intention into the game world (Murray 113). On the other hand, looking through this mask can reveal much of the playable character's identity to the player, making them a valuable vessel to communicate a game's narrative and themes. Both, the act of recentering and player embodiment, relate to the phenomena of interactivity and immersion in the ludofictional world of a game, which will be the focus of this section.

In a general understanding of the terms, “immersive” and “interactive” illustrate the player's experience of the ludofictional world as an actual, real world. This experience of a simulated reality as an actual reality is created by the feeling of being “surrounded by” the world, as well as by the ability “to interact physically with it” and cause some kind of change within the game space (Ryan, “Immersion vs Interactivity” 111). The degree of immersion a work of fiction generates is predominantly based on the “vividness” that its representation facilitates. Thus, the increasing “realism” in the visual representation of modern video games

already mentioned in the previous section of this thesis should make it a highly immersive medium (Ryan, “Immersion vs Interactivity” 112). In addition to the visuality, also called “depth of [...] information” (Steuer 81), a medium’s “breadth of information”, or the various other sensory dimensions employed for its representation, contribute to the degree of immersion (Ryan, “Immersion vs Interactivity” 112). Depth of information describes the visual features of a video game that are relayed to the player by the display of the console or computer, which can range from photorealistic to the abstract pixel art that has been made popular again by various indie games in recent years (Ryan, *Narrative as Virtual Reality* 2 51). Jason Hawreliak emphasizes the multimodality of video games as they “rely upon the communicative resources of a wide array of modes”, including “text”, “moving image or music”, as well as “procedural [and] haptic [...] forms of expression” (6). Thus, they are able to engage many of the player’s sensory dimensions. However, high immersiveness is not necessarily guaranteed by a high degree of information provided through various modes, as too much information could disrupt a pleasurable playing experience, which the process of ludiforming discussed in chapter 3.1 exemplifies. Thus, the quality of the implemented multimodal assets and their capacity to mediate a game’s setting and themes would have a more profound effect on a game’s degree of immersion than its quantity of information. Furthermore, while video games possess all of these immersive features, their reliance on a machine to mediate these narrative modes could also be seen as immersion-breaking, if the player remains too aware of the computer or console they are using to play the game (Ryan, “Immersion vs Interactivity” 113). Therefore, for a video game to be truly immersive, the possible ludofictional world that the player’s consciousness is recentered in does not need to be “as real as” their actual world, but merely possible enough for them “to suspend [their] disbelief for a period of time” (Pimentel and Teixeira 15). In other words, rather than necessarily depicting a direct replica of the player’s actual world in its visual properties or physical abilities, it is enough for the ludofictional world to function in a way that is believable for the player, who then can decide to accept this world as the simulated reality that they will inhabit for the time being. Similarly, this can be described by the concept of flow developed by Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi. In the context of immersion, “a state of flow is characterized by the loss of self-consciousness and the transformation of time” (Kerr, Kücklich, and Brereton 72). So, if the ludofictional world is possible enough for the player to achieve a state of flow, it tends to be experienced as highly immersive. Moreover, Ryan’s “principle of minimal departure” explains this creation of a possible enough ludofictional world by interrogating how we mentally construct this world. If not directly told or shown otherwise, be it via text, image or sound, we construe a fictional possible world “as conforming as far as

possible to our representation of [the actual world]” by assuming “everything we know about reality” to apply to this world as well. Thus, again, the “reliance on the reader’s experience of reality” or their situatedness in the real world as previously referred to (*Possible Worlds* 51), is crucial for the construction of an immersive ludofictional world. Additionally, if we seek out a piece of fiction, we usually want to be immersed in its world and thus “use our intelligence to reinforce rather than to question the reality of the experience” (Murray 110). Revisiting the necessary spatial deviation from this real actual world in the creation of a ludofictional world implies that the immersion in this possible world allows for experiences that “transcend the boundaries of human perception”. As the following analysis of *Assassin’s Creed: Syndicate* will reveal in more detail, the “adoption of a foreign identity” that the game has the player enact, enables them to access the Victorian age in a way other kinds of neo-Victorian media cannot facilitate (Ryan, “Immersion vs Interactivity” 119).

In *Hamlet on the Holodeck*, Janet Murray describes immersion metaphorically as being submerged in another reality like “being submerged in water” and using all sensory dimensions engaged by the specific immersive medium to explore this other reality. More importantly she extends this metaphor to what she calls the “participatory medium” and highlights the interactive side of immersion. Here, in the case of the video game, the player has to “learn[...] how to swim, to do the things that the new environment makes possible” (98–99). This is precisely what games like *Assassin’s Creed: Syndicate* enable the player to do. Besides space-and-time-traveling to a ludofictional Victorian London and perceiving it from various points of view, the player has “the power [...] to modify this environment” (Ryan, “Immersion vs Interactivity” 121). As is the case with immersion, there are also different degrees of interactivity, which, according to Ryan’s discussion of virtual reality, depend on three factors. Firstly, the “speed” with “which input can be assimilated into the mediated environment” determines to what extent interactivity can be facilitated successfully and enjoyably for the player. Secondly, the “range” or “the number of possibilities for action” determines which changes the player can cause in the game. And thirdly, “mapping” describes the predictability of the controls and, if transferred to the video game, the rules of gameplay. The last two categories can be contradictory since, if the possibilities of a ludofictional world were endless, it would be impossible to configure an effective rule system. Therefore, Ryan proposes that “[m]eaningful interactivity requires a compromise between range and mapping and between discovery and predictability” (“Immersion vs Interactivity” 123–124). In other words, while the rules of a ludofictional world call for a deviation from reality, this deviation also must not be

incomprehensible for the player, in order to not hinder their ability to meaningfully interact with their new, simulated surroundings.

Elaborating on the issue of the player's awareness of the machine as a mediator of the otherwise immersive game world offers a further useful tool for the discussion of self-reflexivity in video games. In the context of literary texts, Ryan defines the interactivity between reader and text as the "switch in perspective from world-internal and immersive to world-external and reflexive" ("Immersion vs Interactivity" 126). Remembering the interplay between immersion and self-reflexivity that partly constitutes the definition of neo-Victorian fiction, this version of interactivity can also be understood as another reflexive layer specifically featured in video games that exhibit more narrative features than solely focusing on play. Therefore, video games such as *Assassin's Creed: Syndicate* that mediate a possible ludofictional world based on an actual world of the past, combine the aspects of immersion and self-reflexivity in an engaging way, which provides the player with an interactive space to learn about history. The perspective switch proposed by Ryan becomes apparent in ludofictional worlds as a collection of multiple possible worlds as described previously. Planells de la Maza divides them into primary and secondary possible worlds, which respectively make up the "central structure" and additional paths the player can but does not have to explore, such as certain side quests that do not necessarily influence the world's central structure or narrative, as well as narrative possible worlds. Narrative possible worlds are instances in which "all user interaction is suspended", such as in cutscenes that are often used to elaborate on "the game's fictional framework" (129–130). Moving between these different kinds of possible worlds during the course of a playthrough is often accompanied by switch indicators such as loading screens, quest instructions or the loss of control over the playable character. Thus, the player is made aware of the change and can be prompted to adopt a world-external reflexive perspective. As will be discussed later, the *Assassin's Creed* franchise employs a unique frame narrative, which amplifies this switch in perspective and thus lends itself to the reflexive aspects of neo-Victorian fiction.

As mentioned before, the crucial factor in this equation of immersion and self-reflexivity is the player and their influence on the ludofictional world, its agents and the events that this influence evokes. In his theory of ludofictional worlds, Planells de la Maza proposes three dimensions relevant to the analysis of such worlds. Especially the "Metaleptic Dimension" provides a valuable angle for examining the player's role in the relationship between immersion and self-reflexivity present in *Assassin's Creed: Syndicate*. In this context, the concept of metalepsis is understood as "the connection between the fictional world and the external user",

who has the ability to “participate in” this world (7), albeit with certain limitations prescribed by the predetermined structural and “rule-based system” of the game (Aarseth, “Transgressive Play” 130). As mentioned before, a ludofictional world needs the player to fully come into existence as “[t]he world itself is a static model until the player makes decisions” that modify its properties in some way (Planells de la Maza 107). Since the player is situated in the actual world outside of the game, the access to a ludofictional world “is always *mediated* by a semiotic device” (111), which surpasses “the limits between fiction and reality” in both, “action and feedback” (113). Put simply, the metaleptic dimension of a ludofictional world corresponds to the transformative actions transferred from the player through the playable character to the game world and the perception of the consequences of these changes as mediated by the playable character’s perspective. As “[b]oth the player and the fictional agent are necessary for performing actions that dynamically drive a predesigned world from the static” (138), this dimension encompasses both, the world-external and world-internal perspectives. Elicited by the playable character’s actions that are dictated by the player, the ludofictional world responds via “metaleptic feedback”, such as changes in the game world or the playable character's attributes (171–172). Planells de la Maza refers to this flow between extradiegetic commands turning into intradiegetic actions, which in turn cause intradiegetic responses that are extradiegetically perceived by the player, as “naturalized metalepsis” (169). In contrast, metaleptic instances where “fictional boundaries” are broken either by “the system or another fictional entity” are classified as “exceptional metalepsis” (174). While naturalized metalepsis is innate to the medium, exceptional metalepsis is only used as an additional metaleptic layer in some video games. However, both types highlight the relationship between the player and the ludofictional world. Thus, the awareness of a game’s metaleptic dimension emphasizes the medium’s reflexive potential that goes beyond the still prevalent mainstream attitude focusing mainly on the entertainment function of video games. Combining the video game’s interactive and immersive qualities with this metaleptic exchange between game and player describes the medium as a valuable tool to create neo-Victorian ludofictional worlds, in which players can experience the Victorian age, as well as learn and reflect about its components in a playful way.

3. A Multimodal Analysis of *Assassin’s Creed: Syndicate*

As a multimodal medium, *Assassin’s Creed: Syndicate* immerses the player in its ludofictional world by utilizing various “semiotic modes” to “make meaning through material channels” (Hawreliak 4). As mentioned before, video games use a plethora of modes such as “text, still and moving image, music, sound effect [...] haptics [and] [...] procedurality” to convey their

content and create an interactive environment for the player (Hawreliak 11). Taking the soundscape as an example, *Assassin's Creed: Syndicate* conveys its Victorian setting by including music that creates associations with the Victorian age for the player. Even the title screen is used to establish the aesthetic setting by accompanying the image of gears and bolts with the sounds of machinery which corresponds to the technological advancements of the beginnings of industrialization that define the Victorian age ("Syndicate 1" 00:00:28-00:00:36). These modal choices "influence the player's perception" and thus can be used to create a deliberate representation of the Victorian age (Hawreliak 5). This again emphasizes the relationship between the Victorians and us that is brought into focus by the creation of this representation through the cooperation of creators and players. The interplay of the audio-visual modes that are designed for the player to perceive and the procedural mode, which allows them to interact with and receive a response from the environment (Murray 74), allows them to make meaning of this ludofictional reimagination of the Victorian age. Through its multi-layered engagement of the player, *Assassin's Creed: Syndicate* uniquely links the present to the past and thus embodies what Llewellyn describes as an important feature of neo-Victorian media. According to him, "neo-Victorian is about new approaches to the Victorian period rather than an attempt to indulge in escapism masked as historical narrative" (169). However, I would argue that these two aspects are not necessarily mutually exclusive. *Assassin's Creed: Syndicate's* escapist premise of making history a playground generates an initial motivation for the player to engage with the game's contents, which is then complemented by the framing present-day narrative. The use of the Animus and Initiate as an intermediary between the player and the playable characters Evie and Jacob establishes the "'self-consciousness' about our own subject positions" that is central to neo-Victorianism (Heilmann and Llewellyn 5). This structure makes the player aware of their situatedness in the present, as the game's procedural mode makes them more than a spectator but also continuously reminds them that they are not completely part of past sequences whenever their interactive abilities are taken away during the present-day events. Consequently, governed by the self-conscious lens of the Animus, the player is able to experience how it feels to act as Evie and Jacob within the constructed Victorian past. To determine how *Assassin's Creed: Syndicate* creates this self-conscious neo-Victorian experience for the player, the following chapters will explore how the game's semiotic modes, specifically, text, image, music and proceduality, construct an interactive reimagination of Victorian London, an immersive as well as self-reflexive player performance, and ultimately produce a nuanced representation of Victorian gender norms and stereotypes.

3.1. A Ludoformed London: Re-Imaginations on the Map

It is important to remember that in the specific context of neo-Victorian video games, the ludofictional world is based on a real historical past while the player is situated in their actual world in the present. Accordingly, the individual perception of this simulated past is influenced by the personal views and values of each individual player. For, when interacting with the game world through playable characters, these surrogate actions “[wheedle] its way into the player’s motor system [and] extend the player’s constructed *I* in the real world into the character and through it into the [game] world” (Mason 1115). Thus, video games do not only comply with the aspect of a present-past relation included in the definition of neo-Victorian media, but the interactive relationship the player has with the ludofictional world and its other agents can allow for easier access to the information that is mediated in the game. In the case of *Assassin’s Creed: Syndicate*, the gameplay involves the player in a variety of interactions that uncover information about Victorian London, its famous inhabitants, historical events and societal issues of the period.

To analyze the specific relationship the player has with the simulated Victorian age in *Assassin’s Creed: Syndicate*, the first section of this chapter will focus on the intended discovery of the game’s ludofictional world. Linking back to Ryan’s discussion of possible worlds, she states that while “the actual world is the realm of historical facts, possible worlds are the branches that history could take in the future, and impossible worlds are the branches that history failed to take in the past” (Ryan, *Narrative as Virtual Reality* 270). Again, transferring this to a game like *Assassin’s Creed: Syndicate*, the game’s version of London could be understood as an impossible world, since despite the historical accuracy of the world’s portrayal, the game’s main plot remains largely fictional. However, the player experiences the events of the game vicariously through the playable characters in a simulated present where the player-character’s future could still branch out in multiple ways. Thus, I argue that while *Assassin’s Creed: Syndicate* conveys information about an actual world of the past, this information is fictionalized by being integrated with the game’s ludofictional world, making the London the player traverses a possible world. In addition to being fictionalized, this ludofictional world evidently is also ludified, meaning it relies on the act of play; transforming the past into a game (Aarseth and Günzel 7). Ludification, unlike gamification, alters “communicational, structural and material aspects [of the source] in such a way that the original purpose is secondary or abandoned altogether” (Aarseth, “Ludoforming” 139). In one of his recent collaborations, Aarseth has developed a concept that helps to better interpret the dichotomy of the historical information presented in the possible, and thus fictional world of

Assassin's Creed: Syndicate. As a subcategory of ludification, the process of “ludoforming” describes “turning a contemporary, historical or fictional landscape into a gameworld” (“Ludoforming” 128). Consequently, this process transforms the impossible world of a historical trajectory that partially did not happen into a possible ludofictional world that allows the player to experience it as an allegory of history. As a consequence of the “desire, pleasure, and [...] nostalgic longing for an immersion into this past”, the neo-Victorian “provide[s] versions of (marketable) authenticity for our consumption” (Boehm-Schnitker and Gruss, “Fashioning the Neo-Victorian” 7). Similarly, for video games, nostalgia is one of the main factors making the implementation of a real historical place, such as Victorian London, so appealing, as it offers players the opportunity to “revisit” a place they otherwise could not access to the same extent (Aarseth, “Ludoforming” 130). The player’s recentering to the ludofictional London of *Assassin's Creed: Syndicate* can only be a satisfactory experience if, as mentioned before, the gameplay’s discovery and predictability aspects are balanced. More precisely, the realism in the landscape’s “topographical” layer, or the “sign-stream presented by the game engine to the player” has to give way to the implemented rules of the “topological” layer, which describes the “actual room-for-movement” the player inhabits via the player character (Aarseth, “Ludoforming” 128–131). Therefore, ludoforming Victorian London as a neo-Victorian interface for the player to revisit the nineteenth century includes certain alterations of the source material.

The “critical interface between the present and past” (Kohlke 1), which the inclusive definition of neo-Victorianism entails, finds a very literal manifestation in *Assassin's Creed: Syndicate*. In their allegorical representation of space, “video games typically expose the relationship between diegetic space [...] and nondiegetic space [...]”, or in other words, the topographical and topological layers of the space the player perceives and traverses and the “layers of user interface” (Pearson 271). At almost any time during their playthrough of *Assassin's Creed: Syndicate*, the player can access a “database” that includes various information on the game world, agents and events (“Syndicate 2” 01:24:57-01:26:08). To outline this ludified critical interface, I will firstly focus on the ludoformed version of London, of which the in-game map provides the player with a spatial overview. Looking at this map shows that “the fidelity of the topography [...] yields to the ludic topology” of the gameplay,

as it often does when ludoforming is included in a game (Aarseth, “Ludoforming” 131). While the lower half of *Assassin’s Creed: Syndicate*’s map (Figure 1) appears to be rather faithful in comparison to Charles Booth’s London map (Figure 2), which provides a historically accurate



Figure 1: London map of *Assassin’s Creed: Syndicate* generated by Map Genie. The places declared as landmarks by the in-game legend of the map are marked with yellow x’s.

map of Victorian London, the upper half takes more liberties in the portrayal of the city. Ludoforming often entails “taking the interesting parts of a landscape, cut[ting] them up, and put[ting] them together in a new map” (Aarseth, “Ludoforming” 131), which a side-by-side comparison of the game’s map and the Booth map illustrates. The ludoformed London is divided into seven boroughs, Whitechapel, Lambeth, Southwark, The Thames, City of London, The Strand and Westminster, with similar side quests and sequences of the main quest accessible in each, of which the difficulty level increases in the above order. While these boroughs can also be found in the Booth map, the layout has been slightly altered for the game map. As mentioned before, the map’s lower part that includes Westminster, Lambeth, Southwark, and the City of London remains relatively faithful in-game, which can be attributed

to the fact that many of the historically interesting landmarks are located in close proximity to

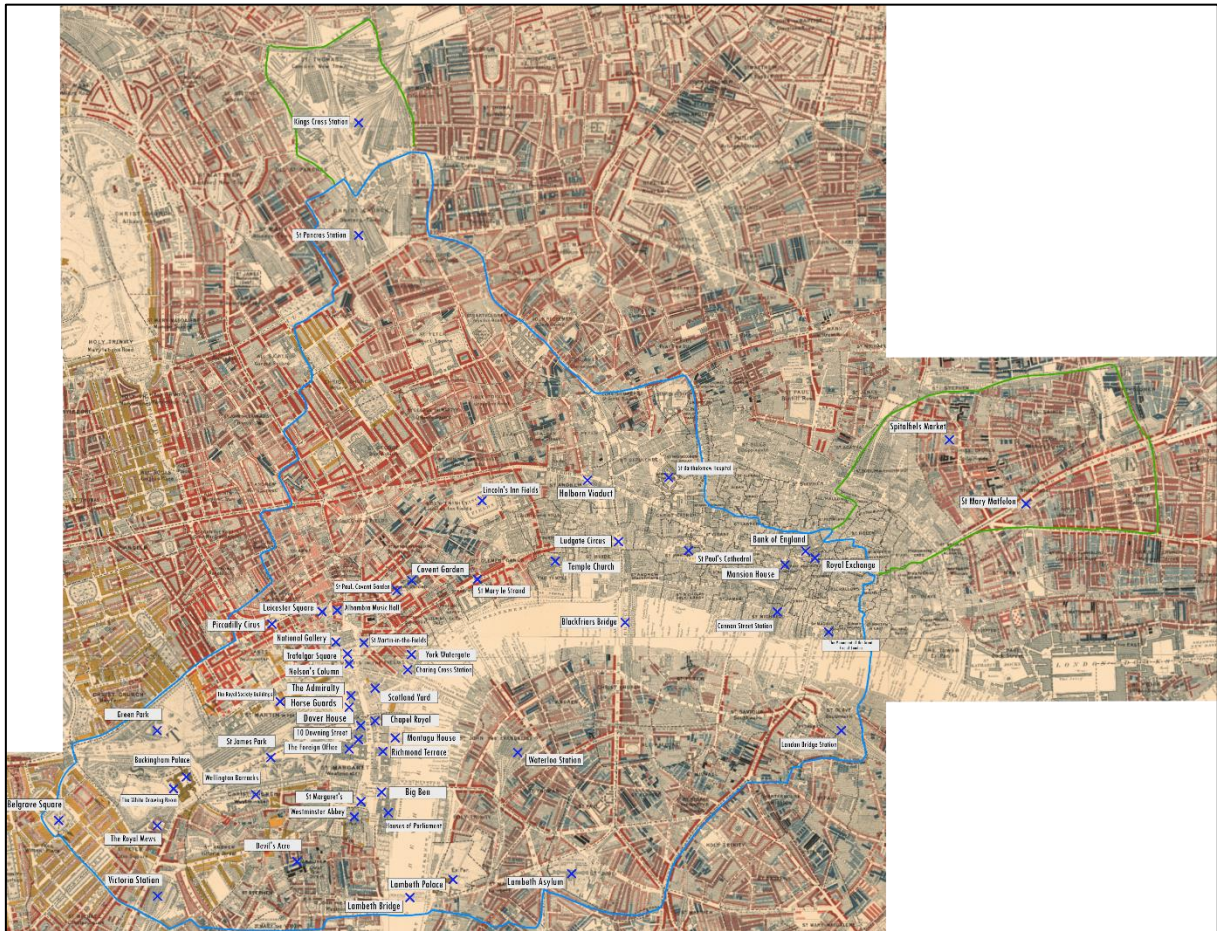


Figure 2: Section of *Maps Descriptive of London Poverty* based on Charles Booth's *Inquiry into Life and Labour in London* (1886-1903). The landmarks found in *Assassin's Creed: Syndicate* are marked with blue x's. The blue lines outline the area that was ludoformed in a relatively connected way. The green lines outline the areas that were relocated; i.e. Whitechapel was moved above the City of London and Kings Cross Station was merged with St. Pancras Station.

each other in these boroughs. The Whitechapel district is relevant for the game's plot and The Strand includes many interesting landmarks, which explains the boroughs' inclusion in the game map despite their location being geographically inconvenient for the gameplay. A faithful portrayal would have made the map's structure less clear and required the inclusion of areas of historical London that would not have been relevant to the narrative. This would have led to a topographical layer that hinders a smooth topological gameplay, as the player would have to inconveniently traverse narratively empty areas. Leading to frustration and highlighting the simulated nature of the possible world, this could lower the degree of immersion the player experiences. Additionally, ludoforming often requires "[d]istances [to be] shrunk" to be traversable for the player. For example, according to *Google Maps*, the time needed to walk the distance from Buckingham Palace to Piccadilly Circus is 16 minutes (Google Maps), while traversing between these places in-game takes approximately 5:15 minutes in walking speed

and approximately 2:20 minutes running and climbing over London's roofs ("Syndicate 24" 00:00:00-00:08:19). The "eclectic fashion" of ludoforming (Aarseth, "Ludoforming" 131) makes sense in the case of *Assassin's Creed: Syndicate*, as it allows a combination of a satisfying gameplay and historical accuracy, of which the former enables the player to learn about the Victorian age while being immersed in the ludofictional world of the game. Another feature of the *Assassin's Creed* franchise is the inclusion of "viewpoints", which function as a guide to aid the player in discovering the game world ("Syndicate 2" 01:35:39-01:36:51). When reaching a viewpoint, a part of the map is uncovered, showing quests and points of interest, such as the landmarks, to the player. If the player then visits this landmark, an entry in the database appears, providing them with historical information about the place ("Syndicate 2" 01:43:26-01:44:08).

Before focusing in more detail on the specific way *Assassin's Creed: Syndicate* integrates the player into the game's overall interface, I will first consider a few more relevant database entries that function as time markers to establish the Victorian setting. Besides the ludofictional world, Aarseth's other dimensions, agents, events and objects, are also represented in the database and used to provide information about the Victorian age. Many agents the player encounters throughout the world can be found in the "people" encyclopedia where they are categorized as allies, enemies, groups and other people. The entries provide the player with background information about many Victorian contemporaries, such as Florence Nightingale, Benjamin Disraeli and Charles Dickens. Dickens's entry, for instance, briefly recounts information about his childhood, the start of his career, his most famous work, an affair and his death ("Syndicate 2" 00:07:58-00:08:12), all of which are supplemented by the interactions the player can have with him during a series of side quests. However, the database entries read less like pages from a history book and more like they are personally addressed to the player, which furthers immersion by making the player feel like part of the ludofictional world. Suggesting a friendly relationship between the authors of these entries, present-day assassins Shaun and Rebecca, and the player, the game also creates space for the player to form an emotional connection and thus offers the possibility for them to care about the information provided

(Figure 3). Entries about historical events are added to the database when an understanding of these events is not necessary for the plot, but they are mentioned in passing by a character or

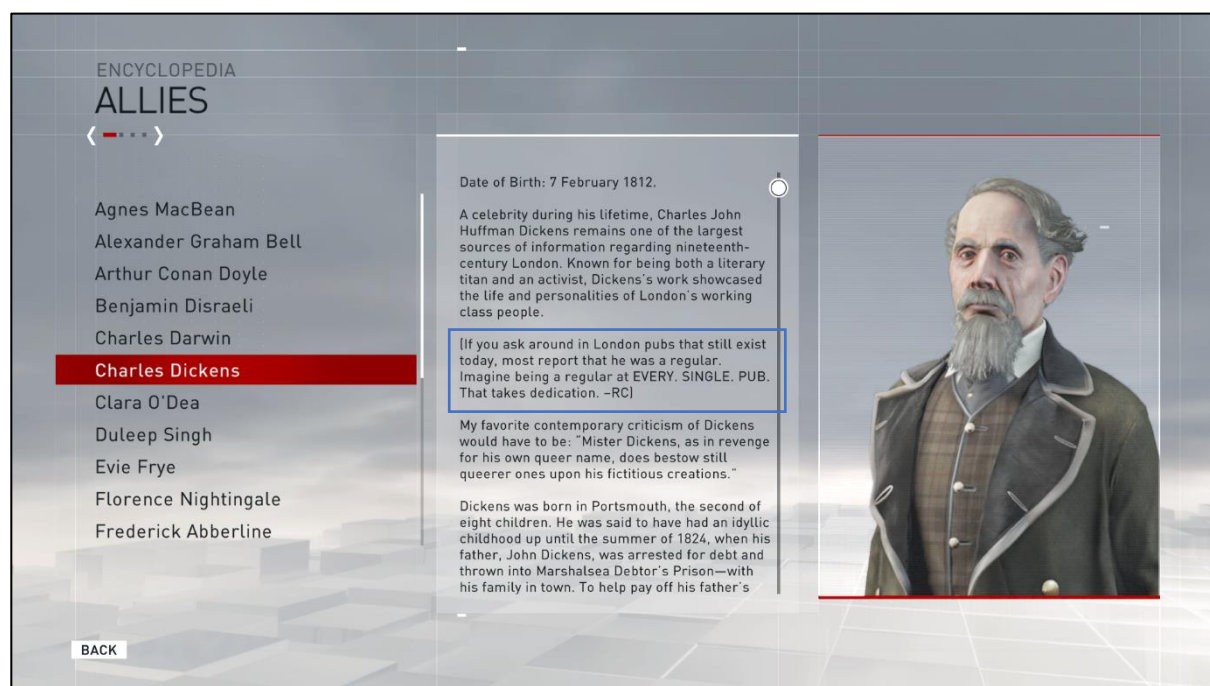


Figure 3: Database entry of Charles Dickens. Rebecca's comment is marked in blue (Ubisoft, *Assassin's Creed: Syndicate*).

come up in a crowd gathering during the gameplay. The player can then decide if they want to read up on, for example, the Crimean War or the Battle of Balaclava. During their playthrough, the player can find various collectible objects, including “Pressed Flowers”, “Illustrations” and letters of “Royal Correspondence”. The intermediality of these objects increases the degree of immersion of the ludofictional London as they contribute to making the game world appear possible. The entry of each pressed flower includes a drawing and corresponding poem or informational paragraph cited from “The Language of Flowers” in-game. This refers to the interest in floriography popular in the Victorian age and specifically books such as Kate Greenway’s *Language of Flowers* (1884). The illustrations are strongly reminiscent of *The Illustrated Police News, Law Courts and Weekly Record* (1867-1938) and depict various situations of Victorian daily life, such as “[s]chool [c]hildren [s]inging “God Save The Queen” in the Green Park”. The royal correspondence depicts conversations between Queen Victoria and her associates and thus conveys a sense of familiarity with this larger-than-life persona (Figure 4).

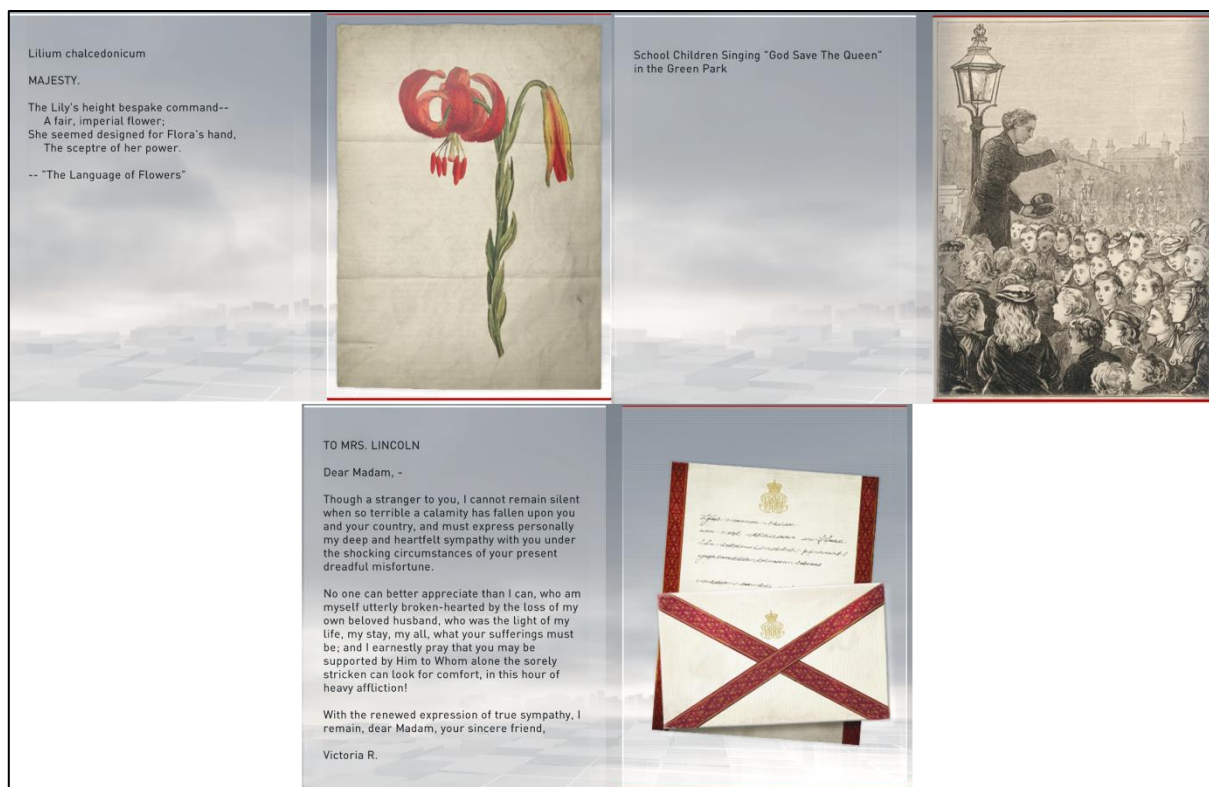


Figure 4: Database entries from Pressed Flowers, Illustrations and Royal Correspondence (Ubisoft, *Assassin's Creed: Syndicate*).

What makes this portrayal of the Victorian age specifically interesting is the blending of history and fiction. When starting the game, a statement appears that denotes the game as “[i]nspired by historical events and characters”, which the aforementioned examples clearly illustrate. Still, as an action-adventure game, *Assassin's Creed: Syndicate* remains a “work of fiction” (“Syndicate 1” 00:00:13), although with a high degree of historical accuracy. Many events of the game’s fictional plot are used to fill gaps in the historical memory of the Victorian age, as it is common within neo-Victorian fiction. For instance, the game includes a ludoformed version of the Alhambra Theatre, which was destroyed by a fire after a performance on December 7, 1882. However, “the cause of the fire [was] unknown” (“A London Theatre Burned”). In sequence 8 of *Assassin's Creed: Syndicate*, this unexplained fire is given a cause as Maxwell Roth, one of the main antagonists, exercises a revenge plan against Jacob and sets the theater’s stage on fire, burning down the entire building (“Syndicate 14” 02:36:08-02:39:46). Since the rules of the Assassin Brotherhood in the franchise dictate them to work in the shadows, which is used to explain the missing records of their involvement in historical events depicted in the games, this perfectly corresponds to instances such as the unknown cause of the fire at the real Alhambra. This suggestion of a deeper involvement in history that the player experiences through the playable characters paired with the plausibility of the in-game events work in favor of the immersive effect of *Assassin's Creed: Syndicate*’s ludofictional

world. In the context of women's writing that repositions lost female voices in the Victorian past, Jeannette King makes an interesting observation. She argues that "if any piece of historical writing is, in effect, one tale among many, then an imaginative construction of a life of which little is known, but which has a basis in documented fact, may have its own claim to a kind of 'truth'" (3). Thus, in addition to amplifying the immersive effect of the game, the allegoric representation of history in *Assassin's Creed: Syndicate* lends itself to the reevaluating work of neo-Victorian studies. Moreover, by inverting the principle of minimal departure, it offers the possibility of "reconstrue[ing] the domains of the real world for which we lack information as the closest possible world of a certain fiction" and thus emphasizes the didactic value of historical reimaginings such as *Assassin's Creed: Syndicate* (Ryan, *Possible Worlds* 54).

3.2. On the Immersive Interface: The Animus as a Reflexive Space

The key feature in the examples above is the agency the player still possesses despite the game's pre-set system of rules. Providing a general definition, Murray describes agency as "the satisfying power to take meaningful action and see the results of our decisions and choices" (126). While the player can only exercise the movements and decisions that the coded gameplay allows for and "respon[d] to the "call" of the machine", the ludofictional world can still be "dynamically altered by [their] participation". Similarly to immersion, the degree of agency can vary and depends on how "autonomous" the player's actions are, the "range of possible choices" available to the player and the influence these actions and choices have on the "course of the game" (127–128). *Assassin's Creed: Syndicate* presents a very linear plot on which the player's actions have no significant influence. However, the player can choose how they want to achieve the goals set out by each sequence. For example, during Dr. Elliotson's assassination sequence, the player is presented with a variety of different options for entering Lambeth Asylum. Depending on if their playstyle is more stealth or combat focused, they can plan their route through the asylum based on their willingness to encounter and fight enemies ("Syndicate 5" 00:51:25-00:53:31). Additionally, the sequence offers opportunities, such as a unique way to kill the target and the option to infiltrate the asylum. While these opportunities aid the player's successful completion of the sequence and make the gameplay more interesting, they remain optional and the sequence can be completed without engaging in either of them ("Syndicate 5" 00:54:06-00:55:48). Moreover, when traversing London outside of an active memory sequence, the player has a vast choice in "spatial navigation", which Murray describes as "[o]ne form of agency not dependent on game structure yet characteristic of digital environments" (129). Thus, while the narratively transformative agency is relatively low in

Assassin's Creed: Syndicate, the open world structure of the game's ludofictional London provides the player with the ability to move freely, choose side quests and interact with objects found in the world, which all together facilitates a high degree of spatial agency. Additionally, it remains the individual choice of each player to what degree they access features such as the database. Some players might read none or only some of the entries because they derive their enjoyment of the game solely from the ludic aspects, such as the fight- or stealth-based gameplay of the liberation and assassination quests. In contrast, other players might read every single entry to experience every aspect of the ludofictional world and simultaneously acquire valuable knowledge about the Victorian age. Again, others might fall somewhere in between these two extremes. Depending on the motivation of the player, the value of *Assassin's Creed: Syndicate* as a neo-Victorian work of fiction varies. Indeed, the game can merely function as a representation of the past as a playground, but it can also aid a playful acquisition of knowledge and based thereon, allow a critical reassessment of the past. The difference between these functions lies within the willingness of the player to engage critically with their source of entertainment.

The role of player agency and interaction is therefore not only relevant when discussing the gameplay executed through a game's playable characters, but also when examining features such as a game's interface. Put simply, the interface "indicates the implicit presence of the outside within the inside" (Galloway 42), which besides the binary identifiers of present vs past and us vs them, adds another dichotomy to the discussion of interactive neo-Victorian media. In most video games, it is the playable character the player controls that creates a connection to the ludofictional world "inside", as the player exercises a performance as someone that remains not entirely their "outside" selves. Players can "[experiment] with alternative identities", which are embodied by playable characters. Again, "the performativity of games" – in this context describing to what extent the performance as a playable character makes the player identify with them – relies on a game's degree of immersion, or how present in the game world and able to exercise "meaningful and consequential" actions players feel (Kerr, Kücklich, and Brereton 74–75). In short, this sense of "presence" in the ludofictional world is mediated by the playable character or the avatar. The avatar often functions as an "extension of the player's body" and simultaneously as the main character of the game's narrative (Dubbelman 77). Teun Dubbelman establishes two approaches to the performance of a game's narrative and the "spatiotemporal consciousness" these approaches construct within the player (82). A representational performance, on the one hand, aims to "communicate a story event from the there-and-then, whether set in the past, the present or the future". Accordingly, representation

generates a “form of presence” that situates the player “in a time and place beyond the here-and-now of our bodily existence”. A presentational performance, on the other hand, aims to “create a story event in the here-and-now”. Thus, it comes with a form of presence by which the player experiences events as happening “in a time and place aligned with the here-and-now of our own bodily existence” without the necessity of being “literally physically present” (89). Dubbelman categorizes games such as Quantic Dream’s *Fahrenheit* (2005) and *Heavy Rain* (2010) as leaning more towards a representational performance and games such as *Half-Life* (1998) and *BioShock* (2007) allowing for a presentational performance, although there is also a possibility for both to co-exist in a game (76).

Such co-existence is helpful for further defining the neo-Victorian interface present in *Assassin’s Creed: Syndicate*, as the player situation in the *Assassin’s Creed* franchise shows a special case of performance. Instead of having the player directly take control over the protagonists Evie and Jacob Frye, *Assassin’s Creed: Syndicate*’s introductory sequence of cut-scenes situates the player in the first-person perspective. As a secondary loading screen appears as part of the game’s narrative, the player is introduced to the Animus, a device that enables people to mentally time-travel to any point in history of which “genetic memories” exist. The tagline of the distributing company Abstergo Industries is shown on the screen and tells the player that “[t]he past is [their] playground”. This play-centered approach to history is interrupted with an overwrite welcoming the player as an “Assassin” before Bishop, a twenty-first-century member of the Assassin Brotherhood, appears on screen, directly addressing the player as “Initiate”. This cutscene functions as an introduction to the present-day setting, important characters already familiar from the previous games, technician Rebecca Crane and historian Shaun Hastings, as well as to the historical setting in Victorian London. The player is informed that they will be investigating the genetic memories of twin assassins Evie and Jacob Frye to find a Piece of Eden, a powerful artifact (“Syndicate 1” 00:02:48-00:04:57), which suggests a representational mode for the London sequences, as the player is explicitly told that they will be reexperiencing events that already happened in the there-and-then. The first-person drone view that is used in the present-day sequences constructs a relatable situation for the player, as their experience aligns with that of the Initiate which benefits the immersive effect of the game. Additionally, the most recent version of the Animus can be accessed from anybody’s home, creating a high degree of relatability between the player and the Initiate, as they are both positioned before a device that lets them experience the actions of other people, blurring the lines between both entities. Thus, the player is experiencing Bishop’s initiation as a presentational performance, aligned with the here-and-now. However, when the player takes

control of Evie and Jacob, this presentational mode is extended to the London sequences, as non-playable characters “acknowledge [their] presence [and] start interacting with [them]” (Dubbelman 86). This creates a multi-layered player performance difficult to distinctly place in this theory. Inspired by Aarseth’s fragmentation of the “real, historical player” into the “implied player”, or the “expectations for a player’s behavior”, an “interface” and an optional “avatar” representing the player in-game (“Transgressive Play” 132), I argue that *Assassin’s Creed: Syndicate*’s player performance is constituted by five layers (Figure 5):

Player	Outside the ludofictional world
Game-interface	Outside the ludofictional world
“Initiate”	Inside the ludofictional world – present
Animus-interface	Inside the ludofictional world
Avatar (Evie and Jacob)	Inside the ludofictional world – past

Figure 5: Fragmentation of *Assassin’s Creed: Syndicate*’s player performance.

From outside of the ludofictional world, the player interacts with the game-interface, which allows for actions such as starting the game and accessing the configurational settings. While the Initiate could be seen as a very literal representation of the implied player within the game, as the player cannot control their movements, which shows the overall “limitation to the playing person’s freedom of movement and choice” (Aarseth, “Transgressive Play” 132), the definition of the “implied character”, or “character without signifiers” is more useful for this discussion. The implied character “shows very few signs of being represented” and “comes into existence by being imagined by the player” (Aarseth and Karhulahti 269, 276), which the faceless entity of the Initiate both fulfills. This lack of signifying properties constitutes the Initiate as a vessel for reflection. Referring back to Ryan’s additional meaning of interactivity as a switch between world-internal and immersive and world-external and reflexive, the Initiate embodies this switch. While they are technically located inside the ludofictional world, it is through this character that the player accesses the ludofictional Victorian London as well as the database within the Animus-Interface that provides partly already reflected information about the nineteenth century. Additionally, the task of searching Evie and Jacob’s genetic memories that the Initiate must fulfill, integrates the normally immersion-breaking interaction with the game-interface by moving them to the layer of the Animus-interface. Opening the on-screen database inside the Animus to read the biographical entry on Queen Victoria is a legitimate action the Initiate would do to complete their task. Compared, for example, to the *Witcher* series, the player as Geralt of Rivia might very well open the bestiary for more information on a monster contract, but the interface shown on screen does not align with the immersive narrative of the

game, since a game cannot simulate a physical book (“Syndicate 25” 00:00:00-00:01:17). Furthermore, the Animus-interface explains the HUD (heads-up display), which includes necessary information and instructions supporting the gameplay, such as a mini-map and the current objective (Figure 6). In some situations, directions for the player to behave in a certain

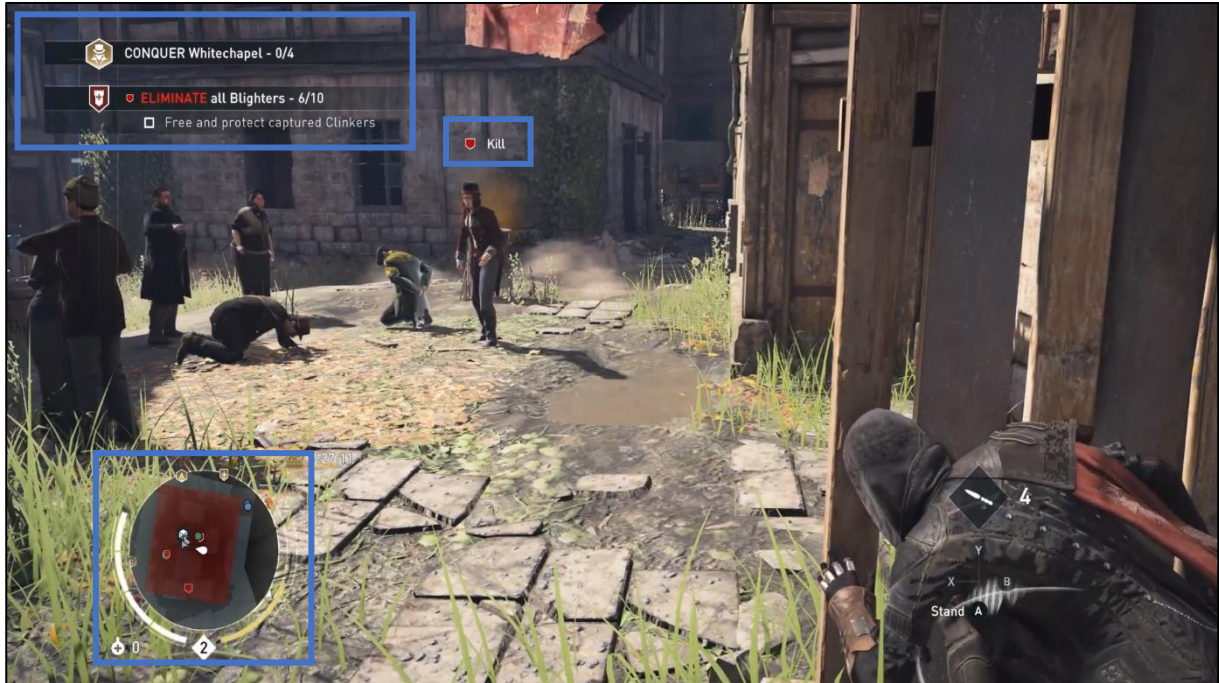


Figure 6: HUD depicted by the Animus-interface including the mini-map and current objective marked in blue (Ubisoft, *Assassin's Creed: Syndicate*).

way appear on screen, which also corresponds to the Initiate's frame narrative. For example, if the player hurts a civilian, a warning appears on screen, informing them that “Assassins did not kill civilians” (“Syndicate 5” 01:34:02-01:34:15). Moreover, this technique is used to limit the ludofictional space in which the player can move about. When the player comes too close to the edge of the map, instead of using invisible walls, which could disrupt the immersion, the Animus-simulation flickers and the player is alerted that they are “[e]ntering an unstable data area” (“Syndicate 1” 00:51:07-00:51:15). Similarly, the game world sometimes dissolves in between sequences, which reminds the player that the ludofictional London is not a real space within the game's narrative (“Syndicate 5” 01:13:02-01:13:13). Another example are the loading screens, which instead of the often-used progress bar, show the avatar inside the Animus-interface before the ludofictional world has been generated and allow the player to move around this in-between-space (“Syndicate 2” 00:17:12-00:17:23). If the avatar “dies” due to the player failing at a mission or miscalculating a jump, the game does not show a “Game Over” or “You Died” screen like for example in the *Super Mario Bros.* (1985-2023) or *Dark Souls* (2011-2018) franchises, but the Initiate “desynchronizes” from the genetic memories they are reliving (“Syndicate 2” 00:18:09-00:18:39). This again includes usually immersion-

breaking but necessary features of gameplay into the game's narrative as it transforms the impossible act of respawning again and again into something the simulated reality of the Animus allows for.

Considering the metaleptic dimension of *Assassin's Creed: Syndicate* facilitates a better understanding of the reflexive link between the Initiate and the playable characters. Applying Planells de la Maza's ludofictional world model in more detail, the nine mandatory London memory sequences constitute the primary possible world of *Assassin's Creed: Syndicate*, which can be complemented by secondary possible worlds in the form of optional side quests, such as conquest activities or the secrets of London collectibles. The present-day sections of this ludofictional world can be categorized as narrative possible worlds that provide the game's frame story. Through naturalized metalepsis, the player is able to enact transformative actions within the ludofictional world. However, this metaleptic aspect is divided into two levels with the interactions of the Initiate with the database, on the one hand, and Evie and Jacob's actions on the other. Additionally, the role of the Initiate also introduces a layer of exceptional metalepsis as the events located in the primary possible world are interrupted by a direct address made through the Animus at the player in the role of the Initiate. For instance, after completing one of Jacob's missions, the continuation of the memory sequence is interfered by Bishop informing the Initiate of Shaun and Rebecca's present-day search for the Piece of Eden ("Syndicate 5" 01:14:55-01:16:16). As an implied character without signifiers, the Initiate offers a direct space for the player to inhabit the story, which creates the impression of being addressed by the conversations directed at the Initiate, who is experiencing Evie and Jacob's genetic memories as if they were happening in real-time. Thus, the initially suggested representational performance of Evie and Jacob's story is transformed into a presentational performance by exceptional metalepsis, as it merges the identities of player and Initiate. This exceptional metalepsis is generated during the switch between the narrative possible world, which directly addresses the player, and the primary possible world, in which the player acts as

Evie and Jacob (Figure 7). While switch indicators, such as the loading screens or accessing the Animus interface are implemented in the game's narrative, they still mark a switch between the

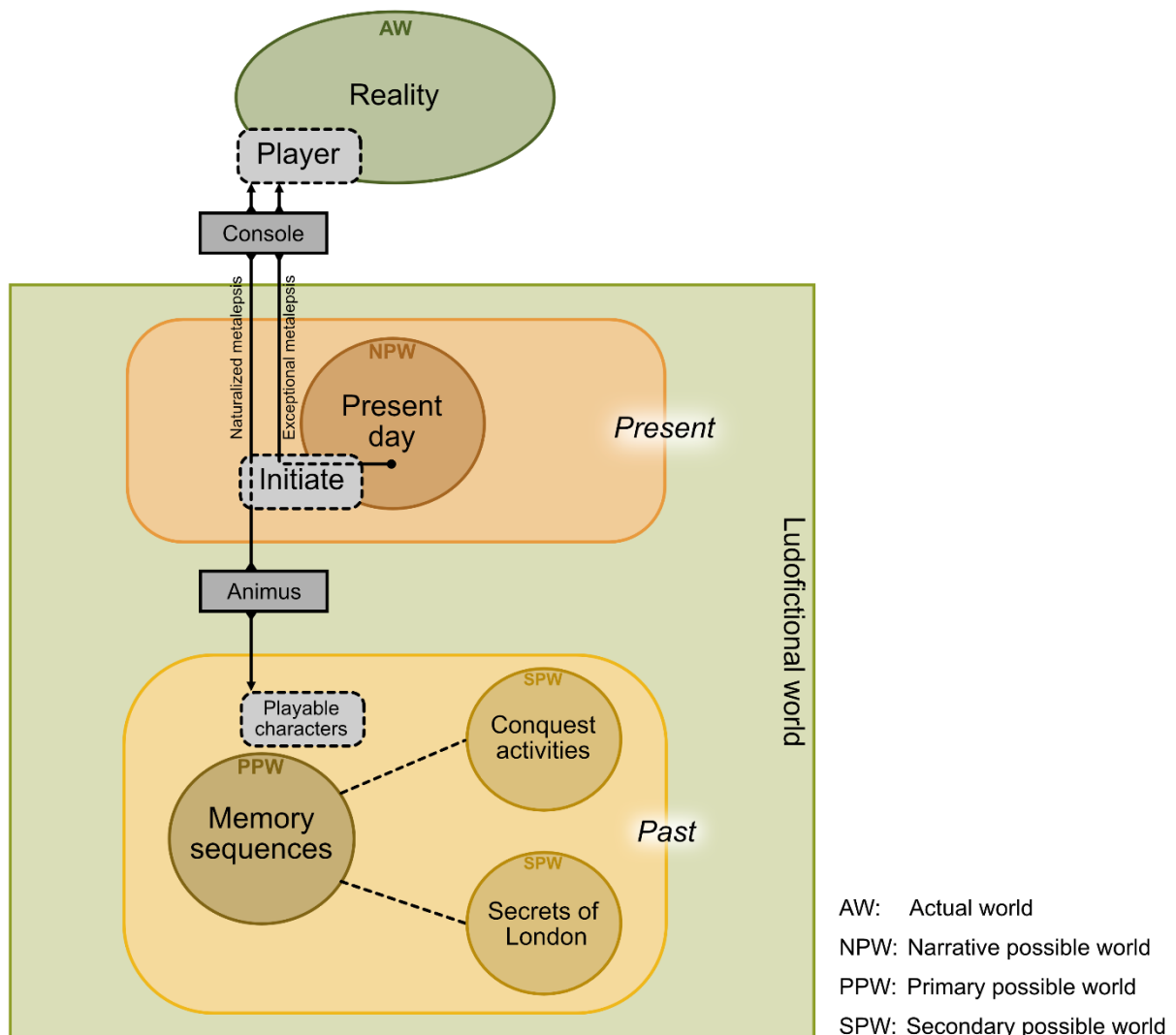


Figure 7: Schematic diagram of the *Assassin's Creed: Syndicate*'s ludofictional world.

primary possible world in the past and the narrative possible world in the present. The indicators thus function as means to facilitate reflection, as they make the player aware of the constructedness of the Victorian primary possible world and their situatedness outside of it. Again, Ryan's definition of interactivity between reader and text as a switch in perspective helps to discern the reflexive qualities of *Assassin's Creed: Syndicate*'s unique player situation. The added performance layer between this world and the actual world of the player established by the narrative possible world of the Initiative allows for an additional level of distance to the reimagined past, which furthermore aids a more objective reevaluation. Overall, the multilayered ludofictional world of *Assassin's Creed: Syndicate* creates a unique neo-Victorian experience that allows the player to engage with an array of themes relating to the Victorian

age, simultaneously in an immersive way and from a reflectional distance created by different layers of player performance. Tom Apperley and Justin Clemens describe this specific form of player performance in the *Assassin's Creed* franchise as an “unfolding interplay of narrative and rules” which facilitates a “meta-reflexive thematization of the avatar-form” (110). Thus, through the conscious reference to their ludic nature, the *Assassin's Creed* games show a degree of self-reflexivity. Combined with the immersiveness video games possess, *Assassin's Creed: Syndicate* can be defined as neo-Victorian. Based on this, I argue that the interplay of narrative and rules and the reflexive space thereby created, additionally encourages the player to not only critically reflect on their role in immersive media but also on the various topics addressed throughout the ludofictional world of *Assassin's Creed: Syndicate*. The naturalized metalepsis from player to playable character, which in this case is mediated through the intradiegetic device of the Animus as well as the console or computer used to play the game, allows the player to act as the playable protagonists Evie and Jacob. Thus, the twins' role in the ludofictional world brings the game's narrative into existence, making them the crucial center pieces to the player's engagement with the themes addressed in the game.

3.3. Interactive Agents and Events: Playing with Victorian Values

Assassin's Creed: Syndicate's ludofictional world allows the player to experience a plethora of aspects of the Victorian age, which are mediated through the game space. Referring back to Bakhtin's essay, he states that besides the inseparability of the “temporal and spatial determinations” of a literary or artistic – and thus by extension a digital – piece of media, its time-space is “always colored by emotion and values” (16). Accordingly, the ludofictional world of a video game based on a historical time-space represents the values and emotions of the reference point for its symbolic representation just as much as those of its time of creation. Adding Massey's definition of space as stories-so far, the simulated space of *Assassin's Creed: Syndicate* functions as a way for the player to access these stories and consequently also the values and emotions attached to the time-space of the Victorian age. Massey also addresses the problematic “regulation of the world into a single trajectory”; a single story so to say. This act of exclusion fails to utilize the “essential multiplicity” of space (71). By being the first installment in *Assassin's Creed's* main franchise to include a female playable character besides the usual male protagonist, *Assassin's Creed: Syndicate* provides access to at least two trajectories from which the player can experience the Victorian age. As surrogate-agents in the game space, the twins Evie and Jacob Frye immerse the player in the ludofictional Victorian London from two often opposing perspectives. As “ludofictional worlds are predetermined

spaces for action and relationships with other fictional beings” (Planells de la Maza 7), *Assassin’s Creed: Syndicate* provides room for the player to engage with the two protagonists and their gendered role in society, both from an internal and external perspective, either playing as or perceiving one or the other from their sibling’s point of view. Another interesting aspect emerges when considering that Ubisoft chose this specific representation of a time period as the first to include playable characters of two different genders, as the Victorian age has one of the firmest sets of stereotypes regarding gender roles and values attached to it.

As mentioned before, it is hard to form one clear definition of the Victorian, which consequently complicates the notion of Victorian gender roles. In addition to the temporal span which the long nineteenth century encompassed, the differences produced by the social classes during that time 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 175). In her 2005 book *The Victorian Woman Question in Contemporary Feminist Fiction*, Jeannette King voices a similar sentiment in that “[g]ender is as politically charged an issue now as it was at the end of the nineteenth century”; a statement which still rings true almost two decades later. Thus, *Assassin’s Creed: Syndicate*’s ludofictional allegory of the Victorian past is a useful tool to, on the one hand “challenge [...] the images of women” and men and the concept of gender at large that emerged from Victorian culture, as well as examine “the values inscribed in those images, and their enduring power”. Consequently, on the other hand, the reevaluation of those images “can add to the modern reader’s understanding of gender” today by exposing many of the origins of contemporary views on gender and gender norms (6).

While it is impossible to establish one comprehensive definition of the Victorian woman or man, there are a few distinct images connoted by the gender ideology of the nineteenth century. The notion that forms the basis of stereotypical Victorian gender ideology is that of the separation into private and public spheres. The household and by extension motherhood constituted the private sphere and “is considered to be the proper place for the ideal Victorian woman”. Accordingly, the public sphere encompasses “[t]he world outside home”, or rather the workplace, which is deemed the “ideal environment for men” (Yildirim 2-3). This binary only provides a general and vague approximation to the actuality of gendered roles in Victorian society, which by now “has been challenged [...] by historians who contested the distinction”

(King 11). Although it is possible that some middle-class women mainly inhabited the private sphere, women from the working class had no other choice but to work “as it was a matter of survival” (Yildirim 9). Besides the distinction between private and public spheres, the notions of the Angel in the House and the fallen woman are strongly associated with the Victorian age. First mentioned in the eponymous poem by Coventry Patmore, the Angel in the House created the image of the ideal Victorian woman, who is “devoted to her family, submissive, self-sacrificing and passive by nature” (Yildirim 2). Opposing the “notion of feminine purity” (Yildirim xii), 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”. This includes not only prostitutes, who in reality often earned more money than female factory workers but also women that engaged in sexual activities outside of marriage (Yildirim 12–14). However, while these versions of Victorian femininity are widespread stereotypes and are often understood as the only two options for a Victorian woman’s life, reality looked much different. Merely an idealistic figure, the persona of the Angel in the House was impossible to achieve for the majority of the female population of Victorian England, and the fallen woman should rather be understood as a way to discredit hard-working women based on the Victorian preoccupation with Christianity and thus the illusion of purity. Consequently, manifested through the writings of Patmore, John Ruskin and other “advocates of domestic ideology”, these myths of femininity 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” (Chouari 2, 10). Evidently, *the* Victorian woman does not really exist, as “Victorian women emerge[d] as no less spirited, capable, and, most importantly, diverse a crew as in any other century” (Vickery 390). Thus, feminists today owe much to the work of our Victorian predecessors debating “the woman question”, such as the suffragettes and all the women that voiced their “demand for emancipation from the duties of motherhood and family life”, as well as better working conditions and pay in the patriarchal society of the nineteenth century (King 9; Showalter 7).

While the separation of home and work life was not as rigid as commonly assumed, a “belief in the separate spheres of femininity and masculinity” was still “cherished” (Showalter 8). Like the feminine sphere, “masculine identities are multiple, complex, and unstable constructions, even within the framework of a particular culture” (Adams 3). Still, the notion of the Victorian man also has certain images attached to it. In contrast to the “self-denial” idealized in women, the model Victorian man was characterized by “energetic self-discipline” and “self-mastery”, which granted him the autonomy that was unreachable for women in

England's "increasingly [...] industrialized society" (Adams 5, 9). Coined by Thomas Carlyle, the "Captains of Industry" were thriving in this society based on their "economic power". However, this version of masculinity was only attainable to upper-class men with the opportunities to become "masters of capital". Most prominently associated with the Victorian age and within reach of the middle-class man, the "gentleman" displayed "a strenuous psychic regimen which could be affirmed outside the economic arena", although straying not too far from the "charismatic self-mastery akin to that of the daring yet disciplined entrepreneur" (Adams 6–7). Transforming self-discipline into performance and thus "transcend[ing] self-interest and the gratifications of social regard", the figure of the dandy fashions himself as a "spectacle" in the "theater of the world". However, while, besides the Victorian gentleman, the dandy often is the most exaggerated stereotype of the Victorian man, "all masculine self-fashioning [...] inevitably makes appeal to an audience, real or imagined" (Adams 10–11).

Despite being unable to encompass the entire historical truth, these stereotypes are worth considering in the context of popular neo-Victorian media. Although not every Victorian woman can be categorized as either an Angel in the House or a fallen woman and not every Victorian man was either a gentleman or a dandy, these notions are useful to evaluate the portrayal of the Victorian age through popular media. Analyzing these media depictions can offer insights into how present-day creators and audiences perceive the Victorians, as well as aid our understanding of the roots of contemporary gender norms. The following chapters will focus on the analysis of Victorian gender norms, ideals and stereotypes as portrayed by *Assassin's Creed: Syndicate*'s protagonists Evie and Jacob Frye. By comparing their general functions in the game's narrative and gameplay, the first section will examine the gendered power imbalance suggested by the portrayal of their overarching roles. Then, a detailed analysis of each character will determine how they are depicted as relating or straying from the above overview of Victorian gender norms and ideals and evaluate how they are subsequently subverting stereotypes. Before doing so, a comment about Evie and Jacob's social class has to be made, as class and gendered ideals of the Victorian age are deeply intertwined. Throughout the game's nine sequences, the twins' social class is not explicitly addressed and their involvement in the Assassin Brotherhood, which as a secret society effectively operates autonomously and unrelated to society's class system suggests them to be relatively unaffected by this system. However, the little information about their previous personal life that the Animus database offers, suggests them to most likely be of middle-class standings before relocating to London. They were born in "a gracious country home" to a "schoolmaster" and "the only daughter of an English steelworks manager" ("Syndicate 1" 01:33:18-01:33:37),

which implies their family to be at least moderately well off financially. Still, between being born into a middle-class family and choosing to rebuild the London Brotherhood from scratch, Evie and Jacob's social standings during the game's events are kept ambiguous, which allows their characterization to encompass a wide array of aspects relating to the gender norms and stereotypes of Victorian England, as will be shown in the following analysis.

3.3.1. *"Gunslinger" vs "Chameleon": Power Dynamics and Gameplay*

The growing belief in scientific knowledge during the mid-nineteenth century appeared as "the 'magic key' for the understanding of gender", which saw women as a "homogeneous group differentiated far more from men than from each other" based on the rules of "nature". This was used as a valid justification for assigning men and women as opposing groups vastly "different educational needs and different social functions" (King 12–13). John Ruskin's lecture "Of Queens' Gardens" published in 1865 describes these different natural characters well:

Now their separate characters are briefly these. 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, wherever war is just, wherever conquest necessary. 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. She sees the qualities of things, their claims, and their places. Her great function is Praise; she enters into no contest, but infallibly adjudges the crown of contest. 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 121–122)

Comparing this to the overarching roles Evie and Jacob embody during the game's Animus storyline, clear similarities can be noticed. Already in the scene that introduces the player to the "unstoppable Frye twins", their opposing characters become apparent. Speaking of their respective first missions, Evie declares that she has "studied the plans of the laboratory and [has] every route covered" before telling her brother not to die, while Jacob, showing off his hidden blade, claims that he has "got all [he needs] right here" and reminds Evie to "[h]ave fun" ("Syndicate 1" 00:07:24-00:8:23). Evidently, his approach is suggested as confrontational and exudes energy for war and conquest whilst not fully grasping the dangers of his methods and rather focusing on the entertainment they bring him. Evie's approach insofar fits the image portrayed by Ruskin as that she does not regard battle as inevitable but rather makes thorough

decisions beforehand. However, instead of relying on others to protect her, her careful planning allows her to protect herself, while also showing concern for her brother's safety.

This is further emphasized when the option to switch characters is introduced, where both comment on each other's abilities rather sarcastically, Jacob referring to Evie as "oh mighty planner" and Evie retorting that he is "the one with the grand ideas, the gangs, the fights, even the outfits [he wears]" challenging Jacob to "lead the way". Additionally, the Animus interface dictates how the player is supposed to play each character, as "Evie favors a stealth approach, whereas Jacob is more confrontational" ("Syndicate 2" 00:11:35-00:12:10). Many games with an implied character "[equalize] man and woman in its ludic approach [and] the protagonist, regardless of [gender], has the same typology of actions" (Planells de la Maza 157). This also applies to more recent iterations of the *Assassin's Creed* franchise, *Odyssey* and *Valhalla*, where the player has to choose between a female or male protagonist before the game begins, but their abilities remain unaffected by this choice. The gameplay of *Assassin's Creed: Syndicate*, however, makes clear suggestions on the type of play Evie and Jacob should be used to execute by providing each character with a slightly different skillset. In addition to their shared combat, stealth and ecosystem skills, the player can unlock three exclusive skills for Jacob, which affect the brutality of his close combat attacks, the amount of damage he takes and make his counter shots automatic headshots. Evie's exclusive skills allow her to turn almost invisible to her enemies, carry more and deadlier throwing knives, as well as increase her overall stealth

abilities (Figure 8). Despite the game's suggestion of distinct play styles for each character, the player can still choose to play the twins how they prefer, as the three exclusive skills do not

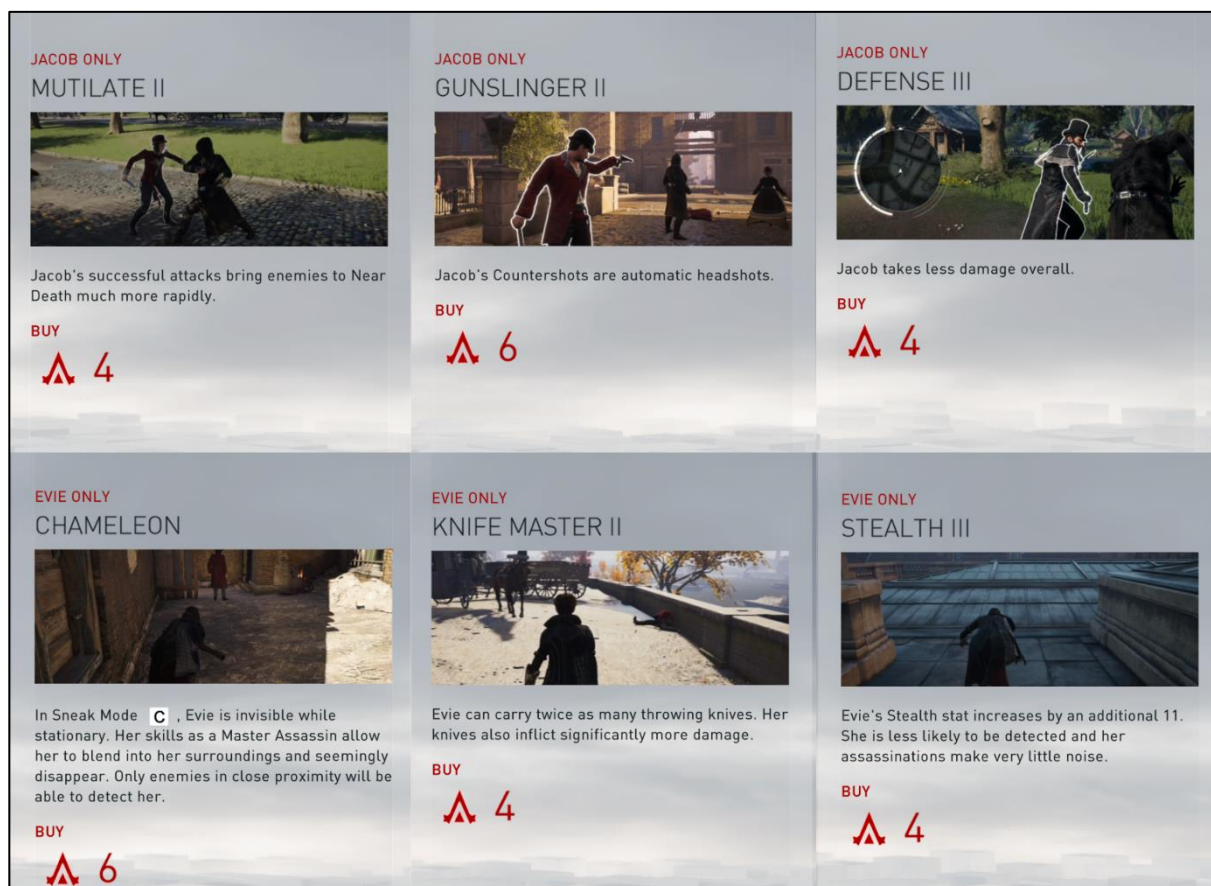


Figure 8: Comparison of Evie and Jacob's exclusive skills (Ubisoft, *Assassin's Creed: Syndicate*).

affect the overall gameplay to a limiting extent. Even more telling than the possible gameplay is the preset characterization of Evie and Jacob that is created by the game's suggestions. Again, Jacob's confrontational character is emphasized, depicting him akin to Ruskin's description of the Victorian man who seizes every opportunity for fight and conquest. Evie's character on the other hand is constructed to be perceived as someone preferring to remain in the shadows, which naturally makes sense as she is an assassin after all. However, keeping the game's time period in mind, Evie's undetectable nature resembles another layer of social behavior expected of Victorian women. Beth Newman describes how "feminine display [...] was socially devalued" and the feminine ideal had women strive to be "properly self-effacing, "invisible" [and] domestic" (5). Thus, ascribing Evie the characteristic to "seemingly disappear" and turn "invisible" (Figure 8) illustrates that beyond the fictional layer of her identity as an Assassin, she is still affected by the societal bounds Victorian feminine ideals imposed on women in the nineteenth century.

Figuratively, this characteristic also depicts her as repeatedly placed in her brother's shadow. From the beginning, Evie's priorities are set on finding the Piece of Eden and thus

preventing the Templar Order from using it to expand their control of London to other parts of the world (“Syndicate 1” 00:06:16-00:06:43). Jacob on the other hand, not so subtly motivated by his self-centered idea of “always [having] thought of [himself] as a gang leader”, rather impulsively decides to start a gang he names the Rooks (“Syndicate 1” 01:30:25-01:31:00). He continuously uses this grand idea to interrupt Evie and discredit her careful plans suggesting that every problem can be solved through violence. For instance, when their Brotherhood associate Henry Green introduces them to their London allies, Evie tries to explain the Templar’s societal influence over the city, which the Brotherhood has “to match” for a fair chance in this conflict. Jacob, however, dismisses her efforts in a belittling way by responding with, “I see what you’re saying, Evie. We need the Rooks.” (“Syndicate 2” 00:08:25-00:08:54). In many situations, despite Evie reminding him that “this is serious” and more than playing gang wars is necessary to reach their goals, Jacob’s priorities lie elsewhere. Certainly, his efforts to liberate London from the opposing gang, the Blighters, do help in the overall conflict. Yet, it is often suggested that his actions are motivated by his desire to fight for fighting’s sake instead of for their greater goal. This reckless mindset allows him to make selfish decisions, such as “not doing anything until [his rope launcher] gets fixed” (“Syndicate 2” 01:24:26-01:24:50), while his sister works on saving London and the rest of the world from an impending Templar overtake. Eventually, Jacob’s tendency to do things merely because they “[sound] like fun” and his disregard for Evie’s pleas to “stick to the mission” (“Syndicate 4” 01:06:16-01:06:27) lead him to “destroy modern medicine [and] the London transportation network” among other things. Yet, instead of taking responsibility after his sister’s accusations, he deflects them by blaming Evie for letting one of the Templars “walk away”. Evie on the other hand is aware of the consequences of her actions and “[intends] to rectify [her mistake] immediately” (“Syndicate 8” 00:23:41-00:23:59). Still, Evie’s one misstep is given much more weight than Jacob’s disastrous “handiwork across the city”, of which the damages Evie “ha[s] been repairing”. Only after multiple failed endeavors, Jacob overtly recognizes the worth of his sister’s guidance when they undergo their final mission together. After repeatedly acting on his impulses and relying on his sister to fix his mistakes, he earnestly asks her for “the plan” beforehand (“Syndicate 14” 02:44:08-02:45:02).

Considering this selection of examples, a comparison of Evie and Jacob’s roles in the overarching narrative demonstrates the gendered power imbalance in Victorian society. Despite Evie’s undoubtedly more significant amount of mental and physical labor, including careful planning, taking responsibility for two people and continuously rectifying her brother’s mistakes, Jacob’s efforts are more overtly acknowledged. While Starrick and his henchmen

discuss the consequences of Jacob's actions in a dismissive but nonetheless rather detailed manner, Evie is merely mentioned as "this sister" Starrick has only "heard of" ("Syndicate 5" 01:13:13-01:15:01). The difference in playtime further supports this, as out of the game's 37 memory sequences, 11 are exclusively playable as Evie and 23 exclusively playable as Jacob. Two of the remaining three are accessible with either playable character and the final memory is shared by both and switches between their perspectives. Additionally, seven of the ten targets are assassinated by Jacob and two by Evie, while Starrick's death is a team effort. Together with the overall predominance of male characters, fictional and historical, *Assassin's Creed: Syndicate* makes an interesting comment on the visibility or remembrance of women regarding important events of the past. Just as Evie's achievements are constantly overshadowed by her brother, an infinite number of women's voices have been lost during the course of history in favor of their male contemporaries' point of view and our task of helping them resurface is a long way from being complete.

3.3.2. *Beyond the Liberated Woman: Evie as an Agent Between Equality and Tradition*

Jeannette King also touches on the liberatory function of reimaginings of the Victorian age. By focusing her argument on women's writing, which centralizes the "female experience", she highlights the ability of these creative works to "[give] back women their place in history, not just as victims but as agents" (King 3). While *Assassin's Creed: Syndicate* does provide a space for women in its ludofictional history by introducing the main franchise's first playable female protagonist, Evie's role in the game's narrative offers a nuanced interpretation, which goes beyond the assumed liberation of a Victorian woman. As mentioned before, the liberatory effect of the agency given to her is dampened by placing her opposite her brother. While Evie's significantly shorter play time reduces the active space the game allows for her representation as a liberated woman, the Animus provides access to her notebook containing diary entries concerning the missions and her thoughts about them ("Syndicate 4" 01:18:30-01:18:46), which echoes the life writing tradition popular during the Victorian age. With life writing, "[t]he 'origins' of women's autobiography are distinctly Victorian" and the research on such, specifically in the context of women's writing, 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 3, 1). In Victorian society, women and their lives were seen as "[unfit] subjects for autobiographical construction", which made diaries, letters and "other more ephemeral or episodic texts" their chosen realm of life writing (Hewitt 21). Such texts are "spaces for forming identity", specifically for that which is "more unsettled, displaced and

repressed” (Amigoni 2). Accordingly, Evie’s notebook is a short but valuable piece of writing allowing Evie’s voice to be heard and her identity to be expressed without her brother’s interference. Therefore, while Evie’s overshadowed characterization can be interpreted as a failed attempt at representing a liberated woman, examining her portrayal in more detail does suggest it to be a conscious representation of the inferior role of women in history. Just as women’s writing and other neo-Victorian reimaginings of the past give women back their place in history, the Initiate’s research allows Evie’s experiences and thoughts contained in her notebook to resurface. Moreover, the game uses Evie’s notebook to overtly comment on England’s societal issues prevalent during the nineteenth century as she writes in her last entry, that “[w]omen are still denied education, suffrage, and property rights” (“Evie’s Notebook” 10). Having Evie voice this problem highlights the meaningful involvement of women in social reform during that time, opposing the mainstream stereotype of the reserved Victorian woman.

Jacob’s prominence also has an additional effect beyond overshadowing his sister which underlines the interpretation of Evie as a character that subverts stereotypes. Albeit *Assassin’s Creed: Syndicate* does not centralize the female experience, 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” (11). The catastrophes caused by Jacob’s tendency to “[act] in haste and [repent] not at all” involuntarily put Evie into the position of the agent that has to repair his mistakes and thus guard his reputation (“Syndicate 11” 01:41:08-01:41:19). The two most prominent examples happen in sequence 5, where “Evie visits Lambeth [Asylum] after Jacob’s assassination of Dr. Elliotson” (“Syndicate 6” 00:06:21) and sequence 7, where she goes to the Bank of England “after Jacob’s assassination of Twopenny” (“Syndicate 11” 01:37:57). In the first instance, Jacob effectively ended the “production of Starrick’s Soothing Syrup”, which Evie describes as “one of Crawford Starrick’s principal revenue streams” in her notebook. After acknowledging Jacob’s achievements, of which he is “justifiably proud”, Evie writes that “[u]nfortunately for us, that was not the end of the story”. Her immediate acceptance of shared responsibility for the negative aspects of Jacob’s actions after giving him credit for the positive aspects ascribes her to the role of a necessary agent for redemption early on in the twins’ story. After Jacob’s rash and badly planned execution of the mission obliterates “the patent medicine of choice in London [...], people [turn] to other [harmful] tonics” and “real medicine [...] [is] being stolen and sold to the highest bidder”. Only because of Evie’s “intervention and the care of Miss Florence Nightingale”, the children that assist the assassins and fell ill due to the lack of real medicine

can be saved. Moreover, Evie disposes of “the thieves hoarding medical supplies” and invests a portion of the Brotherhood’s money in Florence Nightingale’s cause to “create better sanitation regulations”. In her notebook entry, she also makes a point to mention that during all of this “Jacob was nowhere to be found”, demonstrating that she is aware that she is taking responsibility for actions her brother should be working towards repairing (“Evie’s Notebook” 3, my emphasis).

In the second example, “Jacob’s flair for causing trouble has [strikes] again”, as during his mission to assassinate Philip Twopenny in the Bank of England, he does not manage to “exercise care and discretion” and his “heavy-handed manner” cause the press to report the “scandal, questioning the security of the nation’s currency”. Concealed by the resulting chaos counterfeiters “infiltrate the bank and make off with the printing plates for pound notes” (“Evie’s Notebook” 7). As a consequence, citizens lose their trust in the Bank of England and the currency, which according to Frederick Abberline threatens to cause “inflation”, “riots” and manufacturing to be outsourced to America. Rectifying her brother’s mistake again, Evie suggests to “[smuggle] the plates back into the Bank” and agrees to “destroying any counterfeit notes [she] come[s] across”, effectively saving Britain’s economy (“Syndicate 11” 01:37:57-01:41:24). Again, she points out her brother’s absence by responding to Abberline’s expression of gratitude that “it’s Jacob who should be thanking [her]” (“Syndicate 11” 01:50:35-01:51:02). Evidently, in both examples, Evie covertly acknowledges that she is carrying out actions that are her brother’s responsibility. Further into the game, while discussing Duleep’s behavior, Evie begins to explain to her brother how Duleep “isn’t mad [but] [h]e’s trying to take action, to do the right thing”, but stops herself halfway, dismissing the discussion with, “Oh never mind. I’ll take it from here” (“Syndicate 12” 03:06:57-03:07:16). This dismissal demonstrates how she does not see the point in arguing with Jacob about doing “the right thing”, as he will not understand it. Rather she accepts her fate and takes responsibility for the actions of her brother in addition to the labor she is already performing of her own accord for the Brotherhood’s cause. On the one hand, this can be seen as Evie admitting defeat to the patriarchal system that controls her actions to a large extent. On the other hand, however, characterizing her as a woman that always has a plan, thinks things through and never leaves any “loose ends” that could endanger her or others (“Syndicate 1” 00:37:22-00:38:00), highlights the power women nevertheless have, which is far from living as invisible and self-effacing in men’s shadow. Thus, while Evie guarding Jacob’s virtue conforms with part of the common ideal of the Victorian woman, her doing so by executing her agency subverts the gendered power dynamics of the nineteenth

century by ultimately portraying Evie as the one in control, as without her intervention, Jacob would inevitably destroy himself.

This dependence on his sister does not discourage Jacob from continuously “[mocking] Evie’s quest for the Piece of Eden” (“Syndicate 3” 01:18:04). The treatment of Evie’s scholarly endeavors comments on another issue regarding women’s opportunities in Victorian society. As mentioned before, Evie herself writes in her notebook that women are still denied access to formal education. This exclusion was based on questionable biological reasoning as it was argued that “the female system could not cope with both the demands of education and the demands of the reproductive cycle”. Moreover, “[e]ducation in itself was generally thought delirious to female health” (King 18). Whenever Evie’s research is mentioned, Jacob dismissively comments on it. For instance, when Henry introduces the situation in Lambeth Asylum before Jacob’s first mission in London, he asks his sister “what exactly [she] will [...] be doing” and mockingly tells her to “[e]njoy [her] studies” while he is “out killing Templars” (“Syndicate 3” 01:16:53-01:17:06). Shortly after this mission, another cutscene shows Evie at her desk surrounded by books, looking over a map. As Jacob enters, he greets her with describing her efforts as “another exiting night home for Evie Frye” before rudely putting his feet up on her desk. Trying to play his act of disrespect off, Evie informs her brother that she has “found the Piece of Eden”. However, instead of showing any hint of support, Jacob continues to ridicule her by jokingly asking if the artifact will “[h]eal the sick”, “[d]eflect bullets” or “[c]ontrol the populace” (“Syndicate 4” 01:05:39-01:06:28). In both instances his tone and demeanor make it evident that he does not take Evie’s studies seriously, which mirrors the Victorian notion that education was not something a woman should engage with. Moreover, through his carelessness Jacob manages to actively manipulate Evie’s research as “his interference” causes “a wealth of information” concerning the Piece of Eden to be almost completely destroyed (“Evie’s Notebook” 2, “Syndicate 4” 01:10:51-01:13:28; 01:16:23-01:16:49). While being the most notable case, Jacob is not the only one dismissing Evie’s ideas. The notion that a woman’s intellect is unsuited “for invention or creation” as Ruskin’s lecture declares (122), is also noticeable when Evie rides a carriage with a young Alexander Graham Bell. As Bell is explaining his new invention to Evie, she suggests that he “could just call it a telephone”. Bell, however, dismisses this suggestion as “bizarre” and instantly changes the subject to something “[he] was saying earlier” (“Syndicate 3” 00:49:00-00:49:27). This instance also comments on the issue of women not receiving recognition for their scientific achievements until often decades later and men being accredited in their stead. The description of her life before the game’s events characterize her as always having been “studious and

technical” and “[gravitating] toward the more theoretical and organisational parts” of the Brotherhood (“Syndicate 1” 01:33:18-01:33:29). Still, despite all the opposition she encounters, Evie does neither change this inherent part of her identity, nor does she deter from her mission and stays true to her methods for completing it, while finding support in likeminded people. It is telling that one of the few people that acknowledge her achievements is one of the very few women that is portrayed as relevant to the game’s story. In contrast to Bell’s dismissive reaction to her idea, Florence Nightingale thanks Evie and gives her credit for her help in ensuring the distribution of “authentic medicine”. Evie returns the gratitude by stating that “Lambeth is in [Nightingale’s] debt” and making note of her “delight in being able to count the famed Lady of the Lamp as an acquaintance” in her notebook (“Syndicate 6” 00:13:12-00:13:31, “Evie’s Notebook” 3), demonstrating how, if women can count on no one else in society to support their cause, they can rely on each other.

Evie also finds support for her studies from Henry Green, the twins’ Brotherhood contact in London. Similar to Evie’s studies, her relationship with Henry portrays a nuanced image of a relevant issue relating to the role of the Victorian woman, namely that of marriage and the consequential dependence on men. From their first meeting on, Henry is depicted as a potential love interest for Evie. After he offers his condolences for the loss of the twins’ father, Evie is the one to thank him and looks at him intently for a long moment until Jacob interrupts her, rolling his eyes and asking Henry for information about Starrick. Evie’s glance and Jacob’s reaction combined with the music playing in this scene already indicate a possible romance plot between Evie and Henry. While Jacob and Henry are standing on an almost equally high part of the roof, Evie is positioned not only below her brother but also below Henry. Thus, she is glancing up towards him during this scene (“Syndicate 1” 01:29:23-01:31:07). As an isolated instance, this serves as a hint towards the traditional gender roles in a Victorian marriage. For women, marriage was advertised as a “means of survival [...] from childhood” and safety as their husband would earn a majority of the family’s income with his eminently more extensive access to the working world. However, “[b]efore law, a married man and woman were considered as one entity that was represented and dominated by the man”, which meant that “all property, money and [...] [any] children [...] belonged to the man”. In addition to performing “domestic labor” (Yildirim 5), the woman as a wife was expected to fulfill the role of the mother, as “motherhood [was seen as a] woman’s natural destiny” (King 19). This position as the husband’s property and tool to ensure the continuation of his legacy manifested women’s “subordination to men” (King 26).

Despite their initial meeting covertly implying this subordination and pointing towards a more traditional romance, the progression of Evie and Henry's relationship subverts this dynamic. The next cutscene depicts them sharing another long glance, this time however positioned equally in height. Henry, finding her "passion [...] inspiring", already shows his support for Evie's ideas without doubting her, which strongly contrasts with Jacob's dismissive behavior towards his sister ("Syndicate 2" 00:02:08-00:02:28). He supports Evie in her research by sharing "some of his books" and they "are often together" as Evie makes sure to mention in her notebook. Moreover, he "assist[s]" her in repairing the medical system, which places Evie in the superior position opposite Henry's supportive role in their relationship ("Evie's Notebook" 2-4). Jacob, however, is skeptical of his sister's infatuation and reproaches her for "fancy[ing] the bloke already" shortly after their initial meeting ("Syndicate 2" 00:06:16-00:06:36). When their relationship eventually develops, Jacob outright derides Evie for liking Henry, even going so far as to bring up their father's philosophy of not "allow[ing] personal feelings to compromise the mission", which he is aware Evie is sensitive to ("Syndicate 6" 00:16:38-00:17:10). Despite this, Evie begins to care deeply for Henry and allows herself to be vulnerable with him by relying on his plan instead of her own ("Syndicate 11" 02:01:16-02:01:48). Yet, after Henry's plan goes awry and she again finds herself in the mandatory position of the savior, this time rectifying Henry's mistakes ("Syndicate 11" 02:11:17-02:25:49), she denies herself to embrace these feelings. In her notebook, she corrects herself for "very informally" calling Henry by his first name instead of "Mr. Green" and refers to it as "a habit [she] must try to curb". She contemplates if "Jacob is right" and chastises herself for her "clouded judgement", "fear[ing] that [her] father would be disappointed in her" ("Evie's Notebook" 6,9). Moreover, when Duleep remarks that she and Henry "seemed to get along nicely", Evie even refers to their growing relationship as "a problem" ("Syndicate 15" 00:39:23-00:40:35). Her strong mindset towards this subject can be seen as a metaphor for her rejection of the traditional way of marriage. Legally binding herself to a husband and thus signing away her freedom would hinder her from fulfilling her potential, just as relying on Henry obstructed her mission. Therefore, her denying her emotions in favor of her own achievements suggests a subversion of traditional Victorian femininity. However, after Henry saves the twins' last mission by distracting Starrick long enough for them to gain the upper hand in the final fight, Evie declares that Henry "belong[s] in the field *with* [her]" ("Syndicate 15" 01:35:24-01:39:10, my emphasis). She makes the decision to "abandon" her father's restrictive philosophy and plans to travel "with [Henry] to India in the near future" ("Evie's Notebook" 10). While this is how far their relationship progresses in the main story, collecting all of the pressed flowers

scattered around London unlocks a final cutscene in which Henry asks for her hand in marriage, which Evie happily accepts and completes her notebook with a drawing she made of Henry (“Syndicate 23” 00:50:36-00:52:20, “Evie’s Notebook” 11). Nevertheless, adding a classical happy ending to their romance does not negate the subversive qualities of the portrayal of their relationship. Above all, the proposal is an optional scene, which can only be triggered by choosing to collect all pressed flowers, a side quest that is given by Henry and thus can be avoided if the player decides so, illustrating that Evie has a choice whether to marry or not (“Syndicate 7” 01:33:12-01:34:06). Furthermore, Evie proposing that Henry belongs in the field with her, suggests her to be in charge of making decisions instead of falling into the role of her future husband’s property that he has full command over. Their mutually respectful relationship illustrates a more contemporary alternative to the imbalanced dynamic of Victorian marriage, as although Evie exhibits qualities of an independent woman utilizing her freedom, this portrayal adheres to the idea that marriage was seen as a Victorian woman’s main goal and source of security. Additionally, the portrayal of their marriage also helps to illustrate how Evie’s characterization subverts the ideal of the Victorian woman as destined for motherhood. Evie and Henry’s marriage remains childless, which is revealed to the player in the game’s imbedded World War I sequence, where they assume the role of Lydia Frye, who is explicitly described as Jacob’s granddaughter (“Syndicate WW1” 00:03:24). Furthermore, the Jack the Ripper DLC also makes no mention of any children of then 41-year-old Evie. Thus, she is not forced to abandon her passion for the Brotherhood’s cause by the pressure of societal expectations of fulfilling her female destiny as a mother.

Overall, her strong sense of agency, educated nature and equal position to her partner portrays Evie as a nuanced representation of a Victorian woman, emphasizing Vickery’s description of them as “capable”, “spirited” and “diverse” (390). Evie’s portrayal does not correspond to either the stereotype of the Angel in the House or the fallen woman that are often used as time markers in reimaginings of the Victorian age. Still, while many of the ideals of Victorian womanhood are subverted by her characterization, aspects such as her responsibility for Jacob’s virtue and her eventual marriage with Henry represent her restricted position in the patriarchal society of nineteenth-century England. This explicitly manifests in *Assassin’s Creed: Syndicate*’s last memory sequence, where a different highly stereotyped portrayal of the Victorian woman is imposed on Evie and the player simultaneously and tangibly. On their way to infiltrate Buckingham Palace, Evie is shown wearing an ornate red dress with the classic silhouette cinched in at the waist usually created by a corset. The cutscene subtly portrays her discomfort with the situation as she only glances quickly at Jacob and Abberline while walking

past them towards the carriage, which makes her appear slightly self-conscious (“Syndicate 15” 00:53:13-00:54:13). According to Antonija Primorac, the recurring portrayal of the “tightly-laced, corseted female figure” in “contemporary Victoriana on screen and its appropriation and interpretation” has established itself not only as a specific time marker of the Victorian age but also as “an accepted visual shorthand for the notion of the literally and metaphorically repressed Victorian woman” (98). This portrayal is often connected to the metaphor of the “caged bird” (97), in which “the corset becomes the metaphorical cage within which a woman's sexuality and agency are imprisoned” and which mirrors “the restricted social avenues available for the expression of one's desire” (103). The metaphor's focus on a woman's physical restrictions thus “primarily define[s] [her identity] by her sexuality and her body” (108). Despite “the myth of tight-lacing's popularity” having been debunked many times, the metaphor is still frequently used in contemporary popular media (101). Therefore, Evie's situation in the game's last sequence is a familiar visual for most players. Yet, the game's portrayal differs from other forms of media by not only affecting Evie's body represented by the difference in her walk but also influencing the player's possibility to move their surrogate character. Thus, this sequence utilizes what Ian Bogost coined “procedural rhetoric”, or the processes determined by a game's rules and what they represent (Hawreliak 83), to comment on Evie's restricted possibilities. The Animus alerts the Initiate that “Evie's movements are restricted by her dress” and despite the player pressing the same buttons as before, Evie does neither run nor jump (“Syndicate 15” 00:54:29-00:56:10). As the usual strategy of climbing through a window is impossible in her situation, she realizes that she “can't do this on [her] own” and kidnaps a guard to achieve her goal (“Syndicate 15” 01:00:55-01:04:15). Thus, she still remains capable of carrying out her mission despite her restrictions. In addition to the metaphor of the cage represented by her corseted dress, the resulting limitations in player freedom add another metaphorical layer for the representation of her restrictions as a Victorian woman. Just as the player is unable to change Evie's outfit in this sequence, Evie cannot simply shed the disadvantages imposed on her by Victorian gender norms. *Assassin's Creed: Syndicate's* procedural representation paired with the more common visual and textual representations of the corset's effect on women makes the game a rather explicit tool to showcase women's limited agency. Nevertheless, Evie's role as the game's female heroine calls for a defiance of those limitations and she rids herself of the “infernal contraption” (“Syndicate 15” 01:29:19-01:29:28), resulting in her and the player to regain their previous physical abilities. Evie sends the dress to its final resting place with a “Requiescat in pace” which in earlier installments of the franchise was said by an assassin after killing their targets (“Syndicate 15” 01:31:25-01:31:35). Thus, Evie is able to defy the

limitations of the metaphorical cage, just to once again rush to her brother's aid in the final confrontation with Starrick and to 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.

3.3.3. *The Caged Bird: Jacob's Quest for Identity Between Self-Mastery and Performance*

Portrayed as Evie's counterpart in methods and motivation, Jacob embodies the "energy for adventure, [...] war, and [...] conquest" that Ruskin declares as an inherently male quality, as his confrontational, reckless nature leads him to be in the center of gang wars and conquests. However, despite his heroic attempts, he also experiences the inevitable failure connate with masculinity. In the above quote, Ruskin describes that a man "must be wounded, or subdued [or] often misled", which the previous chapter has already briefly established as one of Jacob's main characteristics. On multiple occasions, Evie has to rectify her brother's mistakes and thus Jacob fails to conform to a crucial aspect of Ruskin's argument. He fails to "guard the woman [in this case his sister] from all this" and instead forces her to engage with his "inevitable error[s]" (121–122). His actions make him fill the role of the "victim" King describes as being left vacant by the female protagonist in liberating neo-Victorian reimaginations, while Evie as the "agent" has to save him (3). Evie seems to always have a plan, not only regarding their missions but also for her future with Henry and the Brotherhood as described in her notebook, whereas Jacob is portrayed as an adrift character, who "cannot [...] understand the consequences of his actions" ("Syndicate 5" 01:13:18-0:1:13:38). Throughout the game, he "create[s] almost as many problems as he solves", with his disturbance of London's medical supplies and the Bank of England being far from the only ones. Falling victim to Pearl Attaway's deception, Jacob assassinates Malcolm Millner ("Syndicate 7" 02:30:30-02:31:24), actively "helping the Templar cause" by destroying Pearl's and thus her cousin Crawford Starrick's only competitor in London's transportation business ("Syndicate 7" 02:35:04-02:37:20). In this instance, instead of leaving the consequences of his actions entirely up to Evie, he does try to save what can be saved himself by assassinating Pearl. However, "his haste" in agreeing to Pearl's plans before verifying her claims causes him to "[incapacitate] both of London's principal omnibus companies, [which] create[s] [...] a vacuum in the transit world". After this mission, Evie describes her brother as "terse" and "not answering any of her questions" leaving her to find out about the extent of the problem he caused herself ("Evie's

Notebook” 5). Jacob actively avoids admitting to and standing up for his accumulating failures, which suggests that he feels some degree of shame for his inability to fill the masculine role of the guardian. Thus, his trials and subsequent errors do not serve the purpose of working towards the greater good of their mission or shield Evie from experiencing them herself, but rather directly put her and the rest of London in harm’s way. Moreover, as discussed in the previous chapter, Jacob continuously mocks Evie and her achievements, which serves as a way to discredit her superiority and hence outwardly inverts their roles. In combination with his brutish behavior imposed on the player by the suggested play style for Jacob, his feigned superiority portrays him as the stereotypical “doer” Ruskin describes as the ideal Victorian man (121). However, the weight of this fundamental aspect of Jacob’s character is undermined by the disastrous effects of *what* he does and *how* he carries out his doing. His rash actions paired with his unawareness of their possible consequences depicts him as lacking “the energetic self-discipline that distinguished manly ‘character’” of the masculine ideal (Adams 5). Thus, while failure is accounted for in Ruskin’s description, Jacob’s inability to shield others from the effects of his failures and adopt the masculine quality of the self-disciplined guardian, instead having to surrender it to Evie, suggests a subversion of the masculine ideal of the nineteenth century. Similar to Evie, behind the mask of his reckless behavior, Jacob is a multi-faceted character that comments on several aspects of Victorian masculinity. However, whereas Evie’s subversion of the feminine ideal carries a liberating connotation, Jacob’s inability to achieve the necessary self-discipline and self-mastery to conform to the masculine ideal portrays the struggle of a social deviant to find his place in Victorian England’s “increasingly secular and industrialized society” (Adams 5). This struggle for a sense of identity is highlighted when considering the multiple roles Jacob adopts throughout the game. Beyond his surface-level appearance as a brute who continues to make mistakes, he can best be defined in relation to other, often male, characters.

The driving conflict of *Assassin’s Creed: Syndicate* positions Jacob opposite the game’s main antagonist, Crawford Starrick, symbolizing the “prominence of male rivalries [...] in Victorian culture”. Adams credits the “collective reality of middle-class social and political anxiety throughout the nineteenth century”, such as the industrial revolution (15), as the drive behind these rivalries, since the ideal of masculine “self-mastery” had its roots in the concept of the “disciplined entrepreneur” governing the “economic arena” (7). Thus, the competition and competitiveness found in the business world spread to the personal sector of male identity. As mentioned before, Starrick considers Jacob as his main opponent, while he considers Evie as a mere afterthought. Despite this, after Jacob’s first assassination of one of his henchmen,

Starrick simply describes Jacob as an “insignificant blemish” and expects that the “bothersome fool” will be disposed of soon (“Syndicate 5” 01:13:13-01:15:01). Starrick himself strongly embodies Carlyle’s Captains of Industry by being characterized as “sit[ting] at the helm of the most sophisticated Templar infrastructure known in the western world [controlling] [e]very class, every borough, the gangs, [and] the industries” (“Syndicate 1” 01:30:11-01:30:27). Thus, Jacob’s opposition to Starrick exemplifies the strife for economic and social power at the heart of male rivalries in Victorian culture. Jacob’s efforts to best Starrick stand in for his attempt to identify with the role of such a captain. Channeling his “energy [...] for war, and [...] conquest” (Ruskin 121), Jacob sees Starrick’s grasp of London as an opportunity to prove himself in this masculine sphere by assuming the role of a “gang leader” as the “[f]irm but [f]air” captain of the Rooks (“Syndicate 1” 01:30:26-01:30:56). His plan to oppose the Blighters, the gang that, “manipulat[ed] behind the scenes” by Starrick and the Templars, “overruns the streets” (“Syndicate 2” 00:01:44-00:02:11), is Jacob’s “chance to step in” (“Syndicate 2” 00:03:37-00:04:20). The implementation of this gang war in the gameplay further manifests as a portrayal of the industrial rivalries dominated by Victorian men. After acquiring the train hideout, the player is introduced to the option of upgrading the Rooks. Using the money and resources gained by completing memory sequences and side quests, the player can invest in gang upgrades that affect the Rooks’ combat abilities, their social opportunities such as police bribes and the help of street children, and their monetary advantages in London’s market (“Syndicate 2” 01:26:53-01:28:10). Hence, the Rooks effectively are a business started by Jacob that allows him a taste of attaining the role of a “[master] of capital” (Adams 6). While not mandatory, the gang updates significantly lower the difficulty of the conquest activities. Therefore, the advantage the upgraded Rooks create for the Brotherhood’s advance within London’s boroughs demonstrates the social advantage a successful business venture that dominates its opponents entailed for a Victorian man. As the player advances in the story and conquers London’s boroughs, loosening the grip of Starrick’s control over the city, Jacob’s reputation also increases by having at least a capital on London’s crime sector. As mentioned before, this acquaints him with Pearl Attaway, whom he presents with “a business proposition”, hoping to advance his influence in London as he “[senses] an opportunity that will benefit [them] both” (“Syndicate 7” 01:40:33-01:42:17). However, it quickly becomes apparent, that Pearl has the upper hand in this relationship, proclaiming that “[he is] hired”. Visibly taken aback by this subordination, Jacob tries to explain that he does not “actually work [...] like that”, which Pearl ignores (“Syndicate 7” 01:46:32-01:47:00). Thus, he and his capital themselves are mastered, and by a woman no less. Moreover, he fails to recognize her manipulation and endangers the reputation

of the Brotherhood by benefitting the Templar cause. After Pearl dies at “the hands of that savage”, Jacob’s notoriety develops from the insignificant blemish of the beginning of the game to an opponent warranting Starrick’s anger, who “must be brought to justice” (“Syndicate 8” 00:19:04-00:21:54). Finally confronting Starrick in person, Jacob is further forced into an inferior position in both the figurative and literal sense. When Jacob attempts to assassinate him, Starrick patronizingly addresses him as “my boy” and scolds him for “not [listening]”, reminding him that his disregard for a carefully thought-out plan paired with his rash actions will once again lead to failure. Lecturing him like a misbehaving child, Starrick solidifies his superior position in their rivalry. He forces Jacob to his knees making him look up to him and the social and industrial power he represents (“Syndicate 15” 01:31:13-01:31:25). Once again, Jacob relies on Evie to rescue him, this time from certain death (“Syndicate 15” 01:32:29-01:33:00). While he has a part in defeating Starrick, Jacob is not able to end their rivalry by himself, working together with Evie and Henry. During his death sequence, Starrick claims that he “[is] at the very top of the Order”, which Jacob does not completely negate, retrospectively agreeing that he indeed was superior to him (“Syndicate 15” 01:36:42-01:37:34). After being unable to overpower him alone, this acknowledgment of Starrick’s superior position before his death illustrates Jacob’s acceptance of his previous failures against him. Their rivalry is resolved, however, rather than coming to be at the very top himself, Jacob is reminded of not only his ineptitude for this role but also of the cost of being the sole master of capital. With great power comes great responsibility, which concerning the Victorian male ideal requires a high degree of self-discipline and self-mastery, traits Jacob remains unable to attain.

In addition to his attempt at identifying with the role of a leader, the inclusion of the Rooks connects to another aspect of Victorian male identity. As a subdivision of the Assassin Brotherhood, Jacob’s gang comments on the “widespread Victorian preoccupation with secret societies and brotherhoods”. On the one hand these “social forms” responded to “a desire for collective intimacy among men” and were thus “exposed to attack as ‘unmanly’ because they [seemed] to be hiding something” (Adams 14, 62). Jacob’s leadership of such a social form further portrays him as a character that does not conform to the masculine ideal of the nineteenth century, as while he is able to muster enough self-discipline to organize a community for the Rooks, the secrecy associated with this community is deemed unmanly. On the other hand, Victorian brotherhoods can be read as “surrogate family structures” (Adams 5), which manifests another version of masculinity. Brotherhoods were seen as a means to “realize ascetic manhood through group membership” (Adams 16), which in connection with the economic conditions of that time echoes the familial situations many Victorian men encountered. During

the nineteenth century, “traditional associations of manhood with sexual prowess were weakened by the pursuit of middle-class standards of living, [leading] men [...] to delay marriage in pursuit of adequate income” (Adams 5). By taking in and “[uniting] a mix of disenfranchised outsiders” (“Syndicate 1” 01:30:26-01:30:56), Jacob builds himself a surrogate family that relies on him and that he in turn can rely on. Members of the Rooks can frequently be seen to appear inside the train hideout, which Evie and Jacob live in during their mission (“Syndicate 3” 01:20:43-01:21:50). Thus, Jacob does not only supply his gang with a just purpose but furthermore offers them a familial environment. Surrogate family and source of income at once, the Rooks occupy the space for a traditional family in Jacob’s life, as the *Jack the Ripper* DLC, which is set 20 years after the main game, still shows him living alone without a family in his 40s (“Syndicate 19” 00:25:14-00:28:20). Jacob’s situation in the DLC also affirms what Evie’s initial doubts about Jacob’s role as a gang leader have foreshadowed during their briefing with Henry (“Syndicate 1” 01:30:26-01:30:56). As the player is warned that they are “entering Rooks territory” in the DLC (“Syndicate 20” 00:07:08), it is made apparent that Jacob has lost control over his gang. Repeating the formula of their relationship in the main game, the DLC’s main objective is for Evie to rescue her brother, which combined with his inability to best Starrick on his own, solidifies his inability to adopt the role of a successful leader, neither in the industrial nor the familial setting. Moreover, the association of brotherhoods with unmanliness and the Rooks’ function as a surrogate family portray Jacob as subverting the traditional ideals of the man’s role in the family, while simultaneously commenting on the reality of many Victorian middle-class men and their prioritization of economic power.

While his rivalry with Starrick, which represents his struggle to conform to the most socially profitable version of the Victorian man, runs through the entire game, Jacob’s brief partnership with Maxwell Roth illustrates his experimentation with another style of Victorian masculinity. According to Adams, “manhood [...] must [...] be proven in the theater of the world”, as “theatricality” constitutes an “intractable element [...] in all masculine self-fashioning, which inevitably makes appeal to an audience, real or imagined”. As an expression of Victorian masculinity still referenced in contemporary popular media, this act of theatrical self-fashioning is “implicated in the logic of the dandy”. Thus, during the nineteenth century “even normative masculinity is typically asserted as an unending performance” (10–11), establishing “a norm of ‘manliness’ [that] identified above all with honest, straightforward speech and action, shorn of any hint of subtlety” (14). As the proprietor of the Alhambra Music Hall and a thespian from birth (“Syndicate 14” 02:14:30-02:14:36), Roth embodies these

characteristics in a very literal sense, which his manner of speaking and overly expressive body language further illustrate throughout the memory sequence. More overtly, when Jacob inquires about his reasons for overseeing the Alhambra he declares that “[t]he theatre is in [his] blood [and] theatricality is something of a Roth specialty” (“Syndicate 14” 01:41:04-01:41:49). Contrasting with his sister’s avoidance of displaying herself and her actions to the public eye, the performance of Jacob’s destructive behavior hence “attract[s] the attention of London’s biggest criminal mastermind” (“Syndicate 8” 00:22:25). Upon arriving at the Alhambra for the first time, Roth’s assistant answers to one of Jacob’s sarcastic remarks that “[he] should be on the stage” (“Syndicate 14” 01:07:49-01:08:03), which foreshadows the function of this sequence as a representation of Jacob’s difficulties with the required theatrical self-fashioning as a man in Victorian society. During their subsequent initial meeting, Roth quite literally offers Jacob an opportunity to prove himself in the theater of the world. Welcoming Jacob on the stage of the Alhambra, Roth suggests a partnership to “bring [Starrick] down” together, which highlights the performative aspect of Jacob’s rivalry with the Grandmaster. Despite Roth’s employment under Starrick, Jacob is easily convinced by his open flattery. Describing Jacob’s “heroics in battling the great Crawford Starrick [as] quite magnificent” and referring to their partnership as Roth’s “chance to have a little fun with the bravest man in London” are only the beginning of Roth’s praise for Jacob’s actions (“Syndicate 14” 01:08:59-01:10:28). He encourages Jacob’s “active, progressive [and] defensive” character (Ruskin 121), which has thus far been criticized by his associates, and validates him in possessing these inherently masculine traits without acknowledging their disastrous consequences. Finally acquainted with someone that shares his anarchistic views, Jacob perceives Roth as a role model, who represents the “[f]reedom” associated with the straightforward action of male autonomy (“Syndicate 14” 01:10:48-01:11:38). During their first outing and continuously whenever they are driving in a carriage together, Roth allows Jacob to “[t]ake the reigns” (“Syndicate 14” 01:10:36-01:10:36, 01:32:41-01:32:49), which considering Evie’s disapproval of the majority of Jacob’s plans, has more weight than a mere traveling arrangement. Roth encourages Jacob to act as he pleases and continue with his “[e]xcellent work” in their criminal “amusements”, which Jacob seems visibly intrigued by (“Syndicate 14” 01:52:13-01:52:33). Overall, Roth represents an exaggerated mirror image of the destructive aspects of Jacob’s character, who has little concerns about “leaving chaos in [his] wake” and fully exhausts his autonomy with the simple justification of “why not” (“Syndicate 14” 01:12:14-01:12:26).

However, instead of embracing this side of his identity, Roth’s behavior causes Jacob to realize in which direction he is steering his own life. When “[understanding] what it is to be

free, as [Roth is]” entails hurting innocent children in order to “put an end to [Starrick’s] production line”, Jacob realizes that actions akin to his own previous ones can have disastrous consequences (“Syndicate 14” 02:10:31-02:11:17). Thus, he does not comply with the selfish performance offered by Roth, which albeit exaggerated, portrays the implications of the power connate with some forms of male autonomy. 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 (“Syndicate 14” 02:36:07-02:37:19). 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”. Derived from the stereotype of the fallen woman, rather than “[failing to regulate] a habitual and prescribed exposure to an imagined gaze”, the fallen man “[willfully abrogates his] masculine self-sufficiency”, which results in a “compromised autonomy” (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. Moreover, the “comparison of a fallen woman to a caged bird has deep roots not only in the literature but also in the visual art of the Victorian era” (Primorac 113), which further solidifies Jacob’s portrayal as a fallen man. Mirroring Evie’s physical manifestation of the caged bird in the game’s last sequence, Jacob’s relationship with Roth has him embody this role of the caged bird in a metaphorical way. During their second meeting at the Alhambra, Jacob finds Roth admiring a small crow in a cage, which he refers to as “beautiful”. After they leave for their “second outing”, the camera lingers on the cage, which suggests the bird as a meaningful symbol (“Syndicate 14” 01:31:44-01:32:36). Both, his role as the leader of the Rooks, a crow species, and his bird tattoo (“Syndicate 10” 01:29:20-01:30:11) indicate that the bird is supposed to represent Jacob. Accordingly, Roth uses the ideas of freedom and autonomy as a manipulative measure to draw Jacob towards himself and his machinations, while he was actually only free to act within the bounds Roth set for him. After realizing that he once again has fallen victim to other people’s manipulations and ending his partnership with Roth, he receives a letter accompanied by the now-dead crow from Roth’s cage as an invitation to their final confrontation (“Syndicate 14” 02:12:47-02:13:47). Primorac describes the caged bird as a “metaphor about women and the social role they were expected to play”, which often refers to “not only artistically inclined young girls, but also sensitive, gentle women [...] who need love and kindness to thrive and who are thus smothered by the ‘cage’s’ rigid insistence on duty and earnestness” (97–98). Transferred to Jacob’s characterization as a fallen man, his metaphorical cage comments on the expectations Victorian

society has of him as a man, such as a straightforward and successful performance of male autonomy, which he struggles to conform to. Combined with the gaze of the real and imagined audiences that observe his failure to self-fashion according to the theatrical masculine ideal represented by Roth, this sequence delineates the root of his identity struggle as his need for approval and validation.

An additional layer of Jacob's struggle to come to terms with his identity becomes apparent in the ambiguity of his and Roth's relationship. 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" (Primorac 103). The nature of Jacob's personal relationship to Roth is deliberately kept "ambiguous" yet suggests romantic undertones from Roth's side (Loomer 01:15:30-01:18:20). According to Roth's database entry, he was "[c]harmed" by Jacob and even after their partnership ended, regarded him as "the person he cared for the most" ("Syndicate 14" 02:14:30-02:14:36). Additionally, during their outings, he often addresses Jacob as "my dear" ("Syndicate 14" 01:34:11-01:34:19), and during their final encounter at the Alhambra, describes him as "a young fellow very near and dear to my heart" ("Syndicate 14" 02:19:35-02:20:38). The reward received after their falling out, brass knuckles with the description "All you need is LOVE", further imply underlying romantic feelings ("Syndicate 14" 02:13:49-02:13:49). While Roth lies dying, he kisses Jacob after the assassin voices his distress over the criminal acts Roth has committed previously. Jacob's reaction displays shock and their partnership ultimately ends with him taking a long look at Roth's body and collecting proof of his death by swiping his handkerchief across the dead man's bloody neck ("Syndicate 14" 02:37:22-02:38:26). Paired with Jacob's lack of a female love interest, which usually is a given for all other male protagonists of the main games in the *Assassin's Creed* franchise, and never overtly denying Roth's advances before his final moments, leave his sexuality open to the player's interpretation during the playthrough. Moreover, he actively denies meeting with Roth when Evie initially inquires about the invitation ("Syndicate 8" 00:22:31-00:22:43), who never learns the truth even when encountering a troubled Jacob after Roth's assassination ("Syndicate 14" 02:42:01-02:42:53). 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 62). As confirmed by lead writer Jeffrey Yohalem in an interview after *Assassin's Creed: Syndicate's* release, "[Roth] is in love with Jacob, [who] may have reciprocated" and this sequence takes the place of "the love interest sequence" (Loomer

01:15:30-01:18:20). While their power imbalance and implied considerable age difference portrays their relationship as rather questionable, it remains a useful tool to reflect on the underlying theme of Jacob's other actions discussed in this chapter. It highlights his struggle to figure out his identity within his newfound freedom in London, which in relation to the gendered social expectations of the Victorian age portrays the difficulties of a man that in many ways is unable to conform to the masculine ideal of the period.

However, the outburst triggered by the aftermath of Roth's actions points towards an additional interpretation of Jacob's drive to associate with the criminal. Mistaking a quote by Plato for their father's, the time he spent with Roth evidently put their father on Jacob's mind, who, as Evie reminds her brother, "never approved of [Jacob's] methods" ("Syndicate 14" 02:42:01-02:42:53). As mentioned before, at the beginning of their partnership, Roth embodies an idealized version of what Jacob could achieve if he leaned even further into his anarchistic tendencies. The ambivalence of their relationship thus leaves room for not only interpreting Roth as a role model for Jacob but as an ideal father figure that does approve of him and his methods. Additionally, as discussed in detail in the previous chapter, in relation to Evie, Jacob wants to be perceived as the superior assassin by diminishing her achievements and glorifying his destructive actions. This opposition to his sister further illustrates the root of his struggle for his masculine identity, as Evie represents the qualities of their father that Jacob deeply resents. He refers to the thought of "[becoming] like [their] father" as "[a] fate worse than death" ("Syndicate 15" 01:37:45-01:38:00). When Jacob accuses Evie of "taking over where [their] father left off", she retorts that "[s]omeone has to", which implies a hidden reproach towards Jacob's inability to conform to the values their father taught them and assume the masculine role of the familial guardian ("Syndicate 3" 01:14:52-01:15:32). During his death sequence, Elliotson further acknowledges this by asking Jacob if "[his] father [has taught him] nothing" and calling him a "child" ("Syndicate 5" 01:10:13-01:10:30). Evie and Jacob's database entries also details their relationship to their father, who seemingly was more of a teacher than a father figure to them, as he "raised his children steeped in Assassin heritage". Jacob "gradually came to resent" this and "rebelled against his father's schooling", which combined with Evie's frequent comments on their father's disapproval of her brother, suggests a strained relationship between father and son. While Ethan Frye raised his children himself after "they were cared for by their grandmother until the age of six" ("Syndicate 1" 01:33:18-01:33:37), the focus on their future occupation as assassins and his resulting disapproval of Jacob represents the "growing isolation of middle-class fathers from their sons" during the Victorian age, which was caused by the "separation of home and workplace, and the increasingly rigorous gendering of that

division”. 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 5). Rejecting his father’s teachings and thus never gaining his approval, Jacob was left without a male role model, whom he could fashion the foundations of his identity after. 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” (“Syndicate 14” 02:44:36-02:44:41) while also relying on her to amend his mistakes. After the possibility of gaining the approval of another paternal figure dies with Roth, Jacob seems to be reminded of Ethan’s death as he shouts that their “father is dead” to stop Evie from speaking about him (“Syndicate 14” 02:42:01-02:42:53). His dismissive behavior towards Evie suggests a fear of being abandoned again by a person representing the masculine ideals he is unable to achieve and thus it is Jacob who makes the first move in reconnecting their relationship after their last mission. He finally admits to “[t]he chaos [he] caused” and acknowledges Evie’s involvement in freeing London, as well as that “[he has] missed [her]” (“Syndicate 15” 01:37:45-01:38:28). Inevitably leading to another downfall portrayed in the DLC after Evie leaves him in charge of London alone, 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 (“Syndicate 15” 01:41:38-01:41:43). 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.

3.4. “Them vs Us”: The Remnants of Victorian Values

The last three chapters have highlighted that, as a ludofictional allegory of the Victorian age, *Assassin’s Creed: Syndicate* can function as an interactive space to engage with the gender roles and norms prevalent during the nineteenth century. 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 as a retelling of a past, players might solely want to visit for the purpose of entertainment. Many of Jacob’s outfits come with the stereotypical top hat that most people would recognize as a time marker for the Victorian age and associate it with the image of the gentleman. His generally charismatic and energetic demeanor further help to create this

association. While Evie neither resembles the Angel in the House nor the fallen woman, the two most recognized stereotypes of the Victorian woman, the premise of a female master assassin with the opportunity of conquering London suggests her as a stereotypical representation of the liberated woman that overcomes all her struggles despite that being rather unrealistic for the time. However, she represents more than “the essentially modern heroine's desire to assert her 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 141).

The detailed analysis showed both Evie and Jacob to be nuanced characters used to address a multitude of issues relating to the experience of Victorian gender norms and ideals. Through her relationship with her brother, Evie's character is used to comment on the power dynamics between men and women and shows a subtle subversion of them. Her interest in scientific research and the reactions she elicits from those close to her comments on the situation of women's education and her relationship with Henry highlights the necessity of marriage and the dependence on men for the Victorian woman. However, the equality in power presented between Evie and Henry paired with the absence of children in their relationship introduce further subversive elements to her character. Finally, the limited agency experienced by the player through Evie having to wear a corseted dress illustrates the repression and lack of autonomy women were experiencing during the nineteenth century. Overall, Evie represents many aspects that highlight 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. Jacob's characterization also comments on various aspects of Victorian manhood such as male rivalry, the struggle for economic and social power and the ideals of self-discipline and self-mastery. Similarly, he offers a subversive perspective by being the victim his sister must save instead of guarding her from his failure. He represents traits that were deemed unmanly at the time such as his involvement in a brotherhood, which functions as an unusual surrogate family structure, and his ambiguous sexuality. In contrast to Evie's positive subversion of the feminine ideal, Jacob's subversion of Victorian gender roles is rooted in his inability to conform to the ideals, which leads to multiple failures throughout the game. His metaphorical association with the caged bird and the compromised autonomy this image suggests, highlight the pressure to conform that accompanies the performance-focused male ideals of the nineteenth century.

Overall, the subversion of some feminine norms and ideals by Evie suggests her as a strong, independent female protagonist, which has liberating connotations, while Jacob's diversion from the image of the ideal man is accompanied by many hardships. Throughout the game, Jacob's struggles are portrayed as more complex than Evie's, which is underlined by the

inequality in screen time that each character has. The game's *Jack the Ripper* DLC set in 1888, twenty years after the events of *Assassin's Creed: Syndicate*, makes an effort to balance this inequality by giving Evie an additional seven playable sequences whereas Jacob only appears as a non-playable character. However, the main objective for Evie remains to save her brother and resolve the issues Jacob's loss of control over London has caused, continuing the prioritization of Jacob's hardships. Therefore, while Evie's acts of subversion are portrayed less disastrously, she inherently also has less room for failure. As failure is accounted for in a man's natural character according to Ruskin, the game implies this by allowing Jacob to cause multiple disasters without having to face any lasting consequences. In contrast, Evie's quest to find the Piece of Eden entails fatal consequences for the entire world if she fails, since whoever controls the artifact gains immense power as demonstrated by Starrick's short-lived possession of it at the end of the game. Jacob is allowed the space to master his identity through trial and much error, while Evie must deny herself and the full potential of her ambitions in order to aid her brother.

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 their themes in a contemporary context. Specifically in relation to gender roles and expectations, the Victorian age poses an interesting reference point as it marks an important stage of movements towards gender equality while simultaneously being associated with strict binary stereotypes regarding the era's gender norms. *Assassin's Creed: Syndicate* demonstrates the necessity of these movements by highlighting the power imbalance in Evie and Jacob's relationship. While Evie has more agency than the average Victorian woman presumably had, her brother's actions dictate what she does, mirroring the experiences that still constitute the reality of many women today that are directly or indirectly controlled by the men in their lives or the patriarchal society at large. "Women are not allowed to be the masters of their own repression", Adams paraphrases John Stuart Mill to assess the unequal access to autonomy during the Victorian age (9). Traces of this sentiment still linger within the state of the society of the 2020s, as many aspects of the contemporary mindset evidently remain products of its far-reaching Victorian ancestry. As a broad but meaningful assessment of this mindset, the 2022 gender equality attitudes study, *Levers of Change*, supervised by UN Women reveals "the prevalence of discriminatory attitudes and gender-based stereotypes" (UN Women 3). In *Assassin's Creed: Syndicate*, despite the chaos he causes, Jacob's reputation amongst his associates does not suffer and he is knighted alongside his sister at the end of the game ("Syndicate 15" 01:40:12-01:40:52). Paired with the dismissal of Evie's achievements by her brother, Starrick and Bell, this comments on

the situation of many women today in the professional context. Discriminatory stereotypes still lead to women being presented with fewer opportunities than men and often having to work harder to obtain the ones available to them, while not being credited or even discredited for the labor they do (UN Women 7). Still, while Jacob has more room for failure without being socially reprimanded for it, his character signifies the pressure to perform men are experiencing even in a society that favors them. Specifically, men that do not conform to the norms and ideals produced by patriarchy encounter difficulties in their lives as they are met with obstacles created by social expectations rooted in the idea of hegemonic masculinity or its hypermasculine extreme (Edwards 203).

Not only do the general societal attitudes remind of Victorian gender norms, but according to *The Levers of Change* report “[b]oth women and men are perceived to [also] be portrayed in traditional roles in the media, reflecting and reinforcing gender stereotypes” (UN Women 62). This entails that the escapist pleasures of popular media mentioned in the introduction of this thesis are dampened by the influence these attitudes have on the portrayal of gendered behavior in many areas of fiction. Most relevant to this thesis, the treatment of gender roles in-game and outside is particularly problematic in the video game industry. Over the last decade, “game culture has [...] seen a backlash against nontraditional players [and] [i]n terms of gender specifically, a variety of major sexist incidents have targeted female gamers, game developers, journalists, and cultural critics”. The reason for this backlash is that video games emerged as a “masculinized technology”, which initially “targeted a narrow young, male audience”. This audience has always “defined itself through its engagement with games and other ‘geek’ areas of culture” and thus parts of it feel threatened in their “privileged position” by the diversification and popularization of contemporary video games, which they combat with “sexism and misogyny” (Cote 2–3). Besides the appalling treatment of female and non-binary figures in the video game industry as best, or worst, exemplified by the GamerGate incident, a misogynistic online harassment campaign that occurred in 2014 (Cote 7), many representational aspects of video games are still controlled by the mediums masculinized roots. Everything “from character design, which overrepresents men and underrepresents women [...], to structures of game mechanics and play [...] to storylines and genres that tend to focus on traditionally masculine interests” (Cote 23), perpetuates the suppressed and subordinate role of women mirroring Victorian values. As part of her *Feminist Frequency* series, Anita Sarkeesian calls attention to the many ways in which video games portray women as objects of the male gaze generated by the medium’s expected audience. The most popular trope due to the possibility of pairing it with interactive rescue missions is that of the damsel in distress.

Narratives such as that of Princess Peach in the *Super Mario Bros.* series (1985-2023) and Princess Zelda in the *Legend of Zelda* series (1986-2023) tend to disempower female characters for the sake of empowering male characters and by extension players. This power imbalance “[reinforces] the widespread, regressive notion that women in vulnerable, passive or subordinate positions are somehow desirable because of their powerlessness” (Sarkeesian, “Damsel in Distress: Part 2” 04:43). The “Ms. Male Character” trope uses “feminized imitations or derivative copies of already established male characters”, which are not created as empowered versions of them, but rather “exist only because of, and in relation to, their male counterparts” (Sarkeesian, “Ms. Male Character” 16:19). With the result of “[objectifying] female bodies”, in many games either the “sexuality or victimhood [of female NPCs] is exploited” for the enjoyment of “presumed straight male players” (Sarkeesian, “Women as Background Decoration: Part 1” 02:37). Often this exploitation is implemented as a reward system for the player, which “frames female bodies as collectible, as tractable or as consumable” (Sarkeesian, “Women as Reward” 05:08), like for example in *The Witcher* (2007), where sexual encounters with multiple female NPCs are encouraged by a gameplay mechanic that rewards the player with romance cards, each depicting Geralt’s respective conquest in suggestive poses. Further popular portrayals of female characters continuously “[reduce them] to a tool” (Sarkeesian, “The Lady Sidekick” 02:26) or “demonize femaleness itself” by either “blending sexuality and repulsiveness” creating a “grotesquely female” figure, such as *Dark Souls*’ (2011) Chaos Witch Queelag or employing “temptress” characters, who are threatening because of their sexuality and attractiveness”, such as the desire demons found in the *Dragon Age* series (2009-2014) (Sarkeesian, “Sinister Seductress” 01:37-07:05). Evidently, the primary function of female characters in video games is to “appear sexually appealing to presumed male viewers or players”, which is achieved by “designing them, dressing them or framing them in ways” that elicits this response (Sarkeesian, “Lingerie Is Not Armor” 13:52). Thus, this constant sexualization “[reinforces] patriarchal conceptions of femininity by way of visual rhetoric”, gameplay and narrative, such as female warriors wearing “skimpy, revealing armor” while their male counterparts are given actually functioning sets (Hawreliak 9), or their walking animations distinctively emphasising their swinging hips in a suggestive manner in addition to narrative tropes.

Similar to Evie’s shorter playtime, video games still lack in representation of female protagonists overall to even have the space to counteract these harmful tropes. Recent studies show that the number of female characters is much lower than those of male characters at below “20%, with the share of games featuring a female protagonist being even lower” and include

“almost twice as much dialogue from male characters as from female characters [...] even when the main characters are female” (Breuer et al. 197; Rennick et al. 8–9). Despite mainly having been established as a popular entertainment medium “during and after the successes of the civil rights movements, second wave feminism, and the gay liberation movement”, the video game is only making slow progress in “[pursuing] meaningful diversity or [refraining] from egregious stereotyping” (Malkowski and Russworm 2). To shed the characteristic of further promoting gender inequality, video games need to continue along the path of portraying strong female characters with meaningful stories. Such characters are more easily found in indie games, such as *Gone Home* (2013), *Her Story* (2015) or *Life is Strange* (2015), which “provide empowering narratives that foreground strong female agency and choice” (Perreault, Perreault, and Suarez 245). More recently, strong female leads are also becoming more common in games with bigger mainstream popularity, such as Aloy in *Horizon: Zero Dawn* (2017), or Ellie in *The Last of Us Part II* (2020). Sarkeesian makes an important point by questioning the justifications of exploitative narratives as ways to ensure realism or historical accuracy, as, if a game can include impossible physics, superpowers, dragons and monsters, it should be able to indulge in the fantasy of gender equality and humane treatment of female characters (“Women as Background Decoration: Part 2” 26:40). Female identifying players should be able to enjoy the same games as their male peers without having to tolerate the same objectification and suppressive treatment they are already facing in their everyday lives.

Although video games are still characterized by many of the traits stemming from the medium's origins as a masculinized technology, this representation of empowered male characters at the expense of disempowered female characters can have negative effects on male-identifying players. While discussing “violent revenge-based narratives”, Sarkeesian suggest that they “can also be harmful to men because they help to further limit the possible responses men are allowed to have when faced with death or tragedy” (“Damsel in Distress: Part 2” 23:12). *Assassin's Creed: Syndicate* illustrates this effect, as seen in the previous chapter, Jacob's default reaction to being confronted with his failure is to either lash out at or belittle Evie. While male characters and men's bodies are granted a more diverse portrayal than their female counterparts, some problematic patterns are also still at work here. Many male protagonists exude hypermasculinity, such as Duke Nukem from the eponymous series (1991-2016) or *God of War's* (2005-2022) Kratos, and thus perpetuate unrealistic and harmful ideals that are set up as “extreme distortions” of masculine characteristics (Edwards 203). Even if protagonists are not defined by an extreme iteration of “hegemonic masculinity”, which “in Western society, [...] often [includes] physical strength, athleticism, sexual prowess or power

over women, and mastery of [various skills]”, the superiority these characteristics suggest for the male characters and players contributes to the glorification of gender inequality. However, “the masculinity of games and gamers does not always necessarily coincide with hegemonic masculinity” as many male players “[pin] their identity on being outside the mainstream” as a niche community that, as mentioned before, has to protect their space from intruders, such as female players and game enthusiasts (Cote 5–6). Besides hypermasculine heroes, underdogs or outsiders such as Jacob, who is unable to conform to the masculine ideal of his time, or Geralt of Rivia, who, at least in the first of the *Witcher* games, remained close to the literary source material as rather unattractive and shunned by society, frequently appear as playable protagonists. Despite their deviation from the norm both characters are celebrated or achieve heroic deeds, which aids the internalization of the inherent privileged treatment of men simply because they are men for exactly those players that identify most with being outside of the norm. Both the hypermasculine hero and the underdog can be harmful representations if they ensure their power through the disempowerment of women by objectifying them because of their physical attributes or excluding them based on their presumed lack of skill while resting on their inherent patriarchal advantages (Bola 5). As much as this privilege favors men, “the same system [also] limits them” by “[constricting] possibilities [of self-expression] and [damaging] happiness” (Bola 8; Edwards 231).

Certainly, this is not meant to further demonize the influence of video games on players, as a vast number of discussions on the emphasis on violence of certain types of games have done in the past, and while “violent media stories do contribute to [ideologies such as] hyper-masculinity [, they] are not its only architects” (Edwards 232). Rather this discussion is meant to call attention to the vicious cycle that representation and lived experience undergo in all media, as “representation matters, because it promotes an ideal version of masculinity [as well as femininity and gender roles at large] against which real people are expected to measure up” (Cote 5). Evie and Jacob’s portrayal of Victorian gender norms being applicable to the inequality in the gender representation of contemporary video games, not only points towards the neo-Victorian sentiment that many traces of nineteenth-century ideology are still present within our modern society but also highlights the considerable amount of work that is to be done before anything close to an equal representation of gender is achieved. For this change to be possible, it is important to recognize the harmful patterns and tropes still used in video games so that Janet Murray’s hopeful anticipation for interactive media might apply to video games in the future. Encouraged by her interest in the realities of Victorian women’s life, she writes that “[b]efore the novel could tell the stories of women who did not wind up either happily married

or dead, it would have to change in form as well as in content” (4). In their current form, however, video games are far from embodying this change either in form or in content.

4. Conclusion

This thesis examined the ludofictional world of *Assassin's Creed: Syndicate* as an interactive neo-Victorian space, which provides an immersive experience of the Victorian age for the player and simultaneously allows them to critically re-assess various aspects of nineteenth-century society. Through the interactive qualities of the video game as a narrative medium, the player becomes a participant in the creation of the game's events, which facilitates a deeper engagement with the issues that the game touches on. The multilayered structure of player engagement that the *Assassin's Creed* franchise utilizes, creates a unique form of immersion and emphasizes the meaningful connection between past and present that shapes many aspects of Western society. Creating this “interface between past and present” (Kohlke 1), *Assassin's Creed: Syndicate* quite literally embodies the core element of neo-Victorianism and thus offers a valuable addition to the pool of neo-Victorian narratives, which still rather focuses on traditional media such as literature or film. While the term “Victorian” must be critically evaluated, as the associations created by various representations of the period in popular culture and the historical and factual reality often conflict with each other, it is exactly this stereotyped version of the fictionally adapted nineteenth century that proved interesting for this research. Unveiling what contemporary reimaginings of the Victorian age include in or intentionally leave out of the narrative sheds light on present-day mindsets even more than on the Victorians themselves. The reflexive space that the neo-Victorian interface establishes therefore offers the opportunity to consider different aspects of our contemporary identity from the comfort of a time that is far removed from the present. Gender, as an essential element to human identity formation, is a specifically compelling theme for neo-Victorian creative practices since the stereotypes about Victorian gender ideals and norms are firmly fixed in our understanding of the period and hence should prove as points of contrast to present gender issues. Through the inclusion of a female and male playable character with twins Evie and Jacob Frye, *Assassin's Creed: Syndicate* offers a multimodal experience of two gendered perspectives within the game's ludofictional society of Victorian London.

The immersive and self-reflexive qualities of *Assassin's Creed: Syndicate* are embedded in the game world that the player interacts with in order to co-produce the neo-Victorian narrative. The importance of video games' spatiality signifies that the player's actions prompted and answered by the game's rule-based system bring the symbolic layer that transmits the

game's narrative properties into being. This symbolic layer is based on the real world inhabited by the player, while simultaneously existing as a separately explorable possible world. These interactive possible worlds, or ludofictional worlds, offer multiple trajectories for the player to explore while traversing the game world and following their game-specific objectives and goals. As allegories of space rather than direct replicas of real-world space, ludofictional worlds need to deviate from reality to work together with the game's set of rules to create an enjoyable and immersive experience for the player. The ludofictional world of *Assassin's Creed: Syndicate* is built around a ludoformed version of Victorian London, which is altered just enough to retain its nostalgic value that elicits the desire to visit a place the player could not access otherwise. Thus, the space's topographical layer of visual signs is adapted to accommodate the playability of the topological layer the player interacts with. At first glance, *Assassin's Creed: Syndicate's* version of London seems relatively faithful in comparison with a reconstructed map of the real Victorian London. However, a closer look shows that certain areas have been joined together or moved slightly across the map and distances have been altered to shorten the time of in-game travel. These changes facilitate smooth gameplay, while still allowing for the inclusion of historically relevant sites and regions without negatively affecting the immersive effect for the player. Since spatiality goes hand in hand with temporality, especially in a neo-Victorian context, *Assassin's Creed: Syndicate* does not only allow the player to visit an otherwise inaccessible space but also simulates the experience of and contribution to a long-gone time. As allegories of history, video games mediating the past employ time markers to situate the player in their historical setting and create a sense of involvement in the represented historical events. In *Assassin's Creed: Syndicate*, the discovery of various collectible objects connected to the Victorian age, as well as the interactions with many eminent Victorian contemporaries function as time markers for the player. Furthermore, they experience the temporal aspects of this ludofictional world by being directly involved in events that allude to historical reality, such as the Alhambra theater fire. Many of these time markers can be further investigated through the gameplay feature of the Animus databank, which constructs the uniquely reflexive effect of the franchise.

The interactions of the player with the game's space, objects and agents, result in a feeling of embodiment where the player's consciousness is recentered in the ludofictional world of the game. The smooth gameplay ensured by design choices such as leaving out irrelevant elements and reducing the distance between points of interest in *Assassin's Creed: Syndicate's* ludoformed London, as well as realistic time markers, enables the player to suspend their disbelief in the constructedness of the ludofictional world for the duration of the time spent

playing. The embodiment and recentered consciousness of the player through the playable character allows the player to experience the ludofictional world through the playable character's eyes. In the *Assassin's Creed* franchise, this recentering is produced on multiple layers, which account for the interruptions through the non-narrative game elements. The player accesses the ludofictional Victorian age through the nameless Initiate, who is investigating the lives of the game's playable avatars, Evie and Jacob, via the Animus. Thus, the Initiate is established as a bridge between the past and present, which enables the player to put some distance between them and the London sequences. This facilitates reflection on the past within the in-between space of the Animus, as the player is made aware of the simulated status of the Victorian age through the switches between embodying the Initiate in the present and Evie and Jacob in the past. This specific player situation established a distinct reflexive experience through which the gendered representations of the playable protagonists can be re-evaluated.

Going beyond the popular stereotypes of the Angel in the House, the fallen woman, the gentleman or the dandy, Evie and Jacob represent diverse facets of Victorian femininity and masculinity. A direct comparison of the twins highlights their power imbalance in both narrative and gameplay aspects. Jacob exhibits the confrontational energy for war and conquest that was idealized for the Victorian man, while Evie is portrayed as the duo's decision-maker and guardian for her brother, mirroring the virtuous character of the Victorian woman. The gameplay options for each of them emphasize this by equipping Jacob with advanced close combat abilities while Evie excels in stealth, figuratively placing her in her brother's shadow. Despite Jacob's repeated failures and Evie's achievements, his actions are more overtly acknowledged than his sister's, representing Victorian gender politics that empower men and disempower women. Additionally, a close reading of their representations throughout the game reveals them to reflect on various aspects of their gendered positions in Victorian society. Evie's mandatory supervision of both her own and her brother's reputation highlights both a covert subversion of their power dynamics as well as the limitations she faces by her brother's actions and thus figuratively the patriarchal force. As Evie takes charge of the research efforts connected to their mission, she subverts the Victorian expectation of women to deny themselves profound academic interests, which is reproduced by the game's male characters. An exception to this, and the main supporter of Evie's ideas, the character of Henry Green facilitates the game's commentary on a Victorian woman's duty of marriage and motherhood, which are both subverted by Evie and Henry's relationship. Overall, Evie's characterization offers a nuanced representation of a Victorian woman, which is finalized by making the physical limitations of

her dress tangible for the player, through which the game's last sequence emphasizes the ever-present suppressive limitations Victorian women had to face in the nineteenth century.

Behind Jacob's superficial superiority suggested by his confrontational behavior, his continuous errors position him as the victim that his sister must save on multiple occasions throughout the game. Besides his conflicts with Evie, Jacob's inability to conform to the masculine ideal defined by self-discipline and self-mastery is portrayed through his relationships to other male characters, which reveal various aspects of Victorian masculinity. Jacob's personal as well as industrial rivalry with the game's main antagonist, Crawford Starrick, comments on the strife for economic and social power at the heart of nineteenth-century male identity. Failing, however, to best Starrick on his own, as well as losing control over his surrogate family structure represented by his gang, the Rooks, Jacob portrays a subversion of the masculine ideal in that he is unable to adopt the role of a leader in either an industrial or a familial setting. In Maxwell Roth, Jacob finds a role model, who represents an exaggerated version of Jacob's destructive traits, and their partnership introduces Jacob to the potential of performative self-fashioning that is part of normative Victorian masculinity, as well as comments on the period-specific negative connotations of a potentially romantic relationship between men. Jacob's rejection of this masculine performance portrays him as a fallen man, which is emphasized by his metaphorical manifestation as a caged bird controlled by the expectations created by ideal Victorian masculinity. Subsequently revealed as the root of Jacob's difficulties with forming a stable, normatively masculine identity, his strained relationship with his father comments on the lack of paternal guidance the growing focus on the industry caused for many Victorian boys, setting them up to be at odds with the prevalent masculine ideal built on independence, self-discipline and self-mastery.

Adhering to the tradition of neo-Victorian narratives to rediscover lost voices and relate bygone stories to contemporary ones, the reflexive space the player accesses through the Initiate allows for connections to current discussions on gender roles. Despite her subordinate role in the *Assassin's Creed: Syndicate's* story and gameplay, Evie's characterization can be counted as one of the better representations of a female protagonist in video games. Initially emerged as masculinized technology, the video game and game culture at large still reproduce sexist and misogynistic values, often framing female characters to be objectified or exploited in order to empower the presumably straight male target audience and reinforce patriarchal values. The representation of male characters also suffers under these values as hypermasculine or generally unrealistically strong, skilled and successful characters are still overrepresented. Similar to Evie, Jacob can also be placed on the less harmful end of the spectrum, as at least to some

extent, his hardships exempt him from this problematic characterization. Still, *Assassin's Creed: Syndicate* being based on the Victorian age and thus on an era which is predominantly used to convey specifically rigid and oppressive gender stereotypes in popular media, and yet including only a mild version of gaming culture's sexist attitudes, is telling of the current state of video game culture. To end on a more positive note, however, these observations highlight both the value of applying the neo-Victorian lens to interactive media as well as including popular media such as video games in the neo-Victorian canon. Reimaginings of the Victorian age in all media forms expose the progression, or lack thereof, of values and norms in a plethora of societal aspects, which we must continue to critically reevaluate for our contemporary society to experience fruitful developments. Additionally, interactive neo-Victorian media, such as *Assassin's Creed: Syndicate*, offer valuable possibilities to not only render the Victorian age visible but also create a tangible experience for the player, like the spatial exploration of London or the restrictive experience created by Evie's dress exemplify. The reevaluation of gender ideals, norms and stereotypes is only one approach to the Victorian age the game offers, as *Assassin's Creed: Syndicate* portrays a comprehensive simulation of the nineteenth century, with further research opportunities concerning its depiction of LGBTQ+ characters beyond that of Jacob, the vilification of the industrial and colonial mindset through Starrick and the Templar Order, or the aspect of intertextuality and Victorian literature as represented by characters such as Charles Dickens and Sir Arthur Conan Doyle. Overall, the interactive and immersive space that *Assassin's Creed: Syndicate*'s ludofictional version of London creates, 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. As a multifaceted artistic work, *Assassin's Creed: Syndicate* exemplifies the immense value for humanities research that lies within the medium of the video game, as it is capable of being much more than spaces for escapist endeavors and playful entertainment.

5. References

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Abstract

Video games have not only vastly gained in mainstream popularity over the recent decades but have also slowly begun to be recognized as valuable objects of academic research, as they offer a multimodal perspective on various topics over a multitude of genres. Ubisoft's *Assassin's Creed* franchise (2007-2023) specifically uses interactive historical settings to introduce the player to the cultural and societal environments of by-gone periods. In the franchise's ninth major installment, *Assassin's Creed: Syndicate* (2015), the player is able to experience the Victorian age and its many facets, which allows the game to be read as a neo-Victorian work of fiction. The aim of this thesis is to identify the characteristics that establish *Assassin's Creed: Syndicate*'s ludofictional world as facilitating a critical re-assessment of the Victorian age within an immersive space rooted in an adaptation of the past for the player that is situated in the present. A multimodal analysis of the game's world, its specific method of player embodiment, as well as its narrative and gameplay mechanics, demonstrates how *Assassin's Creed: Syndicate* manifests both, the self-reflexive and immersive qualities of neo-Victorian media. As an illustration of the game's potential for the re-evaluation of the Victorian age, a detailed evaluation of the two playable characters, Evie and Jacob Frye, offers a nuanced portrayal of Victorian gender norms, ideals and stereotypes, which comments on a plethora of aspects connected to the gendered identity of the nineteenth century and simultaneously stimulates reflections on contemporary gender issues. *Assassin's Creed: Syndicate*'s ability to immerse the player in a ludofictional version of Victorian London, while at the same time creating a space for them to reflect on the portrayed themes via its multi-layered player performance, highlights the value of contemporary video games for fields of research beyond traditional games studies.

Key words: neo-Victorian studies, video games, interactivity, immersion, gender, *Assassin's Creed*, possible worlds theory

Zusammenfassung

Videospiele haben in den letzten Jahrzehnten nicht nur enorm an Popularität im Mainstream-Bereich gewonnen, sondern werden auch immer mehr als wertvolle Forschungsobjekte anerkannt, da sie über eine Vielzahl von Genres multimodale Perspektiven auf verschiedene Themen bieten. Die von Ubisoft veröffentlichte *Assassin's Creed* Reihe (2007-2023) nutzt interaktive historische Schauplätze, um Spieler:innen in das kulturelle und gesellschaftliche Umfeld vergangener Epochen einzuführen. In *Assassin's Creed: Syndicate* (2015), dem neunten

Teil der Reihe, können Spieler:innen viele Facetten des viktorianischen Zeitalters erleben, wodurch das Spiel als ein neo-viktorianisches Werk klassifiziert werden kann. Ziel dieser Arbeit ist es, die Merkmale zu identifizieren, die die ludofiktionale Spielwelt von *Assassin's Creed: Syndicate* als immersiven Raum für eine kritische Beleuchtung des viktorianischen Zeitalters zwischen dem Spiel, das die Vergangenheit adaptiert, und den Spieler:innen, welche sich in der Gegenwart befindet, etablieren. Eine multimodale Analyse der Spielwelt, der speziellen Einbeziehung der Spieler:innen in diese, sowie der narrativen und spielerischen Mechanismen zeigt, wie *Assassin's Creed: Syndicate* sowohl die selbstreflexiven als auch die immersiven Qualitäten neo-viktorianischer Medien manifestiert. Um das Potenzial des Spiels für die Neubewertung des viktorianischen Zeitalters zu veranschaulichen, zeigt eine detaillierte Analyse der beiden spielbaren Charaktere, Evie und Jacob Frye, eine nuancierte Darstellung der viktorianischen Geschlechternormen, Idealbilder und Stereotypen, die eine Vielzahl von Aspekten der geschlechtsspezifischen Identität des neunzehnten Jahrhunderts kommentiert und gleichzeitig zum Nachdenken über zeitgenössische Genderfragen anregt. Die Fähigkeit von *Assassin's Creed: Syndicate*, Spieler:innen in eine ludofiktionale Interpretation des viktorianischen Londons eintauchen zu lassen und gleichzeitig einen Raum zu schaffen, in dem über die dargestellten Themen durch seine vielschichtige Spieler:innen-Performance reflektiert werden kann, unterstreicht den Wert zeitgenössischer Videospiele für Forschungsbereiche jenseits der traditionellen Games Studies.