

Article

Black Egyptians and White Greeks?: Historical Speculation and Racecraft in the Video Game *Assassin's Creed: Origins*[†]

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† This essay is dedicated to my nephew Liam Knapp, who always pushed me to play video games and my sister Christina Banker, my first teacher of the ancient world.

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Abstract: Recent portrayals of ancient Egypt in popular culture have renewed attention concerning the historical accuracy of how race and racism appear in representations of antiquity. Historians of the antiquity have robustly dismissed racist claims of whitewashing or blackwashing historical and cultural material in both scholarship and in popular culture. The 2017 video game *Assassin's Creed: Origins* is a noteworthy site to examine this debate, as the game was designed with the assistance of historians and cultural experts, presenting players with an “historically accurate” ancient Egypt. Yet, if race is a fantasy, as Karen Fields and Barbara Fields’ “racecraft” articulates, then what historians have speculated in their study of race and racism are presentations of a *proto-racecraft*, borrowing from historian Benjamin Isaac. This essay argues that *Assassin's Creed: Origins* racecrafts through the paradigm of historical speculation. As historians have speculated on meanings and operations of “race” and racism in ancient Egypt, *Origins* has made those speculations visible through its depiction of a racially diverse Ptolemaic Egypt. Yet, this racecraft is paradoxically good, as the game does so to push back against the hegemony of whiteness and whitewashing in contemporary popular culture.

Keywords: race; racism; racecraft; science fiction; video games; antiquity; *Assassin's Creed*

1. Introduction

The recent portrayals of antiquity in popular culture have energized renewed attention concerning the historical accuracy of how race and racism appear in representations of the ancient world. Claims of “whitewashing” in film have a long, troubling history in Hollywood. From recent examples such as *Exodus: Gods and Kings* (2014) and *Gods of Egypt* (2016) to the BBC miniseries *Troy: Fall of a City* (2018), accusations of racial historical inaccuracies in popular culture have animated a number of scholars of the antiquity to defend historical representation. The entangled histories and cultures of ancient Greece, Egypt, and Rome, in particular, have emerged as a battleground for concepts of race and ethnicity: On one side, the racist imagination of Greco-Roman history and culture as the origin of “white” civilization and on the other side, historians and art historians fighting against ancient historical appropriation (Bond 2017; Whitmarsh 2018; Talbot 2018; Pharos 2018).

The meaning of skin color in antiquity invites historical and cultural speculation about how “race” is made visible in antiquity scholarship as well as popular culture. The fallout over *Troy: Fall of a City* in 2018, in particular, inspired *Pharos*, an online platform of scholars that documents and combats racist attempts of ancient Greco-Roman appropriation, to respond to the racist backlash against the casting

of Black-British actor, David Gyasi, as Achilles.¹ Racist commentators charge the miniseries with a range of prejudicial arguments but in particular of “historical inaccuracy”, namely, that Achilles, a fictional character, was not black. Seemingly not bothered by the fact that Achilles is a mythical figure, these racist commentators claim that Achilles is described as having yellow-blond hair in the Homeric material, and therefore was “white”. While scholars believe that ancient audiences, similar to audiences today, imagined that Achilles looked akin to them, they note that the description of Achilles does not link to some racial connection of being “white” (Pharos 2018; Whitmarsh 2018). Classical scholars argue that much is known about the people in the ancient world, but cultural and ethnic background, not skin color, were the primary force of social differentiation between peoples (Bond 2017; Talbot 2018; Pharos 2018; Whitmarsh 2018). Depictions of darker skin can be seen in ancient cultural material, but scholars deliberate and speculate whether the different skin tones in art actually detail racial differences in the minds and imagination of those in the ancient world (Talbot 2018; Bond 2017; Pharos 2018; Whitmarsh 2018).

Yet, if race is a fantasy, constructed of social, geographical, and historical contingencies, what exactly are scholars deliberating in terms of racial representation in the antiquities? In *Racecraft: The Soul of Inequality of American Life* (2012), Karen Fields and Barbara Fields offer a way for historians and scholars to deconstruct the practice of racism, as they contend that race is actually a byproduct of the practice of racism, not the originator. They create the concept of racecraft, patterned on witchcraft, to explain how ensembles of racial beliefs, concepts, and practices are “crafted” onto lived realities that, in turn, are accepted as real and are recreated through their own continuing acceptance and practice. Racecraft, Fields and Fields write, is “imagined, acted upon, and re-imagined, the action and imagining inextricably intertwined. The outcome is a belief that ‘presents itself to the mind and imagination as a vivid truth’” (Fields and Fields 2012, p. 30). Racecraft, therefore, assists in understanding what we are actually looking at when we “see” race and racism in society and in popular culture.

Video games, in particular, are a noteworthy site where debates about race in antiquity and racecraft appear in popular culture. The tenth installment of Ubisoft’s acclaimed *Assassin’s Creed* video game series, *Assassin’s Creed: Origins* (2017) (henceforth *Origins*) faced racist claims of “blackwashing” ancient Egypt, as Egyptian characters in the game have notionally dark skin, in contrast to their notionally white Greek and Roman counterparts (Whitaker 2018, episode 43). Archeologists argue that the modern notions of race would be unrecognizable to ancient Egyptians; “they were simply Egyptian”, Kathy Bard writes, people from “the land of Kat [black earth]” (Bard 1996). Yet, due to unclear representations in both historical scholarship and in popular imagination, speculation about Egyptians’ “actual” skin color has been the focus of modern preoccupation in popular culture. *Origins’* choice of depicting Egyptians with dark skin is “commendable”, notes Egyptologist Peter Der Manuelian, as it moves away from the pernicious cultural whitewashing of ancient Egypt visible in broader culture (Whitaker 2018, episode 43).

Players see a diverse configuration of aesthetics, behaviors, rituals, and socio-economic perspectives from a variety of Egyptian and Greek (and Roman) subjectivities, set against the backdrop of Ptolemaic Egypt (40 BCE), at a time of immense political and cultural instability. The game follows a Medjay couple (a type of warrior-policeman in Ancient Egypt), named Bayek and Aya, who work to protect the people of Egypt against domestic and foreign (Greek and Roman) actors, while also seeking the revenge of the death of their son at the hands of secretive and powerful elites. Bayek, similar to how native Egyptian populations in the game appear, has dark hair and dark skin, which is in stark contrast to the Greeks he encounters in gameplay. His skin color coupled with his distinctly Egyptian and Medjay clothing is racially coded as “different” to that of Greeks as well. This racial differentiation signifies to players of the game that “race” exists in Ptolemaic Egypt and while not explicitly a focus in the game, the racial difference is intertwined with *Origin’s* narrative gameplay.

¹ Hakeem Kae-Kazim, the Nigerian-British actor who played Zeus in the series, also received racist backlash (Pharos 2018).

Racial difference materializes in the way players “see” the darker Bayek and Aya get involved with entanglements between Greeks, portrayed as white, wealthy land-owning elites, and their colonized Egyptian subjects, whom the Greeks deem inferior in political, economic, religious, and cultural ways.

As in all *Assassin’s Creed* games, historical detail and historical accuracy play an essential role in *Origins*. Ubisoft designs their *Assassin’s Creed* games with the assistance of historians and cultural experts. This investment of historical accuracy by game producers and writers is clearly marked as each game begins with the same message: “Inspired by historical events and characters, this work of fiction was designed, developed, and produced by a multicultural team of various beliefs, sexual orientations and gender identities” (*Assassin’s Creed: Origins*). Yet, as *Origins* takes place in antiquity, much of the historical and cultural material is missing. Thus, “interpretation” is necessary, according to Maxime Durand, the resident historian at Ubisoft (Whitaker 2018, episode 36).

The combination of historical interpretation and speculation of these events, places, and figures, has led to much of the game’s success. The game series, as a form of speculative culture, speculates backward on historical pasts. *Assassin’s Creed* provides what historians have called for (Talbot 2018), that is, digital reproductions, computer animations, and technological visual developments of the ancient world that offer advantages that physical recreations do not. The aesthetics of video games evoke possibilities of how an object, person, and place might have looked in the distant past. To this end, the video game’s former creative director, Aschraf Ismail, note that game creators and designers tried to represent ancient Egypt “as authentically as possible . . . with a foundation of research and credible history” (Nielson 2017). To the game’s credit, much of the reviews of *Origins* received the game as a faithful, while fictionalized, portrayal of ancient Egypt (Hotton 2018; Hall 2018).

Yet, in considering speculation about racial or ethnic difference in Ptolemaic Egypt, what does this imperative to create a world that is at once both “authentic” and historically accurate mean to the presentation of notional racialized differences between Egyptians, Greeks, and Romans? As *Origins* speculates on the historical and cultural complexities of Ptolemaic Egypt, it invites analysis. This essay contends that as game historians live in a racecrafted present, they have anachronistically put race and racism in a world that was different, projecting racecraft into the past. However, their positive racecrafting of the antiquity has political purpose. *Origins* pushes back against the hegemony of whiteness and whitewashing in contemporary popular culture by presenting an “accurate” historical speculation of how ancient Egypt and the people in the ancient world “looked” and how they interacted.

This essay, therefore, first scans how historians have studied the ways in which race and racism appear in the historical and cultural materials, before focusing on *Origins* as the object of study on how that scholarship is rendered as a racecrafted speculation. Just as the video game combines elements of the fantastic with history and historical speculation, this study uses Fields and Fields’ racecraft to unpack how *Origins* similarly crafts the fantasy of race onto a historical reality. Ultimately, this essay argues that *Origins* racecrafts through the paradigm of historical speculation, which is rendered as historical “accuracy”. As *Origins* presents as a historically accurate “vivid truth”, players encounter a game that paradoxically racecrafts and reproduces mystification about race and racism to counter contemporary assertions of white supremacy.

2. Racing and Racism in the Antiquity and Historical Scholarship

Origins’ depiction of racism speaks to the way in which contemporary historians see and think about race and racism in the ancient world. Tim Whitmarsh, for example, warns “modern readers” to remove modern associations because color “isn’t intended to play to modern racial categories; rather, it carries with it ancient poetic associations” (Whitmarsh 2018). The majority of scholars believe that the Greeks did not conceive of “race” as we do (Talbot 2018). James Dee furthers this claim, arguing that

the Greeks and Romans had no regular word in their color vocabulary for themselves,² so any notion of “blackness”, for an example, considered antithetical and inferior to ancient Greeks and Romans is simply absent in the cultural and historical material (Dee 2003, p. 163). Yes, ancient Greeks and Romans “saw” skin color, but “they did not practice systematic racism” as we would understand it today (Talbot 2018).

The historical and cultural material also produces an underlying dispute amongst antiquity scholars on how concepts of race, racism, and ethnicity are to be understood. According to McCoskey, this dispute falls into two categories. First, the “central role of skin color in debates *about* classical antiquity”, which often feature a history (pun intended) of racist “fantasies” that Greeks and Romans were “white” (Talbot 2018; Bond 2017); second, “the radically different operation of race *in* antiquity” (italics original). Both of these need balancing when “assessing the historical impact of race” (McCoskey 2004, p. 298).³ Scholars Rebecca Kennedy, C. Sydnor Roy, and Max Goldman, in their edited collection of texts that span antiquity, introduce readers “to the wide variety of theories from the ancient Greeks and Romans concerning human difference . . . to broaden access to these foundational ideas” (Kennedy et al. 2013, p. xvi). They especially focus on what the Greeks and Romans wrote, in an attempt to assist in the interpretative work “of archeologists, historians, philologists, anthropologists, philosophers—anyone seeking to understand how the ancients understood human difference and how their ideas continue to impact our world today” (Kennedy et al. 2013, p. xvi). Kennedy, Roy, and Goldman’s introduction to their volume argues that while the ancient notions of human difference may not directly correlate to our modern terms of “race” and “ethnicity”, social forms of identification and the differentiation were visible in texts, visual art, and even household objects, which “suggest thinking about human difference was a part of popular as well as intellectual life in antiquity” (Kennedy et al. 2013, p. xv). The editors write: “The Greeks and Romans, like us, struggle to understand the varieties of humanity in the world as they knew it. Their theories for difference, while not the same as our concepts of race and ethnicity, suggested they considered similar causes” (Kennedy et al. 2013, p. xiii). The Greeks and Romans, Kennedy, Roy, and Goldman add, had “multiple and competing explanations for human difference” (Kennedy et al. 2013, pp. xiii–xvi). While these theories of social difference do not correlate to modern terminologies, both the modern concepts and the ancient texts share the principle that human difference is a product both internally determined and externally produced influences (Kennedy et al. 2013, p. xv).

Contemporary research on difference in antiquity is often centered around “the other” in the ancient world and the question of who and what constitutes a “barbarian” (Kennedy, Roy, and Goldman xv). Kennedy, Roy, and Goldman, however, are quick to point out that for the Greeks and the Romans, “the barbarian was only one construct of difference, a culturally based one, that even the Greeks and Romans themselves recognized as constructed and flexible” (xv). Yet, the question remains as to whether or not concepts of race, ethnicity, and so on, had any real influence on being a barbarian, or the social, political, or cultural ideas of anyone else in the ancient world.

Isaac (2004, 2006) and McCoskey (2002, 2004, 2012) have cataloged and contextualized previous writing on these themes in an attempt at answering the profound question of whether people in the

² Dee writes that “one of the little curiosities of Romance philology that the inherited words for the fundamental colors Black, red, green—as well as yellow and purple—have obvious classical origins, whereas the principal word for white in Italian, Spanish, and French is a Germanic latecomer (bianco, blanco, blanc), with albus (“white”) surviving primarily in a specialized feminine form meaning “dawn.” . . . “if the successive generations of Latin speakers in classical and late antiquity had been in the habit of referring to and thinking of themselves as “white” with such expressions as *albi homines* or *alba gens*, it seems unlikely that the word would have been so readily and universally replaced (Dee 2003, p. 160). Additionally, Whitmarsh writes “the early Greek vocabulary of colour was very strange indeed, to modern eyes. The word *argos*, for example, is used for things that we would call white, but also for lightning and for fast-moving dogs” (Whitmarsh 2018).

³ There is a much longer, more contentious debate surrounding the concepts of race in the antiquity that does not feature in the essay. Martin Bernal’s 1987 polemical work, *Black Athena: The Afroasiatic Roots of Classical Civilization*, inaugurated an Afrocentrist perspective of the ancient Egyptians which antagonized historical scholarship regarding skin color in the antiquity. McCoskey does a useful job in cataloging the debates on Bernal’s work in her 2004 “On Black Athena”.

ancient world held any form of racial thinking.⁴ Their work also constitutes parallel ideas in “seeing” and “thinking” race in antiquity for contemporary reading. Isaac and McCoskey reject the inclination to ignore race and racism as a lens in which to study human difference in antiquity. They argue that conceptualizing racial or ethnic (the silent partner concept of race) differentiation in antiquity provides useful analysis on important factors that cross environmental, geographic, political, and cultural concentrations. McCoskey especially argues that those in antiquity used forms of racial discrimination, and therefore race should be used as a lens to further study of categories of social and cultural difference (McCoskey 2002).

Isaac contends there is a lack of scholarship studying the development of “the prevalent negative attitudes towards immigrants and foreigners in Greek and Roman society, and towards other peoples” (Isaac 2004, p. 3). He notes that “one of the difficulties in studying group prejudices in antiquity is the lack of any term in Greek and Latin for ‘racism’, for ‘prejudice’ or ‘discrimination’” (Isaac 2006, p. 33). He argues that due to the “lack” of such vocabulary, stemming “from the fact that there existed no intellectual, moral or emotional objections against such generalizations”, readers therefore must “trace the development of ideas and attitudes for which there existed no terminology” (Isaac 2006, p. 33). Isaac emphasizes the difference in ancient and contemporary beliefs of race and racism, to underscore his claims that ancient attitudes actually “served as prototype for modern racism” (Isaac 2004, p. 1). Isaac is not attempting to defend forms or practices of Greek or Roman racism, nor arguing that they were racist. Instead, he attempts to plot their attitudes towards various cultures along a broad spectrum of mechanisms used to explain human difference (Isaac 2006, p. 263).

Isaac draws together concepts which were “commonly held to determine the collective nature of groups, or the character of peoples” (Isaac 2006, pp. 34–35), to understand “how Greeks and Romans thought and wrote about others”, as well as how they “behaved towards them” (Isaac 2004, p. 6). In studying ancient politics and political systems, perceived purity of blood lines, and environmental determinism, or the definite effect on people born in a given region of its climate and geography, Isaac determines that this early form of racism, which he calls “proto-racism”, was common in the Greco-Roman world (Isaac 2004, p. 6). Yet, as Isaac argues that people did indeed hold “bigotry and social hatred” in antiquity (Isaac 2004, p. 2), he unknowingly uncovers “proto-racecraft”, by detailing the ways that bigotry and hatred are racecrafted in the “dimensions and features of social life and culture” in antiquity (Isaac 2004, p. 6).

One key aspect of this early form of racecraft, environmental determinism, is that Greeks believed these determinate environmental factors become “permanent traits because they become hereditary in one or two generations” (Isaac 2006, p. 38). Rebecca Kennedy argues that this determinate understanding “comes out of the medical tradition” (Talbot 2018),⁵ noting that environmental factors such as cold weather “made you stupid but also courageous”, and “the people they called Ethiopians were thought of as very smart but cowardly” (Talbot 2018) simply because of where one of one’s ancestors originate. “In the North, you have plenty of thick blood” Kennedy notes, “[w]hereas, in the South, you’re being desiccated by the sun, and you have to think about how to conserve your blood” (Talbot 2018). McCoskey, among others, have looked to Hippocrates’ early “medical” treatises that claim, “climate and character are intimately related” (McCoskey 2004, p. 316). The influential work conceptually racecrafts geographic descriptions with those of its inhabitants (McCoskey 2004, p. 316).

Racecraft here is useful in picking through the loose threads of these seemingly “natural” essences tied to one’s geography. These geographical abstractions are racecrafted to the recognizable characteristics such as the shape of one’s face, hair texture, and skin color. Fields and Fields write, “visible physical difference is an unparalleled prop for invisible things” (Fields and Fields 2012, p. 331). The belief in environmental factors having deeper connections to what a person is, is entirely speculative,

⁴ For older work that attended to race and ethnicity in the ancient world, see Snowden (1970, 1983); Thompson (1989); Hall (1997); Fredrickson (2015); Miles (2002).

⁵ For more on Climatic Determinism and the Hippocratic *Airs, Waters, Places*, see McCoskey “On Black Athena” 313–324.

but as Isaac notes, the result of this speculation “is a powerful incentive to discriminatory attitudes”, thus proto-racecraft “turns what could just be an external influence which can be variable (environmental influence) into something that is fixed and permanent (such as skin colour)” (Isaac 2004, p. 38).⁶

From Hippocrates to Aristotle, most Greeks believed that by being in the center, between Asia and Europe, the Greeks constituted the best of all possible geographical and environmental determinates (McCoskey 2004, p. 313; Isaac 2004, p. 61). This superiority was not simply because “others” did not speak Greek, and thus were barbarians, but also because of geographical specialty. Greeks were, as Dee suggests, “Hellenic Supremacists” (Dee 2003, pp. 163–4). As Fields and Fields write, the features that geographically compose a person’s visible “racial” differences also underscore the “presumed inward, invisible content of that person’s character” (Fields and Fields 2012, p. 331). Ultimately, the social hatred and bigotry based on environmentally deterministic factors, among others that existed in antiquity, did not result in the inhuman subjugation and suppression seen in subsequent centuries. Yet, Isaac suggests that the proto- “racial” ideas of the ancient world clearly influenced later periods, especially the Renaissance (Isaac 2004, p. 40), where Europeans began to construct what we may now consider modern notions of race.⁷

McCoskey moves beyond Isaac’s survey of “discriminatory ideas rather than acts” of racism in ancient Greek and Roman literature (McCoskey 2004, p. 2) to study the lived experiences of those who lived under Isaac’s proto-racecrafted ethnic prejudice. To this end, McCoskey focuses on the political, economic, and cultural relationships of ancient Egyptians to their imperial and colonial Greek and Roman subjugators. She is especially after not only the “the position of race” within ancient ways of thinking, but the practice of racism in the ancient Egyptian past (McCoskey 2004, p. 324; 2012, p. 1). McCoskey is studying “what the Greeks and Romans ‘actually’ did” and how they actually interacted with one another (McCoskey 2004, p. 324) with the “racial” thought presented in Greek and Roman literature and philosophy. Similar to Isaac, McCoskey does not argue that ancient racial formation is built upon skin color, but the “deployment” of a racial logic (McCoskey 2004, p. 313), what Fields and Fields call racecraft. Deployment here means racial discrimination against Egyptians to justify Greek and Roman dominance.

One such example, for McCoskey, is the Edict of Caracalla, which “demands the practice of racial identification” in Roman Egypt (McCoskey 2004, p. 299). The Edict was an attempt to expel the Egyptians from the ancient city Alexandria, but more importantly, “the edict notably begins by breaking down the category of ‘Egyptian,’ specifying the precise types of Egyptians who are undesirable based primarily on their economic contribution” (McCoskey 2004, p. 327). Although never identifying skin color as a determining factor, the Edict does specify the “performance” of being Egyptian,⁸ meaning “unruly” and of “low economic status”, which McCoskey contends was “a categorical association of low economic status with ‘minority’ identity that may seem all too familiar to modern audiences” (McCoskey 2004, pp. 328–9). The Edict’s “attempt at [racial] ascription”, writes McCoskey, also details the Roman formation and preservation of “explicit boundaries between various identity categories” (326). Again, although skin color is not articulated in the Edict, McCoskey ultimately argues that race “continues to hold meaning in this context” as clearly the emperor is drawing upon broader ideology in

⁶ Environmental determinism also relates to Black people in antiquity, usually known as “Ethiopians”, as people with notionally darker skin were called by the Greeks, see Snowden (1996, pp. 103–26). Isaac writes: “Ethiopians are mentioned fairly frequently already in some earlier sources, but usually as representatives of peoples living near the edge of the world. In Homer they are ‘the furthest of men’ . . . In later periods blacks did not form much of an actual presence in the Greek and Roman worlds. They were regarded as remarkable, but relatively few of them lived among the Greeks and Romans and no country inhabited by a majority of blacks was ever part of the Greek and Roman empires. (Isaac 2006, p. 36).

⁷ Additionally, McCoskey links her discussion of environmentalism here of ancient environmental deterministic thinking with Mart Stewart’s notion of the environmental determinism found within the US antebellum South (McCoskey 2004, p. 323). The belief and use of similar “climatic determinism” in the antebellum South, conceiving that enslaved Africans were better equipped for labor in the southern climate, is also linked to the racial logic brought forth in the ancient world (McCoskey 2004, p. 323).

⁸ For more on the performative nature of identity, see McCoskey (2012).

his declaration (McCoskey 2004, p. 329). McCoskey claims that the Edict underscores “the deployment (not just articulation) of an ancient racial logic, one in which Egyptian identity figures prominently” (McCoskey 2004, p. 326), but also showcases the “material consequences attached to racial formations in antiquity” associated with that Egyptian difference (McCoskey 2004, p. 329).

3. Speculation, Racecraft, and *Assassin's Creed: Origins*

McCoskey focuses on Ptolemaic Egypt in her study precisely because of the racial prejudice that is overlaid over centuries of imperialism, coloniality, and political and social interactions among Greeks, Egyptians, and Romans. Her study points out that the ample recorded material of the time “attests to the complex ways in which social identity functioned in Ptolemaic Egypt, especially with regard to race” (McCoskey 2004, p. 325). Papyrologists note that the papyri detail far more interconnected social relationships between Greeks and Egyptians and showcase contested social categories of identification as well (McCoskey 2002, pp. 22–23; 2004, p. 325). With this material, scholars are able to speculate on how power functioned in colonized Egypt between Greeks and Egyptians (McCoskey 2002, pp. 22–23), even if no direct evidence of “political or racial justification of Ptolemaic rule” exists (McCoskey 2002, p. 18).

In “Race Before ‘Whiteness’: Studying Identity in Ptolemaic Egypt”, McCoskey writes that a key component to identity formation, both in solidifying Greek identity and understanding Egyptian difference, is the structurally dependent and violent colonial systems put in place by the Greeks. Andrew Erskine notes that Greek culture not only reinforced Greek identity but also became Greek by way of excluding non-Greeks. As Greek culture “serves to enforce Egyptian subjection” (Erskine 1995, p. 43), excluding those whom the Greeks have subjugated, “the more Greeks can indulge in their own culture” (Erskine 1995, p. 43). McCoskey similarly focuses on culture as a means of substantiating political and economic power in Ptolemaic policy, differentiating Greeks from their colonized Egyptian subjects (McCoskey 2002, p. 19). As the “concomitant tool of domination” (McCoskey 2002, p. 20), she argues that culture provided the forms of expression and repression of perceived racial or ethnic identities, which supplied Greek “colonial fantasies and paranoid” that placed them as superior and Egyptians as inferior (McCoskey 2002, pp. 15, 20). The racecrafting of racial or ethnic differences by way of culture is materialized by the combination of the “visual sign of identity”, i.e., race, with the everyday performative nature of identity, or what McCoskey calls social performance. The racialized meaning is connected with cultural visual materiality (McCoskey 2002, pp. 22, 29–30).

It is with respect to these forms of visual materiality that video games excel, making visual what is historically imagined. *Origins*, as in all *Assassin's Creed* games, embedded historians in the creative process from the beginning to prioritize authenticity and accuracy as much as is possible (Nielson 2017). A tremendous amount of work went into “player experience” in order to combine accuracy and authenticity with “historical simulation” (Nielson 2017). Thus, *Origins* captures what the game designers and historians call “authentic” (Maguid 2018) and visually “real” (Campbell 2017). Through this speculative realism, *Origins* showcases the lives of “ordinary people” parallel to the main gameplay. For players, this depiction of everyday life makes the gameplay remarkable (Maguid 2018), as it at once captures the “reality” of the time period and gameplay.

Origins also developed an open narrative approach that allows players to decide what interactions they want to experience. As Bayek, players can follow main quests or join in on side quests that involve the everyday “reality” of ancient Egypt. A player could help a farmer with fertilizing his field or a widow with grief or save sea merchants from attacking animals (*Assassin's Creed: Origins* 2017). The game “feels authentic”, Youssef Maguid writes, “because its people are believable; they have realistic emotions, motivations, reactions. They have crops to harvest, loved ones to mourn, and natron [salt] to collect” (Maguid 2018). Game designers wanted to enable players to interact in a world that is “moving, living and dynamic” (Palumbo 2017). In order to enact a living and moving world, game designers and historians programmed an Artificial Intelligence to give the players the ability to participate in that living world as “real” people go about their lives in Ptolemaic Egypt (Nielson 2017).

Game creators argue that while the grand stage of the social and political narratives of Cleopatra's civil war is seen, the details of regular people in the background of gameplay lead to a more realistic gameplay (Maguid 2018).

Additionally, *Origins* also has a "Discovery Mode" which offers players to travel around Ptolemy's Egypt with gameplay removed. Players can take guided tours created by historians and Egyptologists. Maxime Duran, the head historian for the *Assassin's Creed* series, explains that "we keep the same environments and all the same locations, but you can go everywhere freely, without combat or narrative constraints. We've designed this tour to make Egypt more accessible" (Nielson 2017). When coupled with "Discovery Mode", players are even more under the impression that what they "see" when playing is historically accurate, considering all the care that game producers have put in to make it as accurate as possible.

Another aspect of *Origins*' realism is language. Game designers had to speculatively create an "authentic" mode of Egyptian language, as scholars do not know how ancient Egyptian sounded (Nielson 2017). With the help of both linguists and Egyptologists, the game presents an Egyptian language as real, assembling "actors with Arabic, Hebraic and African backgrounds to make it really come to life" (Nielson 2017). Thus, racial difference is "obvious" to players both because of how historical speculation racecrafts objects, places, and characters in the game, as well as how the characters sound as each carries a "racially" affected real voice to express how "real" Greek or Egyptian characters sound.

Not only do the everyday scenes provide players with a sense of the reality, they are also the site where meaning is derived in the social relations between Greek and Egyptian identities under the confines of Greek colonial subjugation. As such, Fields and Fields' racecraft is useful in considering the historical speculation of racial difference in Ptolemy's Egypt as they write that racecraft explains how fabricated racialized meaning "are pieced together in the ordinary course of everyday doing" (Fields and Fields 2012, p. 46). The game racecrafts the "everyday doing", connecting it with other ideas that shape social life in ancient Egypt. In the gameplay racecraft is visible when a player "acts upon the reality of the imagined thing" as the action "creates evidence for the imagined thing" (Fields and Fields 2012, pp. 33–34).

While not explicitly a narrative focused on race or racism, *Origins* racecrafts examples of racial prejudices that brutalize Egyptians. *Origins* depicts "the fingerprint" of racism (Fields and Fields 2012, p. 29) in Greco-Roman practices of dehumanization and ethnic prejudices against Egyptians. As Fields and Fields note that "racism is first and foremost a social practice, which means that it is an action and a rationale for action, or both at once" (Fields and Fields 2012, p. 27), so too does the socialized differentiation in the video game "transfor[m] racism, something an aggressor does, into race, something the target is" (Fields and Fields 2012, p. 27). Egyptians in *Origins* are seen as secondary citizens in their own lands, their lives and livelihood abused and denigrated, their cultural and religious practices disparaged. As Bayek, players become an arbiter, cycling back and forth between Egyptian and Greek political, economic, religious, and cultural worlds, meting out justice where he (or you as the player) see fit. These interactions give players the opportunity to not only "see" difference, but also understand how difference is made material. Greek and Roman political and social elites, as colonizing powers, extract value from Egyptian land and labor, and reinforce that power by denigrating Egyptian culture and religion.

Subsequently, the racecrafting codes of bloodlines, of "rituals of deference and dominance", or "the gaze", Fields and Fields add, underscore that racecraft does not simply reside in the mind but appears in the game as "social facts . . . both an idea and a reality" (Fields and Fields 2012, p. 46). They write that because racecraft exists in this manner, racecraft constantly remakes and retreats from nominal perspectives and thus magically obscures its own making (Fields and Fields 2012, p. 46). Similarly, *Origins*' designers and their historians obscure the racecraft in the game, as they historically speculate about the everyday normality in the game's general narrative. When players encounter *Origins*, they see Egyptians differentiated from their Greek counterparts by darker skin, clothing,

jewelry, and religious symbolism as a historically accurate and “vivid truth”. Players witness visible racial difference between Egyptians and Greeks (as well as Romans) as a background element of gameplay. One such example is the ways in which Egyptians in *Origins* appear as improvised within the Greek colonial system. In the side quest “The Sickness”, Bayek sees Egyptian farmers, visible by their dark skin and local clothing, burning dead bodies. He is shocked at their treatment of the dead. Players learn that cremation is blasphemous in Egypt, yet players also learn that the corpses are diseased and must be burned to protect others. Through Bayek’s investigation, players discover that the dead were poisoned. As protector of Egyptians, Bayek must then track down the perpetrator and in doing so, discovers that a local broker has been poisoning the poor farmers to claim the farmers’ land for wealthier Greeks in the region (*Assassin’s Creed: Origins* 2017). This violent depiction of inequality is racecrafted for players of the game. Poor Egyptians are made black through the racist conceptualization of public language about inequality, rendering “black” as “the virtual equivalent of ‘poor’ and ‘lower class’” (Fields and Fields 2012, pp. 18–19). Greeks, powerful and wealthy, are seen as the opposite, meaning white.

This racecrafted dynamic of inequality is also made clear in the quest “Murder in the Temple”. Bayek, the “black” protector of his people joins a “white” Greek counterpart to investigate crime in a Greek temple in Faiyum. Religion and land ownership are racecrafted with racial meanings of both religious practices and symbols and how power and wealth are derived by land ownership. In the quest, Bayek discovers that Egyptian religious zealots (Wadjet cultists, after the goddess of lower Egypt) are killing Greeks in response to the Greek temple replacing the previous Egyptian temple. There is a fairly instructive interchange throughout the quest, putting the Egyptian vs. the Greek in racialized unequal contexts. Bayek tells his Greek counterpart that that “your temple is the reason for this trouble” (*Assassin’s Creed: Origins* 2017) in the region, but the local Greek priest who joins Bayek and his counterpart claims the trouble is down to Egyptians being a “prayer-less” people (*Assassin’s Creed: Origins* 2017). Bayek then equates how Greek religion and practices have replaced Egyptian—“Greek gods [now stand] where Egyptians ones stood” to how Greeks have also replaced Egyptian landowners (*Assassin’s Creed: Origins* 2017).

Throughout “Murder in the Temple”, players can hear a local Greek official, in the background of the gameplay, situate the theme of cultural imperialism at play:

Culture for all! Security for all! An increased military presence throughout the Faiyum has made life safer for everyone. Egyptian slums are being torn down, rebuilt, or segregated. Greek settlement is more secure than ever. Security for all! Trade activity has increased tremendously, creating substantial economic growth for Greek business throughout the Faiyum. Prosperity for all! Latest census figures show increased wealth for all in Faiyum. Thanks to the great Ptolemy’s aid for Greek investors, profits have continued to multiply. Prosperity for all! With increased acquisition of Egyptian land and the use of Greek farming methods, farms in the Faiyum now have more success than ever! The new Faiyum promises peace and plenty. A new age of wealth under the guidance of Greek innovation! Prosperity for all! (*Assassin’s Creed: Origins* 2017)

The proclamations articulate how Greece has brought prosperity and wealth to the arid land of Egypt. Through Bayek’s interactions with his Greek counterparts, players learn that Greeks have thrown Egyptians off their own land and are attempting to sell the land to whomever can pay. The Greeks try to reason with Bayek about his concerns for his people: “the Greeks have brought Egypt much progress”. Bayek responds: “progress for Egypt or Greece?” (*Assassin’s Creed: Origins* 2017). He adds: “Greek prosperity means famine for Egyptians” (*Assassin’s Creed: Origins* 2017).

The racialized cultural imperialism in this storyline is impossible to miss. Similar to much of *Origins* gameplay, “Murder in the Temple” is built around Egyptian culture and religion under assault, and players, as Bayek, must resist the Greco-Roman intrusions on domestic Egyptians’ ancient cultural and social systems. These intrusions are racecrafted as notionally white wealthy Greeks command and control much of “black” Egypt, using Greek cultural forms as a means to subjugate the Egyptian

population. While there are attempts at harmony between Egyptians and Greeks, players of the game instead see conflict between Greeks and Egyptians that showcase racialized differences.

4. Conclusions—Could Racecraft Be “Good?”

Ultimately, the racecrafted nature of race and racial differences portrayed in *Origins* arrives by way of historical speculation, as the “exact meanings and operations” of everyday racial and ethnic performances in Ptolemaic Egypt have not been fully interrogated by scholars (McCoskey 2002, p. 35). While not realizing it, players accept racecrafted diversity as real, not only through the continuing acceptance of what is “seen” and “thought” while playing, but also because of the way racecraft is woven into public language of our everyday racecrafted present (Fields and Fields 2012, p. 19). Yet, while *Origins* racecrafts and reproduces mystification about race and racism, the intention is not to suggest race is an eternal concept from the ancient world, but rather to respond to general contemporary charges of racism in popular culture. Thus, game designers and historians engineered their historical speculations with contemporary issues of racism in mind (Nielson 2017).

This essay concludes by returning to the controversies over racist claims of misrepresenting antiquity in popular culture and invites questions on what is to be done in the fight against cultural and historical appropriation. As historians supported representations of diversity in the depictions of antiquity, many received abuse for their corrections of racist whitewashing, leading Tim Whitmarsh to remark that the fight over whiteness in ancient art has “something [more] to do with their [racists] politics” than anything else (Whitmarsh 2018). The political dimension, therefore, of whiteness in both historical scholarship and within popular culture is propped up by the white supremacist ideology that places the Greeks as the epitome of whiteness (Whitmarsh 2018).⁹ This is not without institutional support, however, as foundational scholars such as the 18th-century scholar Johann Winckelmann, the so-called “the father of art history”, maintained that white is simply more beautiful, that “white” equals beauty (Talbot 2018), even if Ancient Greeks “would have been staggered at this suggestion” (Whitmarsh 2018). Historians such as James Dee, among others, question who benefits from the retention of privileging “white” as “a category of pigmentation that, as most [scholars] admit, is not literally white at all, but ‘Mediterranean olive’ or ‘pale brown?’” (Dee 2003, p. 159). Likewise, Mark Abbe says that the persistence of whiteness in the academy is a racial “delusion” that continually supports “assumptions about cultural, ethnic, and racial superiority” as the “core identity of Western civilization” (Talbot 2018).

The “fantasy” of whiteness as beauty held for generations within the academic fields that study the ancient world (Talbot 2018), forcing scholars in the contemporary world, such as Sarah Bond, to fight against the “incredible amount of racism that has shaped the ideas of scholars we cite in the field of ancient history” (Bond 2017). Bond not only fought within the fields of study, but took to defending portrayals of the antiquity in popular culture as well (Bond 2017). While considering what must be done to reverse racist ideology in both scholarship and its manifestations in culture, Bond pointedly connects the two by asking key questions: “do we make it easy for people of color who want to study the ancient world? Do they see themselves in the ancient landscape that we present to them? The dearth of people of color in modern media depicting the ancient world is a pivotal issue here” (Bond 2017). Movies and video games, in particular, are Bond’s targets in changing the narrative of how the ancient world looked. “Public historians”, she writes, must assist those that create artistic representations of antiquity to “produce a contextual framework” for understanding the ancient world “as it truly was” (Bond 2017).

Although Bond is focused mainly on classical sculptures and art, the fact that she mentions reproducing an ancient world as it “truly was” is at the heart of the matter. Can scholars and historians,

⁹ For more on white supremacists taking Greek and Roman history and culture as the paragon of white Western civilization, see Donna Zuckerberg’s *Not All Dead White Men* (Zuckerberg 2018).

supporting filmmakers and video game designers, visually recreate the antiquity if much of the historical and cultural material is missing? The answer, of course, is yes, through expert historical speculation. Yet, within this speculation, modern notions are trafficked in. Thus, contemporary notions of race and racism, as is a theme of this essay, are racecrafted into that historical speculation. If Ptolemy's Egypt was "diverse", how can game historians and game designers show that diversity to the contemporary public, if not by racecrafting people in ancient Egypt as racially "diverse"?

Perhaps a more provocative question regards if racecraft can be used in a positive manner to counter erroneous claims, or, as in the case of *Origins*, to instruct and enable players of the game to "see" how ancient Egypt "actually" was? Additionally, as this notion of a positive form of racecraft is absent from Fields and Fields' work, this essay's deliberation on *Origins*' "good" racecraft possibly expands the conceptualization of racecraft, and how to critique it elsewhere. Thus, this essay has attempted to show that instances of racecrafting the ancient world in *Assassin's Creed: Origins*, while involuntary, can produce a positive effect to counter the hegemony of whiteness in historical scholarship and whitewashing in contemporary popular culture. The racecrafted reproduction of the mystification of race and racism that the video game produces, from the historical speculation that inspired it, is done with political intent. If deployed as a political gesture, racecraft may indeed offer "good" ways to critique racial codes and racial thinking that influence and impact both the study of history and the representations of history in popular culture.

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