

# Game Narrative Review

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**Game Title:** Assassin's Creed  
**Platform:** 360/PS3/PC  
**Genre:** 3rd Person Action/Assassination Simulator  
**Release Date:** Nov. 14, 2007 (PC version: Apr. 04, 2008)  
**Developer:** Ubisoft Montreal Studios  
**Publisher:** Ubisoft Entertainment  
**Creative Director:** Patrice Désilets  
**Author of this review:** Jeff Bickel  
**School:** Guildhall at SMU

## Overview

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Assassin's Creed contains two narratives that integrate together almost seamlessly. Initially, the player controls Desmond, in an alternate version of Earth's future. Through a device called the Animus, the player controls one of Desmond's ancestors – an Assassin, or Hashshashin, named Altaïr. Through Altaïr, the player conducts a series of assassinations, supported by several investigations each, in order to understand the conflict in which the player is embroiled.

The majority of the gameplay takes place in three cities in the Middle East – Acre, Jerusalem, and Damascus – during the time of the Crusades. Through this storyline, the player learns of an ancient struggle between two factions over powerful artifacts known as the Pieces of Eden. Members of the enemy faction – the Templars – seek to control people with these artifacts while those of the player's faction – the Assassins – fight to prevent this from happening. Throughout the game, the player learns that Desmond is a descendant of Assassins while those who have captured him and given him the ability to relive these memories are Templars, who are doing so in order to locate these powerful artifacts in his current time.

## Characters

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### Storyline “Present”:

#### Assassins:

- **Desmond** – The player's avatar when in the present; he is kidnapped by Abstergo Industries – later revealed to be a cover corporation for the Templar organization. Abstergo forces him to enter the Animus – a device that allows him to access the memories of his ancestors – to relive the memories of his ancestor Altaïr. Though the player does not have much information about Desmond's character specifically, it is through exploring the Abstergo offices that the player gains insight into the narrative as a whole.

- **Lucy Stillman** – A young female research assistant. The game initially presents her as working with Abstergo Industries – the faction that kidnapped Desmond. She later reveals herself as an Assassin, and becomes Desmond ally.

#### **Templars:**

- **Dr. Warren Vidic** – A doctor working for Abstergo Industries. His motives are questionable from the start, and the player learns that he is using Desmond to locate a “Piece of Eden,” with which the Templars hope to control the world.

### **Storyline “Past”:**

#### **Assassins:**

- **Altaïr Ibn-La'Ahad** – An Assassin during the Third Crusade. In the opening to the game, he violates the titular creed and must assassinate nine targets to regain his status – this provides the narrative structure for his portion of the game.

#### **Templars:**

- **Al Mualim** – The leader of the Assassins, he later reveals himself as a Templar who is using Altaïr in order to acquire the Piece of Eden. His betrayal allows Altaïr to become the leader of the Assassins, and the confrontation with Al Mualim demonstrates some of the otherworldly abilities of the Piece of Eden.

## **Breakdown**

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In the game’s present, Abstergo agents kidnap Desmond and force him to relive the memories of his ancestor Altaïr. It is within this reliving that the majority of the game takes place, with the player controlling Altaïr for most of the relevant gameplay. In the past, during the time of the Third Crusade, Altaïr breaks the three principal rules of the Assassin order and Al Mualim orders nine assassinations as a means for him to regain his lost status. These nine assassinations, with their supporting investigation activities, are the brunt of the gameplay. This dual structure allows the game to focus the gameplay on the past – where Altaïr is a trained Assassin who is capable of great feats – while still allowing the overall narrative to include Desmond’s story.

Over the course of the game the Piece of Eden serves as a MacGuffin of sorts, driving both sides of the dual narrative. In the past, Altaïr learns more about the artifact and the Templars who seek it. In the game’s present, Desmond learns that Abstergo is a cover for the Templars, who are using him to locate the artifact for themselves.

During the conclusion of the game Al Mualim betrays Altaïr; Al Mualim then demonstrates the power of the Piece of Eden to control people by taking control of a great number of previously friendly NPCs and setting them against the player. After defeating Al Mualim – who also demonstrates powers well beyond those seen in the game before this point – the game returns to its present, and Desmond is free to walk around the lab.

Upon using a power normally reserved for the Altaïr portion of the game, the player encounters a number of puzzles and a credit roll. This final portion gives the player the agency to “solve” how to end the game, which provides a satisfying conclusion that ties together both strands of the narrative.

## **Strongest Element**

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The strongest element of the narrative was how well implemented the nested structure was. From the beginning, it is clear that the two protagonists are separate people, but very closely related. The way the game slowly ties these two storylines together – Lucy revealing herself as an Assassin and Abstergo industries as a front for Templar activity, and Desmond begins to experience Animus effects while out of the Animus – provides a strong backbone for both individual narratives.

## **Unsuccessful Element**

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The most unsuccessful element in Assassin’s Creed were the side missions, in which Altaïr must perform a task – chosen from a rather small list of possible tasks – in order to learn more about his target. These were not unsuccessful for lack of strong narrative; they frequently provided meaningful insight on these targets. They were unsuccessful because the sheer number of these missions, coupled with the low variety of activities, became a frustration point for many players. Intended as ways to immerse the player further, these became a very weak point in the game as a whole and lost much of their impact.

## **Highlight**

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The highlight of the narrative occurs at the very end of the game, after Altaïr’s narrative is completed and the player is once again in control of Desmond. There is no longer a visible objective present, and the player is free to walk around but given no direction as to how to complete the game. However, once the player attempts to enter Eagle Vision – a mechanic formerly only relevant to Altaïr’s portion of the game – they notice strange symbols scrawled across the walls and floors. By exploring the space and inspecting the symbols and puzzles, the player eventually finds the focal symbol that ends the game and triggers the credit roll. This strongly ties together Desmond’s narrative with Altaïr’s, and provides a strong hook for later sequels.

## **Critical Reception**

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The game received mixed-but-high reviews (the Metacritic score is 81), with many citing the repetition of side missions as the weakest point.

In his review for 1UP, Michael Donahoe praises the nested narrative structure, going so far as to lament the fact that this was not well-advertised pre-release. He also condemns the repetitious nature of side missions and elaborates on how much these missions detracted from the game.

In his review for Eurogamer, Tom Bramwell provides a different take on what some consider the high point of the narrative – the ending. He feels that the lack of resolution is

a weak point, rather than an intriguing way for the game to end. He states that the ending is merely to set up for eventual sequels, rather than a strong way to end the game's narrative.

Overall, the game scored highly and many reviewers appreciated the interesting way in which the narrative was structured. Several felt that the ending was poor, lacked clarity, and was merely a gimmick to sell sequels.

## Lessons

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- **Players' Perception of Narrative is strongly informed by gameplay**
  - While the game provided a strong and detailed narrative for Altaïr, many players were unwilling to experience this due to the repetition of side missions that allowed the player to understand more fully his or her targets.
  - There was a significant amount of work "wasted" on the narrative – gameplay that many players did not enjoy mired down strong plot elements.
- **A dual narrative can be strong, even if a majority of the gameplay focuses on one side.**
  - Though the dual narrative proves strong in many media, including games, frequently the split between narratives is nearly even. Assassin's Creed, however, demonstrates that even when the player controls one of the protagonists for a small fraction of the time, the framework is still sound and a strong narrative can still be present.

## Summation

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The dual narrative, with Altaïr's nested inside of Desmond's, provided an interesting backdrop for both. The side missions, though repetitive, strongly immersed the player and provided a means by which the player could choose to delve deeper into the minutiae of the narrative. Though later sequels kept the dual structure, this game is unique in the series in the amount of agency required to fully experience the narrative and the immersion that this grants.

## Sources

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