Jessica de Haan

Student ID: 4095448

Supervisor: Frank Brandsma

Bachelor: Literatuurwetenschap/Comparative Literature

Eindwerkstuk BA Literatuurwetenschap (LI3V14001)

Utrecht University

Blok 3, 2016

# Novel versus Game:

# Players experiencing *Assassin's Creed: Renaissance*

# ABSTRACT

Ludologists claim that gameplay and simulation, which are the reasons why videogames differ from other types of media, should be the focus when analysing videogames, whereas narratologists believe the narrative to be paramount. However, not much research has been done as to how exactly players experience this difference, which is what this thesis seeks to do with the help of *Assassin's Creed II* and *Assassin's Creed: Renaissance*. Both were analysed with Herman and Vervaeck's method for close reading, after which a total of 148 reviews of *Assassin's Creed: Renaissance* by 80 players, 39 non-players, and 29 unspecified readers which were categorised as non-players because of players' tendency to compare the novel with the game. These were taken from Amazon.co.uk, Amazon.com and Goodreads.com and examined with guidelines provided by Baarda et al. Major differences found between the game and the novel on narratological level were the changes in focalisation, narration, time and speech representation. When it comes to the reviews, 56% of the players were negative about the novel, whereas 68% of the non-players were positive. Because of this, it was concluded that, rather than the reading of the novel affecting the experience of the game, the playing of the game had affected the reading of the novel instead, though because of the disparity between opinions, no overarching conclusions could be made. However, it has become clear that gameplay is indeed important for videogames, though the narrative should not be discredited either.

## Keywords

# Table of Contents

# Chapter one

# Introduction

"Stories are of all times and all places" is what Herman and Vervaeck (2009, 9) write in the introduction to *Vertelduivels* (Vantilt 2009). One could add to this that, not only are stories of all times and all places, but they also come in various forms. They used to be spoken and performed before the first scripts were formed, which, as far as scholars know, was around six thousand years ago (Ong and Hartley 2002, 6), and even now many cultures still live without the written word (Ong and Hartley 2002, 31-2). With writing came novels, and after that televisions with series and films; all media with the ability to tell stories. Halfway through the nineteenth century, videogames appeared as well. Many believe that *Spacewar* (1962) was the first videogame to be made, though there are also some who claim that the title goes to *Tennis for Two* (1958) (Huhtamo 2005, 4). Whatever the case may be, these "were merely considered to be base forms of indoor entertainment", having "simple objectives and no discernible plot or structure" (Menon 2015, 108). However, as time went by, games "evolved from simplistic origins to complex narratives, containing driven, well constructed (sic) characters, complex plot (or plots), and involving a greater involvement from the players than mere accurate button-pushing" (Menon 2015, 108). Videogames became yet another medium through which stories can be told. One such videogame is *Assassin's Creed II* (Ubisoft 2009).

*Assassin's Creed II* is part of a collection of action-adventure games developed by Ubisoft, with open worlds that revolve around historical events; in this case the Italian Renaissance. This thesis will focus mainly on *Assassin's Creed II* because out of all the published games of the series, this one was received most favourably by the consumers according to Metacritic (metacritic.com). The setup of these videogames starts with the player slipping into the role of Desmond Miles. He is revealed to have descended from a whole line of notable Assassins, but he left his family because he did not agree with their views. Eventually he gets captured by the enemies of the Assassins: the Templars, who have managed to develop the Animus, a machine that allows people to relive the lives of their ancestors. The Templars use Desmond to find out about his forefathers who fought against the Templars almost all their lives: Altaïr in Syria and Israel, Ezio in Italy, and Connor in North-America. What all these people have in common is the fact that they came in touch with so-called Pieces of Eden, which are powerful, technically advanced devices that can be used for various purposes. After the first five games, Abstergo Industries, which is the company used as a front for the Templar's movements, upgrades the Animus, allowing anybody to relive the lives of anybody's ancestors.

As the games progress, players get to find out about the creation of mankind by a race of superhumans known as the First Civilisation, who also made the Pieces of Eden. Throughout the series, it is revealed who they were and why all this matters in the videogame's present time.

Next to the many (spin-off) games, the franchise exists in other media forms as well, such as comic books and novels. Most of these comic books portray events that happen outside of the games, expanding the story in the background. The novels, on the other hand, are basically written versions of the games, or novelisations. The novel in question is called *Assassin's Creed: Renaissance*, the novelised version of *Assassin's Creed II*, which was published in 2009 in the UK and in 2010 in North America. The writer of all the *Assassin's Creed* novels is Oliver Bowden, a novelist and Renaissance historian. Although he is not officially employed by Ubisoft, and although the novels are published by Penguin Books, the connection to Ubisoft and *Assassin's Creed* is obvious: the cover of the novel, for example, uses the artwork of the game itself. This is not the case for the other novels, but instead they feature the main character(s) in some way or other. Additionally, the back of the novel features the logo of both *Assassin's Creed II* and Ubisoft, where it is stated: "Based on Ubisoft's bestselling game". The inside of the front cover contains official artwork from the game, and the inside page of the back cover is simply an advertisement for the game itself.

**Ludonarrative Dissonance: the Discussion**

Of course, the game of the *Assassin's Creed* series are not the only videogames that tell a story. Other videogames such as *The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim* (Bethesda Softworks 2013) and *Dragon Age: Inquisition* (Electronic Arts 2014) try to combine simulation, rule systems and gameplay, which make up the ludological aspects of a videogame, with narrative, or the representation of the sequence of events. The results of these attempts may vary due to something that has been named ludonarrative dissonance in a blog post by Clint Hocking, Ubisoft's "Creative Director in their Toronto studio" (clicknothing.typepad.com). According to Hocking, ludonarrative dissonance is "a powerful dissonance between what [the game] is about as a game, and what it is about as a story" (clicknothing.typepad.com). In this case he was writing specifically about *Bioshock* (2k Games 2007), which, according to him, threw "the narrative and ludic elements of the work into opposition", and because of the "leveraging of the game's narrative structure against its ludic structure […] the player's ability to feel connected to either" was endangered (clicknothing.typepad.com). In short, the game mechanics and the game's story both promote different kinds of behaviour, which comes across as conflicting to players.

Because of its status as "one of the oldest subjects of study in the humanities", literature and its methods "have been exported to the study of newer media" (Egenfeldt-Nielsen et al. 2012, 214), in this case videogames. Scholars from many different disciplines "[s]ee fit to approach games as one might a movie or novel" and might "claim that narrative [is] *most* important"; these are called narratologists (Egenfeldt-Nielsen et al. 2012, 11). On the other hand, scholars such as Espen Aarseth, commonly known as ludologists, believe that "narrative [is] a mere trapping" and that "game studies should be the study of systems of rules" instead (Egenfeldt-Nielsen et al. 2012, 11). The example of Hocking and the ludonarrative dissonance fits in this last group, for another famous ludologist, Gonzola Frasca, who introduced the term ludology to begin with, wrote that "games cannot be understood through theories derived from narrative" (ludology.org). Though ludology "does not disdain this [narrative] dimension of video games", it "claims that they are not held by a narrative structure" (Frasca 2003, 222).

Next to the ludologists and narratologists, there are also those who believe in a more balanced approach. Jesper Juul, for example, argues that "part of the problem arises from the indiscriminate use of the word "narrative." If everything is a narrative, it is of course not very useful to say that video games can also be described as such" (Egenfeldt-Nielsen et al. 2013, 214). Since, firstly, "[t]he player can tell stories of a game session", secondly, "[m]any video games contain narrative elements", and thirdly, "[v]ideo games and narratives share some structural traits" (Egenfeldt-Nielsen et al. 2013, 214), it is not impossible to think that videogames could get confused with narratives. According to Juul, one should refrain from doing this since "understanding narrative simply as a retelling of events can be misleading" (2013, 214-15). Juul also states that "the experience of playing a game is very different from that of reading a story" and that "it is impossible to translate video games into stories and vice versa" (2013, 214-15). Then there are also scholars, as for instance Dawn Stobbart, who believe that "the partnership of narrative and ludology has produced an evolution in narrative" and that "ludology and narrative have co-evolved to produce increasingly complex narrative modes, many of which are found only in videogames, not in other media" (Stobbart 2014, 145). She claims that it can't be denied that games include narrative, but that the "structure [of games] is unlike any other form of narrative delivery and as such needs to be explored and considered as a medium in their own right" (2014, 15). To deny the importance of the narrative in videogames, however, "is to ignore some fundamental aspects of how video games present narrative", for example cinematic sequences and atmospheric music, which are "established within the analysis of other media, and are as relevant to videogame analysis as the study of gameplay mechanics and rule sets" (Stobbart 2014, 150).

**Experiencing the Videogame in a Novel**

Is it truly impossible to translate a videogame into a story, as Juul claimed? Games are enjoyed for their ability to give players almost absolute control when it comes to the storyline; they become one with the content. Books, however, keep a certain amount of distance between the content and the reader because readers remain observers outside of the story. The reading happens at a pace that they themselves choose, which makes backtracking and rereading sentences and sections possible. But when it comes to games, this pace is decided for the players who are participating in the story themselves, and when things get heated they might not always understand what is going on and simply follow the cues given by the game. An example: if a player was stalking a target while listening to a companion explain why exactly they have to do this, and they were to lose sight of the target, they would try to get closer once more and due to panic and adrenaline might not be paying attention to their surroundings, thus missing what their companion just told them. Just like that, a piece of the story goes missing, and unless the player reloads the scene or searches for it on the Internet, this will remain the case for the rest of the game. This is not something that happens when reading a book, and especially the fact that one can go back and reread a certain portion if the need to do so should arise showcases a large difference between book and game.

What do the players, those who are not in the videogame business or part of the academics themselves, have to say about all this, however? If they were to pick up a book of the game after finishing said game, they might get a clearer grasp on the story and on the 'why' of it all, not just the 'how'. Thus, the information comes differently to the reader than to the player, and this will be examined in this thesis, together with the effect this might have on consumers. The main question, then, is: in what way does reading *Assassin's Creed: Renaissance* affect the experience of playing *Assassin's Creed II*, or the other way around, and in what way is this effect constituted?

To answer this question, first the differences between the game and the novel are when it comes to the story, will be examined. These differences will be analysed by means of basic close reading tools as displayed by Luc Herman and Bart Vervaeck in *Vertelduivels*, which will be used on both the game and the book to determine the manner in which the stories and narrations are built, after which the results will be compared.

Then, in order to see whether the reading of the books affects the player's view on the game, the next sub-questions to be answered are what the readers' opinions on *Assassin's Creed: Renaissance* are, and how the opinions of readers who have played *Assassin's Creed II* differ from those who have not? For this, various sources in which people who have read the

book and/or played the game shared their opinions, in this case the reviews from Goodreads.com, Amazon.com and Amazon.co.uk, will be collected and analysed. These will be analysed according to the steps described by Baarda et al. in *Basisboek Kwalitatief Onderzoek* (Noordhoff Uitgevers 2013) in an attempt to judge how players and non-players reacted to the book, and whether or not this can be connected to the findings of the close reading of the two media forms.

Thus, the theoretical frameworks for this thesis are provided by narratology and qualitative research. With the help of close reading techniques from comparative literature and the framework given for doing qualitative research, which will both be explained in the introductions to the corresponding chapters, *Assassin's Creed: Renaissance, Assassin's Creed II* and the reviews of the novel will be analysed. Narratology works well in the former two cases due to the fact that it gives us the possibility to pick out objective elements from these two different sources of media, making comparing them easier than if one had to do so without. Furthermore, it remains a fact that novels share many components with videogames which are discussed in narratology, while game studies concentrate more on what makes videogames unique, which is why the focus here lies on comparative literature and not game studies. In no way is it being suggested in this thesis that, as narratologists claim, the story or the narrative is the most important component of videogames. When it comes to qualitative research for the reviews, the approach of Baarda et al. will be used because it provides a clear framework for acquiring reliable and trustworthy results.

In the conclusion, the findings will be connected to the debate of ludology and narratology within the field of game studies, whether the consumers' reactions to either the game or the novel fit within this framework or not. Thus the academic relevance here is exploring the debate between ludology and narratology with a practical example. In the final chapter, the limitations of the study and suggestions for further research will be discussed as well.

# Chapter Two

## Close Reading of *Assassin's Creed II* and *Assassin's Creed: Renaissance*

### Introduction

Despite the fact that novels and videogames differ in many ways, close reading, a tool from narratology, offers the opportunity to compare these two forms of media in a way that allows for objective analysis. This makes it perfect for this thesis, in which the game *Assassin's Creed II* is being compared with its novelised counterpart *Assassin's Creed: Renaissance.* This chapter will use Luc Herman's and Bart Vervaeck's *Vertelduivels* (2009) as a guide while examining the two sources for their narrative elements. These elements will be as follows: time, characterisation, focalisation, narration, and speech representation.

Time, as Herman and Vervaeck describe it, "is studied on the basis of the relationship between the time of the history and that of the story" (2009, 64). In order to do this, the duration of the time that has passed while experiencing the story and the duration of the time that has passed within the story itself are used. These are "measured by examining the relationship between the time needed to read the story and the time which the event occupies at the level of the history" (Herman and Vervaeck 2009, 65). They are named the time of the telling (*verteltijd*) and the time of the told (*vertelde tijd*). Five different relationships between these have been distinguished by Mieke Bal (Herman and Vervaeck 2009, 65-67), namely the ellipse (an event has taken place but is not shown), the acceleration (a summary of events), the scene (the duration of describing an event almost equals the duration of the event itself), the retardation (an event is described slower than it actually happened) and the pause (nothing happens). Then there are also the chronology and frequency of described events.

The characterisation is the second dimension of the story. It concentrates on how characters are portrayed in the story, whether this is done in a direct (a recital of traits) or indirect (showing these traits through the characters' actions) manner.

Herman and Vervaeck explain focalisation, which is the third dimension of the story, as "the relationship between the focalised – the characters, actions and objects that you as reader get offered – and the focaliser – the instance that observes and which therefore determines what the reader is offered" (2009, 75).

The fourth dimension, narration, is "the formulation, the whole of manners in which the story is told" (Herman and Vervaeck 2009, 84). This can be either intradiegetic or extradiegetic depending on whether the narrator is part of that which is being told or not, and homodiegetic

or heterodiegetic depending on whether the narrator took part in the story or not. The same goes for the narratee, that which is being addressed.

Finally, the speech representation deals with whether the story is told through mimesis (showing) or diegesis (telling), through direct, indirect and free indirect discourse. Brian McHale (Herman and Vervaeck 2009, 96-98), claimed that these all could be combined into seven specific types: diegetic summary, less purely diegetic summary, indirect content paraphrase, indirect discourse, free indirect discourse, direct discourse and free direct discourse.


## Time

As with most things when it comes to *Assassin's Creed II*, time is not as straightforward as it is in other games. This is mostly because players follow two storylines which differ in 'flow': that of Ezio and that of Desmond. While players follow Ezio from his birth in 1459 until 1499, stopping only at the most important of his memories, only half a month has passed for Desmond. This makes the time of the told forty years and half a month at the same time. The time of the telling is about thirty-three hours (which is the average game length according to Gamelengths.com). Ellipses are therefore the most-used technique when it comes to the Animus's story, which is made especially clear by how only a specific amount of memories are selected to view. Everything that happens in between is not mentioned. Due to this the game gets the episodic nature of its narration. Whenever a memory is shown, however, and the same goes for the moments when Desmond is outside of the Animus, this becomes a scene, in which the time of the told overlaps with the time of the telling.

Most of the time, the events are shown in a chronological order. Even if one were to view the Animus-storyline and that of the real world separately, it would remain the same, with the difference being that the Animus-storyline takes place in the past. There are only a couple of major flashbacks in the entire game, showing what happened thousands of years ago to explain the current situation. One could also view Ezio's memories as flashbacks for Desmond, but this is not truly clear-cut, since Desmond is also reliving them in the present as himself.

The frequency of the game is 'singulative' (*singulatief*), meaning that players witness actions every time they happen. This is often criticised in games, since it can make for repetitive and boring gameplay, which means that players have to repeat certain types of actions several times throughout the game in order to finish it. Whereas the first *Assassin's Creed* (Ubisoft, 2007) repeated a lot of actions – the story was built around the assassinations of certain targets, and each time players had to travel to a city, meet an agent, and gather information about the target by eavesdropping, interrogating, gathering objects or meeting with informants –

*Assassin's Creed II* was lauded for departure from this by making sure that the events differed from each other.

One difference between the novel and the game becomes clear at once: all ties with Desmond have been cut, and instead the novel follows Ezio as his family is betrayed, leaving him to protect his mother and sister while avenging his murdered father and brothers. Whereas the game might have been a combination of science fiction and historical fiction, the novel focusses mostly on the historical aspect. Still, the novel remains 'faithful' to the game in that it does not change the events established in the game itself: Ezio meets Minerva, one of the members of the First Civilization, at the end of the novel, and she speaks to Desmond through him. However, because there is no Desmond in the stories background, this will confuse the reader who has not played *Assassin's Creed II*.

The removal of Desmond, however, makes *Assassin's Creed: Renaissance* much simpler to analyse than *Assassin's Creed II*. Thus the time of the told becomes 27 years, from 1476 to 1503, with the time of the telling being 501 pages. When it comes to the techniques used in relation to the time, there is a larger variety in the novel than in the game. Accelerations are often used to summarise less important events: "Ezio arose before dawn the following day, Sunday 26 April, and made his way to the cathedral" (Bowden 2009, 184). Scenes are mostly used for the dialogue: "'The *Conte* is a patient man. *Salute!*' Leonardo raised his glass" (Bowden 2009, 305). Retardations also take place occasionally: "Ezio's brain raced. He couldn't let go of Lorenzo, who was still losing blood. But if he didn't, he couldn't use his weapon" (Bowden 2009, 191).

The story in the novel moves forward, and there are no flashforwards or flashbacks used. The closest thing to these that happens in the story is in the final scene in which Ezio meets Minerva, who then proceeds to show him both the distant past and the imminent future through otherworldly powers, though they do not actually occur within Ezio's mind: "She raised her arms above her and the roof of the Vault became the Firmament. […] As Minerva spoke, Ezio saw the Sun flare into a vast corona, shedding unbearable light, light which licked the Earth" (Bowden 2009, 497).

As with the game, the frequency in the novel is mostly singulative. However, because the book allows for more diversity when it comes to the way scenes are portrayed, since the reader does not have the freedom of the player to take the same route in every mission, this is less conspicuous because the writer describes each happening in a different manner.

## Characterisation

Characterisation is simple in games due to the fact that the narration is not worded and abundant: thus characteristics are often stated in an indirect manner. Players learn about characters by seeing and hearing them act, not by reading the narrator's description of them. On the other hand, things such as in-game statistics, for example the amount of health, are direct ways for games to characterise the characters.

Direct characterisation is often used in novels, and this is no exception for *Assassin's Creed: Renaissance*: "He was a passably handsome man, his looks marred by a cruel mouth and a weak chin, and though he was a little fat, there was no doubting the power in his arms and legs" (Bowden 2009, 3). Sometimes, however, characters are also described in an indirect manner. For example, when Ezio visits his girlfriend Cristina but is found by her father, the readers only hear what he says: "'Time to get up, girl! Your tutor will be here at any – What the devil? Son of a bitch!' Ezio kissed Cristina, quickly but hard. 'Time to go, I think,' he said, seizing his clothes and darting to the window" (Bowden 2009, 24-25). This, combined with the fact that he calls the guards to get rid of Ezio, tells the readers that he is a strict man who does not approve of his daughter's relationship with Ezio, and that his relationship with Ezio is antagonistic.

Something which stands out in the novel is the fact that, sometimes, the appearances of characters are not even described. Since all the characters in the novel also appear in the game, it could be that the writer assumed the name of a character would be enough to tell the readers, who have most likely already played the game, who that person is and what he or she looks like.

## Focalisation

*Assassin's Creed II* is not a first person game, but a third person game: the player follows the main character through a camera situated behind him. This in itself complicates matters when it comes to games, for, despite the fact that players can see their character on the screen, they are still often seeing the world around them through the eyes of this person. In *Assassin's Creed II*, the most notable example of this is when the player activates 'Eagle Vision', as can be seen in figure 1, which allows Ezio and the player to differentiate between allies, targets, and enemies.

*Fig. 1: In sequence 13, Ezio is standing on top of a roof and looking down upon a plaza with his Eagle Vision activated. The blue figure in the middle is Ezio, whereas most of the other figures are seen as enemies and are red. The figure to the right of Ezio is gold; he is the target.*

The matter of perspective is even less straightforward in the *Assassin's Creed* games in which several perspectives are combined. *Assassin's Creed II* begins with Desmond giving the player a recap of what has happened up until that point: he is at once situated as the main character. However, the game is mostly about Desmond inside the Animus, and in *Assassin's Creed II* that means he takes on the life of Ezio. This might come as a surprise to some, seeing as Desmond is not visible on the game's cover. The back of *Assassin's Creed II*'s box, likewise, states not a single word about him, offering only the possibility to follow Ezio. An explanation for this is the fact that Desmond spends most of the game within the Animus, living Ezio's life; the role of the main character constantly shifts between the two men. Whenever Desmond is inside the Animus, the centre shifts from Desmond to Ezio as we follow him throughout the years. Here the player plays Desmond who is playing Ezio, as it were, though the step between the player and Ezio is so small that it can be easy to forget Desmond exists in the first place. Visual details are used to help maintain this distance between the two, such as 'glitches' that sometimes appear which remind the player that this is but a simulation, as shown in figure 2.

Although in the end, the focaliser is Desmond, the game still tries to trick its players: they can hear both the thoughts of Desmond and what his comrades 'outside' say, who communicate with him through microphones or because he can hear them, in the same way: as a voice-over. Ezio's thoughts, on the other hand, are not shown, widening the breach between Ezio, Desmond and the player.

*Fig. 2: In sequence 1, a mission has just started and white lines appear. These are 'glitches' caused by the Animus loading a memory.*

Without Desmond, Ezio himself becomes the focaliser because we get to see the world through his eyes alone. Because of this, the distance between the reader and Ezio disappears, and Ezio as a character can become more fleshed out. Readers do not just see from the outside what happens to the assassin, but they also read of it through his eyes, see his reactions. They get to find out what Ezio's norms and values are, not those of Desmond. This closeness to the main character allows for more immersion in the story of the novel itself. While in the game, players are always aware and reminded of the 'fake' nature of Ezio's story, being a memory replayed with the help of the Animus, the novel tells nothing but Ezio's story.

**Narration**

The narrator seems to be Desmond, who starts the game with a voice-over summary of who he is, the story up till then and what he plans to do. Thus the narrator would be extradiegetic, as he is not a character in the story, yet at the same time the narration is homodiegetic, for the character of the narrator takes part in the events himself. The introduction voice-over makes it clear that he is communicating outside of the main narrative. One could also see the Animus as a narrator of sorts, telling the story of Ezio to Desmond and his companions, in which case the narrator would be intradiegetic, belonging inside the story itself, and heterodiegetic, for it does not take part in it.

In the first case, the narratee would be the invisible listener/watcher, for Desmond is telling the tale to others who are listening to him. If one were to work with the latter option, the

narratees would be Desmond, Rebecca, Lucy and Shaun, who are following Desmond's progress inside of the Animus.

The novel is written in a third person narrative, perhaps in an attempt to mimic the fact that *Assassin's Creed II* is a third person game, and exactly because Desmond is no longer of importance in this version of the story, the matter of perspective becomes less complicated than it was in the game: the narrator is extradiegetic, for the story is not told by a character, and thus it is also heterodiegetic.

The narratee becomes somewhat more difficult than in the game, because the narrator does not seem to address anybody with his story.

## Speech Representation

One might think that, when it comes to videogames, mimesis is the most obvious option to use, where everything is being shown on a screen and nothing is being 'told' to the player. However, games often guide the players with cues such as, "follow this man", as can be seen in figure 3. *Assassin's Creed II* displays a combination of mimesis and diegesis, which one can divide into 'free roaming mode', where the player can run around the city at their own pace, and 'story mode', which is activated by speaking to a certain person in order to initiate the next mission. But when Ezio is simply strolling through the streets, there is no story to be told, and at most minor things happen such as someone robbing the main character, or a fight happening nearby. Yet even these events are announced with the help of cues such as the appearance of an icon on the map, which Ezio himself of course cannot see. Thus *Assassin's Creed II* is mostly told through diegesis.

However, while the narration uses diegesis, thoughts and speech are represented through mimesis, because the narrator does not summarise these: players get to hear them as they are or were said by the speakers. Though thoughts do not often occur, these, too, are portrayed directly. Hence the presentation of speech and consciousness is done through direct discourse.

*Assassin's Creed: Renaissance* uses a combination of mimesis and diegesis to convey the story. Conversations and important, mostly action-packed events are shown through mimesis: "'Then, to the victor, the spoils,' she said, pulling his head down to hers and kissing him passionately upon the lips" (Bowden 2009, 290). On the other hand, the less essential events are summarised: "Before leaving, Ezio brought news and gifts to Annetta, though it was painful to him to visit his former family home, and he would not enter it" (Bowden 2009, 241).

*Fig. 3: In sequence 1, Ezio is climbing a building while racing his brother to a specified spot, shown as a yellow icon on the map in the right-hand corner. The diegesis here is: "Win the race".*

Thoughts and conversations are portrayed in different manners, though for thoughts the indirect discourse is used most often, for example in: "And even if he did find out, Ezio reflected, he wouldn't be a bad match" (Bowden 2009, 25-6). On rare occasions thoughts are shown with direct discourse: "It burned his lips, but it wasn't bad, and he said so" (Bowden 2009, 272), in which the part 'it wasn't bad' is a direct quote. Conversations are mostly shown through direct discourse; they are quotes of what was said. Every now and again they are skimmed over, however, with diegetic summaries ("Ezio summoned the group he had hand-picked for the mission the following day at sunset. He had laid his plans" (Bowden 2009, 278)), less purely diegetic summary ("Ezio returned to Florence and broke the news to Duke Lorenzo of the death of the last of the Pazzi" (Bowden 2009, 240)) and indirect content paraphrases ("Mario had told him to make contact with one of the *condottieri* patrols he had posted within sight of the town to keep track of its comings and goings" (Bowden 2009, 214)).

## Conclusion

The biggest difference between the novel and the game would be the removal of Desmond from the storyline, which then also affects the matters of focalisation, narration and even time, for without Desmond there are no longer two different timelines in the story. The focus shifts from Desmond to Ezio, and readers get to see the inside of Ezio's mind instead, and without the Animus there are no longer different narrators within the same story. Other changes are mainly constituted through the difference in medium: games are more visual than novels, and therefore

the way of storytelling also differs. Whereas the novel makes more use of diegesis in that events and appearances of characters are stated through words, a combination of diegesis and mimesis takes place in the game in which players can see everything because of the medium's nature, though it also uses verbal, diegetic cues in order to guide players along the right path.

When analysing the reviews in the next chapter, the focus will be on how readers of *Assassin's Creed: Renaissance* experienced the novel, distinguishing between readers who have played *Assassin's Creed II* and those who have not. In the conclusion of the examination, whether or not reviewers who have played the game discuss the same points of interest as seen in this close reading of the two works will be investigated. Perhaps they experienced the book in a different manner than through terms such as the narration and the focalisation, and thus concentrate on completely different aspects.

## Chapter Three
## Analysis of Consumer Reviews of *Assassin's Creed: Renaissance*
### Introduction: Methodology and Material

After having compared *Assassin's Creed II* and *Assassin's Creed: Renaissance* through a more formal and objective approach with the help of a close reading of both the videogame and the novel, the effects of the similarities and differences found in the narrative of the videogame and the novel will be analysed. In other words, the way readers experience these changes and whether readers who do not know of the original source material experience the novel differently is the focus of this chapter.

In order to do so, reviews of the novel will be examined and searched for any signs of differences in the experiences of readers who played the game and readers who have not. How do these differ from each other, and are there any general subjects that players of the game disliked about the novel, whereas those who have not played the game did not notice anything? Do they point out aspects that can be connected with the differences between the two media on narrative level? In the end this will help link the results of the close reading to the game studies debate on ludonarrative dissonance, in which simulation and narration are placed against each other. It will also provide an idea of the effect that the reading of the novel has on the gameplay of those who play, or have played, the game.

In order to see whether the reading of the novel affects the player's view on the game, various sources where people who have read the book and/or played the game, such as reviews on Goodreads.com, Amazon.com and Amazon.co.uk, will be examined. Whereas Amazon.com and Amazon.co.uk offer customers the ability to buy the book after reading what others have said about the product, Goodreads.com is a site where readers gather and make lists of the books they have read and review them. All sites offer reviewers the opportunity to give their products ratings in the form of stars, in which one star means that the reader absolutely did not enjoy the novel and five stars means that they adored it. The Amazon websites invite buyers of their products to write reviews in order to help future customers with their decision, while Goodreads.com relies on the readers to actively seek out the novels they have read and rate them, which is also for the sake of informing others about whether they did or did not enjoy the book. Although there are many different novel editions available on Goodreads.com, the reviews of these various editions can be found in a single list on the page of the novel on Goodreads.com. Because the point of focus in this research are the novels and the experience

of the readers who had or had not played the game, sources such as Ubisoft forums were not used, for it can be assumed that those who post on these websites have already played the game.

These reviews will be analysed with the help of *Basisboek Kwalitatief Onderzoek* by Baarda et al., after which a conclusion will be made. This book guides users in the process of designing and performing qualitative research. Baarda et al. give researchers ways to put their results on paper in a way that helps create order and makes it easy for readers to follow the steps taken during the investigation.

## Ludonarrative Dissonance

Though there has not been a lot of research done on the actual effects of the differences between novels and videogames in practice, the two forms of media have often been compared as such. As mentioned before, Espen Aarseth, a ludologist, has written a lot about the duality between narration and simulation, and is against comparing videogames with novels in the first place. "The pleasure of games is quite different from the pleasures of the novel" (Aarseth 2004, 49), he states, and although there are many problems with his theory in regards to the way he generalises the genre of videogames, he makes a few valid points, such as the fact that the story is part of the game, or the simulation, instead of the game being a part of the story (Aarseth 2004, 52). The narratologists, on the other hand, "[a]dvocate for games to pursue particular narrative forms" (Jenkins 2004, 119). Henry Jenkins has a more mixed view, claiming that "[n]ot all games tell stories" though many "games *do* have narrative aspirations" and that "[n]arrative analysis need not be prescriptive" (2004, 119). Furthermore, according to him, "[t]he experience of playing games can never be simply reduced to the experience of a story" and "[i]f some games tell stories, they are unlikely to tell them in the same ways that other media tell stories" (2004, 120). Through the utterances from various sides in this debate it becomes clear that there are certainly differences between narration and simulation within videogames and between novels and videogames in general. This will be analysed and tested in this chapter, by comparing the experiences of reading a novelised version of a videogame with the narrative elements that differ in both versions of the same story.

## Analysing the Reviews

The research will be done with the help of the empiric-analytical school in which the determining of facts is paramount (Baarda et al. 2013, 55). Furthermore, the research method used is that of the grounded theory of Glaser and Strauss (1967), which relies on the researcher remaining open about the material being analysed. The material in this case will be reviews of

*Assassin's Creed: Renaissance*; thus the qualitative method of data collection will be through the use of existing material. These methods were chosen because, for one, nobody will be interviewed because the needed material can be found online. Furthermore, this research is not, for example, meant to investigate a social or cultural phenomenon, but to discover and investigate possible connections between the experiences of reading a book and playing a videogame. The material for this is easily found on the Internet, and it would be more time efficient to use this than to search and interview respondents.

In the case of this thesis, the research units are the readers of the novel, and this group of people can be split up into those who have and those who have not played the game. This has been done in order to see whether the extremes in opinions, the one being disliking the novel while the other is having enjoyed it, can be linked to these two variables. The research units did not have to be approached due to the fact that their written reviews will be analysed. This division might overshadow the reviewers who seemingly do not fit within the expected differences in experience of the novel and the videogame, such as people who have played the game but enjoyed the novel too, or readers who did not enjoy the novel but have not played the game either. Appearances of such reviews will be noted as well.

For this research, new data will not have to be collected because the material that will be used, namely *Assassin's Creed: Renaissance* reviews, already exists; thus only deskresearch will be needed. The gathered data will be non-numeric (*niet-numeriek*), for it does not consist of statistics (Baarde et al. 2013, 115). This was done since the material is easily accessible on the Internet. Furthermore, it will not be as costly as interviewing people, there will be no trouble with respondents, the researcher will not affect the observing of the data and it can be used to validate and illustrate results (Baarda et al. 2013, 115-6). The research material used is public and impersonal; the reviews were written for others to read them online and were not meant to remain private (Baarda et al. 2013, 125). The data, then, was found on the websites of Amazon and Goodreads. The authors are consumers who decided to write reviews about the book they read, in this case *Assassin's Creed: Renaissance*, in order to tell others who are interested in the novel of their opinion, and whether it is worth reading. No two reviews are the same, and they often contradict each other, which might have to do with whether a reviewer has played the videogame or not. The reviews were most likely written in private spaces such as their homes, and because they are posted directly onto the Internet, they cannot be edited after being published. When looking at these reviews, the most important aspects will be those of content: what is being said, how it is being said and the values of the reviewer. Formal aspects such as

the length of the text and sentences, manner of speech, and the use of adjectives and diminutives will be neglected because these will vary from reviewer to reviewer.

First of all, in the exploration phase of the analysis, which stands for "the exploring of what the sources bring as relevant aspects of the researched subject" (Baarda et al. 2013: 220), reviews were picked out from the websites in question. Whenever a reviewer explicitly stated that they had or had not played *Assassin's Creed II*, this review was then further analysed to see what exactly was being said about the novelised version of the game. The chosen reviews were copied into a Word document, in which markings and comments could be made with ease, as can be seen in the appendix. Reviews in the document were organised firstly by website, secondly by whether the reviewers were players or non-players, and finally by whether the criticism was positive or negative. From both the American and the British versions of Amazon, ten negative and ten positive reviews were taken, thus from each twenty, whereas only ten reviews were chosen from Goodreads.com, for these are more ambiguous; the reviewers on this website pointed out both negative and positive points in their critiques. These were then re-read and, starting with the use of in-vivo codes, which means taking words from the reviews and using them as codes (Baarda et al. 2013, 224), their opinions on various aspects, such as character development and the quality of the writing, were noted. The first thing that stands out is that is that there is no clear division between the opinions of the reviewers who played the game and those who did not: there are positive as well as negative reviews in both groups, although players were less positive than non-players. However, as one might have expected, the players always compare the novel to the game in some way or other, whether to note that the novel remains close to the game, perhaps a little too close according to some reviewers, or that the book either did or did not add anything to the game. Of those who had not played *Assassin's Creed II* before, 15 out of 18 claimed having enjoyed the novel, whereas of their counterparts only 13 of 32 did. In turn non-players focussed more on subjects such as the writing of the novel, whether it was fast-paced, rushed, or laborious to read. Some of the codes had already been noted in the list of sensitising concepts made before starting the analysis, though many had to be added due to the added insight they gave (Baarda et al. 2013, 227).

During the specification phase, in which the goal is to organise "the codes the first phase (the open coding) has yielded" (Baarda et al. 2013, 229), once all reviews had been analysed and all codes written down, the specific nature of these codes was adapted in order to incorporate more phenomena with the same code: 'character development' became simply 'characters'. With the help of axial coding, which, according to Strauss and Corbin, is "a set of procedures whereby data are put back together in new ways after open coding, by making

connections between categories" (1998, 96), similar codes were grouped into categories, in which "codes that, one way or another, refer to the same underlying theme or the same aspect are placed together" (Baarda et al. 2013, 231). An example of this is that the code 'characters' joined the code 'dialogue' in the category 'content'. The resulting categories which reviewers often pointed out in their texts were content, writing style, experience, and genre. These, then, offer insight into the opinions of the readers, who basically use these various areas to either praise or criticise the novel, which will help analyse the differences in the opinions of readers who have played *Assassin's Creed II* and those who have not. If one were to compare what is said by the players with academic literature on the subject, then it would come down to the aforementioned statements of Jenkins: "[t]he experience of playing games can never be simply reduced to the experience of a story" and "[i]f some games tell stories, they are unlikely to tell them in the same ways that other media tell stories" (2004, 120).

Finally, in the last phase of the analysis, the reduction phase, patterns were looked for in what certain reviewers said about the novel in order to describe these by "applying the developed concepts in order to come to a (systematic) description of [what is being analysed]" (Baarda et al. 2013, 237). For this purpose, more research material was gathered: this time, twenty negative and nineteen positive reviews were taken from both Amazon.com and Amazon.co.uk, and twenty from Goodreads.com. Because of the limited amount of reviewers that stated explicitly whether they had played the game or not, the collected reviews now also incorporate those who do not do so. However, because of the fact that reviewers who mentioned having played the game before reading the novel compared the two, one might assume that those who did not do this have not played the game. This new collection was then analysed with the help of the categories devised in the previous phase: in this case, "the present conceptual framework is leading for how the material will be summarised" (Baarda et al. 2013, 239). Baarda et al. also recommended to remain open for any new insights that might not have been clear in the previous phases (2013, 239), and thus, after some additional research, two categories were added, namely external factors and target audience. After having analysed the material, the first research question, about the readers' opinions on *Assassin's Creed: Renaissance*, can be answered by stating that they were mostly positive, namely 81 of the total 148 analysed reviews, or 55%. Many of the negative reviews were more elaborate, however, whereas many positive reviews stated only that the book had been good, if the reviewers wrote anything at all. The answer to the second research question on what the general differences are between the opinions of players and non-players is that, firstly, the readers who have played *Assassin's Creed II* always compared *Assassin's Creed: Renaissance* to their experiences with the game.

Players found that the novel either stuck too close to the script of the game, or remained 'faithful' to it, in which the same aspect can be seen as both positive and negative. A little over half of the group, however, which consisted of 45 of 80 players (56%), had wished for more changes from the game, instead of simply reading a novelised game. 8 of the 45 negative reviewers explicitly expressed their disappointment, having expected something else from the medium. Readers who did not have any knowledge of the game, on the other hand, focussed their reviews on how they had experienced reading the novel itself, whether they had enjoyed it or not, and the genre and styles of the novel, such as the amount of action that appeared. Readers who had not played the game, for example, also noted the hindrance that the occasional Italian word caused, and though players themselves have pointed this out as well, they did not seem as affected by it.

To make sure that this research was as trustworthy as possible, personal interpretations and opinions were kept to a minimum, most notably in relation to the contradictory nature of many of the readers' reviews. This was done by remaining as close to the text as possible as the analysis took place. However, due to the fact that there were more readers who had played the game than those who had not, it is possible that the view on the opinions of the latter might not be as well-represented as that on the opinions of the former. Furthermore, not all reviews used stated explicitly whether the review was a player or not, and thus speculation was needed to divide these reviews into groups.

The validity of this research is related to nothing but the readers of *Assassin's Creed: Renaissance* and whether the fact that they have or have not played *Assassin's Creed II*, the game on which the novel is based, has any influence on their opinion of the novel, or whether the reading of the novel affected their view of the game. Because no other material has been used, for example reviews on *Assassin's Creed: Brotherhood* (Bowden 2010), the next novel in the series, the results of the analysis in this paper has nothing to say on anything else.

**Results**

In this section, the results of the analysis will be placed within the categories that were found in the examined reviews. First of all, the reviews that will be quoted can be found in the appendix, where additional information on the organisation can be found. These have been numbered by batch of data, though all quoted reviews come from the second batch, and then by number in the list, with the added letters signifying on which website it was found and whether it was negative or positive. Secondly, the amount of stars that reviewers gave the novel have not been taken into account other than that one to three stars were categorised as negative by

the websites and those with four or five stars as positive. The negative reviews from Goodreads.com had one or two stars and positives reviews had three to five stars, although reviews with three stars sometimes depended on their contents in order to be deemed positive or negative.

### Content

The category of content incorporates aspects such as the dialogue and language used in the novel, whether the story followed that of the game, if Bowden added information or details that were not shown in *Assassin's Creed II*, the way characters and their thoughts as well as relationships between characters were described and any character development that did or did not take place. The reviews of players differed most from those of non-players when it came to this category, for players commented on the content more often. What many of them said was, for example, "If you play the game or [are] familiar with it, you will probably agree with me that the book is very boring and adds nothing to its game counterpart" (review 2-19e) or, "If you've played through the Assassins Creed 2 game then don't bother buying this book, the story is exactly the same as the one in the game" (review 2-14a). On the other hand, many players claimed that the novel is "[v]ery close to the original game with the added pleasure of parts that you miss in the game" (review 2-16b) or even that it "helps to explain the game better" (review 2-17d). Readers who had not played *Assassin's Creed II* yet discussed content focussed on the story itself, stating that it was "a well scripted story" (review 2-4d) "with lots of characters that have historical names that are very recognizable" (review 2-3d), or that it "needs more depth" (review 2-4a) and that it is "too sketchy, too simplistic in its plot and characterization" (review 2-5a).

As one can see here, the aspects that came forward in the compared close reading of *Assassin's Creed II* and *Assassin's Creed: Renaissance* are rarely mentioned in reviews that belong to the category of content. The only subjects that readers point out are the differences between the characterisation and focalisation of the game and the novel, and even then they do not explicitly use these terms.

### Writing Style

The writing style was one of the few things that garnered almost equal attention from both groups of readers, although the players among them thought more negatively about the quality of the writing. Whereas the majority of non-players approved of it, some stating that it was a "good fast [paced] book" (review 2-5a:p) which contained "good quality wording" (review 2-

23

1a:p) and "great detail to keep me well into the story without getting confused" (review 2-11a:p), most of the players described the writing as "the style of writing that wants details or some sort of descriptive aspect" (review 2-18a:n), and that it is "[w]ritten at an elementary reading level" (review 2-10ac:n). However, there were also several players who did enjoy it, stating that the book "was well written" (review 2-9ac:p) and "reads fairly fast" (review 2-12ac:p), and various non-players who did not, finding that the "authors change their writing style continually" (review 2-2a:n) and that it was "written in a hurry to catch up with the video game" (review 2-6a:n).

One could view speech representation as being part of the writing style, but since this was not outright stated by the reviewers, there is no way of knowing whether they had thought about this or not. Other than that, none of the categories from narratology belong to that of the writing style.

### Genre

Although the category of genre was not mentioned a lot by reviewers, there was still a divide in opinion of players and non-players. Non-players painted the styles and genres in the novel in a more positive light, some having "loved this book because [of] the action in it" (review 2-8a:p) and others claiming that the novel is a "[s]plendid swashbuckler set in the Italian Renaissance – action-packed with a hero who actually emerges as quite intelligent, sensitive, and above all, believable, despite his over-the-top adventures" (review 2-13a:p). On the other hand, a reviewer who had played the game stated that "there is a lot of action but incidents are brief with little consequence other than the death of the opposition" (review 2-19a:n) and that "[t]here is some history but it is superficial" (review 2-19a:n).

There is no clear connection between the category genre and one of the five dimensions of the story. Genre focusses more on the actual content of the story and not the form in which it was written.

### Experience

When looking at the experience of readers, there were two different types: what the readers experienced during the reading itself, and their expectations before they had started. Though the disparity between the amount of times that players and non-players stated their experiences while reading is not as great as that of content, non-players did mention this category more often than the others did. As with the previous categories, the non-players were more positive about the novel than the players. They stated more often that they had enjoyed the book, that

they "could not put the book down" (review 2-10a:p), though a few found that "it does drag at time" (review 2-14a:p, or even that it was "the worst book I have ever read" (review 2-1a:n/2-3a:n). Players, on the other hand, often expressed disappointment, stating that they were "initially disappointed because it starts almost word for word and action for action of the gameplay" (review 2-8a:n) or that, "because I knew what to expect, I wasn't sitting on the edge of my seat to read it" (review 2-16ac:p). Because these readers knew what to expect, they missed part of the experience since the story held no surprises for them.

As with the previous category, what reviewers say in the category of experience does not seem to correspond with any of the story dimensions either. This could be explained by how the dimensions of time, characterisation, focalisation, narration and speech representation are, once more, directed towards the form of the story. The way readers experience the stories is not a part of this, after all.

**Audience**

The audience category was only added after the specification phase in which it was noticed that many readers stated that they themselves belonged to the wrong audience, or that they had bought the novel for a specific audience. This is the only category that was written about by an equal amount of readers who had and had not played the game, and both groups did so in a mostly positive manner. Many non-players stated that they had bought the novel for their children, most often their sons: "[m]y son has never read a whole book […] but he cannot put this series of books down" (review 2-2a:p), or that "I bought this for my son and ended up reading it myself" (review 2-4a:p). Further on this came forward in a different way, as many readers, both players and non-players, stated things such as, "[t]his is the sort of story I would expect from my [twelve-year-old] students" (review 2-1a:n), and that it is "[n]ot really an adult read" (review 2-6a:n). On the other hand, many noted that this book was meant to be read by players, for example, "I would recommend this book if you are a big fan of the game" (review 2-9a:n), but others stated that "if you already played the game there's no point in buying this as the game was so much better" (review 2-11a:n). Players often believed that *Assassin's Creed: Renaissance* should be read by non-players: "if you've not played [Assassin's] Creed 2, this would be great for quickly getting caught up" (review 2-16ac:p), though others countered this by thinking that "[i]f you haven't played the game but plan on doing so, I'd be wary of reading this book. You're likely to reveal many spoilers about the game" (review 2-14a:n).

**External Factors**

The category of external factors points to the price and the aesthetics of the novel, another category which was only noticed during the specification phase. This is the only category which received only positive feedback from the reviewers. Mostly those who had already played *Assassin's Creed II* discussed these factors, stating that, "for the meagre price attached to it I couldn't resist" (review 2-9a:n), that "it doesn't try to masquerade as anything more than it should be for 10 dollars" (review 2-20ac:p) and that "[I] was glad [I] only paid £0.01" (review 2-11a:n). Reviewers also noted the cover, stating that "at least it has a nice cover" (review 2-15a:n) and that it "does look cool on your shelf" (review 2-18a:n).

Both of the final two categories, the audience and external factors, have no links with the dimensions of the story, just like most of the other previously discussed categories. With these two it is simply that they focus on aspects that no longer have to do with the story itself, but with factors outside of the narrative.

**Discussion and Conclusion**

The first thing that has to be stated is the fact that the majority of reviewers analysed in this research had played the game to begin with: a total of 80 out of 148 (54%). The second thing to be noted is that 67% of the negative reviews were written by those who had played the game before reading the novel.

Players most often commented on the actual content of the novel, 42 of them had done so, of which 24 remarks were negative, almost always comparing it to the content of the game. Arguments that were used the most by players were the fact that the novel stuck too close to the script of game, and that not enough new information was added. On the other hand, many positive players, of which there were 18, did in fact note being pleased with the extra details and content that explained certain aspects of the game better and gave a clearer view of what had happened.

The readers who had not played the game focussed more on their experiences of reading the novel, as 35 of them had done, writing whether they had actually enjoyed reading it or not. They also noted different expectations and thus less disappointment than the players – only 10 of these 35 reviews were negative. They also discussed the genre of the novel more often, pointing out the amount of action that took place in the story: 5 non-players had mentioned this in a positive light, whereas only 1 player had done so, and even that was meant negatively.

If one were to compare these results to the works of scholars such as Jenkins and Aarseth, then one can see that, for the most part, their statements hold true. A novel such as

*Assassin's Creed: Renaissance*, which is a quick literal adaptation of its videogame counterpart *Assassin's Creed II*, with a minimal amount of changes, does not seem to work for many readers. Many find it formulaic and repetitive, and they find that without the added aspects that make this repetitiveness work in the game, namely the simulation, it cannot be written as a novel without making adjustments. However, since the majority of readers did enjoy it, and most of these had not played the game, perhaps having experienced the story in the form of a game has changed many of the readers' ability to read it as a novel.

What stands out is that most reviewers simply did not mention any of the aspects noted in the previous chapter. Although the removal of Desmond's storyline from the book was noted 6 times, none of these reviewers connected this to the change in the novel's dimension of time. Reviewers mentioned characters, too, at least 15 times, stating either that the characters were interesting and that they liked the way they could read about Ezio's thoughts or that the characters were not fleshed out enough and that they had wanted to read more about the characters' inner thoughts. Yet none of them said a word about characterisation or focalisation. The only thing that was mentioned was narration, and that went no further than that the narration, or the narrative, was either 'good' or 'bad'. None of the reviewers mentioned the speech representation, whether the story was told through mimesis or diegesis.

Because of the fact that many readers simply do not write reviews, it could be that this research is not as valid as it otherwise might have been. Furthermore, while the analysis was tried to be performed as objectively as possible, it most likely could not have been avoided that some things said in reviews have been interpreted. For example, various reviews might have given the novel three stars, or rated it as being 'ok', though this could be meant as either positive or negative by the reviewer due to the ambiguous nature of this rating system. On top of this, not all reviewers were either completely positive or critical, and some pointed out having liked certain aspects in a negative review or vice versa.

In order to get a clearer view of the differences between the game community and, for example, the community of readers, it would be prudent to also analyse the differences in opinions between reviewers who have and those who have not played the game in relation to other novels and games. The other games that belong to the *Assassin's Creed* series, of which every main instalment has received its novel counterpart, for instance, could be analysed by using the same method to see whether the various reactions found in readers of *Assassin's Creed: Renaissance* can be used for different examples.

# Chapter Four

# Conclusion

This thesis tried to examine in what way the reading of *Assassin's Creed: Renaissance* affects the experience of playing *Assassin's Creed II*, or the other way around, and how this effect might be constituted, and to link this to the debate on ludonarrative dissonance between the ludologists and the narratologists. After all, whereas a lot has been written about the theoretical aspects of the differences between videogames and literature, little research has been done about the practical implications of these differences in a situation such as reading the novelisation of a videogame, as is the case in this thesis in which the experiences of readers who had and those who had not played the game on which the book was based have been analysed.

In the next section of the conclusion, the research questions will be answered with the help of the empirical findings of the previous chapters, revealing any possible theoretical implications this thesis might have for the debate between the ludologists and narratologists in game studies. Afterwards, recommendations for future research will be given and the limitation of this study will be discussed.

## Research Questions Answered

The ways in which the novel and the game differ from each other have been shown with the help of close reading techniques used on both forms of media. The manner in which readers reacted to the book has also been analysed, noting similarities and differences between the experiences of non-players and players. How do these tie in to answer the main question, and more importantly, what does this contribute to the debate between the ludologists and the narratologists?

First of all, it must be stated that, due to the disparity between the opinions of readers, no overarching conclusions can be made, only general statements about certain types of reactions. Thus readers who had not played *Assassin's Creed II* before enjoyed reading *Assassin's Creed: Renaissance* more often than those who did play the game. This points to the fact that, rather than the reading of the novel affecting the experience of the gameplay, it is the playing of the game that has affected the experience of reading the story without the added advantages of freedom given by gameplay. Then again there are players who indeed praised the novel for adding details that they had missed in the game and giving them the option to follow the story in a more precise manner, explaining bits and pieces of the plot that some players had

not understood in the game, in which case the reading of *Assassin's Creed: Renaissance* did, in fact, enrich the playing of *Assassin's Creed II*.

Either way, these results prove that gameplay is important even to those who are not aware of terms such as ludonarrative dissonance, many finding the novel limiting after having known the story with the freedom offered by the game. It has to be noted that many reviewers did believe it to be possible to write a novel like this in a manner that would be pleasurable to both players and non-players, though at the same time many stated that one should not expect much from such novels to begin with, and that one should not pay too much for them. However, the narrative holds some importance for the reviewers as well, for example those who found satisfaction in broadening their understanding of the story behind the game. Perhaps this could be seen as the "increasingly complex narrative modes" that Stobbart (2014, 145) calls the product of the joining of ludology and narrative, but either because players are not yet used to such stories, or simply because the gameplay dominates a videogame, these narrative modes bring about a lot of confusion for some players. As such, scholars could analyse the combination of narrative and gameplay instead of focussing on either one of them, for both are important aspects for many games in their entirety. Still, this does not take away from the fact that, as Juul stated, reading a novel creates a different experience than playing a game does, and that, at least with our current understanding of this relatively new medium, one cannot properly transfer a videogame into the form of a novel (Egenfeldt-Nielsen et al. 2013, 214-15).

### Limitations of the Study

As stated before, due to the fact that the research in this thesis concentrated only on one particular example of a novelised game, what can be concluded from this analysis might not be true for other instances of likewise phenomena, such as other novels in the same series, or novels that tie into the story without copying the story of the game. Even then, there are different aspects that can influence the experience of reading a novel, for example the writer and his writing style, and perhaps that is why some reviewers responded the way they did when it comes to *Assassin's Creed: Renaissance*. That would mean that it was not necessarily the novel's relationship to the videogame that caused readers to react in a certain way. However, because many readers did express the sentiment that novels based on games are rarely books of high quality, it might be that a connection between the reading of a book and the playing of a game exists after all. Additionally, this thesis mainly juxtaposed the novel with the game by looking at it from the viewpoint of the novel, namely with the help of reviews written about the novel.

Furthermore, because not all readers of the novel published reviews on the websites in question, it is possible that the results of this analysis do not correspond with the reality of the situation. That, however, is inevitable, for one also cannot interview every person about a certain phenomenon. There is also the matter that some interpretation by the researcher was needed when it came to examining the contents of the reviews, though personal interference of the researcher was kept at a minimum in order to avoid causing any more such situations.

Lastly, because of the lack of evidence that the differences between *Assassin's Creed II* and *Assassin's Creed: Renaissance* have any effect on the players when it comes to the results of the close reading, one has to wonder whether narratology is a tool that can be used in the first place. After all, since close reading is at an academic level, it is not something that every person has easy access to. Reviewers might have pointed out to similar changes, for example the erasure of Desmond and the modern storyline from the novel, but simply did not know that this affected aspects such as the chronology and the focalisation of the game.

## Suggestions for Further Research

In order to fill the gaps in this analysis mentioned in the previous paragraph, one possibility for further research would be to repeat the same analysis with other novels in the novelised series of *Assassin's Creed*. Other novelisations could be examined as well, for example *Metal Gear Solid* (Benson 2008) and *Crysis: Legion* (Watts 2011), which follow the stories of the games *Metal Gear Solid* (Konami Computer Entertainment Japan 1998) and *Crysis 2* (Crytek Frankfurt 2011) respectively. Other novels, such as the series of *Dragon Age* (Gaider 2009-2011, Weekes 2014, Mercel 2014) and *Mass Effect* (Karpyshyn 2007-2010, Dietz 2012) could be investigated, though these novels are not written versions of the games on which they build but instead offer a look between games. Then there are also many games which are based on novels instead, for example *The Witcher* series (Sapkowski 2008-2015) with CD Projekt RED's *The Witcher* game series (2007-2015) or *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* (Carroll 1865), which has received countless adaptations by various studios. Another step one could take is to find people who played *Assassin's Creed II* after reading *Assassin's Creed: Renaissance* and interview them.

Yet another possibility for further research could be to view the question of this thesis through the lens of ludology instead of narratology. Thus one could examine the roles of immersion and simulation when it comes to the reading of a book which follows the story of a game, since many readers did not explicitly mention aspects that could be tied to narratology in their reviews.

It might also be interesting to do research on this subject by comparing the results of this analysis with literature that discusses the same phenomenon in relation to television and films, and novels. Since these forms of media are older than videogames, they have been examined more often, and so the theoretical issues of adaptation and fidelity, for example, have already been discussed in the field of film and television. Perhaps the theories established in that field can be used for the relationship between games and novels as well.

**Conclusion**

Whereas this thesis has proven that gameplay indeed constitutes an important part of videogames, even for the players who take no part in the academic debate, it has also shown that calling the combination of gameplay and narrative a complex narrative mode that is unique to videogames is not that simple. Some players of *Assassin's Creed II* enjoyed reading the novel because it added more content to what they knew of the game, though many did not, lacking the freedom from the game. Perhaps because players react differently to the aspects that can influence the experience of playing the game, whether in the game itself or through the reading of the novelised version, a simple division between narrative and gameplay does not seem truly possible. Since things such as immersion are a part of game studies, players play an important role in this academic field, and so perhaps game studies should concentrate more on the holistic experience that makes videogames what they are instead of focussing on the singular features of videogames such as the simulation or the narration.

# Bibliography

Aarseth, E. 2004. "Genre Trouble." In *First Person: New Media as Story, Performance, and Game*, edited by Noah Wardrip-Fruin and Pat Harrigan, 45-55. Cambridge: The MIT Press.

Baarda, D.B., de Goede, M.P.M. and Teunissen, J. 2009. *Basisboek Kwalitatief Onderzoek*. Houten: Noordhoff Groningen.

Benson, R. 2008. *Metal Gear Solid*. New York City: Del Rey Books.

Bowden, O. 2009. *Assassin's Creed: Renaissance*. London: Penguin Books.

Bowden, O. 2010. *Assassin's Creed: Brotherhood*. London: Penguin Books.

Carroll, L. 1865. *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*. London: Macmillan.

Dietz, W.C. 2012. *Mass Effect: Deception*. New York City: Del Rey Books.

Egenfeldt-Nielse, S., Smith, J.H. and Tosca, S.P. 2012. *Understanding Video Games: The Essential Introduction*. Leiden: Taylor and Francis.

Frasca, G. 2001. "What is Ludology? A Provisory Definition." *Ludology.org.* Accessed 19 February 2016. http://www.ludology.org/2001/07/what-is-ludolog.html

Frasca, G. 2003. "Simulation versus Narrative: Introduction to Ludology." In *The Video Game Theory Reader*, edited by Mark J.P. Wolf and Bernard Perron, pp. 221-235. London: Routledge.

Gaider, D. 2009-2011. *Dragon Age* series. New York City: Tor Books.

Glaser, B.G & Strauss, A.L. 1967. *The discovery of grounded theory: strategies for qualitative research.* Chicago: Aldine.

Herman, L. & Vervaeck, B. 2009. *Vertelduivels: Handboek verhaalanalyse*. Nijmegen: Vantilt.

Hocking, C. 2007. "Ludonarrative Dissonance in Bioshock." *Clicknothing.typepad.com.* Accessed 18 February 2016.
http://clicknothing.typepad.com/click_nothing/2007/10/ludonarrative-d.html

Huhtamo, E. 2005. "Slots of Fun, Slots of Trouble: An Archeology of Arcade Gaming." In *The Handbook of Computer Game Studies*, pp. 3-21. Cambridge: The MIT Press.

Jenkins, Henry (2004). "Gamedesign as narrative architecture". In: Wardrip-Fruin, Noah & Pat Harrigan (Eds.). *First person: New media as story, performance, and game*. Cambridge: The MIT Press, pp. 118-128.

Juul, J. 2001. "Computer Games Telling Stories? A Brief Note on Computer Games and Narratives." In *Gamestudies,* vol. 1, no. 1.

Karpyshyn, D. 2007-2010. *Mass Effect* series. New York City: Del Rey Books.

Menon, L. 2015. "History First-hand: Memory, the Player and the Video Game Narrative in the *Assassin's Creed* Games." In *Rupkatha Journal on Interdisciplinary Studies in Humanities* vol. 7, no. 1, pp. 108-113.

Mercel, L. 2014. *Dragon Age: Last Flight.* New York City: Tor Books.

Ong, W.J. & Hartley, J. 2002. *Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the World*. Abingdon: Routledge.

Sapkowski, A. 2008-2015. *The Witcher* series. London: Gallancz.

Stobbart, D. 2014. "Playing with Fiction: Ludology and the Evolution of Narrative in Videogames." In *Engaging with Video Games: Play, Theory and Practice*. Oxford: Inter-Disciplinary Press, pp. 145-154.

Strauss, A., & Corbin, J. 1998. *Basics of Qualitative Research: Ground Theory Procedures and Techniques*. Newsbury Park: Sage.

Watts, P. 2011. *Crysis: Legion*. New York City: Del Rey Books.

Weekes, P. 2014. *Dragon Age: The Masked Empire.* New York City: Tor Books.

## Ludography

2K Boston, 2K Australia. 2007. *Bioshock.* [Multi-platform]. 2K Games.

Bethesda Game Studios. 2011. *The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim*. [Multi-platform]. Bethesda Softworks.

Bioware. 2014. *Dragon Age: Inquisition.* [Multi-platform]. Electronic Arts.

CD Projekt Red. 2007-2015. *The Witcher* series. [Multi-platform]. CD Projekt RED.

Crytek Frankfurt. 2011. *Crysis 2*. [Multi-platform]. Electronic Arts.

Higinbotham, W. 1958. *Tennis for Two*. [Analog computer].

Konami Computer Entertainment Japan. 1998. *Metal Gear Solid*. [Multi-platform]. Konami.

Russel, S., Graetz, M., Wiitanen, W. 1962. *Spacewar*. [PDP-1].

Ubisoft Montreal. 2007. *Assassin's Creed*. [Multi-platform]. Ubisoft.

Ubisoft Montreal. 2009. *Assassin's Creed II*. [Multi-platform]. Ubisoft.

## Cited Images

Fig. 1. Yasenchak, R. 2010. "Assassin's Creed II: Repaired Memories Review." *Elder-geek.com*. Accessed 8 January 2015.
http://elder-geek.com/2010/02/assassins-creed-ii-repaired-memories-review/

Fig. 2. Alexander Harding. 2011. "Assassin's Creed II: First Few Missions (1)." *YouTube.com*, 23:15 minutes. Accessed 8 January 2015.
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-f0ib9o94KA

Fig. 3. Alexander Harding. 2011. "Assassin's Creed II: First Few Missions (1)." *YouTube.com*, 23:25 minutes. Accessed 8 January 2015.
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-f0ib9o94KA