

The People Never Have the Power, Only the Illusion of It: Opposing Utopias in *Assassin's Creed*

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Abstract: Utopia has been described as a world of desired perfection as conceived by the human imagination. However, perfection is a subjective concept, and one person's vision of Utopia could easily become a dystopia for many others. Nazis, religious extremists, and several others have all erroneously considered their actions to be for the greater cause of bringing about a perfect world while placing ethical connotations of their actions under erasure.

The Assassin's Creed video game franchise also deals with this dichotomy of Utopia/Dystopia. Set in actual historical periods (Renaissance Italy, the French Revolution, etc.) and featuring prominent historical figures, such as Niccolò Machiavelli and Napoleon Bonaparte, the game describes the struggles between the fictional factions of Assassins and Templars. The Templars wish to build a utopia of order, where a select few make decisions for the rest by abolishing personal choice, while the Assassins want to bring about a world of freedom where everyone is free to live their life as they please, despite the disorder and chaos that might entail.

This paper seeks to juxtapose these opposing utopic ideals, to examine how they are two sides of the same coin and how a true utopia remains only a hypothetical probability.

Keywords: Assassin's Creed, Utopia, Dystopia, History

Introduction

Ever since the dawn of civilisation, even before Thomas More coined the term "utopia," humankind has been striving to create a society modelled after its own ideas of perfection. Various forms of governance, innumerable laws and regulations and an equally staggering number of social and religious structures have been implemented in order to find this elusive holy grail of immaculateness. The curious facet of More's work, which is often overlooked however, is that it not only gave a word for this ethereal society, but that also pointed out the impossibility of attaining such a structure. While various interpretations of *Utopia* have been derived, it is undeniable that one of More's primary motives behind *Utopia* was to state the improbability of creating a perfect world where everyone is happy and content. Human beings are creatures of want and desire. The second that these wants are met, new ones take their place. Not only would a utopian society have to have an unprecedented number of like-minded residents, but also near-unlimited resources to meet all of their demands. With the unlikelihood of a utopian society becoming increasingly evident, one adopts the next point of thought: is, then, a dystopia a more likely outcome? Since utopia and dystopia are two sides of the same coin, the possibility seems highly unlikely. The fact remains however that the models of utopia and dystopia remain both elusive and cognate since, one person or group's definition of utopia will always be the definition of another person or group's dystopia. There is no doubt that Nazi Germany was a dystopian society, but for the Nazis themselves, it was a step forward towards

an ideal world. History is filled with such interesting points of ideological contrast, which gives the *Assassin's Creed* franchise a unique vantage point for our present inquiries.

Ubisoft, the video game studio that created *Assassin's Creed*, have for a long time used the motto, "History is our playground." The video games, of which there are currently over a dozen iterations, are situated in historical periods, such as Renaissance Italy and ancient Greece, and the players have the opportunity to interact with historical figures like Niccolò Machiavelli and Socrates. Hence, *Assassin's Creed* can be considered to be historiographic metafiction. Through these narratives, the players can look at iconic moments in history and realise how the concepts and precepts of a perfect world are flawed, have always been flawed and are likely to remain that way.

The Utopia/Dystopia of *Assassin's Creed*

In *Assassin's Creed* two clandestine groups have been waging a secret war over the fate of humanity for centuries. These two factions are the Brotherhood of Assassins and the Templar Order. While the groups are fundamentally opposed to one another, their end goal is quite similar. Both wish to create a "utopia" for the people of the world to inhabit. The assassins' utopia is based upon their creed, "Nothing is true, everything is permitted" (*Assassin's Creed*). Ezio Auditore Da Firenze, the protagonist of *Assassin's Creed Revelations* elaborates further by saying:

To say that nothing is true, is to realize that the foundations of society are fragile, and that we must be the shepherds of our own civilization. To say that everything is permitted, is to understand that we are the architects of our actions, and that we must live with their consequences, whether glorious or tragic.

Thus, the assassins wish for a world where the common people give shape to their society and are free to make their own choices, with the success/consequences of said choices being theirs to enjoy/suffer. This, however, could possibly lead to a chaotic world. For example, the French Assassin Arno Dorian, in *Assassin's Creed Unity*, was instrumental in bringing about the French Revolution, which was a brutal and bloody (albeit necessary) chapter in France's history. Thus, the very steps taken to create a "utopia" are often intrinsically "dystopic" in nature. Such instances further underline the essential entanglement between the two supposedly contradictory ideals.

On the other hand, The Templars, seek to design a world governed by a select few. In such a world, people would have no free will, but there would also be (in theory) no suffering or want, since society shall follow strict rules with little to no deviance. Such a world of order will doubtless be peaceful, but it will be one without individuality and freedom. Within the narrative of the game, this feat is accomplished by using mythical artefacts known as the Pieces of Eden, which can strip a person of their free will. Countless instances in human history records an effort to circumscribe freedom and enforce a regimented living upon the masses. These movements in history have always elucidated the blurring boundary between the "utopian" idea and "dystopian" reality.

Freedom Vs. Order

The Assassin's Creed poses an interesting question before its players. Although the answer is redundant in the larger scheme of things, the game asks the player, which world would one prefer? A free, but chaotic one, or one of enforced peace and order. These clashes are seen in the historical settings of the games as well. From the vicarious and lawless lives of the pirates in *Assassin's Creed III: Black Flag* to the tyrannical rule of the British in pre-independence America in *Assassin's Creed III*, we are given plentiful examples of how either of the options are nothing close to being perfect. Interestingly, the conception of More's *Utopia* was the culmination of similar contending ideas of societal structure in the time of the renaissance. Quentin Skinner noted that European thinkers were deeply enmeshed in the pursuit of locating the best form of a state. While they agreed that a state would be at its prime only when its laws were just and its citizens happy, a consensus was not reached as to how such a state was to be established.

Skinner identifies two trains of thought with regard to this problem which, interestingly, align quite nicely with the philosophy of the assassins and the Templars. One of the popular responses to this problem was the idea of assigning all decisions of a state to one single person (*Pater Patriae*), as opposed to the court. Reading through John Tiptoft's translation of Buonaccorso, Skinner discovered one of the methods that was proposed for the selection of the *Pater Patriae*. He writes,

According to the commonly accepted view, the answer is that those citizens who are noblest and worthiest to occupy such honourable positions will be those who are possessed of high lineage and ancient wealth. As Tiptoft more succinctly expresses it, the suggestion is that 'noblesse resteth in blood and riches'. (Skinner 136)

As can be expected, this observation was met with a significant amount of derision. Most notably, Niccolo Machiavelli and Erasmus expressed their amazement and disbelief at such an observation. Machiavelli, in a straightforward manner, stated, "What can conceivably be thought noble about a man who merely has numerous ancestors and a long account of his family history?" (139). Erasmus conceded that lineage was important, but only if a person perfectly emulated the nature of their distinguished ancestor, and wasn't simply resting on the laurels of their forefathers. Instead Erasmus suggested that if a single leader were to be chosen, it should be based on their virtues, merits and/or good deeds. Machiavelli echoes a similar sentiment, when he states, "It is virtue that constitutes the one and only nobility" (140). It is, therefore, not a matter of surprise that Machiavelli was portrayed as a member of the Brotherhood of Assassins in *Assassin's Creed II* and *Assassin's Creed: Brotherhood*. His presence is a reminder that the philosophers of the past have treated the nature of a unified infallible utopia with considerable ambiguity.

The Brotherhood of Assassins in *Assassin's Creed*, much like Erasmus and Machiavelli, believe in the importance of merit and virtue. It was this belief that led them to oppose the tyranny of Rodrigo and Cesare Borgia in Renaissance Italy, to help George Washington oust the British from America and to help the downtrodden citizens of Victorian era London. The

Brotherhood's own system of leadership is based on merit, as each 'Master Assassin' or 'Mentor' is the greatest of his/her era. The Templar's, however, preferred the idea of a *Pater Patriae* who was chosen due to their lineage and/or wealth. Known as the 'Father of Understanding' or 'Grand Master', this title was bestowed on historical figures such as Julius Caesar, Rodrigo Borgia and Charles Lee. Such figures either came from renowned families, coveted wealth and fortune, or had aspirations of fame and conquest. Each of these characters, in one manner or the other, chose to use the 'Pieces of Eden' to bring about a world of absolute order.

The Templar, Haytham Kenway, defended the actions of order by stating, "The people never have the power, only the illusion of it. And here is the real secret: they don't want it. The responsibility is too great to bear" (*Assassin's Creed III*). This idea seems to be reminiscent of Althusser's concept of state apparatuses, as well as Gramsci's notion of hegemony. People are made to feel as if they have a choice, when in reality their choices are being made for them by the established power structures and cultural politics. The Templars, therefore, believe that since free will is an illusion, there is no harm in taking it away, if it will result in widespread peace and harmony. The flaw with such a society is that the person who is assigned the power to govern people unconditionally, might themselves be corrupted by the power. As Juvenal eloquently put it, "*Quis custodiet ipsos custodiet?* (Who guards the guardian?)" (Juvenal 347-348).

However, the Brotherhood of Assassin's is in no manner a perfect organisation. Ezio Auditore Da Firenze, in his role as 'Mentor' in *Assassin's Creed: Revelations*, comments upon the contradictory nature of the Brotherhood, "It is strange what we do. We seek peace through violence." Their penchant for violence and their desire to upturn autocratic institutions, usually without a replacement in mind, oftentimes leads to chaos. When native American assassin Ratonnhaké:ton (also known as Connor Kenway) sought to avenge his tribe's forced displacement from their ancestral land, his teacher, Achilles Davenport, cautioned him by saying, "In your haste to save the world, boy, take care that you don't destroy it" (*Assassin's Creed III*). Templars have also pointed out the flaws in the philosophy of the Assassins. Chiding Ezio Auditore Da Firenze for his continuous efforts to thwart the utopic plans of the Templars, in favour of liberty, Prince Ahmet of the Ottoman Empire said, "And when things fall apart, and the lights of civilization dim, Ezio Auditore can stand above the darkness and say proudly, "I stayed true to my Creed"" (*Assassin's Creed Revelations*). Such observations lead us to the consideration that, similar to More's Utopia, the desired society of both the Templars and Assassins is an impossibility.

No Such Thing as Paradise

Stephen Greenblatt, in his book *The Swerve: How the World Became Modern*, brings into focus the probable reasons behind the creation of More's magnum opus. Prior to the book's publication, Europe was gripped in an ideological tussle between the devout followers of Catholicism and the rising popularity of Epicureanism following the reprinting of Lucretius' iconic work, *On the Nature of Things*. Several thinkers and philosophers sought to find a middle ground between these two polarities, and More was one of them. His Utopians were Epicureans

at heart, since they believed that human happiness was essential for the creation of an ideal society. According to Greenblatt:

More clearly grasped that the pleasure principle—the principle given its most powerful expression in Lucretius’ spectacular hymn to Venus—is not a decorative enhancement of routine existence; it is a radical idea that, if taken seriously, would change everything. (Greenblatt 229)

However, the Utopians weren’t strictly Epicureans, as they were firm believers of religion, the afterlife and feared divine punishment. More considered fear, whether inspired by divine or human agencies, necessary to keep a community on their best behaviour. As Greenblatt puts it:

Fear might be eliminated in the philosopher’s garden, among a tiny, enlightened elite, but it cannot be eliminated from an entire society, if that society is to be imagined as inhabited by the range of people who actually exist in the world as it has always been known. Even with the full force of Utopian social conditioning, human nature, More believed, would inevitably lead men to resort to force or fraud in order to get whatever they desire. (Greenblatt 232)

The very same idea is supported by characters in *Assassin’s Creed*, such as Dr. Warren Vidic who, in the first *Assassin’s Creed* game, is heard saying:

The human race calls out for direction. They want to know why they’re here, what they are meant to do. And once they understand how to live their lives, everything will be better.

While the idea of oversight and a set of guiding principles is generally a welcome thought,

Vivian Greene has observed that any utopian setting can quickly devolve into a dystopia, depending on how its features are implemented. She gives the example of utopian architectural concepts, and how they came to inspire Jeremy Bentham.

Architecture also plays a leading role in the narrative of utopian efforts. From the Italian Renaissance Ideal City and the architectural innovations developed by, for example, Filarete, to the late-eighteenth-century French visionary architecture of Étienne-Louis Boullée and Claude-Nicolas Ledoux, implicit in the thoughtful construction of space is the urge to change and better society. Ironically, both Ledoux’s Ideal City for the Saline de Chaux (the royal saltworks) and Boullée’s *Cenotaph to Newton* were never built. Instead, penitentiaries based on the Panopticon of English reformer Jeremy Bentham were later realized and again raise the terrifying possibility of too much control and demonstrate how an optimistic vision can become chillingly dystopic. (Greene 5-6)

Later games in the series would come to prove Greene’s point, as numerous Templars attempted to help society by attempting to deprive it of its free will. On the other hand, the

Assassins' have no wish to provide any sort of direction. Their very creed is not a doctrine or a set of commands, but an 'observation of reality'. Mary Read, in *Assassin's Creed IV: Black Flag*, sums it up eloquently, "We're assassins and we have a creed, aye. But it does not command us to act or submit. Only to be wise." While this sounds ideal on paper, it follows that the idea of the creed can differ from person to person, with seemingly disastrous results. This was proved to be the case when the French assassin Pierre Bellec, thanks to his misinterpretation of the creed, nearly wiped out the entire French Brotherhood, in an attempt to make them stronger than before. Much like V's "Land of Take-What-You-Want" in Alan Moore's *V for Vendetta*, which is a chaotic landscape that needs to be traversed before reaching the promised "Land of Do-As-You-Please", the assassins aim to pull down tyrannical institutions which result, more often than not, in pandemonium. It is, then, left to the people to find their way back to stability.

Conclusion

A common criticism of Thomas More's *Utopia* starts with the name of the book itself. Derived from the prefix "ou-", meaning "not", and "topos," meaning place, utopia literally means "not-place" or a place that does not exist. While More later clarified that the word was supposed to be spelled "eutopia," where the prefix "eu-" meant good (thereby changing the meaning to "good place"), the general consensus remains that the very word "utopia" symbolises its apparent impossibility. While the historiographic metafictional nature of the Assassin's Creed games do illustrate this notion, it is the act of playing them that is most educational. By being immersed within these events, and witnessing first-hand the failures of such utopian endeavours, the player comes to fully understand the dual nature of utopia/dystopia, and how utopia is a fictional notion at best. However, that does not mean that ideas of utopia cannot inspire to seek a better world. One can take inspiration from the assassins' and hold ourselves responsible for the society one lives in, while taking a leaf out of the Templars' book by adhering to a fixed set of rules that will help us improve said society. Set amidst the deluge of multiple historic upheavals, games like *Assassin's Creed* provide the audience/reader/gamer with a palimpsest of past mistakes of mankind in the hope of inspiring a more cautious approach to future progress.

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