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Assassin's Creed

Developed by Ubisoft Montreal

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The team behind *The Prince of Persia: the Sands of Time* returns to the action-platform scene with their newest title, *Assassin's Creed*. Set in the Middle East, circa 1100 A.D., you control Altair, a member of the secretive Assassin's guild. As Altair, you visit three carefully reconstructed cities from King Richard's crusade in an attempt to put an end to the conflict between the Christians and Muslims by free-running through the cities, gathering intelligence and assassinating nine key figures that stand to profit from the Crusade. While the first two hours of the game are nothing short of breathtaking, a few issues soon arise due to the repetitive nature of the plot and the gameplay. *Assassin's Creed* is a beautiful, highly polished, and sometimes tedious experience. There is great potential here, but in the end *Assassin's Creed* is a fun medieval Parkour simulator with greatly untapped potential.

Visually, the game is one of the best on the market today. The models, environments, and lighting are all worthy of the moniker, "next-gen." However, what really impresses about the graphics is the animation. Altair's movements are incredibly natural and realistically animated, but it is his transitional animations that are so remarkable. There are no breaks in the animation, no awkward shifting of the character to grab onto a ledge. Instead, if the handhold Altair reaches for is a little to the right of where it would usually be, he simply reaches his hand more to the right than he normally would. This kind of adaptive movement breaks away from the canned animations that designers have used up to this point in gaming (with the exception of ragdoll physics, of course). Watching characters realistically move through environments without breaking the laws of movement and gravity adds to the game's ability to immerse the player in the game world and in the story. There are a few instances of clipping that occur throughout the game, but nothing game-breaking. The one aspect of the game's visuals that fell short of expectations occurs during combat. During combat I would like to see the lasting effects of my sword on enemies. Every time Altair stabs a guard and pulls his sword out, the sword left no mark. I'm not saying that I want to see excessive amounts of

gore, but if Ubisoft Montreal are going to the trouble to show blood spurts, they ought to be able to show bloodstains on jerkins and tunics.

The triple-A marketing and graphics may sell the game, but the free-form gameplay fails to keep the experience going strong past the first couple of hours of play. The cities are vast and detailed, and the crowd moves dynamically, reacting to Altair, but the lack of variation in the game becomes apparent after the second or third assassination mission. Upon reaching one of 3 cities—Damascus, Jerusalem, and Acre—Altair must visit the Assassin's Bureau, where he is tasked with dredging up information on his target. He must complete 3 out of 8 objectives for each mission, including pick-pocketing suspects, performing menial tasks for informants, interrogation, and eavesdropping. After gathering enough information on his target, Altair is allowed to carry out the assassination. This basic formula repeats itself nine times throughout the game, without fail. The only variation in the formula comes in the very beginning and the very end of the game. The cities are unique, but they are similar enough in blocky architecture that they are essentially the same, and the methods of gaining intel on your targets are the same in every district of every city. This repetition makes the playtime leading up to each assassination feel more like a chore than a game.

This repetition also extends to the layout and architecture of the cities themselves. Yes, each of the cities sports a slightly different color scheme, and yes, Acre has French arches while Jerusalem has Muslim spires, but essentially they are the same city: narrow streets crowded with lepers, beggars, merchants and guards, peppered with viewpoints and whiny women crying out for help. I appreciate that each of the cities was recreated based on the layouts of the cities they are based on, but because they are so similar I would have rather had one city that was more developed with indoor locations as well as outdoor locations, or a biblical city and a modern city to traverse, rather than three nearly identical biblical cities and a modern prison cell.

Controlling Altair is a blast. There is nothing in gaming quite like traversing an open city Prince of Persia style. Contrary to some reviews, the controls are very intuitive and easy to pick up. *Assassin's Creed* adopts a self-called "puppet system" for controlling Altair: one button for each hand, one for the head, and one for the legs, and a fifth button to toggle between low and high profile modes, where you can either blend in

with the crowd or stand out in order to perform certain high-risk actions such as sprinting or climbing up a wall or drawing your weapon. Combat in the game is less complicated than similar action-platforming games such as *God of War* or *Heavenly Sword*. It is fun, flashy, easy to learn, but also very imbalanced. Once Altair learns how to counter-attack, he can take on 20 guards without a problem by simply holding down the block button and pressing the counter-attack button every time a guard attacks. This almost breaks the game by taking all of the pressure off of being a sneaky assassin. Where is the tension of approaching an unsuspecting target if when you fail to remain hidden, you can just kill the entire city guard to get to your target? A simple solution to this would be to make the enemy guards smarter, so that at least they would attack you all at once instead of circling you, waiting for their turn to die as if they come from some bad Hong Kong action movie. Difficulty gripes aside, the combat is easy to pick up and relatively intuitive. In a game that is more about platforming and stealthy assassination than it is about single combat it is not game breaking, but it comes close.

The narrative in *Assassin's Creed* is intriguing, if a bit shallow at times. The characters were interesting, and the voice-acting is very well done, but the predictable twists, repetitive nature of the narrative (you simply gather info about and then assassinate nine targets) and cliffhanger ending ultimately leave you feeling unfulfilled at the end of the story. The buzzword surrounding the game's plot is "duality." The game is, according to some reviewers, unprecedented because it casts doubt on the player's actions: is he right for assassinating these people? Is Altair on the right side of this conflict? While duality does pervade the story, *Assassin's Creed* certainly did not do this first, nor does it do this the best. *Bioshock* and *Shadow of the Colossus* are just two examples of other games that tackle the issue of the grey area between right and wrong, and both do it better than *Assassin's Creed*. *Shadow of the Colossus* even contains a similarly repetitive nature, but never feels like a chore, whereas your actions in *Creed* ultimately do. The beginning and ending of *Assassin's Creed* really shine in comparison to the rest of the game because they are so different from the other ten hours of gameplay. The game forgoes sandbox gameplay in favor of guiding the player along one path, and when it does this, the player is 100% engaged in the story and the action feels new and

exciting. If these highly scripted moments were peppered in among the repetitive sandbox elements of the game, the experience would be much more satisfying.

Assassin's Creed is a great example of the power of next-gen systems, and it shows great potential both as a franchise and as a standalone game. It falls short in its execution due to repetitive gameplay, overly similar (if visually striking) environments, and unbalanced combat. It is the perfect example of the problem that a lot of triple-A titles run into nowadays: because it takes such a large amount of time to code game engines and create art assets for blockbuster games, they become flashier and more polished, but at the same time shorter and simpler in design. There is plenty of time to add new environments, varied mission structure, and a more engaging story in future installments, and based on the sales figures and the fan reaction the game has received so far, it looks like Ubisoft Montreal will have a chance to make good on the potential of their new franchise.