



## THE BLACK FLAG AND VIDEO GAME VEXILLOLOGY

**Edward Crump**

Flags Australia

### INTRODUCTION

Flags permeate media as representations of (among others) people, nation and state. They often form part of video games. This presentation will examine how flags are utilised in the popular 2014 title *Assassin's Creed IV: Black Flag*, set in the early 18th Century Caribbean. The presentation will examine how flags in this video game are used to geographically, racially and culturally locate both the player and character avatar they inhabit, and how flags are part of the "performance" of self, allowed by the video game medium. It also considers how flags are used by game designers as "shortcuts" for identity, in the context of flags' use within the broader issue of colonialism and minority representation.

My talk is about the use of flags in a video game, *Assassin's Creed IV: Black Flag*.

To provide some context especially of those unfamiliar with this type of computer interactivity, I discuss the narrative and outcomes of the video games *Assassin's Creed III* as well as *Assassin's Creed IV*.

The latter, (ACIV) sub-titled *Black Flag*, is an action-adventure game set in the mid-18th Century Caribbean, and was one of the highlights of the 2013 gaming calendar.



The main character plays Welsh pirate turned assassin Edward Kenway in the centuries-long war against the evil Templars.

Not a perfect game, it has nevertheless sold over 11 million copies, receiving generally positive reviews. The game has been subject to a great deal of discussion, particularly about some of the content in the game's expansion, *Assassin's Creed: Freedom Cry*.

Although in the fast-paced world of gaming ACIV is already being forgotten, I feel there is at least one more aspect of the game that deserves attention: its use of flags. As both a vexillologist and a fan of the series - I have played every game in the series - I have found the display and utility of flags in the game reflected a mature understanding of their power.

### COMPETING SOVEREIGNTY

ACIV, as I will call the game, goes to great lengths to use flags, and they are spread liberally around Caribbean islands colonised by the European powers, in particular Spain, France and the United Kingdom.

The game's eponymous 'black flag' however is not as central as its prominent placement in the game's title suggests.

Flags are used in ACIV to demarcate space and visually establish European (which in the game's narrative, means "Templar") political, social and religious control over a particular territory.

Often it seems the flags in the game are outsized compared to the small colonies they are attached to - for example, these Union Flags (**right**).

Flags are used as a game design tool to differentiate islands that otherwise would appear very similar to the player, and are used to represent the effect of European colonisation in creating small spheres of European control in the Caribbean.



## NATIVE ISLANDER REPRESENTATION

However, what about those who were colonised?

The European idea of sovereignty is challenged by a visual, material representation of native islander identity and their experience of what sovereignty means. This is established by their person - in the way they dress, the way they speak, and importantly to the game, to which Western political force they form an alliance with (the Assassins rather than the Templars).

Unfortunately, I was unable to get a screen-shot from the game of the islands' native peoples: however, compared to the colonies, indigenous peoples are depicted noticeably lacking in European trappings such as uniforms, European-style dwellings and symbols such as badges and flags. It is evident however, that the merging of the Assassin's order with the native population has begun the process of applying European standards on the native society - the Assassin's uniform and their 'A' symbol, for example. The game goes to great lengths to show this is 'simply' a mixing of cultures, and in any case a result of a common ancestry from the *First Civilisation* in the game's folklore.

This means that the game views progress as taking on European forms of identification, including living and fighting underneath the Assassin's symbol, including the European main characters' black flag.

ACIV, for that failure, represents an improvement on the previous entry in the series, Assassin's Creed III. In ACIII, set during the American Revolutionary War, the Native American protagonist Ratonnhaké:ton's maturing both as male and an effective assassin/avenger is represented by his gradual adoption of Western elements such as the Assassin's uniform, symbol and a western-sounding name.

These Eurocentric notions of what constitutes maturity and ability have at least started to be addressed and diluted in its sequel.

## EDWARD KENWAY

Assassin Creed IV's protagonist Edward Kenway is an antagonist to all the colonial governments and an eventual full-fledged Assassin. His presence under the black flag of his pirate vessel, like the native population, challenges the established norms of political power through a challenge to the colonist's monopoly of violence.

By not conforming to a flag flown on an island, and all the expectations of European behaviour it entails, as well as by joining with pirates, Kenway marks himself out as an Other, someone different.

In effect, Edward take his own "island" around with him - his ship (**right**).

It is therefore no surprise that he allies himself with the native tribes, who themselves are presented as Others by the game explicitly



(established in in-game dialogue) and implicitly by comparing the structure of their living spaces, weapons, dress etc.

From my previous research and from what others in the field have said, I argue that flags in the real and in the virtual world are used in at least two ways - to unite and to divide. Flags are used to tell those who adhere to them - those the flag seeks to represent - of safety and familiarity which is particularly important in the colonial context where the Other forms a presupposed bodily threat - and thus build bonding social capital with one another.

They are also used in the same way however, to tell Others they are *not* in a familiar territory and should expect to be challenged.

The player, acting in the role of Edward Kenway, experiences this directly. When acting suspiciously in a colonial town centre, usually marked by a flag among other forms of symbolic representation of differentiation and power, they are challenged verbally and physically by other, non-playable characters including both the guards and the citizens.

The player, through the interactivity that video games provide, can choose to conform and escape punishment by acting "normally," to challenge the authority through physical violence, or to escape authority and expectations of correct behaviour by moving away from colonial control in the town to the "freedom" of the wilderness.

The game therefore promotes a polarised view of society between the free individual of the playable character - who has free will because of his central role to the narrative - and the communal, homogeneous, geographically bounded colonialists who are not playable.

Colonial non-playable characters represent everything contrary to the game's narrative push, incorporating non-playable character as elements of the ongoing war between the Templars and the Assassins.

One element is the juxtaposition of those living under their own flag, and those subscribing to another's flag. The nature of the videogame medium thus contributes to the experience of living under and fighting against flags and what they seek to represent.

## WHAT IS FREEDOM?

At one point in the game Edward and his fellow pirates attempt to cast off old national allegiances and expectations, and form a new identity formed solely by their own desires and moral systems. The game's narrative however, supports these old European ethical frameworks by demonstrating the failure of the "Pirate's Republic" under their alternative governance model.

On the other hand, Edward finds success in the mixing of native and Assassins' Order cultures. Individual success is therefore not viewed in the game as complete freedom from restraints, but freedom in an ordered, and hierarchical system to which you submit. This mirrors the game's play-design. While you are free to wander around the Caribbean, there are technical constraints in what you can do there: for example, you can travel to a city such as Havana, but not all doors lead anywhere or can even be opened.

## VIEWPOINTS

Throughout the Assassin's Creed's different games, the protagonists have used viewpoints as important elements in establishing control over territory (**right**). When the player performs a viewpoint scan, the territory below them is mapped for them.

In this sense they mimic a flag's use as an element of control over a particular area, and challenge the existing flags. Usually the flag is located below the player when they perform their viewpoint synchronisation, and so



the player both literally and metaphorically looks down on the flags that represent colonial power, enhancing the power fantasy.

## ON THE WATER

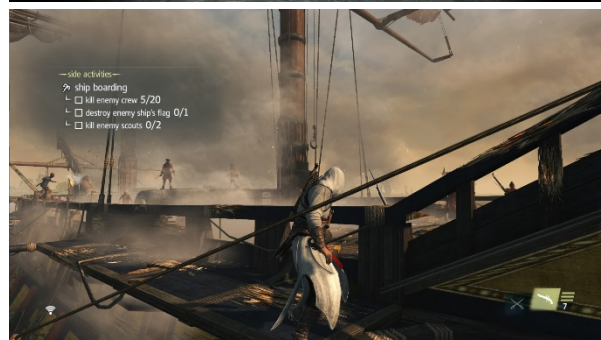
Assassin's Creed IV features a great naval combat system. It's one of the most fun parts of the game. Flags are important elements used in ACIV for this naval combat and for navigation. They tell the player who to attack and who not to, although other elements contribute to this too. They can either give the player comfort or cause for concern. A flagged ship represents mobile sovereignty over the territory proximate to a ship. As a lower-levelled ship at the beginning of the game, seeing a Man-o'-war flying a Spanish flag was a clear sign to stay out of their way.

On the other hand, seeing a dynamic battle between a fellow pirate and an enemy ship draws the player's empathy, and potentially makes us want to fight them too.

From the pure design of the ship it is difficult to tell who to help, but flags (among other criteria, such as character costumes in the game) help the player distinguish between friend and foe, while exploring the fragility of national identities. Remove the flags and it is difficult for the player to see the difference between the non-playable characters, amplified by the limited number of character models in the game. Captains for a French or Spanish vessel are in fact depicted alike, simply differentiated by dress and the flag they fly under (**right**).



In AC IV's naval combat, enemy ships can either be destroyed or boarded and taken for a greater in-game reward. For smaller ships, such as a schooner, it is enough to simply take down a few crew members to claim a win. As the size of the ship increases additional criteria are required to be successful. One of these criteria is to take down the flag from the top of a ship's mainmast (**right**).



The inclusion of this criterion in the game demonstrates a critical understanding of the purpose and function of a flag. Ubisoft, the game's creator, appears to recognise that not only does raising a flag exert control as discussed earlier, but the *removal* of a flag from a position of authority denotes the elimination of control by those flying the flag. The sea and land around the captured ship is de-territorialised as colonial state power is removed.

The elimination of control is only of a kind however. Depending on the player's actions, the ship may be destroyed once the financial and human capital of the ship has been fully exploited, but control may be re-established under the player if he (or she?) decides to keep the ship as part of the protagonist's trading fleet.

Edward therefore becomes a mimic in miniature of the colonial powers. He remains a challenge to their fleets, but *within* the established European framework of what constitutes state power, not as an alternative challenge to that power. Edward Kenway on the waves truly represents the pirate he began the game as, not the Assassin he will become on land.

## CONCLUSION

The Assassin's Creed meta-narrative has always pitted nation-states against a powerful and diffuse network of individuals. One aspect of the centuries-long contest between Templars and the Assassins has been the contest of symbols between the two sides, starting with the Crusaders in the first Assassin's Creed game.

ACIV's contest between flags is situated within this context. Both the player and the character have experienced this over time as the player interacts with protagonists who have progressively moved through history from Crusader Jerusalem to the French Revolution.

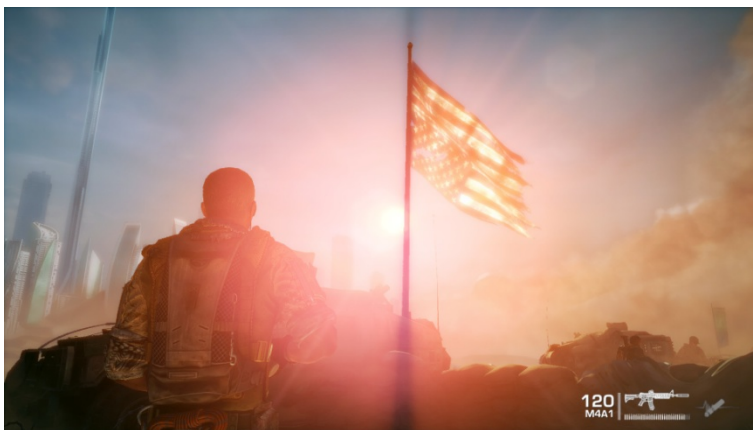
It was interesting to see how *Assassin's Creed Unity*, the following instalment in the franchise and set in the French Revolution, also used flags and the role of competing national symbols as part of the broader struggle between the loyalists and the revolutionaries.

Ubisoft, a French company, was challenged by the French Revolution in a number of ways, even leading to a government minister lambasting it as anti-revolutionary propaganda.

Part of that challenge in that they needed to use established images of France before those images were actually in widespread use, another issue that made it all the way to *Le Monde*.



We see here the boundary between a game's aim to be historically accurate and our modern need for recognisable and relatable symbols. We will see how they approach this year's *Assassin's Creed Syndicate*, set this time in Victorian London.



I have shown how flags have been used in just one video game. They are littered throughout many others, including this United States flag - inverted - in *Spec Ops: The Line* (left).

Next time you're playing a game keep an eye out for a flag - it might provide you with vital clues as to what is really happening.

Edwin Crump,  
Canberra, ACT  
Email: [edwin.c.crump@gmail.com](mailto:edwin.c.crump@gmail.com)