How Ubisoft Montreal used historians to make Ancient Egypt authentic in Assassin's Creed Origins

The Montreal game maker recruited era experts for its latest historical adventure to help create an interactive history tour within the game

Assassin's Creed Origins is set in the time of Cleopatra and Julius Caesar, more than 2,000 years ago, stretching further back into history than any previous game in the series. Ubisoft

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"I love it!!!!!!!!"

If you've ever played an Assassin's Creed game and wondered just how much of its detailed historical world was truly authentic, the answer is simple: A heck of a lot.

Series fans know that Ubisoft Montreal's artists and designers do a terrific job replicating landmark architecture such as London's Houses of Parliament and Rome's Colosseum, and that they also accurately present the backgrounds of famous historical figures like Leonardo da Vinci. However, it may surprise some to learn that Ubisoft's mission for period authenticity goes far beyond these obvious icons. They work with historians to learn about everything from culture to clothing to the specific designs used on building tiles. And they listen to what they're told.

For the just-launched *Assassin's Creed Origins*, a game set more than two millennia ago in Ancient Egypt – further back in history than any other in the series – Ubisoft brought on several historians, including Quebec-based Evelyne Ferron, a specialist in Greco-Roman Egypt who teaches ancient history and *Ancient Egypt* history at the University of Sherbrooke and general history at College Merici in Quebec City. She worked with Ubisoft for four years to educate its game makers on Ancient Egypt.

"For the first two years, I gave presentations to various Ubisoft teams about the environment, climate, weather, animals, plants, trees, and mountains of Egypt at the time of Cleopatra, and the differences between the major areas," she said in an interview with Post Arcade. "I also presented about the political situation and the everyday life of the Greeks in Greek cities like Alexandria as well as the Egyptian population, covering culture, general history and historical figures, food, games, clothing, cities versus countryside, architecture, colours on the buildings, and arts."

TRENDING IN CANADA

But her work didn't stop there. The game is partially set within cities that no longer exist and for which there are no concrete visual references. This forced Ferron to look elsewhere to figure out what a city like ancient Alexandria might have looked like.

"I researched different theses for the theories about the fact that the ruins of the Library of Ephesus were inspired by the one in Alexandria, that Petra in Jordania had inspiration from that city as well, and that the Romans depicted Alexandria on their painted walls," she said. "I studied the ruins of Pergamon as well to help them figure out a traditional Hellenistic city plan."

She also had to help them understand the difference between what's old and what's really old. For instance, Ferron explained that while the pyramids and the Sphinx were certainly in better shape during the time of Cleopatra and Julius Caesar, they were still some 2,500 years old and very weathered, which meant that they would have been sun bleached and sand-worn, and that any colouration the Sphinx might have retained at that point would have been well faded by time.

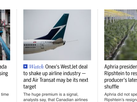
There were also times when she needed to stand her ground as an historian and insist on specific details. Ubisoft, to its credit, listened to her.

"There were preliminary discussions about a scenario that would have placed a mummification scene in a temple, which would have not been entirely accurate according to Egyptian customs," she explained. "I offered my expert opinion on the scenario, and Ubisoft was able to tweak the scene to make it completely accurate."

Ferron hopes that stringent adherence to historical fact in a game like *Assassin's Creed: Origins* will do more than just satisfy those with a keen eye for detail. She thinks it could prove educational, informing audiences about how Cleopatra's Egypt was deeply multicultural and that pharaohs had actually become Greeks. She also hopes it will provide insight on Cleopatra and Julius Caesar's relationship, which went beyond its well-publicized romance to include politics and strategy.

More than that, she hopes it will provide the people who play a better sense of what everyday life in Ancient Egypt was like.

"Players will experience the differences in lifestyle in the Greek cities such as Alexandria versus Egyptian towns like Memphis or the countryside," Ferron said. "They will understand that agriculture was still the basis of the general economy and how they did it around the Nile River. They'll discover that yes, Egyptians feared crocodiles, but feared hippopotamuses more, because they'll get to fight some in the game! They will experience different environments, and come to realize that Egypt is a big country with a lot of diverse areas – even in the desert."



And there's one specific feature new to the series that she thinks could even make *Assassin's Creed: Origins* a viable means of learning in a formal class setting. Dubbed Discovery Tour Mode, it lets players explore Egypt at their leisure, learning about its history via guided tours curated by historians and Egyptologists. It's almost like a textbook in video game form.

"Players will be able to discover many aspects of the lives of Ancient Egyptians, with audio narrations and written texts to help them learn about food, libraries, scientists, politics, and architecture," said Ferron. "So for the teachers it can become a real educational tool, and that's pretty cool."

Check back next week for Post Arcade's full review of Assassin's Creed Origins.

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