

After two samey semi-sequels, *Assassin's Creed* has finally left the Renaissance behind, turning to the untapped frontier of a young America in order to shift to a focus on non-urban exploration





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ASSASSIN'S CREED III

Ubisoft heads for the wild frontier, but
how much revolution is truly going on?

Publisher	Ubisoft
Developer	In-house (Montreal)
Format	360, PC, PS3
Origin	Canada
Release	October 2012

After murdering his way through a sizable chunk of Renaissance Italy, Ezio Auditore da Firenze has finally hung up his hidden wrist blades. In his place is Connor, a half-Mohawk, half-British inhabitant of Colonial America, who (in as-yet-unseen circumstances) comes to discover and embrace his assassin ancestry just as the restive colonies prepare to throw off the tyranny of the king and go to war.

The American Revolution might be a perfect setting for the *Assassin's Creed* brand of storybook history, its open warfare making for a rip-roaring change of pace from the oft-shadowy conspiracies of *Assassin's Creed II* and its follow-ups, but is Connor the perfect protagonist? Ezio's swashbuckling swagger gave the series a jolt of matinee charm, while Connor is a less scene-stealing lead at first glance. His sober pronouncements lack Ezio's charisma, and his detailed assassin's garb and European heritage muddle the faint, slightly discomfiting hints of noble savage about him. This addition to the thin ranks of gaming's Native American leads avoids being a stereotype, but we hope a personality can be forged from all these contradictions. ➤



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BELOW Cinematics are improved by simultaneously capturing body movement, facial movement and voicework. Animators have doubled the number of animation points in faces, too, focusing in particular on eye and mouth details



Why don't we see this setting more frequently? "It's incredibly difficult for shooters to explore the American Revolution," Francois says, "because guns weren't so hot back then. It took forever to reload a musket"



Connor's the only weak link in what's an otherwise thrilling demonstration of *Assassin's Creed III's* potential. Series fans couldn't be blamed for feeling exhausted after three games' worth of Ezio, yet there's enough change on show to justify a fourth *Assassin's Creed* in as many years. But as director of IP development **Tommy Francois** explains, *Assassin's Creed's* overhaul has emerged naturally from its change in setting.

"We had five or six people doing research on the American Revolution," he reveals. "The game spans a 30-year period from 1753. You can imagine how much work that was, specifically because the American Revolution is one of the periods in history from which we have the most documentation."

What this authenticity means for players is historically accurate missions (ancient Templar conspiracies notwithstanding), weaving in and out of known events. It means combat altered to account for the technology of the time, with slow-firing muskets giving packs of redcoats a one-chance shot to down Connor as he closes in from range. And it

means two famous cities, New York and Boston, with wide streets and a lack of well-known landmarks representative of the settlements at the time. But it also means there's a wild, untapped frontier connecting those settlements, and it's here that the most significant overhaul of the *Assassin's Creed* formula will be found.

"It's a humongous area," Francois continues. "It's actually 1.5 times the size of Rome in *Brotherhood*. We needed to make sure it wasn't just something aesthetic. One of the pillars of *Assassin's* is exploration. And Connor is an American Indian. He needs to feel comfortable there."

The trees are the most obvious change, the region's tall canopy adding a new method of locomotion. Whereas rooftops offer flat or slanted planes that are easily jumped between, here we see Connor picking his next perch more deliberately than Ezio ever had to – sometimes clambering vertically to reach a higher branch, and sometimes bracing himself between Y-shaped splits in the trunk. A full, supple range of animations can handle most

arrangements of foliage, however, with Connor hanging and grabbing branches one after another, climbing frame-style, when they begin to group closely together.

But forests offer more than trees, as lead animator **Jonathan Cooper** points out. "It was important to revisit the climbing system to tackle rock formations. The new system is based on real rock-climbing movements

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researched by the team." It certainly seems dynamic when we watch Connor clamber a rocky surface more uneven than anything the clean lines and smooth curves of Renaissance architecture ever troubled Ezio with tackling.

The forest setting looks to bring an element of consideration to a climbing system that has until now favoured 'flying yourself and forget' free-spirited parkour. Organic



String theory

Originally, Connor was equipped with a 'chain blade', a sort of extending knife on a chain, enabling him to impale enemies from the treetops. It's been switched for the less substantial rope dart for the sake of historical accuracy. "As much as we exaggerate history in *Assassin's*, we don't want to go too fantasy," Francois asserts. "We want to stay true to the period we've set it in. The weapon didn't look authentic." Connor was also originally going to scalp his victims, but "we found out through research that [Mohawk] Indians didn't scalp," Francois says. "Plus it didn't serve gameplay, [and] made it look more violent than it needed to."



As well as a bow, tomahawk and hidden blade, Connor carries dual pistols, and can also snatch firearms from soldiers. There's even a cover system, although the focus here won't be on firefights

arrangements of trees and cliffs provide less obvious perches for assassinations than previous games' telegraphed overhangs, and while the movement has lost none of its grace, there's clearly been some effort to communicate the sheer exertion of mastering such a space. "Connor now uses more or less effort to traverse the undulating terrain," says Cooper. "[This connects him] to the environment like never before. He applies appropriate effort depending on the depth of the snow, as he struggles to move as fast as possible." It's no exaggeration. Deep snow banks might provide the ideal route for stealthy assassinations, but Connor's walking pace notably drops as he traverses them.

As Connor trudges through the forest, he happens upon the dead body of a redcoat (found by following the blood trail splattered on the snow). Any mystery surrounding this death is short-lived, though, as an angry bear descends on Connor, swatting him to the ground with a swipe of its paw. It may just be scripted for this encounter, but for a moment

Connor seems stuck in the white landscape. Then he pulls himself out and gets in an elegant stab to the neck with his hidden blade before the struggle can go on any longer.

"In the frontier zone, we consider the wildlife to be our 'crowd,'" Francois explains, referring to a defining feature of *Assassin's Creed's* residential districts. "There's going to be a lot you can do with wildlife. If you kill an animal with a musket, that would be sloppy; the skin would have more holes, things like that, [and] you'd get a smaller reward. Connor is an American Indian; he has a great respect for nature, and it's going to show in his interactions with animals."

As well as playing host to these new mechanics, the frontier zone will contain smaller settlements, and be the location for a significant chunk of the game's missions. It has the bonus of looking beautiful, recalling (in winter, at least, since different weather types and summertime will also feature) the frosty charms of *Red Dead Redemption's* West Elizabeth section, but looking and feeling more directly interactive to boot.



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Screenshot gallery





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That isn't to suggest the townships look any worse, as a trip to Boston proves. As Connor disembarks from a ship in the busy docks, there's a sense of period atmosphere that rivals anything in Venice, Florence or Rome. Union flags flutter from docked navy vessels, lovingly detailed wooden buildings line the streets, and a crowd filled with lively NPCs surges around Connor. Importantly, it also interacts with him – one dogged salesman pursues him as he walks along the pier, eventually arriving at a customs checkpoint staffed by His Majesty's finest.

But the redcoats aren't happy with his presence, and a classic *Assassin's Creed* chase ensues. It will feel more familiar to anyone who's played previous games in the series than the forest scenes, but a couple of minor innovations appear. The first, as Connor charges through a hectic market with soldiers close behind, is a new capability to seamlessly leap onto moving objects. In this case, Connor springs on top of a rolling wagon that bridges the gap between two stalls for a precious moment. The second is the ability to head inside buildings. With suspiciously perfect timing, a Bostonian lady opens her second-floor window, only for Connor to burst into her room and out of an exit on the other side of the house. "It's a small innovation," admits Francois, "but it's important to the pacing."

While chases seem to work as before (the soldiers give up the pursuit soon after they lose sight of Connor), the environments are obviously very different to anything we've seen in an *Assassin's Creed* to date. Streets are wider, and while a few carefully placed trees bridge the gaps between buildings, it's hard not to come away with the sense that the series' relatively under-used 'social stealth' elements, such as blending into crowds, are going to have to be brought to the fore.

Ubisoft finishes our demonstration with a set-piece on a scale far beyond anything in previous games: The Battle Of Bunker Hill, an early skirmish during the siege of Boston. While Ubisoft is keen to stress that Connor has an overarching agenda of his own, for now he seems to be favouring the colonial forces, receiving an order from General Israel Putnam (issuing the famous "don't fire until you see

the whites of their eyes" order when Connor arrives) to assassinate a redcoat leader who's lurking deep behind enemy lines.

The scale of the battle is vast, and oddly reminiscent of *Empire: Total War*, as musket fire from rows of British troops leads to eruptions of smoke on the distant hillside. But once the impact of the scale diminishes, Connor's route through the battle is relatively pedestrian, picking out available cover in between volleys of musket shots. Much more interesting is a revamped battle system shown when Connor runs into a squad of soldiers heading towards the frontline.

Ezio's elegance has been exchanged for brutal slaying, and Connor's tomahawk gets a full workout. What's more, one takedown, in which Connor manages to give a soldier a face full of his own musket, looks set to become a signature manoeuvre. To get up close, Connor pounces and uses a soldier as a human shield,

"We now have kills where the animation doesn't slow before you strike a target"

the long reload time of muskets meaning one shot is all he has to be concerned with. We can't tell from this encounter if enemies still patiently attack one at a time, but Connor certainly seems to flow through them more smoothly than ever. "We now have kills where the animation doesn't slow before you strike a target," Francois reveals. "It sounds like nothing, but it gives our game a better pace." The impact of this tweak is made clearer when Connor finally finds his target's camp: he charges in and kills two soldiers without losing one iota of the momentum he then uses to leap upon his victim.

Assassin's Creed III is a huge undertaking. Its scale alone threatens past games in the series, but this isn't just a case of bigger is better. Interactions have been overhauled, and the new setting is informing every aspect of the game. Ubisoft can't resist dubbing it a revolution, but that's missing the point. This is still *Assassin's Creed*, but it feels fresher and more exciting than it has since a boyish Florentine named Ezio was first unveiled. ■

Q&A

Matt Turner

Lead script writer,
Ubisoft Montreal



Why the American Revolution?

It wasn't just picked out of the hat. For us, the setting is always just the backdrop for the story of the Assassins and Templars, which is the core of the fantasy. What happened during the Revolution reflects perfectly where our Assassin/Templar story was going to go. On top of that, for us it was important that *ACIII* was not just a reskin. It had to be new.

With that in mind, how did you go about designing and writing Connor?

Well, it was again all about making a new *Assassin's Creed* all the way through. That meant the character too. It meant the character had to be driven by a new reason, reasons that were unique to him. Ezio's an extremely successful character, and that's a big pair of shoes to fill. We needed a character who was at home in the frontier, so the Mohawk aspect was kind of a no-brainer. We've worked really hard to set Connor apart in the way he fights, the way he moves, and the way he talks. All these things needed to be different. But after that, we started exploring who he would be. He's driven by justice, where Ezio was driven by revenge. He's more earnest and direct. We show his whole life: you grow up with him, see him as a kid, and you see why he becomes what he is.

You're dealing with the Revolutionary War, as well as a plotline involving the Native American people. Do you remain impartial, or make judgements?

For us, it's important to not take sides and just portray the history, not trying to colour it. And, you know, regarding the stuff that happened to Native Americans at that time, we want to address that as honestly as possible, and that will also contribute towards Connor's character, for sure. And it's something that we think often gets overlooked in terms of that time, [lost] in the glory of the whole thing. It's important to the brand to be quite true to the history, and we want to give that story as much attention as the stuff that most people will know about.

When dealing with historical characters, how do you fill in their personalities?

That's the thing; for the most part – especially for the most famous characters, like Washington and Franklin – the historical record for what those guys were up to is astonishingly detailed... so we're able to paint a pretty accurate picture of what they were like. For the lesser-known characters, we have to make more of a choice. And that's kinda fun, to try to surmise what a person was like.



As well as more detailed NPCs, Ubisoft wants to highlight the presence of more children and animals in towns. This looks more vibrant than before, but could easily be filled with repeating animations

Eight studios are involved in ACIII's production. We hope it can avoid *Revelations* syndrome, in which the game is clearly slotted together from parts

