

FICTIONAL CHARACTERS' HEROISM IN ASSASSIN'S CREED III VIDEO GAME IN THE PERCEPTION OF INDONESIAN VIDEO GAMERS

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Abstract: *Assassin's Creed* is a historical fiction video game developed and published by Ubisoft. This video game has been so far considered as one of the most violent video games. *Assassin's Creed III* is the third sequel of which plot is set in a fictional history of real world events and follows the centuries-old conflict between the Assassins and the Templars. Based on this study, the plot, characters, characterization, and scenes in *Assassin's Creed III* are deemed to be able to give positive teachings to the young generation, despite the fact that there are violent and sadistic scenes in the story. Haytham Kenway, who is "evil" protagonist in *Assassin's Creed Forsaken*, is portrayed as an expert in using weapons, since he was kid. Separated from his family, Kenway was taken by mysterious mentor, who trained him to be the most deadly killer. Comparisons with classic characters such as Oedipus, Hamlet, or Indonesian legendary character Sangkuriang are intentionally made to sharpen the analysis. The finding of this study is that heroic value might be found in either protagonist or antagonistic characters, whose roles involved numerous violent actions. Comments from the official website and social media which claim that *Assassin's Creed* has brought negative impacts on the consumers might not be totally true.

Key words: *character; heroism; violence; evil protagonist*

1. INTRODUCTION

Materialistic, consumerist, and hedonistic cultures have significantly hastened the flourish of popular fictional characters. As quoted from Ryan Hart in *the Guardian*, film and video games such as Batman, Superman, Captain America, Spiderman, Ironman, or hundreds of their adapted forms, spin-offs, and pastiches have gained popularity and profits, thanks to fictional characters notably super hero characters of the DC and Marvel comics (Hart, 2001:7).

So far, it is usually only the fictional characters in high literature which are often considered as models or the agents of enlightenment (Cawelti, 1872:18). Thus it is quite interesting and desirable to see the roles of the fictional characters in popular literature, which are sometimes regarded as characters of "subliterature". In this case, it is to see how their transformations and adaptations are such as in comics and video games.

The character of colonel Guile in *Street Fighter*, a video game produced by Capcom Japan, which is then transformed and adapted into several works and entertainment media such as comics, movies, series and cartoons, is depicted as an American soldier which is expert in martial arts. In addition, Guile is a character possessing a strong militaristic character, which is clearly portrayed in the character stereotype.

Ryan Hart, further, elaborates in *The Guardian* that Guile is on the 14th in the rank of fighters in *Street Fighter* (Hart, "Top 20 Street Fighter Character-Part I"). While according to Paul Furfari, Guile is one of the most important characters in the storyline of *Street Fighter* video game, other than Ryu and Ken (Furfari, "Top 50 Street Fighter Characters"). On the other hand, Abraham Van Helsing, who is depicted also in popular literary works with their adaptation and transformations such as in films and video games as a monster-hunting character, is often considered as the spin-off character of its famous classic depiction by Bram Stoker in his *Dracula*.

The character of *Lara Croft*, in contrast, is presented to the consumers as a female protagonist character with a cute, pretty-face and an attractively athletic body in the video game sequels *Tomb Raider* which was firstly developed in 1993. This character is also developed in several genre of popular literature such as video games, films and novels. As a heroine in *Tomb Raider's* plot, Lara Croft shows distinct characteristics throughout her struggle accomplishing hero's quest.

While Haytham Kenway, who is the "evil" protagonist in *Assassin's Creed Forsaken*, is portrayed as the master of weapons, especially deadly concealed and secret weapons. It is told by the popular novelist Oliver Bowden that "being separated from his family, Kenway was brought and raised by a tutor, of whom identity remains concealed and unexplained until the end of story, who trained him to be the deadliest killer". Hero's quest becomes the drive of Kenway's characterization, which means also the drive of the story plot. It can be observed that the quest is his desire to retaliate, by not trusting practically anyone and questioning all perceived truths he knows from people in his surroundings.

This is clearly stated by the author, Oliver Bowden:

Consumed by his thirst for revenge, Haytham begins a quest for retribution, trusting no one and questioning everything he has ever known. Conspiracy and betrayal surround him as he is drawn into the centuries-old battle between the Assassins and the Templars (Bowden, 2012:2).

Bowden describes that "Haytham Kenway has been taught to use a sword from the age he was able to hold one" (Bowden, 2012:1). Nonetheless, despite his notorious profession as

professional killer, Kenway possesses unique charisma which deserves our attention and study. A killer or criminal in literature is not always presented as a figure whom people detest all the time. As written in John Cawelti's article "A New Mythology of Crime", there have been changes in perspective, either of writers or readers, to see literary works of which theme is crime, or the ones which present criminals as their protagonist such as in Mario Puzo's *the Godfather*, which present Michael Corleone, a mafia boss, as the protagonist (Cawelti, 1975:4).

According to Franco & Zimbardo, heroism is a social attribution, never a personal one; yet the act itself is often a solitary, existential choice. It is historically, culturally and situationally determined, thus heroes of one era may prove to be villains in another time when controverting evidence emerges; yet some heroes endure across the centuries. Moreover, the very same act accorded hero status in one group, such as suicide bombing, is absolutely abhorrent to many others (Franco & Zimbardo, 2011:1). Nevertheless, the everyday-life heroism does not have to be dealing with super heroic actions which may look and sound so fantastic. Heroism in the daily life may start from trivial and inconsequential actions i.e. solving family problems, feeding the poor, finding cures for a sickness and the like. Nevertheless, in the context of popular literature, which is merely for entertainment, escapism and pleasure, there might be a question whether or not big heroic actions or fantastic fights a norm while discussing the value of heroism.

In addition, when people in modern society tend to consume what is usually considered as products of popular literature and culture, it seems questionable whether or not they can, at the same time, lose their lofty-minded values such as heroism, chivalry, manner and politeness.

This study is to re-examine the value of heroism which might be implicitly stated or reflected in fictional characters, notable the protagonist. The material object of this study is the *Assassin's Creed* video game the 3rd series, which is then adapted into a novel, *Assassin's Creed: Forsaken*.

This study applies qualitative method of research and data collecting, which place the researcher as the subject in data interpretation process so that in the practice there are steps such as: 1) compiling the study design which covers the steps in deciding the theme, theories, methods, and also deciding the location based on stated indicators; (2) obtaining the data, interviewing the respondents which are video gamers in Yogyakarta, processing the data, which is continued by (3) analyzing the data.

This qualitative study covers different populations. The first population is the documents related to the values of heroism of fictional character in video games which are adapted into popular novel. The second population is taken from the data obtained from the step 2, which are explained previously, through in-depth interview. This becomes the qualitative data of this study. The respondents are video gamers and the readers of *Assassin's Creed* which are members of video game community "Silver Couch (SC) Yogyakarta". As previously discussed, the researcher has speculated and made assumption that the character Haytham Kenway in *Assassin's Creed Forsaken* possesses the characteristic of heroism and can be positive role model to young readers and gamers.

In the *Assassin's Creed* sequels since the first series, the character belonging to the Templars, including Haytham Kenway, are positioned as "evil" character, or as "opponent" to be precise, to the characters belonging to the Assassin's group. Thus, that might be a question about whether those opposing characters can possess any quality of hero, which can be taken as role models, or not. While, there might be also question about whether or not all stories with evil protagonist are suitable to be taken as models, especially for the young generation, because of people's assumption that those characters reflect terribly wicked and immoral role models.

There have been a number of statements, for example on its official website, declaring that *Assassin's Creed* video games are full of violent actions which thereby ruined the moral of young generations. So, is there any correlation between heroism and violence? Or there may be another question such as "are the *Assassin's Creed* novel and game supposed to be consumed by young generations? The answers of those questions deserve a scientific scrutiny and examination.

2. DISCUSSION OF THE MAIN THEMES

During his journey and struggle in overcoming problems and challenges that he encountered, Haytham Kenway performs actions indicating his heroic soul, which leads this study to come to the assumption that he can be considered to possess characteristic of heroism, whether directly or indirectly, which can be perceived and understood by the consumers, in this case readers and video gamers. This is probably not the primary mission, since it is widely known that the popular literature is created mainly for amusement and pleasure. It should give satisfaction, rather than education.

The word heroism itself, based on Webster dictionary, means a courage or bravery in defending truth and fairness. This is just matched with what Haytham Kenway performs in

the Assassin's Creed plot. But Like an archetype, the value of heroism is universal. To this extent, it is clear that the value of heroism is accessible in any culture. Nevertheless, as the rapid advancement of technology which hastens the development of the society, consumerist, materialistic and hedonistic culture is also developed, placing and considering all things as commodities. Thus, it is worth to question whether or not the values of heroism still exist in this post-industrial society, or it has been eroded by the fast-moving current of those materialistic and consumerist cultures.

The role of Haytham Kenway as protagonist plays a significant role in the story. There are, however, different terms to call a protagonist such as a hero, focal character, central character, main character and so on. The protagonist may experience some transformations, which will be a very important part of the story, such as its climax. The character Haytham Kenway also experiences changes, either mental or physical. It can be seen when his identity is finally revealed. There is a quest that is on Haytham, and he is the character who drives the plot.

Despite its various manifestations in numerous popular genres, hero's quest often becomes the primary element. The universal characteristic of hero's quest can be perceived and be given meanings in several different cultures. In this sense, hero can also be translated as main character or "protagonist", which the story revolves. In popular literature, the hero will face and overcome all the challenge or problems, which are the elements of the story formula.

Iago in Shakespeare's *Othello* can be, as it is the most frequently done, identified as the protagonist of the novel because he plays a central role in all the controversies of the play. Occasionally, a moral weakness is highlighted that causes the fall of the protagonist. Thus, there is a term of tragic protagonist, or more widely known as "tragic hero", of which characteristic can be found, for instance, in Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, where the protagonist experiences terrible events because of his hesitancy and indecisiveness, which troubles him while murdering his evil uncle. Therefore, Hamlet's struggle in dealing with the antagonist is what precedes the story.

In addition, as stated by Beth Mckenney in her website the term tragic hero was defined by the Greek philosopher Aristotle as a self of great importance and virtue who becomes aware of a moral defect, which leads to great tragedy, within himself. It is not quite sure that Haytham possesses such awareness, for it is not clearly explained in the story. Nevertheless, Haytham is aware that there is something wrong, and he needs to perform an action to overcome the problem ("Tragic Hero").

Like Hamlet, Haytham Kenway also killed but he killed even much more than Hamlet, for Kenway is a professional killer. He is the character on which the storylines in *Assassin Creed III* video game revolves. A protagonist, such as Kenway, can sometimes be very controversial because of some evil traits. Like Billy Budd who is the protagonist in Herman Melville's *Billy Budd* and Becky Sharp from William Makepeace Thackeray's *Vanity Fair* who can occasionally be very manipulative in order to achieve their own interests.

Many Greek heroes often challenged the gods or seemed to believe themselves to be above other human beings. One of the best examples of ancient Greek play involving a tragic hero is Sophocles' *Oedipus Rex (Oedipus the King)*. While he is a young man, an oracle, or someone with the gift of seeing the future, tells Oedipus that his fate is to kill his father and marry his mother. Oedipus wishes to avoid this future, so he leaves his home. This may show that he thought himself to be able to escape from, or even to trick, god's predestination. This is because humans are supposed to accept their fate, according to the believers.

On the contrary, Kenway's religiosity is not exposed in the story, whether or not he challenge god's predestination. He only performs actions which he thinks he needs to carry out, and defends his principles. His life, however, still has to end tragically, being killed by his one son.

In the story of Oedipus, a tragic fall caught up with the protagonist. After rising to power and marrying the queen of his new home, Thebes, Oedipus learns that he has done exactly what he hoped to evade, as previously told by the oracle. One of the men he killed on his way to Thebes was actually his father, and the woman whom he married was his mother, who is finally shocked and disgusted after learning the truth and kills herself.

Marjorie Barstow in his article entitled *Oedipus Rex as the Ideal Tragic Hero of Aristotle* stated that Aristotle once said that the end of all human struggles is happiness. This happiness, as carefully discovered by Aristotle, does not basically come from the gifts of fortune, but rather "from a steady and comprehensive intellectual vision which views life steadily and distinguishes in every action the result to be attained" (Barstow in Levin 1960:182).

On the other hand, the tragic hero is a man who fails to attain happiness, and fails in such a way that his career excites, not blame, but fear and pity in the highest degree. In the *Poetics*, he is described as not eminently good and just, not completely under the guidance of true reason, but as failing through some great error or flaw of character, rather than through vice or depravity (Barstow in Levin 1960:83).

When we analyze the character of Oedipus, we discover that, in spite of much natural greatness of soul, he is, in one vital respect, the exact antithesis of Aristotle's ideal man. He

has no clear vision which enables him to examine every side of a matter with unclouded eyes, and to see all things in due perspective; nor has he a calm wisdom which is always master of his passions (Marjorie Barstow in Levin 1960:183).

Connor, in *Assassin's Creed*, is more similar to the classic *Oedipus* in that Connor kills his own father, though he by no means marries his own mother since he never meets his own mother during the story. But this study is not dealing with Connor, since he is “a good guy” antagonist, who is finally victorious, sending-off everything tragic to the protagonist, Haytham Kenway.

While, in Indonesia, there is also a folktale entitled “Sangkuriang” or “The Legend of Mount Tangkuban Perahu”, telling a heroic story of a hunter, Sangkuriang, who unintentionally kills his father and falls in love with his eternally attractive mother. This Sangkuriang character is more similar to Oedipus than to Connor in *Assassin's Creed*. However, as stated before that there is no romance between Connor and his own mother, and it is quite surprising that Connor does not seem to regret at the end. This might become a cause that there are respondents who give more sympathy and admiration to Haytham Kenway, and believe that it is actually Haytham that possesses stronger trait of a hero (“Sangkuriang”).

What makes Haytham's death less tragic is that Haytham is not “a good guy”, not an Assassin, since the series of *Assassin's Creed* is telling the struggle of the Assassin, not the Templar. There is, of course, rivalry between the two groups but in this story it is the Assassin that becomes “focus of attention”, which is clearly predicted from its title. This is also the reason why Connor's killing can be seen as something legitimate.

As stated by Jacques Wilson in *literarydevices.net*, in an article section entitled *Protagonist Definition*, it is possible that “there are more than one protagonist in the same story”, exemplified by Faulkner's *As I Lay Dying* when there is a part telling the situation of Addie's Bundren's demise in the novel which makes her relatives tell the story from their own perspectives differently, so that they are all equally important to the story (Wilson “Protagonist Definition”).

While, in his *Tragedy and the Common Man*, an article compiled in Richard Levin's book, Arthur Miller stated

In the sense of having been initiated by the hero himself, the tale always reveals what has been called his "tragic flaw," a failing that is not peculiar to grand or elevated characters. Nor is it necessarily a weakness. The flaw, or crack in the characters, is really nothing and need be nothing, but his inherent unwillingness to remain passive in the face of what

he conceives to be a challenge to his dignity, his image of his rightful status. Only the passive, only those who accept their lot without active retaliation, are "flawless." Most peoples are in that category (Miller qtd. in Levin 1960:171).

Responding the previous quotation by Miller, we can say that Kenway, by no means, is a flawless character. Therefore, he is more similar to the aforementioned tragic hero than to most people. He did retaliation, defended his principles, and sought for the real truth.

While, in an article entitled *The Concept of Formula in the Study of Popular Literature*, John G. Cawelti, a prominent figure in popular literary cultural studies, referring Northrop Frye's note, wrote that: "the western and the spy story can both be seen as embodiments of the archetypal pattern of the hero's quest which Frye discusses under the general heading of the mythos of romance" (Cawelti, 1972:7)

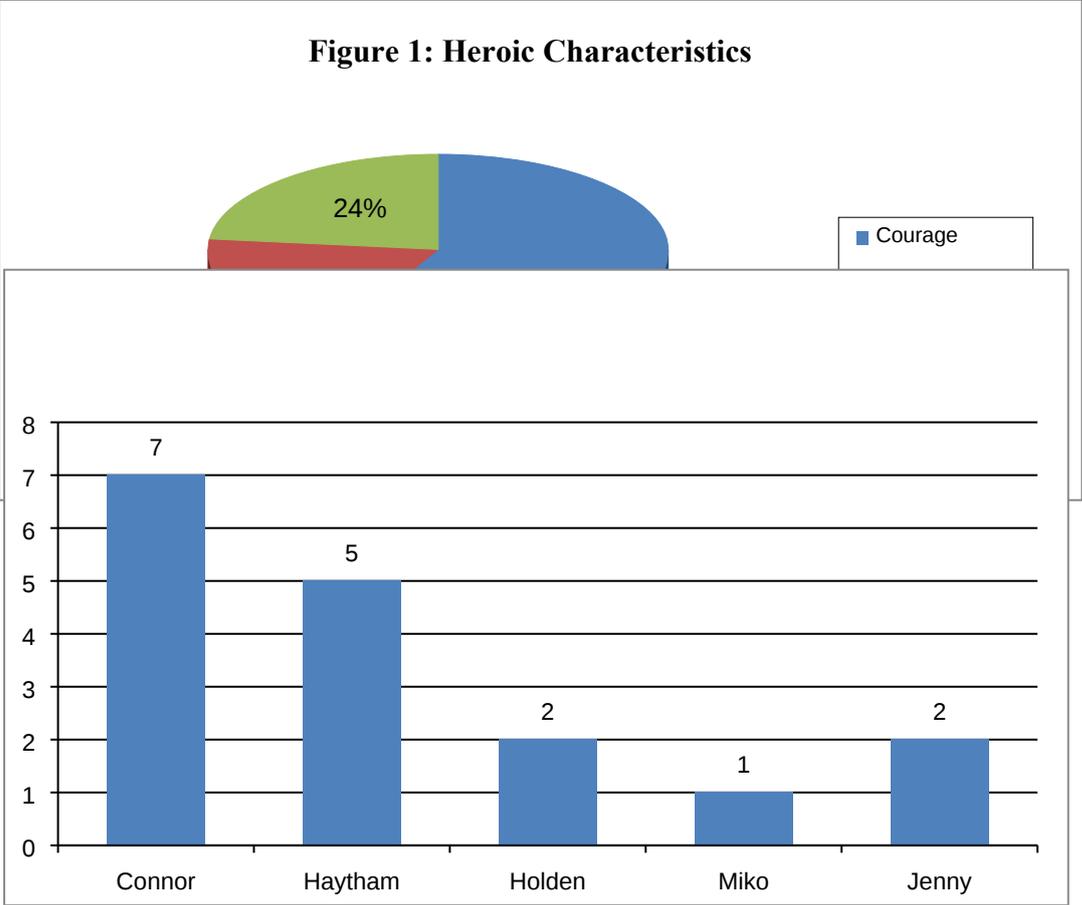
In popular literature works, patterns and formula which are derived from archetype or myths combined and synchronized with more specific cultural conventions. When the formula are repeated, and established, which means when they become widely used, those patterns will be more common to be called genres. This is also similarly suggested by John G. Cawelti when he wrote:

Formulas, however, are much more specific: Westerns must have a certain kind of, setting, a particular cast of characters, and follow a limited number of lines of action. A western that does not take place in the West, near the frontiers, at a point in history when social order and anarchy are in tension, and does not involve some form of pursuit, is simply not a Western. A detective story that does not involve the solution of a mysterious crime is not a detective story (Cawelti, 1972:7).

There are myths and stereotypes in the characterization of a hero. The most common is the depiction of a courageous hero, which make a coward hero almost impossible. But this might not be true for a coward winner. For instance, if it is considered that in "The Assassination of Jesse James by the Coward Robert Ford" written by Ron Hansen placed Robert Ford as the victorious guy at the end of the story, the protagonist must be Jesse James whose end was so tragic.

In *Assassin's Creed* plot, we can see a common typical "pattern" of a tragic hero which has been very common, and other characteristics such as mysterious identity, fate-driven character, and a tragic end. To some extent, *Oedipus Rex* by Sophocles is incomparable with Bowden's *Assassin's Creed* in that the former is one of the greatest and the most widely-read classic stories, whereas the latter is merely an adaptation of its video game version, a mass market-oriented work.

In the end, based on the respondents in this *Assassin's Creed* study, it is believed that courage is considered to be the closest quality to heroism, compared with perseverance and idealism, while the characteristic of betrayer is perceived as the most contrast from heroism. We can see that the myth and stereotype, previously mentioned, can have influence to consumer's judgment and opinion.



Interestingly, Connor becomes the most favorite character of *Assassin's Creed* instead of Haytham Kenway. This might be caused by Connor's side which is dominated by members of Templars, while Haytham's group is dominated by members of Assassin.

Figure 2: Most Favorite Character

Connor is perceived by the respondents to be one who has the most description and characteristics of heroism. This is quite weird yet surprising because Connor actually is not the protagonist of *Assassin's Creed III* or its novel adaptation, *Assassin's Creed: Forsaken*. However, there are also respondents who choose Haytham instead of Connor, for they might finally sympathize Haytham after being killed by Connor, and in that scene Connor seems to believe that he is right when he kills Haytham. Are they also going to choose Laius instead of Oedipus? This is very interesting and is in line with Franco and Zimbardo's previously quoted argument that "heroes of one era may prove to be villains in another timewhen controverting evidence emerges" (Franco & Zimbardo, 2011:1). This might be able to become a question for another research hereafter.

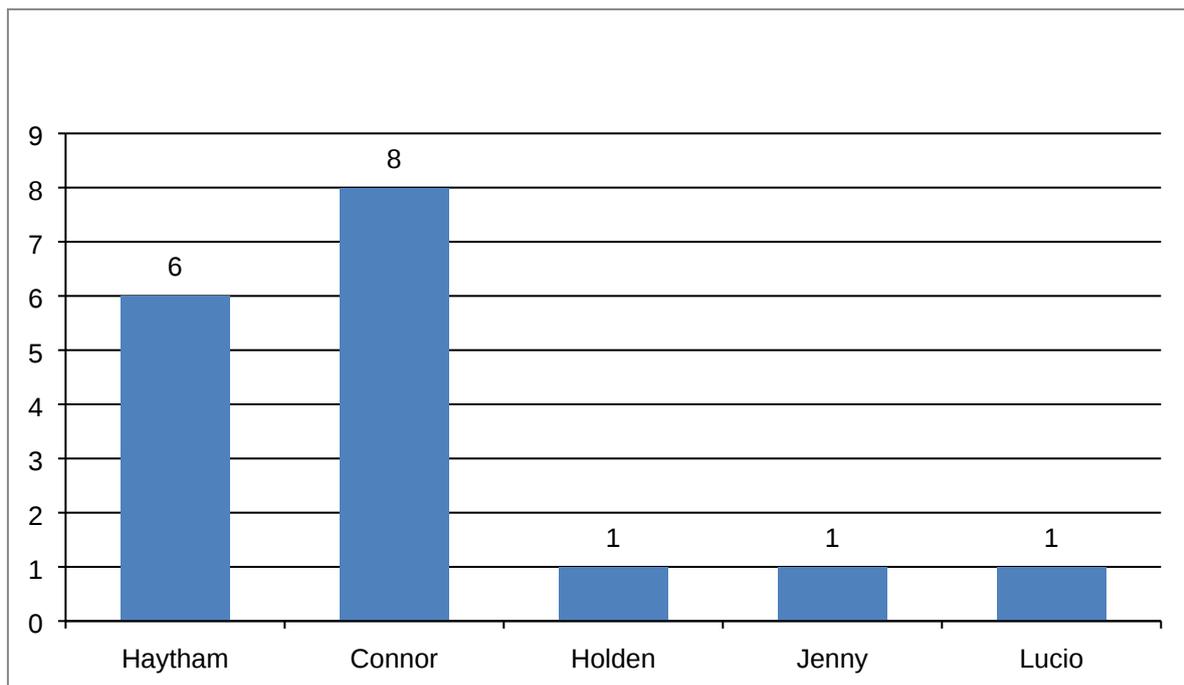
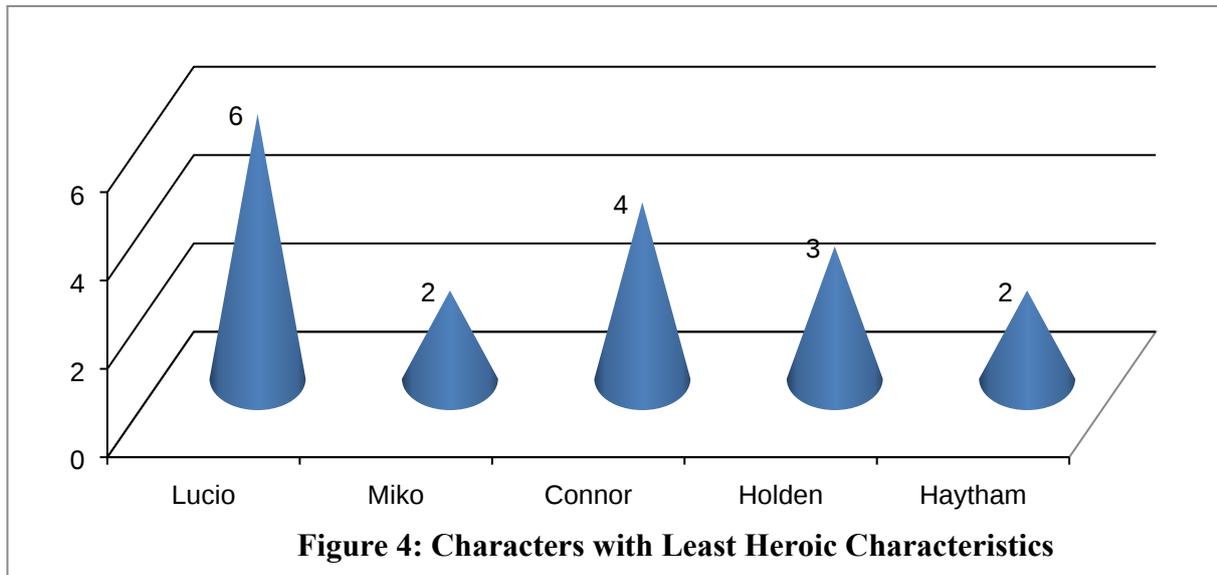
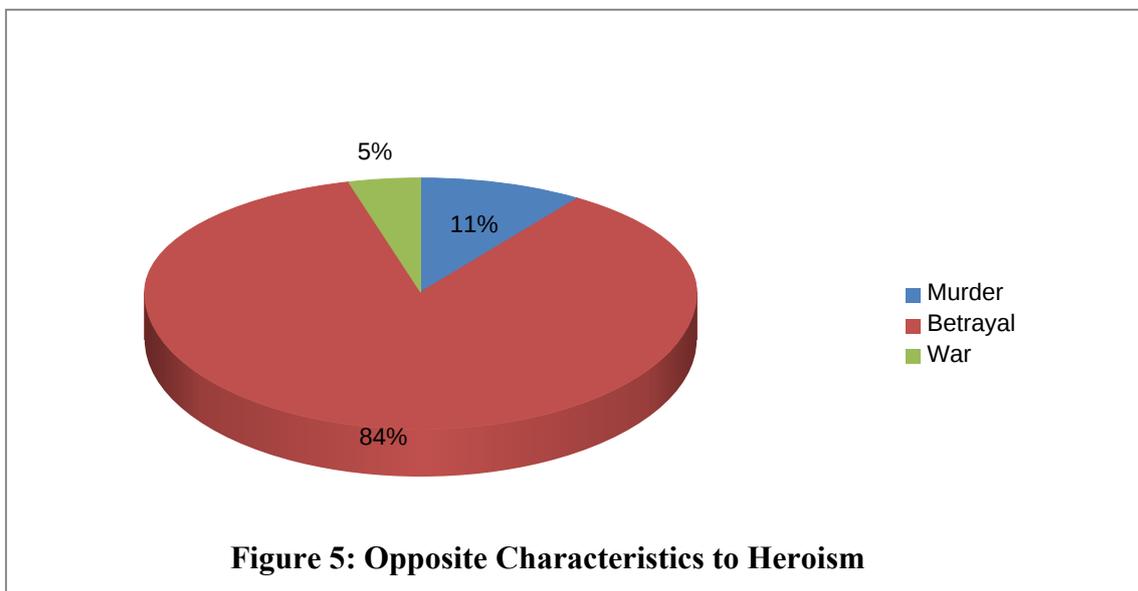


Figure 3: Characters with Most Heroism

It has been stated before that Connor is not the protagonist of the story, since the plot of *Assassin's Creed III*, or its novel adaptation, revolves in Haytham. However, it is clear in the story that Connor is the one who is depicted as "the good guy". Meanwhile, Lucio is perceived by the respondents as the least heroic character. This is matched with the researcher first assumption.



There are murders, betrayal, and war chosen to be distinguishing factors because all the three are involved in the plot of the Assassin’s Creed III. In this case, 84% of the respondents state that betrayal is the opposite of heroism. Haytham is betrayed and he wants retaliation. He also pursues the real truths, because has been wrong in trusting the make-believe or fake ones.



It is probably not so surprising that most of the respondents (88%) state that Assassin’s Creed is violent story. But it is quite interesting that most of them (71%) also state that

Figure 6: Heroism often Involves Violences

there will often be violence to create and produce the characteristic of heroism. This might be caused by the frequent violent actions performed by their favorite characters, either Connor or Haytham, that prompt their subjectivity in seeing the violence.

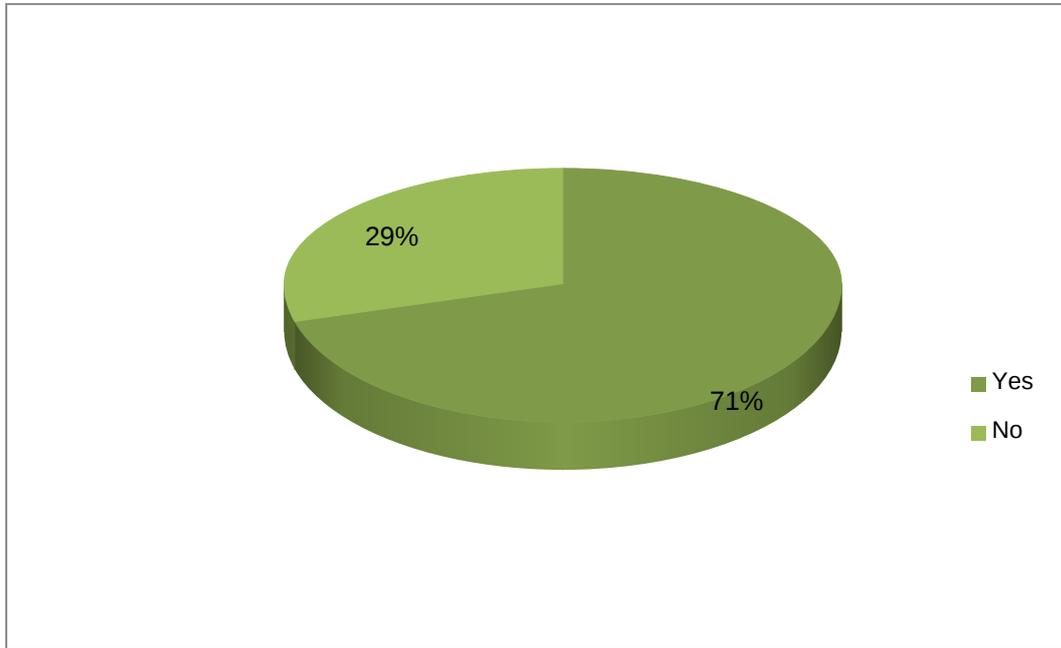


Figure 6: Heroism often Involves Violences

Even 12 % of them say that violence is “a must” in creating heroism. However, there are 88% of the respondents who disagree that heroism always involves violence.

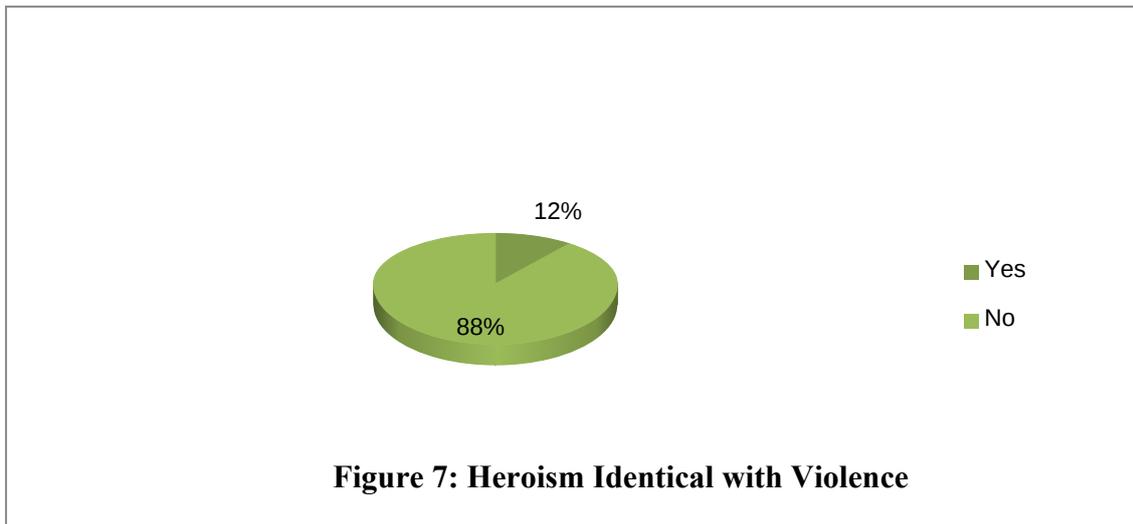


Figure 7: Heroism Identical with Violence

Furthermore there are 76 % of the respondents who state that death of a character will heighten the possibility of him or her to be called hero, or to be seen as having the characteristics of a hero. This relation between death and heroism might be interesting to study and become the next research question.

3. CONCLUSION

In spite of some limitations of this study, one of which is the fact that it involves only limited number of respondents (17 respondents), this study has been conducted successfully. The researcher believes even though the number of respondent is not big enough, the results obtained by this study is quite valid because it aims at video gamers, who know exactly about video gaming and story of *Assassin's Creed*. Some of them have played this for years. From the descriptive data obtained during this study, it can be concluded that regardless its violent and sadistic characteristics, the video game *Assassin's Creed* is still believed to be able to give a positive lessons to the young generation. Comments from the official website and social media claiming that *Assassin's Creed* has given terrible impacts to the youngsters might not be entirely correct. Most respondents believe that the value of heroism can be found in *Assassin's Creed*. Therefore people should not just this video game as causing teenage violence and other delinquency.

In conclusion, the findings of this study are 1) courage is perceived to be the closest quality to heroism 2) a betrayer has the least heroism. Connor is still the most favorite character in the *Assassin's Creed III*, though he is not the protagonist in this story, 3) Connor, not Haytham, is the most heroic character, 4) Lucio has the least heroism, 5) 71% of the respondents state that there can be violence in heroism and 6) 12% of the respondents believe that violence always occur in heroism. The next researches are encouraged to use more number of respondents or take other *Assassin's Creed* sequels.

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