

Part I

Producing Religion

“Which Choices Lead Game Makers to
Use Religion in their Videogames?”

2. Making Religion at Ubisoft

Abstract

This chapter takes a look into the offices of Ubisoft Montréal, which is with 3500 staff members the biggest game studio currently in the world, and the main place of development for *Assassin's Creed* during most of the franchise's lifespan. This chapter draws on 22 interviews with *Assassin's Creed* developers, including its original creator (Patrice Désilets) and most of its directors to programmers, artists, writers and others who have worked on a best-selling series that thrives on the mystery of religion throughout history. Doing so, it argues that commercial interests drive a corporation to create a nostalgic "marketable religion" that commodifies belief by reducing it to an acceptable version for the largest possible audience. Five editors and a handful of decision-makers lead thousands of workers globally to make a digital religion without beliefs.

Keywords: production studies, cultural industries, commodification, *Assassin's Creed*, historical mystery, sci-fi perennialism

Ninety-five million players have waged fictional Holy War against the Templars, playing as Muslim Assassins or their various modern-day equivalents in the *Assassin's Creed* games. As noted in the introduction, it is increasingly likely that this relatively young audience is mostly secular. Yet Ubisoft Montréal's *Assassin's Creed* series (AC) is one of the best-selling games of the recent decade, even though its premise and settings are religious through and through. Ubisoft is not a religious organization: its Montréal studio is the biggest game studio in the world, and they are driven (presumably) by profit, not ideology.

So, who decides how and why to make religious content for a 21st century audience? To answer these questions, this chapter is based on 22 expert interviews with a mix of famous and anonymous game developers who were involved in the start and continuation of the AC franchise since 2007. The analysis reveals among "whom" decision-making is distributed in the

cultural industries, how that leads to certain worldviews and aesthetics being represented and why Ubisoft's version of "marketable religion" comes to be produced for a global audience.

Ubisoft's Religious Franchise

If modernism and technological calculation lead to a disenchantment of the world, as sociologists like Marx and Weber suggest, it is surprising to see the videogame industry rely so heavily on religion. Why, in other words, does one of the most advanced technological industries in the world sell magical worlds full of gods and religious organizations to millions of secular(izing) players? Research on videogames and religion has indeed observed that it is odd to have religious tropes appear so dominantly in games like *World of Warcraft*, *Final Fantasy* or *Zelda* (Bainbridge, 2013; Campbell & Grieve, 2014; Perreault, 2012). However, one recurring example rises above these, both in the literature as well as for players and online communities themselves, based on previous research (de Wildt & Aupers, 2019, 2020): Ubisoft's *Assassin's Creed*. Souvik Mukherjee writes that "Ubisoft's understanding of the religious differences is important in shaping the players' attitude to the game" (2016, p. 393), while theologian Frank Bosman goes so far as to claim that "in the *Assassin's Creed* game series, developer Ubisoft reinterprets traditional Christian mythology" (Bosman, 2016, p. 63). Reza Sattarzadeh Nowbari adds that "in spite of the game developers' assertion of having had a culturally divergent group for producing the game and the lack of any sort of dogmatism," a reference to the game's opening disclaimer,¹ "it could be argued that the game is full of messages referring to the very present day and deciphering these messages can lead to a better understanding of this game" (2012, p. 207).

What such readings have in common, firstly, is that "developer Ubisoft" is personified into a monolithic entity with underlying intentions. And secondly, that these intentions can be deciphered or understood, leading to a better understanding of the game. But who is this monolithic developer, and how – as indeed Nowbari suggests – can knowing Ubisoft and the choices and cultural backgrounds that led to the *AC* series aid in understanding

1 Since the first game in 2007, the first screen displays a disclaimer reading "Inspired by historical events and characters. This work of fiction was designed, developed and produced by a multicultural team of various religious faiths and beliefs." Starting with *Syndicate* in 2015, an addition reads "various beliefs, sexual orientations and gender identities."

how religion ends up in a 21st century industry? While previous research has looked into how religion is represented in games (Bosman, 2015; de Wildt, 2019; de Wildt et al., 2018; Wiemker & Wysocki, 2014) and what players do with religion in games (Aupers & Schaap, 2015; de Wildt & Aupers, 2019, 2020), researchers have rarely asked the question *why* game developers choose to use religion in their games, and how they come to make such decisions. In other words, while people have looked at games and their consumption by players, they have seldom looked at their production. This chapter, by contrast, asks the questions: *Who* decides to put religion into popular best-selling videogames? and *How* are these decisions made and *why*?

Methodology

To answer these questions, I conducted fieldwork in Montréal, consisting predominantly of two types of interviews, all with workers at Ubisoft's Montréal studio, the lead studio for *AC* (with the exception of *Syndicate* and *Odyssey*). One type of interview was anonymous, with various workers from all different branches of game development (programmers, game designers, level designers etc.). These anonymous participants were sought out to compare their experiences (shared from the safety of anonymity) with named interviewees' accounts. In the same period I conducted expert interviews with a key informant in the industry and 16 named participants: various creative directors, writers, directors and lead designers. The reason they are not anonymous is twofold: first, their name attests to their central importance and authority in the process of making these games, and thus the value of their insights. Second, it is difficult to keep directors and lead designers anonymous: they are by definition famed game developers at the top of their career, directing hundreds of workers over multiple years. As such, their names are credited at the end of games, as they are in the list of participants shown in table 1.

In total, 56 developers were approached across the spectrum of producers, creative directors, writers, game designers, level and mission designers, programmers, artists, animators, audio engineers, quality assurance, marketing and so on. In the end, 22 semi-structured interviews were conducted (39%), with 51% non-responders and 7% who declined. Participants are of various genders, races, beliefs and sexualities – as indeed the “disclaimer” announces – although the majority of participants was male, white and agnostic if not vocally atheist. Many of those who wanted

Table 1. List of (former) Ubisoft Informants and Participants

Name	Role(s)	Games										
0	Osama Dorias	Informant										
Other Ubisoft games; general Montréal industry insider; key informant.												
		AC1	AC2	Broth.	Rev.	AC3	AC4	Rogue	Unity	Syn.	Origins	Odyssey
1	Patrice Désilets	Original Creator, Creative Director	✓	✓	✓							
2	Jean Guesdon	Head of Brand, Creative Director, Producer	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
3	Alexandre Amancio	Creative Director, Writer, Artist				✓			✓			
4	Alex Hutchinson	Creative Director					✓					
5	Maxime Durand	Brand Historian				✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
6	Aymar Azaïzia	Brand Content Manager, Production		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
7	Anon-brand	Brand, Production, Marketing	Seven games (anonymized)									
8	Russell Lees	Writer					✓		✓	✓	✓	
9	Mustapha Mahrach	Writer, Level Design Director, Mission Director		✓		✓		✓			✓	
10	Anon-writer	Writer	Four games (anonymized)									
11	David Chateaufneuf	Level Design Director	✓									
12	Gaelec Simard	Game Director, Mission Director, Lead Level design	✓	✓	✓		✓		✓			

Name	Role(s)	Games										
		AC1	AC2	Broth.	Rev.	AC3	AC4	Rogue	Unity	Syn.	Origins	Odyssey
13	Nicolas Guérin				✓				✓	✓		✓
14	Steven Masters	✓		✓		✓						
15	Anon-level1	Five games (anonymized)										
16	Gregory Belacel	✓			✓							
17	Anon-level2	Three games (anonymized)										
18	Maxime Ciccotti								✓	✓		
19	Anon-mission	One game (anonymized)										
20	Anon-tech	One game (anonymized)										
21	Gilles Beloeil		✓	✓	✓	✓			✓	✓	✓	✓
22	Maxime Faucher		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓	✓

Note: The ordering is based on the “Game Crediting Guidelines” of the International Game Developers’ Association (IGDA, 2014).

to remain anonymous and those who declined cited job vulnerability, most of whom were either women, of religious minorities, or (junior) workers on recent games; the reasons for these, in a male-dominated and highly precarious industry (IGDA, 2018), are likely understandable but outside of the scope of this book.

Interviews were semi-structured, conducted around Ubisoft’s main offices in Montréal, and conducted predominantly in English – with parts in French and Dutch, quotes translated where so. These interviews were conducted in the context of a four-month-long ethnography in Montréal’s Mile End, with much (off the record) fieldwork in and around the offices of Ubisoft, and the companies of ex-workers (notably Bethesda, Electronic Arts, Panache, Red Barrels, Reflector, Thunder Lotus, Typhoon and Warner Bros. Montréal), Siboire, the Waverley, and all along the Boulevard Saint-Laurent. Second, I was given access to some internal documents, most notably various versions of what was called the “Brand Bible,” under conditions that they be quoted but not reproduced. Finally, these methods are supported by a study of the primary texts, including the main games (table 2), and their accompanying paraludic materials, including manuals, texts, player-made wikis, documentaries, making-of videos, short films, comic books and post-mortems of the development process. All data were gathered under informed consent, as well as non-disclosure agreement contracts where preferred.

Table 2. The Settings and Periods of the Main Assassin’s Creed Games

Setting	Period	Title	Abbreviation	Release
Third Crusade	1191 AD	<i>Assassin’s Creed</i>	AC1	2007
Italian Renaissance	1476–1499 AD	<i>Assassin’s Creed II</i>	AC2	2009
	1499–1507 AD	<i>Assassin’s Creed: Brotherhood</i>	Broth.	2010
	1511–1512 AD	<i>Assassin’s Creed: Revelations</i>	Rev.	2011
Colonial era	1754–1783 AD	<i>Assassin’s Creed III</i>	AC3	2012
	1715–1722 AD	<i>Assassin’s Creed IV: Black Flag</i>	AC4	2013
	1752–1776 AD	<i>Assassin’s Creed: Rogue</i>	Rogue	2014
French Revolution	1776–1800 AD	<i>Assassin’s Creed: Unity</i>	Unity	
Victorian era	1868 AD	<i>Assassin’s Creed: Syndicate</i>	Syn.	2015
Ptolemaic Egypt	49–43 BC	<i>Assassin’s Creed: Origins</i>	Origins	2017
Peloponnesian War	431–404 BC	<i>Assassin’s Creed: Odyssey</i>	Odyssey	2018
Viking Expansion	872–878 AD	<i>Assassin’s Creed: Valhalla</i>	Valhalla	2020

Branding Religion

The *AC* series is known to 95 million players and numerous academics (e.g., Bosman, 2016; de Wildt, 2019; El Nasr et al., 2008; Mukherjee, 2016; Nowbari, 2012) as a game steeped in religion. Briefly put, its titular protagonists are the “Assassins,” a historical secret society that was introduced in the first game as an Islamic order that fights the Templar crusaders trying to take over the Holy Land. Each of the following games stages a different religious or (later, increasingly) political conflict – to the background of which the mystery of “those who came before” is revealed: a society of gods like Minerva, Jupiter and Juno to whom the Assassin–Templar conflict can be traced back to the creation of the first humans, Adam and Eve, whose powerful “Apple of Eden” is the main object over which the two factions fight throughout human history.

From the outset, it became clear that a large number of people are involved in making and continuing this trans-historical story of religious conflict. Hundreds to thousands of people work on a single game for years – over 4600 people were credited on 2018’s *Assassin’s Creed: Odyssey*. How does that work and who decides to put religion in a product like that? As Nicolas Guérin puts it:

It’s a big machine. For every AAA game, specifically at Ubisoft, teams are very big. We’re talking about teams of more than 600 people in one studio, and then you have many other studios amounting to around a thousand people working on a thing, which is *massive*. Plus many levels of approval and political complications around decision-making and all that stuff. It’s not you know, that the process is simple like “we think of this,” and we do it. That’s not how it works. But there was a general direction by Patrice way back when. (Guérin)

Others, too, kept referring back to one specific figure: Patrice Désilets, often along with lead writer Corey May. About the iconic “Leap of Faith,” *AC*’s original level director, David Châteauneuf, said “the Leap of Faith really carries the *signature of Patrice*.” Gregory Belacel, a junior game designer also on *AC*, specifies: “So I came up with the towers, Steven Masters did the combat, Pat Plourde led ‘presentation,’ but the Animus and things like that, *everything was Patrice’s idea*.” This includes the religious focus of the premise, described by Guérin as “very much Patrice, that concept of religion [...] and *AC* took a touchy subject! It took Muslim characters fighting Christian characters, which was *bold*. It was kind of a stance that Patrice

wanted to take on things.” Jean Guesdon emphasizes that “Patrice will tell you, he is the ‘father of Assassin’s Creed’” – making Guesdon, modestly put, its adoptive father.

When asked, Patrice Désilets confirms his role as originator: “I am the father of *Assassin’s Creed*” – albeit quickly followed by a core team of like-minded developers. “Sure, it’s eventually everybody. But the core, the flash [of the original idea]² was me. Corey was writing the two other Princes so Corey was not even on the team. Jade was still working at EA. And so I was there!” Specifically,

It was on the corner of Saint-Joseph and Chambord. In the little house there, a little apartment on the first floor where I was asked. “Okay, yeah, you have to come up with a *Prince of Persia* game.” And I’m like, “What the fuck do I do? I just finished one. What do I what do I do?” *And I came up with Assassin’s Creed!* (Désilets)

Désilets’ concept was a product of several things, including “gut feeling,” “Zeitgeist” and some direction by marketing: “in December [2003] I met with Sebastien Puel who [...] was a marketing guy for *Sands of Time* and he said, ‘Oh, fantasy doesn’t work really well these days. The next big thing is going to be historical.’” Reading up on the subject, what was supposed to be a sequel to the *Prince of Persia* franchise, became a game about the historical (and current) religious society of the Nizari Ismaili as described in “a little book from the *J’ai Lu* collection, a book about secret societies. Inside there was a bunch of them, but the first one was the myth of the Old Man of the Mountain and it was like a 10-page summary of the *hashashin*” (Désilets).

The concept was developed alongside a personal crisis of faith, fuelled by doing research for the game about the *hashashin*:

I turned thirty – this crisis of like, “What is life, what am I doing, what is the purpose of all this?” And then, it totally disappeared while making *Assassin’s Creed*, and I’m like, “No! Fundamentally I do not believe!” [...] What really pissed me off was the church! I really had a problem with church.

I always loved the supernatural story of Jesus when I was a kid, when you watched [the film] *Jésus de Nazareth*, it’s beautiful and it’s like it’s magical. There’s magic tricks which are called miracles. But then I figured out it’s

2 More common in Québécois French than in English, “j’ai eu un flash” is idiomatic for a sudden realization, a flash of genius.

also historical. And then I started to read and because I did *Assassin's Creed* and the Crusade theme... It's really about the dogma. *Assassin's Creed* is about dogma. It's against dogma. [...] When I found out about the assassins' motto, their creed, from the books I read about the *hashashin* and the Ismaili – that's what they still believe now. That “nothing is true and everything is permitted” and that's basically... how I live my life now, too!

This almost militant sentiment against institutionalized religion was broadly shared by the team. Growing up in the same culture and time period, the initial core team – Désilets, Corey May, Alex Drouin, Philippe Morin, David Châteauneuf, Claude Langlais, Nicolas Cantin etc. – “Except for Corey, roughly put we're all French Canadian with the same background, born into a Catholic family. Then suddenly that culture and faith just disappeared. [...] Of those people, nobody would say they're religious. So we were all in the same boat” (Désilets). They are all children of their parents' *révolution tranquille*, making them Québec's first generation to choose, for instance, between “religion” (formerly a mandatory course) or “morality” in school, while the province shed its Catholic identity and church influence on the state.

The goal is not to give a complete taxonomy of what cultural influences ended up in *Assassin's Creed* through Désilets (“Zeitgeist,” “the culture in Montréal around the time,” “the *Lost* TV series,” “*The Da Vinci Code*,” among other things). However, the fitting conclusion so far is that far from a monolithic corporate black box, the original vision of *Assassin's Creed* stems from a single identifiable person with very specific (even hyper-local) experiences with and ideas about religion.

However, what started as a specific idea by an identifiable individual shaped up to be a successful game, and then a franchise – and this necessitated changes to the “controversial topic” of the Crusades, especially in what was still the Bush era, “hence the disclaimer of the first game” (Guérin). The disclaimer – “that was Jade [Raymond]'s concern a lot. She was afraid of the pressure of the corporation, [because of her] being the producer. To be careful with the subject matter and make sure that nobody gets pissed off, a corporation will do that. It's normal – they're on the market!” (Désilets).

Assassin's Creed had to become a brand that is “fun for everybody,” because

the thing about religion is that when you're representing a character's belief, you try to do it in the correct way. But it's a videogame, so we know it's worldwide. There are a lot of people that will play it, and we don't want the game to just talk to some people and not others. We want to

get through to the majority and it's a difficult exercise, because we also want to be true to the historical era – what those people, those characters believed in at their time period. (Mahrach)

As the franchise was codified into a reproducible, continued formula – it counts 21 games, four movies, nine novels, 12 comics, and other media as of writing – Désilets parted from the project shortly after *AC2*. While the second game still involved some controversy (as Steven Masters put it, “*AC2* is in the Renaissance, so *of course we're going to end up punching the Pope*”), the franchise was later cleaned up to be “fun for everybody.”

After *AC2* in 2009, different creative directors – traditionally the lead figure responsible for what is made by hundreds of developers on a game – take on iterations of the franchise simultaneously, so that in the 10 years after, 19 more games were released. I was able to interview all the creative directors ever to work on *Assassin's Creed* in Montréal, and got a portrait of a heavily safe-guarded creative process, which participants and I came to call the “Marketing–Brand–Editorial” sandwich. Around each part of developing a yearly *AC* release (from game design and writing to all the satellite studios making assets in China etc.), there are three teams that work on all the games. Marketing provides the base of what players expect from a setting (say, “focus groups tell us that Vikings will be popular this year, and they want Nordic gods”); the Brand team protects consistency across the series (its signature “flavour,” if you will); and Editorial's approval tops each game off to appeal to the broadest possible market (figure 1).

The main architect of the *AC* brand's codification into a coherent and reproducible formula was Jean Guesdon, who started as Production Coordinator late in *AC1*'s development, and ended up building the “Brand team” that codified the *AC* formula, replacing Désilets' vision with a “Brand Bible.” As Désilets explains,

I got one last meeting with Ubi. It was at my place. Jean [Guesdon], Corey [May] and myself. And we established all the rules, all the big dadada. And then I left a month and a half after that. (Patrice)

The big “dadada,” in Guesdon's words came down to a set of tools and rules to make sure every media product, especially the games, are held together as consistently “on Brand.”

My role on the brand team was to actually explain what *AC* was about, the rules that needed to be followed by others. When we started to do novels,

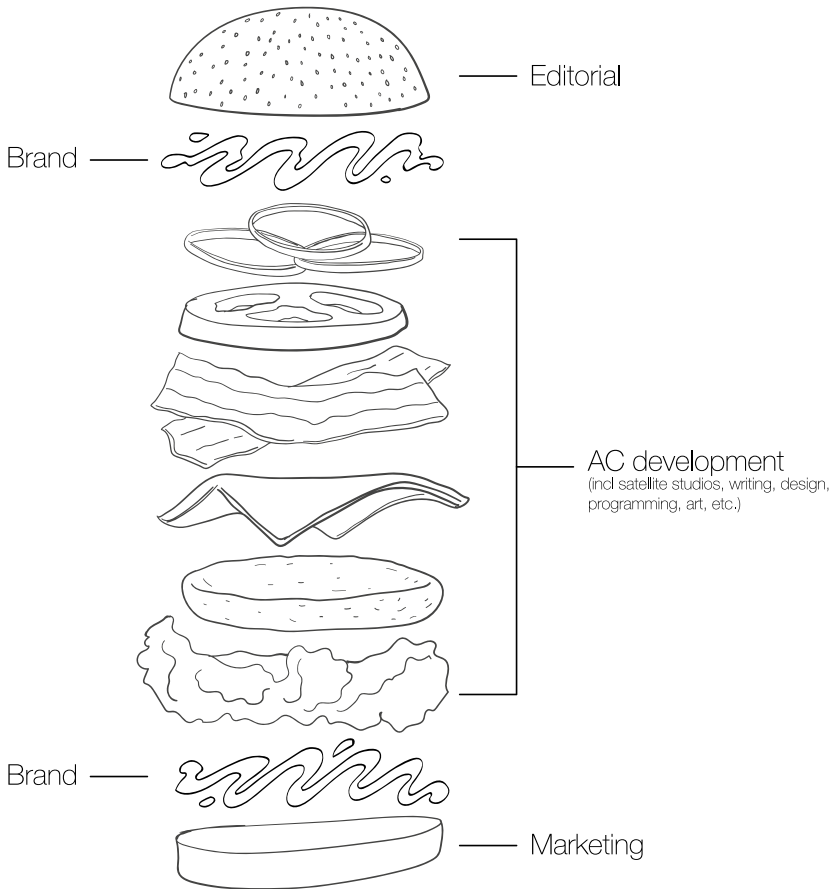


Figure 1. Around each part of developing a yearly AC release, Marketing provides the base, the Brand team guarantees a consistent, recognizable “flavour,” and Editorial’s approval tops the game off for release. (Based on illustration by Siripattana Sangduen/Shutterstock.com, edited by Wiegier Jonker.)

comic books, short movies etc., I theorized and made some communication tools to explain the limitations. [...] For example, on our positioning in terms of belief and spirituality, the fact that we don’t want to take sides. Trying to portray both sides as grey. So there is theoretically no good or bad. There are two different things and they fight for what they think is good for human society. This kind of stuff. (Guesdon)

This new “positioning in terms of belief and spirituality” is a vital change from Désilets’ original anti-dogmatic view on religion, in which the original game’s Templar crusaders represent an institutionalized Christian status quo

that wants to deceive and control the population, or what an anonymous member of the Brand team (for almost 10 years) called the Templars' "opium for the masses" (Anon-Brand).

Second, Marketing provides the base of each new *Assassin's Creed* game. Based on focus groups and feedback, creative directors are given a setting, story outline and one or two new game mechanics to introduce. Alexandre Amancio reconstructs what it means to direct an *AC* game within this new structure, in which "they had already started *Unity*. [...] They knew it was the French Revolution and they knew it was in Paris. And that's about it, and that there was going to be co-op. [...] So it was like a big jigsaw puzzle. That was my job, trying to figure it out." In most cases, Marketing already had a list of themes – either from previous pitches or market research – and went on from there.

GUESDON: A setting like Egypt is very loaded with expectations, when it comes to Gods etc., in terms of pop culture and entertainment, and so we know that some players come to the game with this kind of expectations. So, how do we provide them with experiences like that?

INTERVIEWER: How do you know what players expect?

G: Well, we have a Marketing team that look at [that]. How is Egypt represented in entertainment? And so we just look at global things and you quite soon realize that it's fantasized a lot. [...] You have some focus groups and [ask] people about Egypt as a setting for an *Assassin's Creed* game.

Developers from across the franchise – from the Brand team, the core team (including directors), to junior developers – echoed that, informed by Marketing's conclusions on "what people's perception of a period is," they then knew "that's the game they have to make" [Anon-Brand]).

Finally, the process is topped off by Editorial, "a team of five people who defend the franchise atmosphere" (Ciccotti). This small group of people "at the very top has more influence over [the representation of the] worldview than anyone else" (Lees), and the way this is done defines – rather than any personal ideology or faith – how (and why) religion or anything else is represented in a certain way. Editorial was variously described as "staying away from controversy" (Anon-level2), "not stepping on toes" (Azaïzia), "and making sure it doesn't offend anyone" (Simard). In the end, "business makes the call" (Azaïzia), and they do so from Paris, where Ubisoft was started as

a family company by the Guillemot brothers in 1986. In Creative Director Alex Hutchinson's words:

If Yves [Guillemot] came down and said from France, "You're absolutely cutting the hood...." Well, he owns the company so that's [it], we're cutting the hood. [...] We do green light meetings in Paris where you have to present the characters and to present the story and the executives will weigh in. So Serge Hascoët, who is the CCO [Chief Creative Officer] of the company, has overruled settings in the past that certain people wanted and just said he doesn't find them interesting – but that's his prerogative.

Hence, "Editorial" in Paris has the final say, often erring on the side of safety. The whole process, from Marketing, to core team (led by a creative director and their producer), to the eventual product of nearly thousand employees spread across the main studio (usually Montréal) and its satellites across the world, is kept in check in its various stages by Editorial. Throughout this "stage-gate" process, Editorial are thus the final arbiter in a process that "defers to the market and the largest possible audience" (Masters), in order to check whether Marketing, Brand team, and the individual game's developers are producing something that sells.

Within the Marketing–Brand–Editorial sandwich, creative work on individual AC games has clear parameters. Writer Russell Lees ascribes the resulting religion-for-everyone to marketing logic, stating that "working with religion on a scale for a world audience means you can't write anybody off" (Lees). It is from this process of calculated inclusiveness that AC's marketable representation of religion arises as twofold: nostalgic and perennialist.

A. Nostalgic Mystery of History

5. Pivotal moments in Human History are the basis of our Franchise. Assassin's Creed will always take a revisionist approach on real events. We'll use historical gaps to create our story.

– "10 Commandments," *Assassin's Creed Brand Bible 1.0* (2010)

AC's marketable religion is nostalgic: placing religion in history, and inviting 21st century (secular) players into this mystery. At its core, AC uses historical periods to create new games within its franchise. The idea is to "make something out of the dark corners of history, from an occultist point of view, which is linked to the whole conspiracy between the Templars and the Assassins but from a historical perspective" (Guérin). When asked why

religious conflict has mostly been central to these dark corners of history, many echoed Brand historian Maxime Durand's explanation that religion "was [not only] the thematic at the beginning of the creation of the game, but *also* it's been part of very important human history for the last thousands of years and it's been very, very important" (Durand).

Beside the sheer quantity of historical struggles and settings to work with, what is effective about religion? What "works" for game developers? Religious elements are recognizable to large amounts of people: the biblical Apple of Eden became the "story MacGuffin" because "the Apple of Eden speaks to people. People are *familiar* with it" (Belacel), and it was put in a place that Lead Level Director David Châteauneuf described enthusiastically as "a secret place, a *mystic place* that doesn't exist. [We based it on] Petra. We wanted it to be like Al Khaeznek but under Solomon's Temple. It's a known location, and most people would know about Solomon." Religious elements are furthermore "mystical," to the point that "religion gives 'oomph' to something simple. *Gravitas!*" (Guérin). It offers "mystery locations" (Simard) and "people are easily hooked by its magic. [...] Its symbolism resonates with modern societies" (Guesdon). In the more writerly words of Russell Lees, "religious settings have dramatic, inherently interesting, visually sumptuous qualities."

When describing a scene in *Unity*, in which the Assassins' initiation ritual takes place in a more secular time (the French Revolution), Creative Director Amancio explains how and why they stuck to religious aesthetics:

the aesthetics of candles, of stone, of hoods... these are universal things that have existed for a long time. So they have a certain – they radiate a certain sense of awe and mystery. [...] So we played on that. That there's something to be said about the flickering orange light, right, it speaks to something that's inside us all. That's very, very ancient right? (Amancio)

Quintessentially, by offering religion through the "historical tourism" of *AC* (Russell), religion becomes something more recognizable to everyone – no matter where they are from – because it is ancient and mysterious for a 21st century audience: "from the old world, something very cryptic – old religions like Catholicism have their own mystique" (Anon-level2). By using "history as a playground" (Masters), *AC* offers a nostalgic way for everyone to relate back to the "awe and mystery" of religion that several developers (including Désilets, Russell, and Guérin) each compared to Dan Brown's work:

The Da Vinci Code, It's the same thing. It's like religion has that power of being mystical at the same time as [being] a source of inspiration to many

people. It wields that occult power. Dan Brown's success is because it's so easy twisting hidden meaning into religion in history, and people love to have that feeling that, "Ooh, we're playing with something big, something important." (Guérin)

B. Sci-Fi Perennialism

7. *Assassin's Creed is based on Technology – Nothing is Magical. Everything has a plausible technological explanation.*

– "10 Commandments," *Assassin's Creed Brand Bible 1.0* (2010)

AC's marketable religion is furthermore perennial: it connects religion across cultures and periods to one underlying abstract struggle that continues into players' own world, now and here. While *AC1*'s initial Third Crusade conflict is between the Knights Templars and the *hashashin* in the Holy Land, 1191 AD; *AC2* is about the Borgia papal authorities and the secular Assassins in Renaissance Italy; *Unity* places those factions on two sides of the French Revolution; and *Origins* takes place 2000 years before the Crusades, centring on the "Hidden Ones" versus the "Order of the Ancients," and so on. As an anonymous member of the Brand team explains:

Pivotal historical moments are often driven by religion. It's an important part of human history. But wherever the Templars are, it's just that they're located in a place of power. They're not always Christian – they just occupy the current status quo. And in other periods they will be called different things: the Order of the Ancients, Abstergo etc. (Anon-brand)

Whether religious or, in some periods, secular, *AC*'s struggle is perennial: "order" versus "freedom," "status quo" versus "resistance," and thus relevant across places and periods, and accessible to players from all cultures. The "perennial perspective," as popularized by Aldous Huxley in 1945, suggests that underneath the differences between religious beliefs, vocabularies and rituals of different cultures and periods, there is a universal underlying mystery (Huxley, 1945). In the case of *AC*, the franchise presents a pan-historical and global conflict of which "the historical context shapes which form the conflict takes" (Amancio). Central to this fascination is a universal mystery, relatable to anyone, in Anon-level2's: "Old religions like Catholicism have their own mystique: using it for a game is so perfect, whether it is a Gregorian chant, something Byzantine or Indian, players everywhere will go, 'Oh, this is mystical, something fantastic.'"

This search for the underlying mysteries of history is at the core of the franchise, and it is an approach that Guérin in his interview called “a cabbalistic approach of finding hidden meaning in religion across history, creating this sort of tertiary reading of things.” Guesdon similarly compared the brand’s strategy to “tapping into this rampant culture of religious symbolism, of esotericism,” calling it

the conspiracy theory of religions: people can dive into it, put themselves into it, can invest, can build it themselves. That’s the beauty of esotery. You just give them some dots to connect, and people will create the links. [...] The franchise became super strong because we managed transmedia. So, you can consume games on [their] own, but every single creation is also a dot [within the whole franchise] and people, players, readers [and] watchers who consume several games, films and so on make the connections [and] they feel smart about it, saying, “Holy Shit. I understand so much now!” (Guesdon)

AC’s mystery is presented by Ubisoft deliberately through the “present day,” which runs through the franchise’s different media. Because of this, fans can only put together this narrative by buying each game, film, novel and comic, to find out the truth behind a secret, divine race manipulating our historical struggles: the Isu – whose names (Jupiter, Minerva, Juno) hint at their perceived divinity by early societies.

What fans find out as the franchise goes on, and as they combine their knowledge via online forums and self-made encyclopaedias, is that these early gods are *actually* a very scientifically advanced society, passing down their technology through history. Hence, Adam and Eve were just the first version of the Isu’s creation (humanity, made to be enslaved). The Turin Shroud is a “nanotech matter regenerator” that can heal the owner, once owned by Jesus, and by Jason and the Argonauts who called it the Golden Fleece. The Apple of Eden was a neurotransmitting mind-control device which, in the words of one character in *AC7*, “turned staves into snakes. Parted and closed the Red Sea. Eris used it to start the Trojan War; and with it, a poor carpenter turned water into wine.”

Thus, AC’s perennialist esotericism translates all the mysteries of historical religions into the 21st century vocabulary of science. In the “present day,” the players of *AC* come to find out that all religious mystery is actually technology. The Brand Bible states that “There is no magic in the *Assassin’s Creed* universe. [Arthur C.] Clarke’s third law says it best: ‘Any sufficiently advanced technology is indistinguishable from magic,’ or as the Brand

Bible's author explains, "[W]e always made it like the First Civilization [Isu] lived for real, they left artefacts that are actual tools. [...] People are very easily hooked by these kind of features and devices" (Guesdon). According to Wouter Hanegraaff's book on "esotericism in the mirror of secular thought," such tales "of ancient civilizations which were superior to ours both in spiritual and in technological knowledge, belong to the stock-in-trade of western occultism." (1996, p. 309). The "single most influential source" for this, and a seminal figure in the development of New Age thought, was the American clairvoyant Edgar Cayce, whose stories of the past lives of his patients – much like the premise of AC's Animus – enjoyed widespread popularity. Through these accounts "Cayce describes a tradition of 'perennial wisdom' that is passed on from Atlantis to Egypt, and from Egypt to the 'great initiate' Jesus" (Hanegraaff 1996, p. 309).

The AC franchise taps into this same desire to make sense of disparate religious mysteries. Furthermore, it does so by leveraging players' need to unravel these mysteries by unfolding the explanation over the course of 21 games, four movies, nine novels, 12 comic books, and other media. This marketable religion is, first, made nostalgic by putting it safely in historically appropriate periods; second, made perennial by tying all periods together through a universal mystical truth; and third, made present by bringing it into 21st century scientific vocabulary. As a result, the franchise itself gets an esoteric structure, that is, it depends on the disparate connection of occult or secret knowledge (historical correspondences, syncretism between traditions, symbolic images) from mystical and historical sources alike (Faivre & Needleman, 1993; Hammer, 2001; Hanegraaff, 1996). Or, in Guesdon's words on AC:

When I was in charge of the brand, we needed to minimize the risk of inconsistencies and maximize the opportunities for connections, links, echoes from one creation to another. So that people start from something which is known, but they think they're clever, more clever than the rest of humanity and they will understand what is behind everything. This is *esotérie*. [...] It is a balance to find a sweet spot of what is known [and] what is not known. And in this gray zone people will engage. [...] I think this is why AC succeeded at some point.

Conclusion: Branded Belonging

Mircea Eliade wrote about a surge in "unheard-of popularity" of the esoteric magazine *Planète* in 1960s France, leading to his explanation of what makes

esotericism attractive – if only for popular consumption (1976). Eliade argues that it was an antidote to the existentialism of the era, and he describes the magazine as a mix of popular science, occultism, astrology, science fiction, spiritual techniques and “more than that. It tacitly pretends to reveal innumerable vital secrets – of our universe, of the Second World War, of lost civilizations, of Hitler’s obsession with astrology, and so on” (p. 9). This “holistic outlook which coupled science with esotericism [...] presented a living, fascinating and mysterious cosmos in which human life again became meaningful” calling its readers to “unravel the other, enigmatic universes revealed by the occultists and gnostics” (p. 10).

Just as *Planète* succeeded by giving people disparate connections between history, mystery and religion in a time of existentialist disillusion; so *Assassin’s Creed* manages to sell a marketable form of religion that inserts meaning and mystery into history for a post-secular audience – in the tradition of *Planète* as much as *The Da Vinci Code*. What makes *AC* unique is that it involves players in doing so: not just a magazine, book or film, the structure of the transmedial franchise itself is esoteric. That is, fans need to pull together all the hints or “dots” from its many games, novels, and other media to reveal the explanations that *AC* promises. In the process, *AC* shows a blueprint of what marketable religion looks like to the broadest possible 21st century audience.

Who puts religion in videogames? In the case of *Assassin’s Creed*, the work of one designer (and a sympathetic culture around him) evolved from a culturally and generationally specific rejection of religious dogma. With the success of games, however, the way in which religion was treated in the game became marketable.

How? Under corporate leadership, codified and checked by the Marketing–Brand–Editorial sandwich, the marketable religion of the franchise was made to be inclusive and “fun for everybody” – specifically, for a global audience of 95 million, good for 140 million sales between 2007 and 2019 (Ubisoft, 2019).

Why? It creates belonging for everyone, everywhere, without the burden of believing. By presenting religion first as belonging in history through nostalgia; second, as belonging to everyone through perennialism; and third as not needing belief through scientific vocabulary. *Assassin’s Creed*’s nostalgia, perennialism and sci-fi vocabulary together create a branded belonging for *everyone*, without belief for *anyone*. To further qualify the brand’s slogan: “Nothing is *exclusively* True. Everything is *inclusively* Permitted.”

This syncretism of historical traditions, perennial mystery and scientific vocabulary is accomplished in the same way as in esoteric (and occult)

traditions. That is, it depends on connecting not only various traditions through the promise of underlying mystery (perennialism), but it also brings magic into the realm of science and technology. This has major implications for, for instance, Weber and other modernists' dichotomy between magic and "technical means and calculations" (1919, p. 139). While it is clear that others have earlier observed and theorized the collapse of magic and science through technology in, e.g., Neopaganism (Aupers, 2010; Hanegraaff, 1996), New Age religion (Aupers & Houtman, 2006; Hammer, 2001; Heelas, 1996), and virtual worlds (Aupers, 2007; Turner, 2010); this chapter adds an empirical perspective on "Why" and "How" those in charge of production come to do so. Beyond vague notions of the "atmosphere" and "oomph" of religion – although important – to draw people in, it is the structure of esotericism itself that draws consumers to connect ideas offered to them over multiple products.

Theoretically, what this means is that Ubisoft's *Assassin's Creed* is emblematic of two things. First, it reproduces an idea of religious decline: that religion is something of the past. This is accomplished, as argued above, by bringing religion into the present only as misconceptions of past societies – and legitimizing it in the present only through the use of pseudo-scientific discourse. This transposing of historical religions into the "rationalized" present allows Ubisoft to place the most irreligious and religiously diverse audiences alike into the same disenchanted version of history. Secondly, what marketable religion does is *commodify* a religious tradition. I am aware that commodification is a notoriously underdefined, overdetermined buzzword of Marxist cultural and political theory. At its root, however, "commodification" is a process by which something without economic value (culture, or in this case, religion), is assigned a use value and made exchangeable or interchangeable: i.e., made into a commodity (Marx, 1904, pp. 19–21). More simply, anthropologist Arjun Appadurai calls a commodity "anything intended for exchange" (2005, p. 35), adding that it is not necessarily (e.g., when bartering) with "reference to money [but] *with* maximum feasible reduction of social, cultural, political or personal transaction costs" (ibid.). In all exchanges of commodity, from barter to capitalist exchanges, the commonality is in "the object-centred, relatively impersonal, asocial nature" of the exchange (ibid.). By reducing such "marketable religion" to an esoteric amalgamate that is supposed to include everyone, and be uncontroversial to the largest possible audience of buyers – in other words, commodifying religion – the individual religious traditions are thus reduced to commodities. And apparently: religion sells.

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