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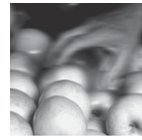
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Marketable religion: How game company Ubisoft commodified religion for a global audience

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Abstract

Videogame companies are selling religion to an overwhelmingly secular demographic. Ubisoft, the biggest company in the world's biggest cultural industry, created a best-selling franchise about a conflict over Biblical artefacts between Muslim Assassins and Christian Templars. Who decides to put religion into those games? How? And why? To find out, we interviewed 22 developers on the Assassin's Creed franchise, including directors and writers. Based on those, we show that the "who" of Ubisoft is not a person but an industry: a de-personalized and codified process. How? Marketing, editorial and production teams curb creative teams into reproducing a formula: a depoliticized, universalized, and science-fictionalized "marketable religion." Why? Because this marketable form of religious heritage can be consumed by everyone—regardless of cultural background or conviction. As such, this paper adds an empirically grounded perspective on the "who," "why," and "how" of cultural industries' successful commodification of religious and cultural heritage.

Keywords

production studies, cultural industries, videogames, religion, commodification, Assassin's Creed, marketable religion, depoliticization, universalization, science-fictionalization

Introduction

Ubisoft Montréal's *Assassin's Creed* series [AC] is one of the best-selling game franchises of the recent decade, and its premise is religious through and through. In these

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videogames, 95 million players have waged fictional Holy War against the Christian order of the “Templars,” playing as Muslim Assassins or their various modern-day equivalents. This is odd, when the audience for videogames such as this is overwhelmingly young and secular. Ubisoft is not a religious organization: its Montréal studio is the biggest game studio in the world, driven presumably by profit, not religious ideology. What drives companies like Ubisoft to sell religion like that? In other words, who decides, how and why to make religious content for a 21st century audience? Departing from theories of secularization and current literature on an unexpected “return of religion” in digital media culture and games, we address this question based on the analysis of 22 expert interviews with a mix of famous and anonymous game designers involved in developing the *AC* franchise since 2007. In the analysis, we focus particularly on how decision-making is distributed in game development, how that leads to the representation of religious worldviews and aesthetics and, ultimately, why Ubisoft’s version of “marketable religion” comes to be produced for a global, secular audience.

Secularization and religion in games

Despite a long-standing process of secularization in the West, religion sells. Religious decline in Europe, North-America and Australia has meant that increasingly fewer people identify with a church religion, and attend religious services (Brenner, 2016)—and less so the younger and higher educated they are (Johnson, 1997; Pew, 2018). This process of secularization, or at the very least a decline of “belonging” to institutionalized religion (Davie, 1990; Luckmann, 1967), has been predicted by social scientists since the 19th century (Comte, 1830). Marx and Engels prophesized that “all that is holy is profaned” as a consequence of bourgeois capitalism (1848: 10), and Weber theorized that, in modernity, “technical means and calculations perform the service” of the mysterious and incalculable forces of faith (1919: 87).

Over the last decades, however, processes of disenchantment and secularization have been off-disputed. Grace Davie showed that while fewer (young) people indeed consider themselves as “belonging” to a religion; they may nonetheless “believe” in God, hell, heaven and supernatural entities (1990). Thus, there is religion outside of “going to church” and identifying with an organized world religion. Already in the 1960s, sociologist Thomas Luckmann argued that the decline of Christian religion in the West was accompanied by the rise of non-institutional, more privatized forms of religion that blossom outside of church and chapel. Luckmann referred to this as a “market of ultimate significance” in which religion became a product of consumption that was manifest in and spread by media (1967: 201). Such “client and audience cults,” Stark and Bainbridge argue, by and large compensate for the nagging quest for meaning (1985). This type of religious consumer behavior, or “spiritual supermarket” (Lyon, 2000), is generally mediatized: religious themes are transmitted through Christian rock music, New Age books and other means. And the presence of religion persists in secular media, too. Around the early 2000s, 3 weeks after the events of 11 September 2001, Jürgen Habermas even observed that Western news media and politics were once again so undeniably pre-occupied with religion that he deemed our society “post-secular” (Habermas and Reemtsma, 2001). More recently, it has been widely

assessed that religious symbology and narrative are staples of media texts for popular consumption such as Hollywood films, series and videogames (Aupers, 2007; Clark, 2005; Partridge, 2004).

This manifestation of religion in media texts seems especially salient in the domain of videogames. Theologians, religious scholars, sociologists and media scholars have picked up on the presence of religion in games in edited volumes (Bornet and Burger, 2012; Campbell and Grieve, 2014; Detweiler, 2010), methodology handbooks (Šisler et al., 2017), dissertations (Perreault, 2015; Steffen, 2017), and a large number of journal articles extensively studying and contextualizing games' reliance on religious tropes. They particularly identify religious functions and communities (Geraci, 2014; Wagner, 2012); as well as beliefs and entities in games (Bosman, 2019; de Wildt et al., 2018), finding Judaism (Masso and Abrams, 2014; Gottlieb, 2015), Islam (Šisler, 2008; Campbell, 2010), Hinduism (e.g., de Wildt et al., 2020; O'Donnell, 2015; Zeiler, 2014) or "god" (e.g., Bosman 2019; Leibovitz, 2013). And while these scholars particularly point out the prominence of "history-based" religion in game texts, others analyze in empirical detail how "fiction-based" religion (Davidsen, 2013)—religion mixed with myth, magic and fantasy fiction—dominates popular online games like *World of Warcraft*, *Final Fantasy* and *Zelda* (Bainbridge, 2013; Campbell and Grieve, 2014; de Wildt and Aupers, 2021; Detweiler, 2010). One recurring example rises above these studies, in the theoretical literature as well as empirically for players and online communities themselves ((de Wildt and Aupers, 2017, 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: 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" (2016: 63).

When such researchers make reference to developer Ubisoft (whose "understanding [...] is important" [Mukherjee, 2016] and who "reinterprets [...] Christian mythology" [Bosman, 2016]), it personifies "developer Ubisoft" into a monolithic entity with underlying intentions. Secondly, deciphering these intentions supposedly leads to a better understanding of the game—despite never asking those developers. Instead, research has predominantly looked at the games themselves and how they represent religion to the trained (academic) eye (ibid., de Wildt, 2019; El Nasr et al., 2008; Nowbari, 2012); as well as if and how playing these games may have spiritual significance to people (Brock, 2017; Geraci, 2014). While the latter "player-centered approach" is more scarce, it provides empirical insight into what individual players actually do with religion in games (Šisler et al., 2017)—the ways in which they decode the "text," construct (ultimate) meaning and how this relates to their (secular) worldview (de Wildt and Aupers, 2019; Schaap and Aupers, 2017).

From the broader theoretical perspective on secularization and religious change sketched here, then, it is equally pivotal to study the production side. Who is this supposedly monolithic developer, and how can knowing "Ubisoft," or the choices and cultural backgrounds that led to the *AC* series, aid in understanding *why* game development companies choose to use religion in their games for what is ostensibly a secular audience? This last choice in itself can be understood as remarkable development. The game industry is by now the biggest cultural industry in the world (e.g., ERA, 2018; ESA, 2018; YouGov, 2020) and its audience is overwhelmingly made up of exactly the demographic that leads

secularization statistics: young, Western, educated, and male. In the case of *Assassin's Creed*, for instance, its average player is young (39% being under 19, [GameVision, 2011]), male (ibid.), college-educated (Griffiths et al., 2003; Nagygyörgy et al., 2013; Williams et al., 2008), and overwhelmingly—representing 79% of Ubisoft's sales—from North-America and Europe (Ubisoft, 2020: 8). This puts the audience for *Assassin's Creed* squarely in the middle of secularization statistics by age, gender, education and location (Hackett et al., 2016; Johnson, 1997; Pew, 2018).

Differently formulated, it is more likely for young people in the West to encounter religion in videogames than they would in church or anywhere else. Studying the motivations of game companies to insert religious narratives in games is hence relevant for sociological debates on secularization and religious change in Western countries. In addition, the apparent convergence between the domain of religion and the seemingly “secular” game industry potentially contributes to studies on contemporary consumer culture. For these theoretical reasons and based on an empirical case-study of Ubisoft (developers of *Assassin's Creed*), we ask: *who* decides to put religion into popular best-selling videogames, *how* are these decisions made, and *why*?

Methodology

To answer these research questions, the first author conducted fieldwork in Montréal, consisting predominantly of two types of semi-structured interviews mostly lasting between one and 2 hours (for an average of 82 min on the record), all with workers at Ubisoft's Montréal studio, the lead studio for *AC* (with the exception of *Syndicate* and *Odyssey*, which were made elsewhere). Interview questions focused on specific design decisions and how they came about; as well as questions for directors and those overseeing development about choices made to include religion and the underlying motivations for it. For the first type of interview, various workers from all different branches of game development (programmers, game designers, level designers, etc.) were interviewed anonymously. These anonymous participants were sought out to compare their experiences (shared from the safety of anonymity) with named interviewees' accounts. Second, expert-interviews were conducted 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. Secondly, 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 occur here by their quotes, in the same vein as, for example, Karppi and Nieborg's study of ex-Facebook employees (2020); just as developers' names are credited at the end of the games they worked on; and as they appear in the table of participants below (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 to remain anonymous and those who declined cited job vulnerability, and most were women, of religious minorities, or (junior) workers on recent games; the reasons for these, in a male-dominated industry (IGDA, 2018), are likely understandable but outside of the scope of this paper.

Interviews were semi-structured, conducted around Ubisoft’s main offices in Montréal, and conducted predominantly in English—sometimes in French and Dutch, quotes translated where so. The interviews were conducted and analyzed in the context of a 4-month ethnography in Montréal’s Mile End, in addition to (on- and off-the-record) field work in and around the offices of Ubisoft, surrounding bars, and the companies of ex-workers (notably Bethesda, Electronic Arts, Panache, Red Barrels, Reflector, Thunder Lotus, Typhoon, and Warner Bros. Montréal). Secondly, the first author was given access to some internal documents, most notably various versions of what has been called the “Brand Bible,” under conditions that they be quoted but not reproduced. This internal design document functions to set out the “commandments” and rules for the franchise, and has proven central to the franchise’s standardization. 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, and Non-Disclosure Agreement contracts where preferred. The whole process has been approved by the authors’ primary institution’s ethics committee.

Assassin’s Creed: The construction of a marketable religion

To introduce the games briefly: its titular protagonists are the “Assassins,” modeled after the Ismaili Order of Assassins, a historical secret society that was introduced in the first game, in 2007, as an Islamic order that fights the Templar crusaders—a Christian order—trying to take over the Holy Land. Each of the following games stages a different religious, 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 from the present to the very 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. This best-selling narrative setting 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.

So how did such religious narratives end up in a best-selling game, or rather: who decided to put it there, how was the decision made and why? This analysis will set out, first, descriptively to show how one creative director’s vision on religion was turned into a brand and then, secondly, to show how religion was subsequently depoliticized, universalized and science-fictionalized in its evolution toward the “marketable religion” of *AC*.

From the outset of our study, it became clear that a large number of people are involved in making and continuing *AC*’s trans-historical story of religious conflict. Hundreds to

Table 1. List of informant and participants (ordering based on the International Game Developers' Association's "Game Crediting Guidelines" [IGDA, 2014]).

Name	Role(s)	Games						
		Other Ubisoft games; general Montréal industry insider; key informant.						
0 Osama Dorias	Informant	ACI	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 Azaizia	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 Gaellec Simard	Game Director, Mission Director, Lead Level design	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓	
13 Nicolas Guérin	Level Design Director			✓			✓	✓
14 Steven Masters	Lead Game Designer	✓		✓				
15 Anon-level1	Lead Mission Designer, Level Designer	Five games (anonymized).						
16 Gregory Belacel	Level Designer, Game Designer	✓		✓				
17 Anon-level2	Level Designer, Mission Designer	Three games (anonymized).						
18 Maxime Ciccotti	Mission Designer						✓	✓

(continued)

Table 2. The main *Assassin's Creed* [AC] games as per December 2020, with abbreviations used.

Setting	Period	Title	Abbreviation	Release
Third Crusade	1191 AD	<i>Assassin's Creed</i>	<i>AC1</i>	2007
Italian Renaissance	1476–1499 AD	<i>Assassin's Creed II</i>	<i>AC2</i>	2009
	1499–1507 AD	<i>Assassin's Creed: Brotherhood</i>	<i>Brotherhood</i>	2010
	1511–1512 AD	<i>Assassin's Creed: Revelations</i>	<i>Revelations</i>	2011
Colonial era	1754–1783 AD	<i>Assassin's Creed III</i>	<i>AC3</i>	2012
	1715–1722 AD	<i>AC IV: Black Flag</i>	<i>AC4</i>	2013
	1752–1776 AD	<i>Assassin's Creed Rogue</i>	<i>Rogue</i>	2014
French Revolution	1776–1800 AD	<i>Assassin's Creed Unity</i>	<i>Unity</i>	
Victorian era	1868 AD	<i>Assassin's Creed Syndicate</i>	<i>Syndicate</i>	2015
Ptolemaic Egypt	49–43 BC	<i>Assassin's Creed Origins</i>	<i>Origins</i>	2017
Peloponnesian War	431–404 BC	<i>Assassin's Creed Odyssey</i>	<i>Odyssey</i>	2018
Viking invasion of Britain	873 AD	<i>Assassin's Creed Valhalla</i>	<i>Valhalla</i>	2020

thousands of people work on a single game for years—over 4600 people were credited on 2018's *Odyssey*. How does that work and who decides to put religion in a product like that? As level director 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” *AC1*'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 *AC1*, 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 *AC1* 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]¹ 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 Sébastien 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, fueled 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 *Jésus de Nazareth* [film], 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 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 nowadays. 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 church religion was broadly shared by the team. Growing up in the same culture and time period, the initial core team—Désilets, producer Jade Raymond, writer Corey May, animator Alex Drouin, game designer Philippe Morin, level designer David Châteauneuf, programmer Claude Langlais, artist Nicolas Cantin, everyone, “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 *AC* 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 question of “*who* decided to put religion into *Assassin’s Creed*” points to a single identifiable originator. His hostile sentiments towards the

Christian church as an institute and, simultaneously, his openness to “supernatural” stories, “magic” and “miracles” is not just an individual story. Tellingly, the religious biography of Désilets resonates with others in his milieu and with broader developments in Western culture where institutional religion makes way for non-institutional and privatized forms of religion on the “market of ultimate significance” (Luckmann, 1967; Stark and Bainbridge, 1985) and open-ended spirituality (Aupers and Houtman, 2006). Based on the interviews however, we can analytically distinguish three developments in the process of *AC*’s construction of a veritable marketable religion: depoliticization, universalization and science-fictionalization.

Depoliticization: Religion as “fun for everybody”

The first development is the “depoliticization” of religion or, in other words, shaping a religion that does not offend any consumer on the globe, regardless of their beliefs and convictions. What started as a specific idea by an identifiable person, shaped up to be a successful game and then a franchise—which necessitated changes to the “controversial topic” of the Crusade, especially in what was still the Bush-era, “hence the disclaimer of the first game” (Guérin). This famous disclaimer,¹ “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).

AC and its depiction of religion had to become a brand that is “fun for everybody,” because, in the words of writer and director Mustapha Mahrach,

“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 widely accessible and reproducible formula—it counts 22 games, 4 movies, 9 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 game designer Steven Masters put it, “*AC2* is in the Renaissance, so *of course we’re going to end up punching the Pope*”), the franchise’s treatment of religion was quickly depoliticized to be a-political and steer away from controversy, or indeed in Mahrach’s words 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 11 years after, 20 more games were released. The first author was able to interview all the creative directors ever to work on *AC* in Montréal, and got a portrait of a heavily safe-guarded creative process which we and our participants, came to call the “marketing-brand-editorial” burger. 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 brand’s codification into a coherent and reproducible formula was Jean Guesdon, who started as production coordinator late in *ACI*’s development, and ended up building the “Brand team” that codified the *AC* formula in what is called the “Brand Bible,” replacing Désilets’ vision. 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, comic books short movies et cetera., I theorized and made some communication tools to explain the limitations [most notably the Brand Bible]. 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 nor bad. There are two different things and they fight for what they think is good for human society. This kind of stuff.” (Guesdon)

This not wanting “to take sides” and a new “positioning in terms of belief and spirituality” is a vital strategy of depoliticization, and marks a departure from Désilets’ original anti-dogmatic view on religion. It is a market-friendly change to how the franchise would continue to frame religion, replacing Désilets’ polemic stance with the “portray[al of] both sides as grey,” whereas the original game’s Templar crusaders represented an institutionalized Christian status quo that wants to deceive and control the population, or what an anonymous worker (serving for over a decade on the Brand Team) called the Templars’ “opium for the masses” (Anon-Brand).

Universalization: “It speaks to something inside us all”

“**Commandment #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: 7

A second, yet related, development is a universalization of religion in *AC*. After establishing a depoliticized Brand, the Marketing department provides the base for each new *AC* game to

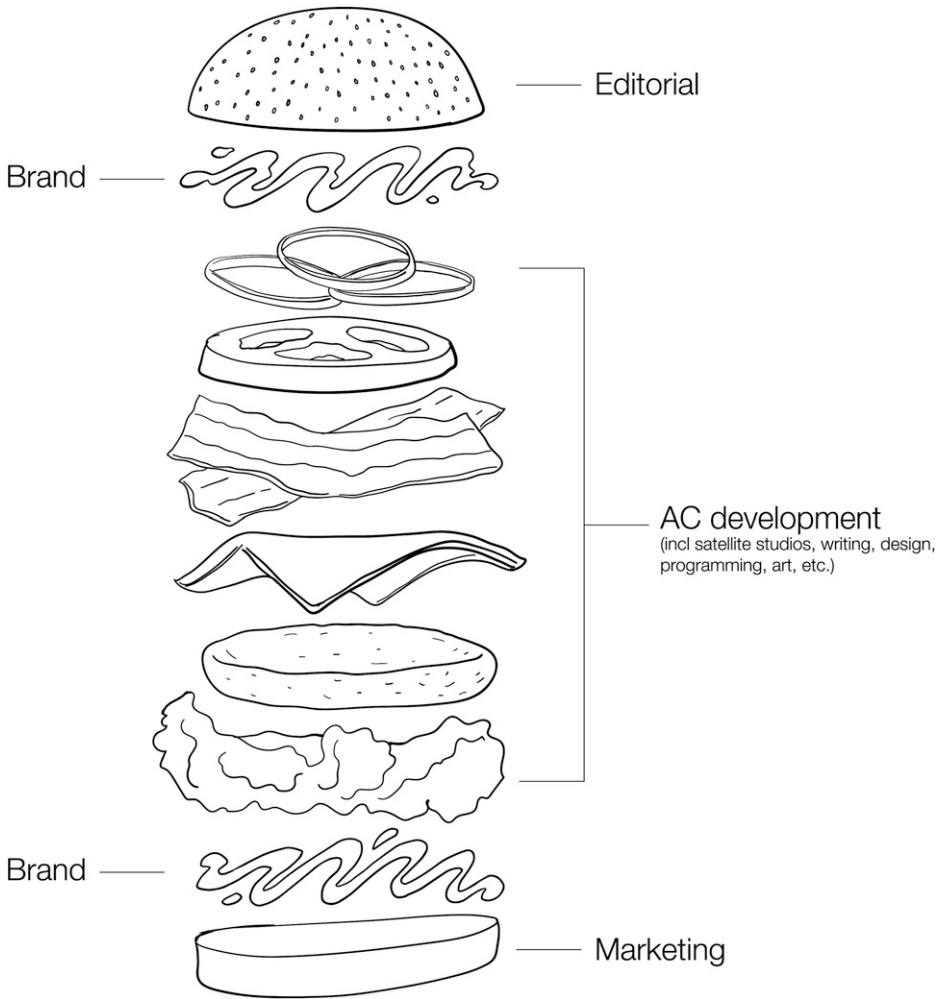


Figure 1. Around each part of developing a yearly AC release, Marketing provides the base, the Brand guarantees a consistent, recognizable “flavour,” and Editorial’s approval tops the game off for release. (Based on illustration by Siripattana Sangduen//Shutterstock.com, edited by Wieger Jonker).

be more universally acceptable, based on focus groups and feedback. Creative directors are given a pre-determined setting, story outline and one or two new game mechanics to introduce. This process is streamlined to not just cover different historical settings that appeal to a broad demographic, but to universalize them in a way that everyone can relate to them. This universalization also applies to the representation of religion in the game.

Creative director Alexandre Amancio (*Revelations*, *Unity*) reconstructs what it means to direct an AC game within this already established structure:

“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 has a list of themes (cultures, periods, etc.) based on market research. Considerations about which religions or folklores to use in new games are already part of this:

Guest: A setting like Egypt is very loaded with expectations, when it comes to Gods et cetera., 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?

Guest: Well, we have a marketing team that look at... How is Egypt 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 Brand team, core team (including directors), to junior developers—echoed that, informed by Marketing’s conclusions on “what is people’s perception of a period,” then “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 [representation of] 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, we’re cutting the hood. [...] We do greenlight 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 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 (a team led by the creative director and 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 to a broad audience. Within the Brand-Marketing-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 [...] 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 universal: identifiable and uncontroversial for everyone, regardless of culture, religion, or other conviction. 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), or 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 famous fiction author 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 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)

AC’s marketable religion is thus universal: it connects religion across cultures and periods to one underlying 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, centering on the “Hidden Ones” versus the “Order of the Ancients”; and so on. As the anonymous Brand team-member 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, et cetera” (Anon-brand)

Whether religious or, in some periods, secular, *AC*’s struggle is perennial: “order” versus “freedom,” “status quo”—“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. 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’.”

Science-fictionalization: “Advanced technology is indistinguishable from magic”

“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: 7

AC’s mystery is grounded in various religious traditions but presents itself to players deliberately through the “present day”, which functions as a consistent frame to use science

fiction to explain beliefs and magic. This search for the underlying scientific truth of religion 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 esotericism. 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 its own but every single creation is also a dot [within the whole franchise], and people, players, readers, 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)

Because of this, fans can only put together the pieces of this puzzle by buying each game, film, novel and comic. In doing so, they are encouraged to find out the truth behind a secret, divine race manipulating our historical struggles: the Isu—whose names (Jupiter, Minerva, Juno, etc.) hint at their perceived divinity by early societies.

What fans find out as the franchise further develops and as they combine their knowledge via online forums and self-made encyclopediae is that these early gods “actually” form a scientifically advanced society, passing down their technology through history. In this way, *AC* plays with the relation between religion and technology—the latter being the hidden core of all religious, magical and mysterious manifestations in history. In *AC*’s alternative history, for example, Adam and Eve were just the first version of humanity: a robot slave race created by the Isu. The Turin Shroud is “actually” 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 “actually” a neurotransmitting mind-control device which, in the words of one character in *AC1*, “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 depoliticized and universalized religion further translates all the mysteries of historical religions into the 21st century non-denominational vocabulary of science. In the “present day,” the players of *AC* come to find out that all religious mysteries are actually technology. The Brand Bible states that “There is no magic in the *Assassin’s Creed* universe. Clarke’s third law says it best: ‘Any sufficiently advanced technology is indistinguishable from magic,’” or as the Brand Bible’s author explains “we 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). Such narratives in *AC* resonate with the esoterical Western tradition and popular contemporary forms of spirituality. According to religion scholar Wouter Hanegraaff’s writing 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, 309). The “single most influential source” for this was Edgar Cayce, who became popular with stories of the past lives of his patients—

much like the premise of *AC*'s Animus—on the basis of whose 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, 309).

The *AC* franchise taps into this same desire to make sense of disparate religious traditions. Furthermore, it does so by leveraging players’ need to unravel these mysteries by unfolding the explanation over the course of 22 games, 4 movies, 9 novels, 12 comics, and other media. This marketable religion is, firstly, depoliticized by making it uncontroversial for a wide audience; secondly, universalized by tying all periods and cultures together through a perennial mystical truth; and third, science-fictionalized by presenting it in a 21st century pseudo-scientific vocabulary. As a result, the franchise itself gets an esoteric structure because of its science-fictionalization, that is, it depends on the disparate connections between occult and technological knowledge, from mystical and scientific sources alike (Faivre and Needleman 1993; Hanegraaff 1996; Hammer 2001). 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, what is not known—And in this grey zone people will engage. Yeah, and I think this is why *AC* succeeded at some point.”

Conclusion: Marketable religion

Over the last decades the sociological thesis that religion is in decline in Western societies, has been scrutinized. On the emergent “market of ultimate significance” (Luckmann, 1967) and in “client and audience cults” (Stark and Bainbridge, 1985), various forms of non-institutionalized religion, mysticism and esotericism are offered for spiritual seekers and consumers. Media play an import role in their spread and proliferation. Mircea Eliade wrote in this respect about a surge in “unheard-of popularity” of esoteric magazine *Planète* in 1960s France, leading to his explanation of what makes esotericism attractive—if only for popular consumption (1976). Eliade 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” (1976: 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” (1976: 10).

Just as *Planète* succeeded by giving people disparate connections between history, mystery and religion in the 1960s so *AC* manages to sell a marketable form of religion that inserts meaning and mystery into religion for a secular audience—in the tradition of *Planète* as much as the *Da Vinci Code*. Indeed, previous research on players of *AC* and similar games showed that such meaning and mystery draws players in to “role-play”

religion; and to try on different belief systems (de Wildt and Aupers, 2019; Schaap and Aupers, 2017). What makes *AC*'s production unique, however, is that Ubisoft's developers do not tend to an audience already seeking ultimate meaning, and do not stick to just one product. Motivated by commercial goals, they actively involve a secular audience into pulling together all the hints or connecting the "dots" of its esoteric worldview, and invite them to do so by buying into a whole multimedial franchise. In other words: only by buying the combination of its many games, novels, and other media, consumers are promised the full alternative history and religious worldview of *AC*. While further research needs to be done on both the production and consumption side of religion in videogames, we see in *AC* a blueprint of how one cultural producer created a form of "marketable religion" for the broadest possible 21st century audience.

By "marketable religion" we mean, based on our analysis above, a form of religious aesthetics that appeal to the largest possible commercial, secular audience: a representation of religious traditions that is in this specific case made marketable by depoliticizing it to be uncontroversial, universalizing it to appeal to everyone, and science-fictionalizing it to connect it to "modern" technological rationality. But "who" creates this marketable religion, "how" do they create it and "why" in this particular form? Those were the questions addressed in this research. *Who?* In the case of *AC*, the worldview of one designer (and a sympathetic culture around him) evolved from a culturally and generationally specific, secular rejection of religious dogma into a codified and standardized "marketable religion" under corporate leadership dominated by the "marketing-brand-editorial" burger. *How?* This marketable religion was depoliticized, universalized, and science-fictionalized to appeal to a global audience of 95 million, good for 140 million sales between 2007 and 2019 (Ubisoft, 2019). *Why?* To present religion first as belonging outside of political conflict; second, as belonging outside of the specificity of cultures; and third as belonging outside of *belief* itself, belonging instead to science. *AC*'s depoliticization, universalization and science-fictionalization together thus create a marketable religion for *everyone*, without belief for *anyone*. To further qualify the brand's slogan: "Nothing is *exclusively* True. Everything is *inclusively* Permitted."

Theoretically, what this means is that Ubisoft's *Assassin's Creed* is emblematic of two broader developments. 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 disenchanting version of history. Secondly, what marketable religion does is *commodify* a religious tradition. We are aware that commodification is a notoriously under-defined, overdetermined buzzword of Marxist cultural and political theory. At its root, however, "commodification" is a process by which something without economic value (culture, mythology, or in this case mainly: religion), is assigned a use value and made exchangeable or interchangeable: that is, made into a commodity (Marx, 1904: 19–21). More simply, anthropologist Arjun Appadurai calls a commodity "anything intended for exchange" (2005: 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-centered, relatively impersonal, asocial nature” of the exchange (ibid.).

More than a “market of ultimate significance” then (Luckmann, 1967), it is this ultimate significance itself which is reduced to a commodity, exchangeable for money and stripped of its substantial, social, cultural, political and personal meaning. In Luckmann’s paradigm, the desire for ultimate significance is treated as functioning according to a *metaphorical* market of supply and demand of meaning. Particularly in the secularizing 1960s in the West, “client and audience cults” (Stark and Bainbridge, 1985) could construct their own form of ultimate meaning—such as “New Age” religion or individual “bricolage” (Aupers and Houtman, 2006; Luckmann, 1967), mixing Christianity, Buddhism, Paganism, self-help, mindfulness, and so on. However, it is through further commodification of religious meaning, that cultural industries such as the games industry reduce religion to a “marketable religion.” In *AC*’s case, by reducing it to a marketable religion that is supposed to include everyone, and be uncontroversial to the largest possible audience of buyers—in other words, by *commodifying* religion—religious traditions are reduced to commodities. And apparently: religion sells.

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Notes

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

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