Franchised Esotericism

Religion as a Marketing Strategy for the *Assassin's Creed* Franchise

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Introduction

Assassin's Creed (Ubisoft since 2007) is steeped in religious plurality. Christian and Muslims vie for possession of a Judaic artefact created by a pantheon of Ancient Greek, Egyptian and other gods. Its audience, however, is not just huge but likely secular: indeed, it is more likely for young Westerners to encounter religion in videogames such as *Assassin's Creed* than in a church, mosque or synagogue.

Assassin's Creed [*AC*] is a franchise of action-adventure games in the alternate history setting sketched above. It was started in 2004 by a team led by creative director Patrice Désilets, producer Jade Raymond, and writer Corey May. Being tasked initially with making a new *Prince of Persia* game (Broderbund 1989), they instead developed a new Intellectual Property around a machine, the Animus, that can access memories embedded in human DNA. Based on this narrative premise, players primarily take control of 'Assassins:' members of an elite guild of assassins based initially on the Muslim **hashashin** who lived in the mountains of Persia and in Syria between 1090 and 1275 (Daftary 1994, p. 5). In periods and locations across history, these Assassins vie for control over the world with a rivalling faction: the Templars – based in turn on the Christian 'Knights Templars.' This premise serves as a basis for a franchise counting, as of writing in February 2022: twelve 'main' games (Table 1), twelve spin-off games, a feature-length movie, a symphonic orchestra tour, three short films, 13 graphic novels, ten novels, a board game, and three editions of an encyclopedia.

Table 1: The main Assassin's Creed [AC] games as per February 2022, sorted by historical setting, with abbreviations.

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

In 2020, Ubisoft reported internally that *Assassin's Creed* should be considered one "of the four most successful new brand launches in the history of video gaming" (Ubisoft 2020a: 14). If that sounds like a game company tooting its own horn – a recognisable sound to those who study any cultural industry – it is nonetheless based on some solid numbers. Although Ubisoft is hesitant to publish exact numbers per game or franchise, its annual report for 2020 claimed over 155 million *Assassin's Creed* games sold since 2007, and "100+ million unique players" (Ubisoft 2020b: 3). Later in the same year, the newest title, *Assassin's Creed Valhalla* (Ubisoft Montreal 2020), was claimed to have sold more units in its first week than any other entry in the series, and its "record performance for the Assassin's Creed® franchise [meant a] total yearly revenue up 50% vs prior record set in 2012–13" (Ubisoft 2021: 1).

For such a popular franchise, *Assassin's Creed* [*AC*] builds on something increasingly unpopular: religion. This chapter aims to show that *AC* nonetheless uses, and then aestheticizes religion in two ways – perennially and esoterically, as will be elaborated below – which serve to attract the largest possible audience. This involves answering the following questions, along which the chapter is structured:

(1) Who plays *AC*?
(2) What is likely to be their religious position? And
(3) How does *AC* represent religion for this (secular) audience?

Based mainly on a content analysis of the franchise itself – additionally informed by player interviews (de Wildt/Aupers 2019), online discussions (de Wildt/Aupers 2020), developer interviews (de Wildt/Aupers 2021), and analyses done elsewhere (cf. de Wildt, 2020) – I will argue that *AC* uses the structure of videogames and its transmedial franchise more broadly to lead the believer-consumer of *Assassin's Creed* to actively construct meaning through bricolage.

Assassin's Creed's Crowd

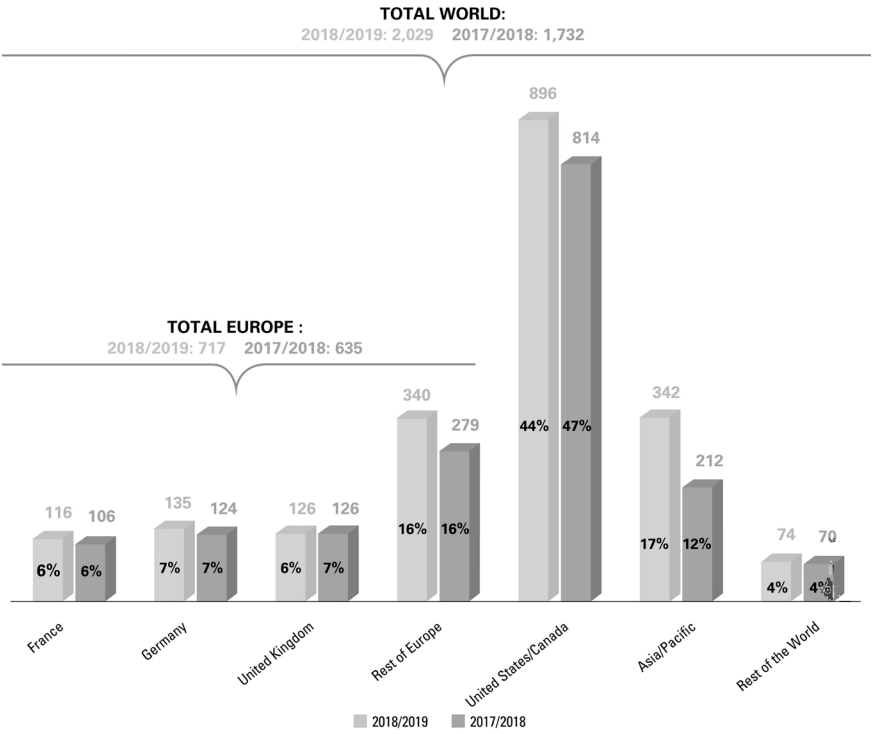
Who plays *Assassin's Creed*? Although exact statistics are not publicly available, the typical *AC* player is a young, college-educated man from North America or Western Europe. Due to practical limitations, not all demographics are perfectly reliable, recent, or specific to *AC*. For this reason, I go over the sources for them one by one, from most to least specific, noting each time how reliable and specific they are, and concluding nonetheless that those demographics (Western, young, male, college-educated) are highly likely to be true to a large extent. A quick caveat about a definition that runs through this text: when I refer to 'Western' and 'the West' as shorthands throughout this chapter, I am first of all echoing the demographic and geographic delineations made by the research I am referring to. Secondly, when using it 'myself,' by the West I mean those (settler-)European and settler-colonial cultures that are hegemonic on, geographically speaking, Turtle Island (North-America); in Europe, especially Northern- and Western-Europe; and the various non-ceded territories of Australia and *pākehā*-settled New-Zealand: territories with many shared cultural, historical and linguistic traits that we often collectively but vaguely identify as 'Western,' in which contemporary cultural industries produce much (but not most) of the world's commercially successful movies, music, and videogames; and in general the cultures through whom dominant concepts of 'religion' and 'secularisation' are defined. It is also, for full disclosure, where I grew up as a Dutch author.

Assassin's Creed players are mostly North-American or European. Based on Ubisoft's own sales figures from its annual financial report (Ubisoft 2020a: 8), most games were sold in North America (49 per cent) and Europe (34 per cent), vis-à-vis only 13 per cent in Asia and 4 per cent in the 'rest of the world' (Figure 1). The report does not break these sales down per game, but it is safe to assume that *Assassin's Creed* follows this pattern, being Ubisoft's best-selling product.

Assassin's Creed players are furthermore primarily men, even when compared to videogame industry averages in the European Union and the United States. According to an industry report from 2011 by third-party business analysts *GameVision*, 81 per cent of *Assassin's Creed* players were men (Sacco 2011). Although no such report has been updated since 2011 (to this author's knowledge), the company's 'brand maps' consisted of comprehensive surveys and interviews with "over 5,000 consumers in the UK, Germany,

France, Italy and Spain" (GameVision 2011: n.p.), each focusing on a specific franchise (ibid.).

Fig 1: Assassin's Creed franchise sales from 2018–2020 by region, report freely available (net bookings, in € millions) (Ubisoft 2020a: 8)

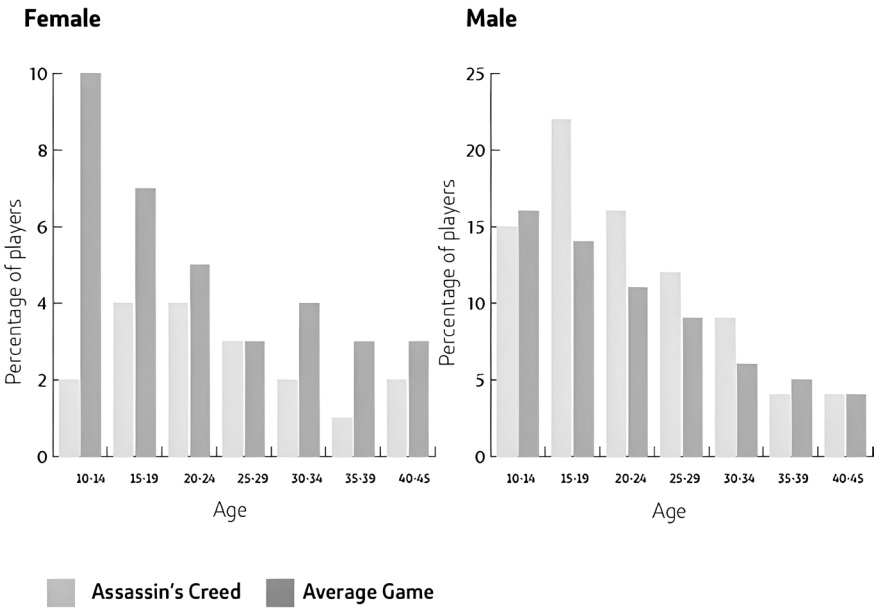


The same report gives a breakdown of *AC* players' ages (by gender), showing 39 per cent of the players surveyed to be below 19 (Figure 2). In that same year, European market research by the *Interactive Software Federation of Europe* [abbreviated ISFE] recorded only 12 per cent of players under 19 (ISFE 2012: p. 11); while the *Entertainment Software Association* in the US recorded 18 per cent under 18 (ESA 2011: p. 2) – current data puts players under 18 years old at 20 per cent in 2021 (ESA 2021: p. 2). With the caveat that *GameVision*'s data are a decade old, this does suggest that *AC*'s core audience (in 2011) was both younger and more male than players in general.

Finally, players of videogames in general are likely to be highly educated. Without being able to obtain data specifically about Ubisoft or *Assassin's Creed*, various studies of videogame playing populations indicate that players in general are higher-educated than the general population (e.g. Griffiths et al. 2003; Nagygyörgy et al. 2013; Williams et al. 2008). Although many of those sources focus on specific games or genres, a more general study by a Florida Healthcare provider presents a number of college- and higher graduates as high as 47.89 per cent out of 1045 'self-identified' gamers surveyed (Blackford 2020) – although self-identification with the gamer label or subculture is notoriously

skewed when it comes to gender, race and sexuality (cf. Shaw 2012), there are no indications this affects levels of education.

Fig. 2: Assassin's Creed players age and gender breakdown in 2011, based on a freely available report by MCV and GameVision (Sacco 2011)



As I wrote, these sources are not ideal: they are simply the best information available. Although it is certain that *AC* players mostly reside in North-America and Europe, it is not more than **plausible** that they are male, young, and educated. It is easy – and encouraged – for readers to dismiss this demographic estimation as vague or unconvincing. I believe it nonetheless supports the main argument below, which stands on its own. At worst, this study bases itself on the *AC* games itself, on twenty-two people who made them – and in some cases were decisive or even originatory in making them – and eight people who played them. As a methodologically informed suggestion, and when triangulated with both the games analysed here and the plausible (but occasionally outdated or very general) demographic sources above, I argue that these twenty-two developers and eight players stand to illustrate the wider group described above, and more importantly: the demographic that the *AC* games seem largely designed for.

Assassin's Creed's Crowd's Creeds

With those caveats in mind, then, players of *Assassin's Creed* are likely young, Western men of relatively high education. This does not mean they are exclusively young, Western-educated men; it does mean that they conform overwhelmingly, and with quite some certainty, to this demographic – especially in comparison to the general (videogaming) public. The reason I set this out so elaborately above is that, upon closer inspection, this

demographic, perhaps coincidentally, is the same demographic that leads global secularisation. I add 'perhaps coincidentally' because while part of *Assassin's Creed*'s success as a franchise **might** indeed be its serving religious content to an audience most divorced from religion out of anyone in the world; that is **not** what I argue for here – if only because I am reluctant to compare such content to gameplay, narrative, marketing and all the other elements contributing to success. Instead, all I observe here is that *Assassin's Creed*'s audience is largely made up of a demographic that is an overwhelmingly secular demographic on a global scale. Throughout this chapter, as announced, I simply argue that exactly this audience is attracted to *AC*'s aestheticisation of religion as it was designed (and marketed) by *AC*'s developers. Let us start with the first point, and I will conclude this chapter with the latter.

As I have stated elsewhere, it is "more likely for 'young' people in the 21st century […] to encounter religion in videogames than they would in church or anywhere else" (de Wildt 2023: 13). This may sound simply provocative, but it is true that 2.2 to 2.5 billion players globally (>28.5 per cent of the population) and 338 out of 512 million EU citizens (66 per cent) spend about six hours per week on average in-game (Limelight 2018; Newzoo 2017; WePC 2019). Their average age is around 34 in the U.S. (ESA 2018: 4), and 31 in the EU (ISFE 2021: 7); whereas weekly church attendance for adults under 40 years of age is 36 per cent globally, 28 per cent in the US, 16 per cent in Canada and 10 per cent in Europe, and declining (Pew 2018). Put colloquially, for many adults, especially well-educated Westerners below 40 like me, church is a thing we see on a screen – where the magic is **real** – instead of on Sunday. People in general decreasingly go to places of worship such as churches, mosques, and synagogues (Brenner 2016); decreasingly belong to a specific tradition (Davie 1990), nor regard religious beliefs as relevant to their lives (Voas/Crockett 2005).

All of that is to say that generally, people are becoming less religious in the West (WIN/GIA 2017; Zuckerman 2006), even in the U.S., which were long resistant to secularisation (Pew 2019). This is especially true the younger and more educated they are (Pew 2018; Johnson 1997); and more so in the case of men – by comparison to whom women are more religious in general, especially Christian women (Hackett et al. 2016), and including non-church traditions such as identifying as spiritual (Houtman/Aupers 2008). In other words, the audience of *Assassin's Creed* finds itself demographically at the forefront of those leaving the church since the 1960s – yet *en masse,* those same 'forerunners' enjoy a game deeply steeped in various religious traditions.

Alternative Creeds

At this point, we should briefly take pause and note two things. Firstly, that there is religion outside of 'going to church' and identifying with an (organised) world religion. Secondly, that *Assassin's Creed* is not exactly a game about **being** religious, or going to church – unless it is, as players do in *AC2* (Ubisoft Montreal 2009), to assassinate the Pope. Indeed, some would argue that religion did not necessarily 'disappear' from the West: it just changed to either (1) beliefs and practices not organised through a church, or (2) a nostalgic and mysterious thing we see on screens. Let us start with the first one.

Writing on the difference between "believing" and "belonging," Grace Davie shows that while fewer (young) people indeed consider themselves as belonging to classical religious organisations; they nonetheless may *believe* in the existence of things such as God, hell, heaven and so on (1990). Whereas Davie surveys Europeans and Brits about such traditional religious concepts as 'God,' another sociologist – Thomas Luckmann (1967) – argued instead that entirely non-traditional beliefs and practices emerge outside of churches. According to Luckmann, the decline of church religion in the West gives way to a more privatised "invisible religion" (ibid: 103). That is: religion and spirituality appear privately through "bricolage," or the kind of hand-picked DIY set of religious elements from various traditions, which we might recognise in contemporary spirituality, New Age, self-help, mindfulness and other ways of meaning-making (ibid.). These individually customised forms of religion are typically theorised as a shift from 'religion' to 'spirituality,' often identifying the latter with esoteric traditions or New Age, and conceiving it as "post-Christian," "alternative" or "holistic" (cf. Houtman/Aupers 2007; Partridge 2004; Woodhead/Heelas 2005).

Secondly, religion persists in a third way that is not "believing" nor "belonging" (Davie 1990): it engages us through popular culture without ever doing either. Religion's appearance in media proves to be an enduring form of religious tradition transformed into entertainment – especially when it presents itself as 'esoteric,' i.e., as mysterious and unique rather than the everydayness of regular religious practice. In this light, Christopher Partridge (2004: 40) observes a "re-enchantment of the West" through film, television and popular music, in particular paying attention to such pop-cultural influences as George Harrison and *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (Whedon 1997), which popularise spirituality, the occult and other esoteric alternatives to institutionalised religion: a "return to a form of magical culture" through popular media (Partridge 2004: 40). Indeed, just as popular music of the 1970s introduced tropes from oriental spirituality, so did television in the late 1990s introduced a preoccupation with esoteric traditions such as Occultism, Gnosticism, Yoga and so on, continuing well into the 21st century. Further examples for Partridge would be hit series of the 1990s and 2000s such as *Charmed* (Burge 1998), *True Blood* (Ball 2008) or *Vampire Diaries* (Williamson/Plec 2009).

We may see the same kind of use of esotericism, or what Partridge (2004) calls 'occulture,' in the popular books and films of Dan Brown or the *Assassin's Creed* videogames – the latter of which came out at the top of Dan Brown's rising popularity. Both engage in speculative fictions that suggest more is going on beneath the surface of our own societies' history by using the mystery of the Catholic church to unearth all types of plots and conspiracies in Jerusalem, the Vatican and old French churches that reveal the magical, mysterious secrets of Opus Dei or the Templars. Lynn Schofield Clark documented ethnographically how teens deal with such interweaving of the supernatural and religion in fiction (2005), and found that teens' engagement with series like *Angel* (Whedon/Greenwalt 1999), *Buffy* or *The X-Files* (Carter 1993) leads them often to reconsider their religious stance against (or sometimes back in line with) organised religion, while speculating about the place of magic and the supernatural in their own belief systems (Clark 2005).

Thus, the situation is threefold: there is simultaneously (1) an apparent retreat from organised religion (secularisation); (2) a change from religion into privatised bricolage

(invisible religion as per Luckmann 1967); and (3) a persistence of religion in entertainment media (a kind of 'visible religion') – especially in esoteric, mysterious, occult forms. There remains, in other words, a certain desire – or at least a market – for those who leave the church to engage in other meaning-making practices. As said, this is especially so when those practices are esoteric or, as I use the umbrella term 'esotericism' here: non-institutionalised practices of meaning-making that are often formulated in small groups and touted as giving access to (mystical, spiritual, occult) knowledge by tying together eclectic traditions including science, traditional religion, and historical secrets.

What role does such visible religion play in the postsecular religious marketplace? More specifically in this case, **how** does the *Assassin's Creed* series present religion to an audience that does not belong to an organised religion, but nonetheless buys into it?

How Will I Address This Question?

I will address this question based on one primary method (content analysis) and two adjacent forms of data (developer and player interviews). I am here mainly interested in 'how' *Assassin's Creed* presents religion – although I will state my answer in accordance with both developer intention and player reception. If my main method is content analysis, my main dataset is the *AC* franchise itself, including its non-game sources. As stated above, these data include the twelve 'main' games until 2020's *Valhalla* (see again Table 1), twelve spin-off games released until then, a feature-length movie, a symphonic orchestra tour, three short films, 13 graphic novels, ten novels, a board game, and three editions of an encyclopedia.

This will be supplemented where possible by 22 developer interviews, which I conducted between July and September of 2019 in Montreal (with the exception of one initial interview conducted in June 2016, when I ran into Ubisoft's head historian at the time, Maxime Durand). Additionally, I draw on interviews with eight players, conducted between March 2016 and September 2016 (initially part of a larger dataset not tied to this specific franchise). Both datasets consist of semi-structured interviews of between one and two hours long, focusing respectively on **why** the developers included religion and **what** meanings players took from that within the context of their own (non-)religious identities. More importantly, both are a way of triangulation with the main dataset (cf. Carter et al. 2014), rather than the main source of data for my current argument. For more elaborate methodologies **and** analyses isolating these interview-based datasets, I refer to previous publications instead for brevity's sake (cf. de Wildt 2020; de Wildt/Aupers 2019; 2020; 2021).

How Does *AC* Present Religion?

Based on the method presented above, I answer the question (how does the *AC* franchise present religion to an overwhelmingly secular audience), by arguing three things. First, that *AC* presents religion as perennial: i.e., according to the perspective that underneath the differences between the religious traditions of historically and geographically divided

cultures, there is a universal underlying mystery (Huxley 1945; Schmitt 1966). The franchise presents a pan-historical and global religious conflict of which "the historical context only shapes which form the universal conflict takes" (Amancio, Creative Director, *Unity*; qtd. in de Wildt/Aupers 2021: 15).

Second, that this perennialism is presented esoterically: i.e., that it depends on players actively making connections between occult and technological knowledge, from mystical and scientific sources alike (Faivre/Needleman 1993; Hammer 2001; Hanegraaff 1996), and that they do so within a transmedial context. That is, fans need to actively pull together all the hints or 'dots' from its many games, novels, and other media to reveal the explanations that *AC* promises. In the words of long-time Brand Content Manager Jean Guesdon: "we needed to maximise the opportunities for connections, links, echoes from one creation to another […] This is *esotérie*" (qtd. in de Wildt/Aupers 2021: 17).

Third, this paper concludes that by doing so, *AC* not only furthers spirituality's commodification and co-optation into the marketplace (Aupers/Houtman 2006); but additionally uses the structure of videogames to lead the believer-consumer of *Assassin's Creed* to actively construct meaning through bricolage (Luckmann 1967); as well as spend a whole lot of money.

Perennially

Religion in *Assassin's Creed* is perennial. That is to say: the rituals and beliefs that drive the series' main characters, narratives and mechanics are continually recurring throughout history in only slightly different forms. There will always be a conflict between two parties, which were named from *AC1* (Ubisoft Montreal 2007) and throughout most of the series the (titular) Assassins and the Templars. While much has been written about *AC*'s relation to these groups' historical roots (Bosman 2016; de Wildt 2019; El Nasr et al. 2008; Mukherjee 2016), it is important to note that the name and appearance of these groups change according to the geographical and historical context of each game, novel, and other media. Thus, the Templars may appear as the 'Order of the Ancients' in the franchise's Ancient Egyptian and Greek settings; as Abstergo Industries and Abstergo Entertainment – closely modelled after the game's real-life developer Ubisoft – in the contemporary settings; as the 'Red Hand' organisation in its Danelaw settings; as Yeluohe (曳落河) or the Golden Turtles (金龟袋) in the Chinese manhua/novels; and so on. Similarly, what was called the Brotherhood of Assassins in the first game's setting (the 12th century Holy Land) appears in different times, settings and media as the Medjay, Babylonian Brotherhood, Artabanus' group, the People's Will (*Наро́дная во́ля*), and a plethora of other names.

While their name and historical context may differ, the conflict is always the same: between a highly organised cult or church insisting on authoritarian control of the general population (the Templars); and an anarchist network resisting such control (the Assassins). Similarly, their appearance (cloaks vs robes), methods (stealth vs mass manipulation), and rituals (initiations, speech acts, assassinations – for which cf. Bosman 2018), vary only slightly between each of *AC*'s media objects and, furthermore, increasingly become similar as the two organisations evolve throughout the franchise.

Appearing thus in differently-religious historical and geographical settings, these globe-and time-spanning organisations and their beliefs adapt to fit the setting. Whether appearing as the papal Borgia versus Florentine nobility in Renaissance Italy, or differently in ancient Greece, the Crusader Era, 16th century Constantinople; and even in secular settings such as revolutionary France and communist Russia: their underlying belief system is always the same.

Such an understanding of belief is sometimes referred to as perennialism: namely that all religions have the same mysterious root, even though specific beliefs and practices may appear and be organised and practiced in different ways throughout history. The modern idea that a perennial philosophy underlies all religious traditions stems mainly from Renaissance-era, neo-Platonist theologians such as Marsilio Ficino (incl. Ficino 1482) – a Plato translator and, later, humanist philosopher – Giovanni Pico della Mirandola (esp. Pico della Mirandola 1486), and Agostino Steuco (spec. Steuco 1542). They all argued that religions appear like other Platonic Forms: as (imperfect) manifestations of an eternal, universal Idea (cf. Plato 514): the perennial philosophy. Thus, in the words of Steuco, for example, underlying all religions and philosophies, there is "one principle of all things, of which there has always been one and the same knowledge among all peoples" (1542; qtd. in Schmitt 1966: 517). Famous author and mysticist Aldous Huxley, inspired by psychedelic drug use, argued that the "rudiments of the perennial philosophy may be found among the traditional lore of primitive peoples in every region of the world, and in its fully developed forms it has a place in every one of the higher religions" (1945: 1). What exactly those rudiments are, or indeed what the perennial truth **is**, will be inevitably unknown or contested. Historian of Philosophy Charles Schmitt shows that while "*the* key theme [of] what perennial philosophy is," (1966: 517 [original emphasis]) is an assumed agreement of what Steuco claimed to be "one and the same knowledge among all peoples" (Schmitt 1966:517) – while "such a universal agreement is not at all obvious" (ibid.). Nonetheless, this perennial truth – regardless of what it actually is and whether we could ever articulate the Idea absolutely – is what presumably underlies and ties together scholasticism, Platonism, mysticism, positivism, naturalism, Catholicism, Western, and Eastern philosophy. Listing these, Schmitt fittingly adds that "[t]his is but a partial list! I have not yet seen scepticism referred to as philosophia perennis, but I expect to any day" (1966: 505–506).

The point is this: while the underlying perennial truth itself will be contested, the expectation is always that there **is** an underlying truth which is both universal and absolute – just as the creeds of both the Assassins and Templars insist. For this reason, they can appear throughout history and take on historically and geographically fitting Forms without compromising their underlying (universal, absolute) Ideas.

All of which is good news for players of *Assassin's Creed*: no matter what you (do not) believe and no matter where you are from, all the franchise's periods and settings in history apply to you! In the words of one anonymised level designer who worked on three *AC* titles, "using it [religion] 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'" (Anonymized level designer, qtd. in de Wildt/Aupers 2021: 15 [emphasis added]). The traditions are presented almost interchangeably: whether it is 9th-10th century Catholic chanting; 16th century Byzantine; or 'Indian' – which could mean a whole

lot of things, to be frank – the point is to draw a 'mystical,' 'fantastic' atmosphere from them that appeals to anyone. In the words of Amancio – who directed the Byzantine-era *Revelations* (Ubisoft Montreal 2010) as well as *Unity*'s (Ubisoft Montreal 2014) French Revolution setting – it is not mainly about the specificity of the setting, but about creating a generalised atmosphere of religious aesthetics that anyone can relate to, saying:

> 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, qtd. in de Wildt/Aupers 2021: 14–15)

Players seem to agree. When I asked several players who were theoretically selected for different religious backgrounds, how they relate to religion in videogames; religious and non-religious players alike indicated how much they related to the generality of historical religious settings, and many of them unsurprisingly mentioned *AC*. A Catholic player told me

> they did a pretty good job of [portraying Islam] in the first *Assassin's Creed*, you know, you hear the call to prayer quite a bit during the game, and you see Muslims praying, there's – you go through mosques a couple of times and whatnot, so and it seemed based on my experiences with Muslim friends and colleagues, it seemed a very accurate portrayal of you know what 99 percent of practising Muslims go through on a regular basis. So that was pretty accurate. I haven't seen that much of it in other games. (Catholic, qtd. in de Wildt/Aupers 2019: 876)

Now, regardless of whether this player's recollection of playing *AC* is correct – there are calls to prayers and mosques in *Revelations*, but not so much in the first game – the memory is one of a Catholic player from Boston relating to a 12th century Muslim context. Players across culture and religion feel this transposition to the setting and identification with the character. A Hindu player recalled "you forget who you are, you forget what you have to do in the next few hours […] I become the character, I think like the character. *I* fought the post-Renaissance missionaries in France, the British, the Arabs I guess. [Although] one game I haven't played is the *AC* that takes place in India [*Assassin's Creed Chronicles: India* (Climax Studios 2016)]" (Hindu).

Others echoed this: especially when the setting is not their own, they can relate to it because it seems to represent something 'shared:' Ubisoft allows them to tap into a (perhaps superficial) sense that whatever setting they are presented with is speaking to some underlying commonality. To cite one more, an agnostic player shared that "just because I don't believe in this thing [religion] doesn't mean that I can't spend a day in someone else's shoes […] I relish the opportunity to role-play, to actually identify with the role of my character" (Agnostic, qtd. in de Wildt/Aupers 2019: 875).

Esoterically

Religion in *Assassin's Creed* is furthermore esoteric. What I mean by this is that *AC* invites players from all sorts of backgrounds – Agnostic, Hindu, Catholic, and so on – into its own secret perennial philosophy, by involving players themselves in the process. As I wrote above, I operationalize the umbrella term 'esotericism' here as any non-institutionalised practice of meaning-making that ties together eclectic traditions including science, traditional religion, and historical secrets. As I will argue below, *AC* does exactly this. Briefly put, *AC* presents religion as not only perennial: it is furthermore dependent on actively tying together eclectic traditions (including science, religion, mythologies and religion, in a way that only good players (and readers, and viewers) of all its media objects can do. The good players, readers, and viewers being: those who buy and complete all the games.

This special access – reserved for 'good' consumers – to the underlying mysteries of history is central to *AC*, which Nicolas Guérin (a Level Design Director on four *AC* games) called "a cabbalistic approach of finding hidden meaning in religion across history, creating this sort of tertiary reading of things," (qtd. in de Wildt/Aupers 2021: 16) and which Jean Guesdon called the brand's strategy to "ta[p] into this rampant culture of religious symbolism, of esotericism" (ibid.). This constitutes a

> conspiracy theory of religions: people can dive into it, put themselves into it, can invest, can build it themselves. That's the beauty of *ésoterie*. 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, qtd. in de Wildt/Aupers 2021: 16)

This 'aha'-moment of being let into the grand underlying secrets of history and religion is central to not just the individual *AC* games but, more importantly, as Guesdon states, to the brand's entire strategy as a franchise.

Only the Assassins and Templars (and, thus, the player) can learn about this underlying perennial truth below history. It is a continuous thread of truth that runs back to 'Those Who Came Before,' or the 'First Civilization' of 'Isu:' essentially three different terms for a civilisation of super-intelligent superhumans with names like Minerva, Juno and Jupiter. What might be regarded by non-players of *AC* – or those outside of its diegesis – as disparate gods and mythologies is tied together into a narrative that explains everything: Minerva, Juno and Jupiter weren't gods, they were just superior beings to us. In the words of Ezio and Minerva in *AC2*:

> **Ezio**: "You are… gods."
> **Minerva**: "No. Not gods. We simply came… before." (Ubisoft Montreal 2009: n.p.)

So, the Roman gods, the Biblical Nephilim, the Scandinavian *Æsir* (Thor, Odin,), the Buddha, Egyptian gods, Hindu gods, and others were real all this time, but in a slightly profane way. They were just part of a civilisation that originally inhabited the Earth before us, who created us humans as a race of inferior slaves to be controlled. They were not 'divine,' just technologically advanced. The Biblical Apple of Eden? A very fancy mind control device to keep humans enslaved. The Shroud of Turin? A neurotransmitting healing device. Excalibur and the sword of Damokles? Powerful swords made by the Isu Hephaistos (a god of blacksmithing in Greek and Roman mythology) that happened to fall into human hands.

This knowledge is esoteric because it connects the dots between religions, mythologies, science, and all the mysteries of history, and more importantly: only very few have access to it. Many, but not even all, of *AC*'s protagonists, will be a rare individuals in history to understand a little bit of this perennial, esoteric truth. The only one who can piece it **all** together is the contemporary player who has access to each of these protagonists: intradiegetically, this is done through the Animus (a device that accesses historical people's memories stored in DNA); extradiegetically, this is done by playing (or otherwise consuming) *Assassin's Creed* products.

Conclusion: Franchised Perennial Esotericism

Religion in *Assassin's Creed* thus becomes franchised, in the sense that it only provides meaning if all of its products are consumed in order to make sense. Under the logic of Ubisoft's transmedial franchise, each *AC* product – main games, DLCs, mobile games, novels, encyclopediae, comic books, movies, miniseries – distributes the brand's trademarked version of perennial, esoteric religion, along its many products. This form of religion – which I have in another context called "marketable religion," (de Wildt/Aupers 2021) based on how the developers have shaped it – functions in two ways when we look at the content of the *AC* franchise and its various media objects (again: whether those be games, films, or whatever). Firstly, **individual media objects** provide esoteric knowledge – or sometimes just hints – of how all the world's religions are perennially connected, which can only be made fully understandable if consumers learn more about the Isu and their technology across all its products. Secondly, the **franchise as a whole** draws the consumer into buying the next media object to gain access to further explanation. The way in which this esoteric knowledge is disseminated is always partial for individual media objects in the *AC* universe: the mystery of the Isu is never the focus of the main plot of any single game, book (etc.). Although some cutscenes involve the Isu, most of *AC*'s underlying truth is distributed across the franchise as a whole. Players must actively piece together this underlying truth through optional puzzles, collectable objects, hidden e-mails, side-stories, and so on. Notably, again, this extends beyond single media objects: only by playing, reading, viewing and otherwise consuming and buying as many *AC* products as possible can we understand how things **really** work.

Importantly, this knowledge is never complete. While Patrice Désilets and Corey May originally intended to make this a self-enclosed trilogy,[1] the franchise was made into a Brand by Jean Guesdon, who replaced Désilets under the new title of 'Brand Creative Director' (cf. de Wildt/Aupers 2021). In the context of this chapter, the consequence is that the mystery will likely never be fully explained: there must be more for future *AC* products to divulge.

Even more importantly, the theoretical consequence of this is that the consumer becomes an active constructor of meaning by being tasked to piece together the esoteric knowledge spread across the franchise. In this way, the idealised 'believer-consumer' of *AC* actively reconstructs *AC*'s perennial, esoteric religion in the same way that Thomas Luckmann (1967) describes the act of 'bricolage' that I briefly introduced at the start of this chapter. To reiterate, by "bricolage" Luckmann meant the individualised 'DIY' process of "invisible religion" through which religion has survived the de-institutionalisation of religion of the 1960s – a decrease in church membership and religious "belonging" that some had mistaken for a disappearance of religion altogether (1967). Bricolage thus entails a picking and choosing of elements of religions in a presumed "marketplace" of religion and spirituality, where individuals can pick and choose religious elements, in what by those after Luckmann has variously been called "do-it-yourself-religion" (Baerveldt 1996), "pick-and mix religion" (Hamilton 2000), "religious consumption à la carte" (Possamai 2003), or a "spiritual supermarket" (Lyon 2000; cf. Aupers/Houtman 2006).

There is, of course, one major difference between what such sociologists describe as bricolage in a marketplace of religion; versus the bricolage performed by players of *AC*. There is really not much of a choice as to which religious elements can be 'picked and mixed:' players may only reconstruct what Ubisoft left for them to build with. It is essentially akin to confusing 'DIY' with IKEA. That does not mean the effort by players is trivial, and they still get the joy of reconstructing *AC*'s (perennial, esoteric) take on religion; but the work has been prepared by *AC* developers' handpicking from all kinds of religions to make a 'marketable' religion that offends nobody. This contributes to what I have elsewhere called a "commodification" of religion on top of the 'market-ification' already identified by Luckmann and others (de Wildt/Aupers 2021). That is, as a commodity, religion is stripped of its social, cultural, political meaning in order to be reduced to its use value for exchange: as a background setting to a game, say, or an atmosphere of general mystery.

Thus, to conclude, while *AC*'s audience is at the forefront of secularisation, the *AC* franchise presents this audience with a perennial, esoteric representation of religion,

1 This original plan was pieced together based on interviews by me with *AC*'s original creator Patrice Désilets and *AC3*'s creative director Alex Hutchinson (although I was unable to contact writer Corey May). It has been echoed by others in the industry and was publicly hinted at by voice actor Nolan North on a panel at Metrocon 2015. Briefly put, the third game would end with a resolution of the conflict in the present day, with Desmond Miles – voiced by North – taking down Abstergo using the combined knowledge and skills of all his ancestors, including *AC1*'s Altair and *AC2*'s Ezio. Also, it is the end of the world in 2012, and Desmond Miles and Lucy are starting a new civilization somewhere else – as Adam and Eve. "That's why she's called Lucy, after the Australopithecus afarensis" (Désilets). Where are they? To quote Désilets "*Boum! It's a freaking spaceship!*"

and does so in a commodified way, using the logic of esotericism to sell its 'marketable' religion across various transmedial media objects. Let me unpack those claims once more, step by step. Who plays *Assassin's Creed*, and what is likely to be their religious position? From what we can plausibly gather, this audience consists mainly of the exact demographic at the forefront of secularisation – Western, male, young, and educated. Yet those same 'forerunners' enjoy a game deeply steeped in various religious traditions. How does *AC* represent religion for this largely secular audience? As perennial – i.e., that there is one underlying truth common to all religious and philosophical traditions – and esoteric – i.e., that religion can be made understandable through the combined, rare knowledge that only a select few have access to.

What is the consequence of this? *AC*'s representation of religion follows the same market logic that spirituality and New Age religion have taken outside of the church, particularly since the 1960s: a picking and mixing of religious elements from any tradition at hand. What's more, this handpicked assemblage presents a "marketable" religion that will offend nobody and that anyone can identify with (de Wildt/Aupers 2021). Rather than perform individual bricolage, however, consumers of *AC* are invited to reconstruct meanings that have already been laid out by the franchise: a commodified, enjoyable puzzle that promises the answer to understanding all of history's mysteries. This logic of esotericism – of piecing together scientific, historical, mysterious and religious knowledge – is at the centre of *AC* as a franchise. Every media object – *AC*'s many games, books, and other transmedia products – offers a piece of this puzzle that only the 'true' fan has access to. It offers the joy of understanding the 'real' truth behind everything, without having to believe in anything at all.

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