

# Producing Nostalgic Belonging: an Interview Study of *Assassin's Creed's* Development

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## INTRODUCTION

Videogames, as has been repeated ad nauseam, represent the biggest cultural industry in the world, making more worldwide than the film and music industry combined. At the same time, videogames do something unexpected, for an industry so modern and technological: they harken back to religious worldviews and symbologies that we are rapidly losing. Regardless of whether that is a bad thing (or a good thing) at all, it is certainly against the grain of (Western) societal trends since the 19<sup>th</sup> century. While previous research has looked into how and from which origins religion appears in games (Bosman, 2016; de Wildt, et al., 2018; de Wildt, et al., 2019; Wiemker & Wysocki, 2014); why players like or dislike religion in their games (de Wildt & Aupers, 2019a); and what they do with games in their respective cultural contexts (de Wildt & Aupers, 2019b; López López, et al., 2019); researchers have rarely asked the question *why* game developers choose to use religion in their games at all, and how they come to make such decisions (cf. Hall, 2001). This paper, by contrast, asks the question ‘*who* decides to put religion into popular best-selling videogames? *How* are these decisions made and *why*?’

The question is pertinent not just because the past centuries have seen rapid secularization (in the sense of institutional religion’s relevance to the public sphere as a source of meaning [Durkheim, 1912; Habermas, 2006]), but also because the traditional reasoning posed – albeit somewhat reductionistically here – is that “technical means and calculations” now perform the function of gods (Weber, 1919). Why then, does such an advanced medium’s industry rely on old-fashioned magical means instead, and for a secularizing demographic no less? The existing literature on videogame production is very often either political-economical (e.g., Dyer-Witthof & de Peuter, 2009; Kline, Dyer-Witthof, & de Peuter, 2003; Nieborg, 2011), or ethnographic (e.g., O’Donnell, 2014), or both (Kerr, 2017), giving little insight into why choices are made within a AAA context, and who does the decision-making. As research by e.g., de Smale, Kors & Sandovar shows (2019), however, individual interviews across different roles on the development team can give complementary insights into *how* and *why* design choices were made. Rather than an ethnographic overview of company structure and culture; or a company’s wider functioning within a political-economical(-military-industrial-marketing-global) context, then, interviews with game developers are the method to answer *why* a game became like it is. This method was employed in order to answer why, then, one of the most advanced

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technological products in the world places millions of players in magical worlds full of gods and enchanted heritage?

## **INTERVIEWING UBISOFT**

This paper answers that question based on interviews with N=21 game designers of various positions, roles (and religious backgrounds), working for Ubisoft Montréal – the world’s biggest game studio. Ubisoft creates a best-selling franchise, *Assassin’s Creed* (2007—), about a conflict over Biblical artefacts between historically Muslim Hashashin and Christian Templars; furthermore based on a recurring underlying narrative of ancient gods that created the first humans, Adam and Eve. Concretely, the first author conducted fieldwork in Montréal, resulting in 21 expert-interviews about motivations, worldviews and design decisions, with (named) Creative Directors (including originator Patrice Désilets, brand creative director Jean Guesdon, et cetera), writers, designers and other (anonymous) workers on the franchise. The ‘who’ of Ubisoft is unpacked as an increasingly de-personalized and codified process; despite starting from one person’s very concrete (anti-)religious convictions. How does it end up doing so? Through the process of a codified “Brand Bible,” and the ‘Branding-marketing–editorial’ sandwich; working together to provide a version of ‘marketable religion’ that is attractive, marketable and uncontroversial to anyone, regardless of culture and (non-)religious conviction.

## **MARKETABLE RELIGION**

What does marketable religion look like as produced for a 21st century, ‘postsecular’ audience (Habermas, 2006)? Through the process of codifying (and successfully selling) its representation of religion, *Assassin’s Creed* shows how. First, religion is made nostalgic by putting it safely in historically appropriate periods; second, it is made perennial, i.e., ‘for everyone’ by tying all periods and traditions together into an underlying universal mystical truth; and third, it is made present by bringing it into 21<sup>st</sup> century scientific vocabulary of technology and rationalization. Thus, the Turin Shroud – considered by Christians a sacred artefact left by Christ – turns out to be a ‘nanotech matter regenerator’ that can heal the owner; and the Apple of Eden was a neurotransmitting mind-control device. As a consequence, Ubisoft manages to create a Western esoteric product that appeals to secular and pluralist audiences precisely because it leverages the structure of esotericism: by buying all 21 games, and the related 9 novels, 4 movies and 12 comics, players can play with and find out the ‘truth’ behind all human societies’ religions. In conclusion, Ubisoft actively uses religious Belonging for ‘everyone’ (Davie, 1990), without the burden of Believing; to use the magic of religion without having to get rid of technology and rationalization; as well as to sell a whole lot of videogames.

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