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## “Everything is true; nothing is permitted”

### Utopia, Religion and Conspiracy in Assassin’s Creed

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LARS DE WILDT

Rodrigo [de Borja, Pope Alexander VI, LdW] looked surprised: Don’t you know what lies within? Hasn’t the great and powerful *Order of the Assassins* figured it out? [...] Are you really so naive? I became Pope because the position gave me access. It gave me power! [...] It’s all lies and superstition. [...] Ezio, we *Templars* understand humanity, and that is why we hold it in such contempt! OLIVER BOWDEN, ASSASSIN’S CREED: RENAISSANCE

## INTRODUCTION

The ASSASSIN’S CREED series has always framed religion as a dystopian power play. Starting with one game in 2007, the series now (in 2019) includes 21 games, four movies, various books and other media—each more or less taking place in another historical period and place. Throughout all of those, two secret societies (the Assassins and Templars) fight throughout history to find a sacred artefact that will help themselves shape the world as they see fit, while keeping the other party from doing the same. The Order of the Assassins are initially presented as a liberating secularizing force, utopian in

its plan to free the minds of historical societies from the (Catholic) Templar mind-controllers.

This chapter will challenge that initial conception. It will start with a review of the relevant literature on Utopia, religion and conspiracy, and then proceed in two sections. The first section argues that the series' original premise monopolizes the Assassins' project as utopian. The Utopia of the Assassins' secularized secret society tries to create space for its 'not-place' (Utopia) in the Holy Land of Jerusalem in the year 1191. This secular Utopia is set against the outside invasion of the Catholic dystopian Templar crusaders. The second section of the paper will trace the development of the series' characters, settings and stories between the first game in 2007 and its most recent release (at time of writing) in 2018 to argue that the idea of Utopia comes increasingly to overlap with the dystopia of the other. That is, that the Assassins' dystopia is the Templar's Utopia and vice versa. Cynically put, both sides are equally legitimate in their striving toward contrasting Utopia, by vying for full control over historical societies: everything is true. Nothing is permitted.

## CONSPIRACY, FAITH, AND UTOPIA

Two paratexts shed light on how the basic idea of Utopia comes to fruition in the game series. In the advertisement for *ASSASSIN'S CREED SYNDICATE* (2015), a nobleman dreams of blades erupting from every surface of Victorian London, as he is chased by them. Waking up, his assistant, in a decidedly upper-middle class British accent asks him: "Is there a problem, my lord?"—"No, nothing that concerns you." As the camera tracks the faces of several conspiring standers-by, Depeche Mode's *Personal Jesus* ("Reach out and touch faith") plays in the background. Assassins appear on the rooftops and a line of text appears full-screen, in all capitals:

OPPRESSION HAS TO END

The advertisement, titled "Blades" and filmed by the agency BETC France for Ubisoft, ends with Depeche Mode's titular lyric "Your own personal Jesus," framing the Assassins as Christ-like liberators. The ad contains all the

elements of the series that this paper focuses on: conspiracy, faith, and a utopian project: “oppression has to end.” Similarly, the advertisement for ASSASSIN’S CREED III (2012, “Rise,” by Sid Lee) shows revolutionaries before the American Revolution noting their moments of resistance (“When I say no to a law we never voted for. When I stop feeding an Empire a world away [...] When I ask God to look the other way”), culminating in another full-screen, all capital slogan:

## RISE

Just as the advertisements, reviews too have framed ASSASSIN’S CREED as revolving around an aspiration toward some kind of better world. ASSASSIN’S CREED, according to Games Radar, is about “restoring peace to the region.”<sup>1</sup> ASSASSIN’S CREED III, according to Kotaku’s Stephen Totilo is about “Connor creating his own better society.”<sup>2</sup> Others note that in ASSASSIN’S CREED: UNITY (2014) “revolution is in the air and it’s time for you to take a step up and aid the change for a better world,”<sup>3</sup> and in ASSASSIN’S CREED: LIBERATION (2012), players will “be infiltrating plantations, guiding slaves to freedom, and generally fighting to *create a better world*.”<sup>4</sup>

## Utopia

This sort of discourse (diegetically, in surrounding media and in game culture’s reception of the games) strongly suggests that ASSASSIN’S CREED can be, and is being read, as utopian. Before going into how the game presents its utopian project(s), it is valuable to go over what that entails.

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- 1 Reparaz, Mikel: “Assassin’s Creed Review,” *Gamesradar*, 2007; <https://www.gamesradar.com/assassins-creed-review/>
  - 2 Totilo, Stephen: “The Controversial Assassin’s Creed III Is More Impressive in 2019,” *Kotaku*, 2019; <https://kotaku.com/the-controversial-assassin-s-creed-iii-is-more-impressi-1833676354>
  - 3 Milner, Jarred: “Review: Assassin’s Creed Unity,” *SA Gamer*, 2014; <https://sagamer.co.za/review-assassins-creed-unity-xbox-one>
  - 4 Rosenberg, Adam: “Assassin’s Creed 3: Liberation Review: Flawed, But Realized Potential,” *Digital Trends*, 2012; <https://www.digitaltrends.com/gaming/assassins-creed-3-liberation-review-realized-potential/>, [emphasis added].

Most originally, as most chapters in this book will in some way state, the idea of Utopia—as a non-place on which to find, project or potentially realize an ideal world—comes from Thomas More’s *Utopia*, first published in Leuven, Belgium in 1516. In it, in front of Antwerp’s Onze-Lieve-Vrouwekathedraal [*Cathedral of Our Lady*], More’s protagonist starts relating a story of a perfect state called Utopia (οὐ [not] + τόπος [place]). Gerald Farca, writing about such utopian projects in videogames in his book *Playing Dystopia*, argues that the “*act of imagination*,”<sup>5</sup> [emphasis original] which is at the root of all utopian thinking “induces a transformative process.”<sup>6</sup> What this means for videogames, and fiction in general, is that an utopian narrative is always a “concrete fictional portrayal” of Utopia in action,<sup>7</sup> leading Farca to conclude that videogames particularly:

“involves the player in a playful trial action in which she may ergodically and imaginatively explore an alternative societal mode through play that is considerably worse than the game designers’ empirical present.”<sup>8</sup>

Put simply, the player gets to actively engage with (‘ergodically,’ i.e., through non-trivial input on the game)<sup>9</sup> as well as imagine Utopia. Typically, in videogames, this means one of two things. Either the player works toward establishing a Utopia, such as, arguably according to some, the cases of *WORLD OF WARCRAFT* (2004), *SIMCITY* (1989), or *BLACK & WHITE* (2001).<sup>10</sup>

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5 Levitas, Ruth/Sargisson, Lucy quoted in: Farca, Gerald. *Playing Dystopia: Nightmarish Worlds in Video Games and the Player’s Aesthetic Response*, Bielefeld: transcript 2018, p. 37.

6 G. Farca: *Playing Dystopia*, p. 37.

7 Ferns, Christopher S.: *Narrating Utopia: Ideology, Gender, Form in Utopian Literature*, Liverpool: Liverpool University Press 1999, p. 34.

8 G. Farca: *Playing Dystopia*, p. 403.

9 Aarseth, Espen J.: *Cybertext: Perspectives on Ergodic Literature*, Baltimore: JHU Press 1997, p. 1.

10 Galloway, Alexander: “Warcraft and Utopia,” *Ctheory* 2/16 (2006); Kłosiński, Michał: “Games and Utopia,” *Acta Ludologica* 1, no. 1 (2018), pp. 4-14; Markocki, Miłosz: “Creating Utopian or Dystopian Worlds in Digital Games,” *More After More* (2016), pp. 118-133.

Or the player works to dismantle the opposite of a Utopia: dystopia, i.e., usually a hopeless future vision of an autocratic, oppressive state, such as in the cases of *HALF-LIFE* (1998), *FALLOUT* (1997), *BIOSHOCK: INFINITE* (2013), *CART LIFE* (2010),<sup>11</sup> and so on.<sup>12</sup>

## Religion

Often one person's heaven is another's hell. So, too, it seems to be in the Utopia games literature. What Gerald Farca reads as "a Utopia based on the principles of religious piety and American exceptionalism,"<sup>13</sup> leads Frank Bosman to the opposite conclusion about the same game: to him, "the religious based American exceptionalism of [*BIOSHOCK INFINITE*] is the firm ground on which Ken Levine has created his second dystopian society."<sup>14</sup> Religion, Bosman notes, occurs throughout dystopian games in various ways, although all of the ones he analyses—in the games *BIOSHOCK* (2007), its successor *INFINITE*, the *DISHONORED* (2012) games and *BRINK* (2011)—start off as Utopian projects.<sup>15</sup>

Christian religion, especially, is historically framed as a utopian project. This goes beyond the description of Eden or the promise of Heaven as perfect, just no-places as alternatives to the current society—whether oppressed by Romans, or others. As Bosman also notes, Puritans fleeing to the United States framed their project as utopian, "trying to establish a new Eden."<sup>16</sup>

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11 It should be noted that, while *CART LIFE* seems to portray to many parts of the world a classic dystopian vision of dehumanized hopelessness under an oppressive state; it is elsewhere read as an accurate satire of, if not an actual portrayal of North-American neoliberalism, for which see, e.g., de Wildt, Lars: "On the Subject of Play: Digital Game-Play as Models of Ideologies," 2014, Leiden University; <https://openaccess.leidenuniv.nl/handle/1887/28571>

12 Tulloch, Rowan: "Ludic Dystopias: Power, Politics and Play," *Proceedings of the Sixth Australasian Conference on Interactive Entertainment* (2009), pp. 1-4; Bosman, Frank G.: "'The Lamb of Comstock.' Dystopia and Religion in Video Games," *Online. Heidelberg Journal of Religions on the Internet* 5 (2014), pp. 162-182.

13 G. Farca: *Playing Dystopia*, p. 326.

14 F. Bosman: "The Lamb of Comstock," p. 177.

15 *Ibid.*, p. 178.

16 Bremer, Francis J. quoted in F. Bosman: "The Lamb of Comstock," p. 175.

Regardless, the presence of religion in contemporary Western media is odd. That is, it is *at odds* with the decline of religion in (Western) cultures and their public spaces. The prediction that religion is in decline is at least as old as the social sciences, in which secularization has been a defining concern as old as its founding fathers. Auguste Comte called “l’état théologique, ou fictive [*the theological, or fictive state*]” of humanity its most primitive state, of which the scientific is its “état fixe et définitif.”<sup>17</sup> Marx famously predicted that “alles Heilige wird entweiht [*all that is holy is profaned*]” at the coming of capitalist modernity,<sup>18</sup> and Durkheim wrote that “le domaine de la religion [...] va de plus en plus en se rétrécissant [*the sphere of religion is continually diminishing*]”.<sup>19</sup> Max Weber, lastly, spoke (in his inaugural reason at Munich University) about the “Entzauberung der Welt [*disenchantment of the world*]” by which technology and rationality now perform what the savage needed religion and magic for.<sup>20</sup> And indeed, statistics do show a decrease in church attendance, baptism and other institutional religious rituals over the course of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, especially in the case of Western

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17 “Cette loi consiste en ce que chacune de nos conceptions principales, chaque branche de nos connaissances, passe successivement par trois états théoriques différents: l’état théologique, ou fictif; l’état métaphysique, ou abstrait; l’état scientifique, ou positif [...] la troisième, [est] son état fixe et définitif. [*This law consists in that each of our principle conceptions, each branch of our knowing, passes successively through three different theoretical states: the theological or fictive state; the metaphysical or abstract state; the scientific or positive, state [...] the third one is humanity’s fixed and definitive state.*]” Comte, Auguste: *Cours de philosophie positive: première et deuxième leçons*, Hatier 1982.

18 Marx, Karl/Engels, Friedrich: “Manifest der Kommunistischen Partei,” in: *Marx-Engels: Werke* 4, 1848, pp. 459-493, here p. 462.

19 Durkheim, Emile: *De la division du travail social*, Quadrige: Presses Universitaires de France 1991, p. 144.

20 Weber, Max: *Wissenschaft als Beruf*, Vol. 1., Berlin: Duncker & Humblot 1919.

youngsters.<sup>21</sup> The resulting argument is that either religions' social and cultural significance diminishes as a whole,<sup>22</sup> or that institutional religion shows at least a retreat from the public sphere.<sup>23</sup>

Yet we see a subversive occupation with religion as a mainstay in popular culture, specifically videogames. In such cases, religious symbology either serves to add mystery (or indeed magical re-enchantment)<sup>24</sup> through what religious scholar Christopher Partridge calls a "re-enchantment" through "occulture."<sup>25</sup> We see specific examples of this in, for instance, the use of the occult to bring magic and tension to *BUFFY THE VAMPIRE SLAYER*, in the popularity of bestsellers such as Dan Brown's *Da Vinci Code* or, indeed, *ASSASSIN'S CREED*.

## Conspiracy

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- 21 Dobbelaere, Karel/Voyé, Liliane: "Religie en kerkbetrokkenheid: ambivalentie en vervreemding," *Verloren zekerheid De Belgen en hun waarden, overtuigingen en houdingen*, Tiel: Lannoo 2001, pp. 117-152.
  - 22 Wilson, Bryan R.: *Religion in Secular Society*, London: Penguin 1969; Wallis, Roy/Bruce, Steve: "Secularization: The Orthodox Model," in: Bruce, Steve (ed.), *Religion and Modernization: Sociologists and Historians Debate the Secularization Thesis*, Oxford: Oxford University Press 1992; Bruce, Steve: *God Is Dead: Secularization in the West*, Vol. 3, Oxford: Blackwell 2002; Norris, Pippa/Inglehart, Ronald: *Sacred and Secular: Religion and Politics Worldwide*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2011.
  - 23 Dobbelaere, Karel: "Some Trends in European Sociology of Religion: The Secularization Debate," *Sociology of Religion* 48, no. 2 (1987), pp. 107-137, here p. 107; Dobbelaere, Karel: "Towards an Integrated Perspective of the Processes Related to the Descriptive Concept of Secularization," *Sociology of Religion* 60, no. 3 (1999), pp. 229-247; Habermas, Jürgen: „Die Dialektik der Säkularisierung," *Blätter für deutsche und internationale Politik*, 4 (2004), pp. 33-46. In English: Habermas, Jürgen: "Notes on Post-Secular Society," *New Perspectives Quarterly* 25, no. 4 (2008), pp. 17-29.
  - 24 Aupers, Stef: "'Better Than the Real World.' On the Reality and Meaning of Online Computer Games," *Fabula* 48, no. 3-4 (2007), pp. 250-269.
  - 25 Partridge, Christopher: *The Re-Enchantment of the West*, Vol. 2, London: A&C Black 2006.

In such cases as the *Da Vinci Code* or ASSASSIN'S CREED, religion—or more specifically the church or any other established, intransparent institution—serves as a black box on which to project, or map, the unknown. As Fredric Jameson insists,

“Conspiracy, one is tempted to say, is the poor person’s cognitive mapping in the postmodern age; it is a degraded figure of the total logic of late capital, a desperate attempt to represent the latter’s system, whose failure is marked by its slippage into sheer theme and content.”<sup>26</sup>

Conspiracy is, in other words, seen as a layman’s theorization of what happens in complex systems to which they have no access or insight—such as global capitalism, governments, or the Vatican. According to Jaron Harambam and Stef Aupers, such “conspiracy theories particularly compete with those formulated by social scientists”<sup>27</sup> by providing accounts of social control,<sup>28</sup> and “claim[ing] to uncover (supposedly) ‘hidden’ plots or machineries which have caused a particular state of affairs or events to take place.”<sup>29</sup>

In the 20<sup>th</sup> century, however, the threat of such systems has always been that of an invader on the ‘outside,’ whereas the postmodernist conspiracy of the 21<sup>st</sup> century is of a paranoia pointed inward. Peter Knight argues that

“Where conspiracy-minded narratives of the individual and national immune system under threat might once have served to bolster a sense of (albeit restricted) communal identity, they now regularly register the far more scary anxiety that we can no longer tell the difference between Them and Us.”<sup>30</sup>

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26 Jameson, Fredric: *Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, Durham: Duke University Press 1991, p. 356.

27 Harambam, Jaron/Aupers, Stef: “Contesting Epistemic Authority: Conspiracy Theories on the Boundaries of Science,” *Public Understanding of Science* 24, no. 4 (2015), pp. 466-488, here p. 2.

28 Melley, Timothy. *Empire of Conspiracy: The Culture of Paranoia in Postwar America*, Ithaca: Cornell University Press 2000, p. 42.

29 Parker, Martin: “Human Science as Conspiracy Theory,” *The Sociological Review* 48.2 (2000), pp. 191-207, here p. 191.

30 Knight, Peter (ed.): *Conspiracy Nation: The Politics of Paranoia in Postwar America*, New York: NYU Press 2002, p. 5.



Conspiracy then, according to authors like Jameson, Knight, Aupers and Harambam, arises as a way of dealing with the complexity of postmodern systems—interconnected, interrelated, intransparent bodies. Consider the presence of mistrust at every level of our public sphere. News and social media show growing groups of people with no trust in ‘their own’ climate scientists, vaccines, spherical earth, ‘their own’ United States Government, ‘the Washington swamp,’ the Deep State, the European Commission, Parliament and Council, the ones behind it all *actually* running everything; whether they are lizard people, the illuminati or whomever is spraying chem trails. It’s all related, and you can’t know what is true, but once you go down the rabbit hole, everything is significant. Harambam & Aupers stress this normalization of conspiracy through its pervasive presence in popular fiction, arguing that:

“[Conspiracy] not only features in popular culture—for example, films like *The Matrix*, bestsellers like *The Da Vinci Code*, or TV-series like *THE X-FILES*—but conspiracy theories have become an increasingly normalized idiom to account for seemingly inexplicable phenomena in contemporary society. From narratives about the ‘real truth’ behind the attacks of 9/11, the deaths of John F Kennedy, princess Diana, and Bin Laden, or collective vaccinations like against the Swine flu—official explanations are increasingly challenged, reconstructed, and contested by a discourse of conspiracy.”<sup>31</sup>

## ASSASSIN’S CREED: A CASE STUDY

Across the literature, a pivotal point for conspiracy culture in the 21<sup>st</sup> century appears to be September 11; such as through the 9/11 truth movement.<sup>32</sup> The

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31 J. Harambam/S. Aupers: “Contesting Epistemic Authority,” p. 2.

32 Harambam, Jaron J.: *‘The Truth Is Out There:’ Conspiracy Culture in an Age of Epistemic Instability*, Rotterdam: Erasmus University Rotterdam 2017; Stempel, Carl et al.: “Media Use, Social Structure, and Belief in 9/11 Conspiracy Theories,” *Journalism & Mass Communication Quarterly* 84, no. 2 (2007), pp. 353-372; de Wildt, Lars: “Entwining the National and Personal: Art Spiegelman’s Post-9/11 Shapeshifting,” in: Folio, Jessica/Luhning, Holly (eds.), *Body Horror and Shapeshifting: A Multidisciplinary Exploration*, Leiden: Brill 2013, pp. 123-

case study for this chapter, *ASSASSIN'S CREED*, came up in exactly that time. While the United States was still very much pre-occupied with the War on Terror, carrying the traces of September 11 in North-America, the world also saw a rise of Islamophobia and religion-based conflict across the European continent. It is the period that has been called “post-relativist,”<sup>33</sup> exacerbating a “clash of civilizations,”<sup>34</sup> whose news cycle brought the importance of religion back into the public sphere to the point that Jürgen Habermas declared it “post-secular.”<sup>35</sup>

Yet, *ASSASSIN'S CREED* was set in the Middle-East during a period defined by religious turmoil. It was originally a continuation of the *PRINCE OF PERSIA* IP, but in an open-world Middle-Eastern setting in order to show off the (then) ‘next-generation’ of consoles’ computing powers. The game’s developers, Ubisoft, added a disclaimer presumably in order to distance themselves from any perceived bias in the ‘clash of civilizations’—Islamophobia would have surely meant horrible sales for a promising title. Thus, the first screen upon starting the game reads, now famously:

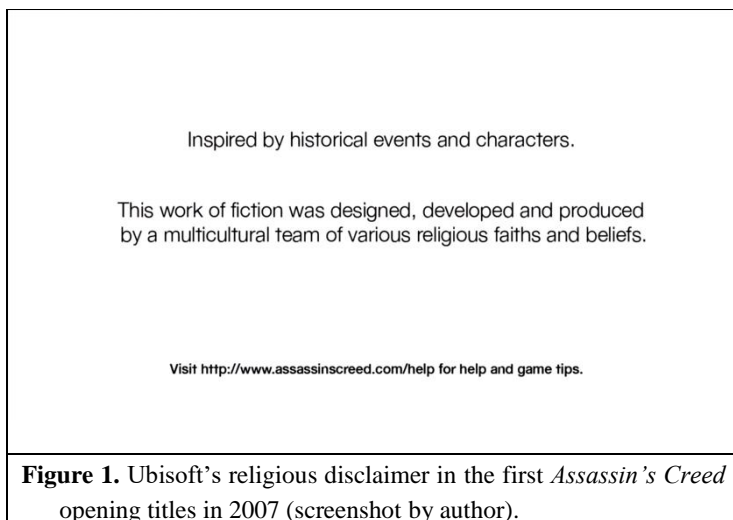
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136; Wood, Michael James/Douglas, Karen M.: “‘What About Building 7?’ A Social Psychological Study of Online Discussion of 9/11 Conspiracy Theories,” *Frontiers in Psychology* 4 (2013), p. 409.

33 Fish, Stanley: “Don’t Blame Relativism,” *The Responsive Community* 12, no. 3 (2002), pp. 27-31; Rothstein, Edward: “Moral Relativity is a Hot Topic? True. Absolutely,” *New York Times* 7 (2002), p. 13.

34 Huntington, Samuel P.: *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order*, London: Simon & Schuster 1996; Eagleton, Terry: *Reason, Faith, and Revolution: Reflections on the God Debate*, New Haven: Yale University Press 2009; Bolets, Maria: *Barbarism and its Discontents*, Stanford: Stanford University Press 2013.

35 J. Habermas: “Die Dialektik der Säkularisierung.”



The formula of the game has more or less stayed the same, with a small shift toward more open adventuring in 2017—much akin to Nintendo's new ZELDA game of that same year. That is: as an Assassin—or sometimes a Templar—the player exists in a duality between the present time and the past. This past is where most of the games take place, and it is re-lived by entering a machine called the Animus which digs up the ancestral experiences of the framing story's character's forefathers. In the first game, Altaïr Ibn-La'Ahad [*The Bird, Son of None*] during the Third Crusade; in the second game Ezio Auditore in 15th century Italy; and so on. Players learn about the Assassins' and Templars' secret orders in each period, weaving a historical tapestry of 'speculative fiction:' all this time, the stories of ASSASSIN'S CREED tell us, all the great conflicts and inventions of human history were a result of these two groups' search for the 'Apple of Eden.'

The Apple of Eden, originating from that original 'no-place' (Utopia) of happiness, the Garden of Eden, is the central element of ASSASSIN'S CREED's universe. Every main and supplementary game or paraludic content revolves around this key to re-establishing Utopia—and that transmedial universe currently (as per April 2019) unfolds over 21 games of which 11 'main' entries (see Table 1), one full-length movie, three short films, 13 graphic novels, nine books, a board game, and three editions of an encyclopedia.

**Table 1.** The *Assassin's Creed* games as per April 2019, with main entries in bold.

Setting	Period	Title	Release
Third Crusade	1191 AD	<b>ASSASSIN'S CREED</b>	2007
	1190 AD	AC: ALTAIR'S CHRONICLES	2008
	1191 AD	ASSASSIN'S CREED: BLOODLINES	2009
Italian Renaissance	1476-1499 AD	<b>ASSASSIN'S CREED II</b>	
	1491 AD	ASSASSIN'S CREED II: DISCOVERY	
	1499-1507 AD	ASSASSIN'S CREED: BROTHERHOOD	2010
	1511-1512 AD	ASSASSIN'S CREED: REVELATIONS	2011
Colonial era	1754-1783 AD	<b>ASSASSIN'S CREED III</b>	2012
	1765-1777 AD	ASSASSIN'S CREED III: LIBERATION	
	1715-1722 AD	<b>AC IV: BLACK FLAG</b>	2013
	1716-1718 AD	ASSASSIN'S CREED: PIRATES	
	1735-1737 AD	ASSASSIN'S CREED: FREEDOM CRY	
	1752-1776 AD	<b>ASSASSIN'S CREED ROGUE</b>	
Italian Renaissance	1501-1506 AD	ASSASSIN'S CREED IDENTITY	2014
French Revolution	1776-1800 AD	<b>ASSASSIN'S CREED UNITY</b>	
Ming Dynasty	1526-1532 AD	AC CHRONICLES: CHINA	2015
Victorian era	1868 AD	<b>ASSASSIN'S CREED SYNDICATE</b>	
Sikh Empire	1841 AD	AC CHRONICLES: INDIA	2016
October Revolution	1918 AD	ASSASSIN'S CREED CHRONICLES: RUSSIA	
Ptolemaic Egypt	49-43 BC	<b>ASSASSIN'S CREED ORIGINS</b>	2017
Peloponnesian War	431-404 BC	<b>ASSASSIN'S CREED ODYSSEY</b>	2018

The following analysis will use a variety of material to, whenever possible, stress the argument is as much rooted in the games' diegesis through formal analysis—primarily through gameplay setting and citations of dialogue—as well as extradiegetically through studying the game's reception: i.e., how game culture (reviewers, players on forums) and game studies (academics) support the ideas discussed. Throughout, I will focus primarily on the main games, and their switch over time from an aesthetics of a modernist-conspiratorial secular Utopia versus religious Dystopia, to those of a post-modernist conspiracy of decentralized utopian visions. Additionally, I base myself broadly (when theoretically or empirically necessary) on material from across and around the ASSASSIN'S CREED universe: supplementary games, books, surrounding lore, journalistic commentaries, and of course academic work.

## CENTRALIZED UTOPIA

The central struggle of the ASSASSIN'S CREED series described above, is initially presented as that of a dystopian force entering from the outside. Through giving privileged access to Assassin ideology, the series' initial focalization monopolizes the utopian project of the Assassins, thereby casting the Templars as dystopian, Catholic conspirators.

### Assassin Utopia

A utopian narrative is always a "concrete fictional portrayal" of Utopia in action,<sup>36</sup> or in the case of ASSASSIN'S CREED, a fictional portrayal overlaying human history in a speculative fiction. Scholar of videogames and cultural memory Emil Hammar insists, for instance, that ASSASSIN'S CREED FREEDOM CRY is a "potentially cathartic power fantasy within a historical struggle," in this case against transatlantic chattel slavery.<sup>37</sup> In such readings, it is clear that the Assassins are on the 'good side' of history. They resist the Templar crusaders in the first game, they unravel a plot by corrupt Templar

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36 C. Ferns: *Narrating Utopia*, p. 34

37 Hammar, Emil Lundedal: "Counter-Hegemonic Commemorative Play: Marginalized Pasts and the Politics of Memory in the Digital Game Assassin's Creed: Freedom Cry," *Rethinking History* 21, no. 3 (2017), pp. 372-395, here p. 389.

pope Rodrigo Borgia in the second game (but nobly spare his life), they fight the Templar colonial powers as a half-Mohawk Assassin in ASSASSIN'S CREED III, they fight for the French Revolution in UNITY, and so on.

By contrast, the Templar project opposes that of the Assassins'. Or rather, as the Assassin project is framed as a reaction to the Templars' injustice; the Assassin utopian project is always in response to a dystopian project by the Templars. As one reviewer describes them:

"the Templar order [is] an ancient and secretive sect of wealthy and powerful individuals whose goal is literally world domination. They remind me of the Mayflowers in the criminally underrated Bruce Willis movie Hudson Hawk. They don't believe in individual freedom, [Templars] believe people are too stupid and dangerous to have freedom. This is the complete opposite of the Assassin Order which believes in liberty and collaboration for building a better world."<sup>38</sup>

The words of the first game's protagonist Altaïr, stress the Assassin perspective on this opposition of Assassin Utopia against Templars' dystopia:

"I have realized, that so long as The Templars exist, they will attempt to bend reality to their will. They recognize there is no such thing as an absolute truth—or if there is—we are hopelessly under-equipped to recognize it. And so in its place, they seek to create their own explanation. It is the guiding principle of their so-named "New World Order;" to reshape existence in their own image. It is not about artifacts. Not about men. These are merely tools. It's about concepts. Clever of them. For how does one wage war against a concept? It is the perfect weapon. It lacks a physical form yet can alter the world around us in numerous, often violent ways. You cannot kill a creed. Even if you kill all of its adherents, destroy all of its writings—these are a reprieve at best. Some one, some day, will rediscover it. Reinvent it. I believe that even we, the Assassins, have simply re-discovered an Order that predates the Old Man himself..."<sup>39</sup>

There are three things to note about this. First, Altaïr has a certain authority within the universe, receiving, throughout most of the games, a special status as the first and in many ways 'original' Assassin for players to embody.

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38 Quake, John: "Assassin's Creed 2 Review," *Rebel Gaming Canada*, 2017; <https://www.rebelgamingcanada.com/assassins-creed-2-review/>

39 Altaïr Ibn-La'Ahad in the ASSASSIN'S CREED II Codex, an in-game encyclopedia.

Altair was the introduction for all players to the universe, being their first “avatar,” i.e., “the primary interface between the user and the world, in the sense that the player of the game acts on the world of the game through the avatar.”<sup>40</sup> His formulation of the Assassin project, in other words, is seminal—underlined by the fact that this citation appears in the “codex” of ASSASSIN’S CREED II, the fourth game—making it into something of a founding document for the Assassins. Secondly, the ideological position of Altair himself is formulated in opposition to the Templars’ dystopian ambitions to “reshape existence” into a “New World Order.”

Thirdly, Altair stresses the abstract ideal of both the Templar and Assassin project: it is “about concepts,” and “lacks a physical form:” the Assassins’ (reactive) project is of an ideal world to be imagined and realized, not a political interest or a material, contained struggled but a concept, a Utopia.

### **Secular Creeds**

The Utopian project of the Assassins has its roots in both a religious conflict (the Crusades), and a religious organization (the Ismā‘īlī hashashin), yet it is subsequently presented in the game as a secularizing project. The religious roots of the game are clear: the invading crusaders of the first game are a quintessentially religious force. The Templar Order was historically a Catholic Military order, recognized by the Pope from 1139 until 1312. The games unambiguously present the Templars in this historical light: they invade the Holy Land. (The sequel would figure a Templar as the aforementioned pope, Rodrigo Borgia). The speculative fiction adds only more religiosity to the theme of the game: the Templar Order conspires to create a society in which they control and manipulate the totality of its subjects through the Apple of Eden.

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40 Apperley, Thomas/Justin, Clemens: “The Biopolitics of Gaming: Avatar-Player Self-Reflexivity in Assassin’s Creed II,” in: Kapell, Matthew (ed.), *The Play Versus Story Divide in Game Studies Critical Essays*, Jefferson: McFarland 2015, pp. 110-124, here p. 113. Additionally, those and other authors have noted that care must be taken to acknowledge the sensitive genealogy of the concept ‘avatar’ with both its roots in sacred Hindu tradition and its entanglement to contemporary videogame culture, industry and theory since at least the 1960s, for which see: de Wildt, Lars et al.: “(Re-)Orienting the Video Game Avatar,” *Games and Culture* (OnlineFirst).

This promise of Eden and the ability to reconstitute it in different historical ages run through the series. For the Assassins, too, historically and in the game, Eden is an important figure. Consider that historically, assassins were offered a specific hallucinogen-induced vision of Utopia to motivate them, in the shape of a garden of Eden. As one common folk etymology explains pertaining to the *hash* in the original *Hashashin* from which Assassin was derived, young assassins were made to become high on hashish and shown a vision of Eden. As El-Nasr, et al., explain:

“According to the tale, Al-Sabbah constructed a heaven, often referred to as the ‘garden of paradise’ furnished with their interpretation of heavenly delights and women. The followers were drugged, taken to the garden, and later awakened to be told that they were in paradise. After they were able to fathom the luxury of such paradise, they were drugged again and taken away from the garden to a cave-like dwelling. They were then told that God had given them a preview of paradise, but in order to return to it, they needed to carry out some important tasks, including assassination, justifying such action by saying that their targets are evil men. The assassins that went on these missions were very dedicated, believing that they were Martyrs killing for God.”<sup>41</sup>

In the game, however, despite their Ismā‘īlī background, the Assassins take a turn with Altair’s story to present a secularizing vision of Utopia. Many of the themes of Utopia in the game are about liberating the world from the dogma and control of organized religion. The titular ‘creed’ of the Assassin’s, *‘Nothing is True, Everything is Permitted’* is explained by Arno, the protagonist of UNITY as a creed that “teaches us that nothing is forbidden to us” while also stating that:

“The Creed is a warning. Ideals too easily give way to dogma. Dogma becomes fanaticism. No higher power sits in judgement of us. No supreme being watches us to punish us for our sins. [...] All that we do, all that we are, begins and ends with ourselves.”

The rhetoric of the Assassins is one of personal responsibility for actions and ideas, without a divine appeal to a super-human truth. Or, as Nick Dinicola

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41 El-Nasr, Magy Seif et al.: “Assassin’s Creed: A Multi-Cultural Read,” *Loading...* 3/2 (2008), pp. 1-32.



summarizes his reading of the game: “The Assassins represent rationalism, humanism, and logic; the Templars represent leadership based on blind faith.”<sup>42</sup> Again, in the words of Altaïr himself:

“I have studied the ancient pagan faiths that came before this more recent obsession with a single, divine creator. They seem to have focused more on the fundamental forces at play in the world around us and less on arbitrary moral rules... [...] But no more. Now we are asked to succumb to a far more simplified explanation. How naive to believe there might be a single answer to every question. Every mystery. That there exists a lone divine light which rules over all. They say it is a light that brings truth and love. I say it is a light that blinds us—and forces us to stumble about in ignorance. I long for the day when men turn away from invisible monsters and once more embrace a more rational view of the world. But these new religions are so convenient—and promise such terrible punishment should one reject them—I worry that fear shall keep us stuck to what is surely the greatest lie ever told.”

### **The Greatest Conspiracy**

“[T]he greatest lie ever told” is presented by Altaïr as religion. It is this mystery of religion—is it man-made? Whose interests does it serve?—that is leveraged by the developers as a drawing point to the game’s setting. As Jade Raymond (who led the creation of the first ASSASSIN’S CREED as a producer) explains in an interview with Magy Seif El-Nasr:

“People are also fascinated by ‘History’s Mysteries,’ and the Templar Treasure was ripe for exploring. What did the Templars find beneath Solomon’s Temple? Why did they want it? Where is it today? The same can be said for the Assassins themselves. We know a little bit about them, but their very nature made them a secretive bunch. Most of what’s known comes from third hand accounts. These were very likely orchestrated events, carefully planned by the Assassins to ensure a specific, controlled image was portrayed. Who were they really? What motivated them? What secrets were members given access to as they rose through the ranks? These were all questions we get to play within the story. And the answers are pretty interesting.”<sup>43</sup>

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42 Dinicola, Nick: “The ‘Assassins’ Religion,” *Pop Matters*, 2010; <https://www.popmatters.com/118104-rationalizing-faith-in-assassins-creed-2496143914.html>.

43 M. El-Nasr, et al.: “Assassin’s Creed: A Multi-Cultural Read,” pp. 6-7.

Coming out at the top of Dan Brown's rising popularity, the game seemed to game culture what the *Da Vinci Code* was to over 80 million readers (in 44 languages) and \$758 million worth of cinema-goers in the film adaptation's opening weekend in 2006. Both engage in speculative fictions that suggest more is going on beneath the surface of our own societies' history, by suggesting to unearth all types of plots and conspiracies around the mystery of the Catholic church. It was indeed picked up as such by popular commentators, one of whom wrote about ASSASSIN'S CREED III that "the game indulges a cartoonishly oversimplified revisionist conspiracy history, and frequently sidelines some inconvenient truths."<sup>44</sup>

These 'fast' and loose aesthetics of conspiracy centres purely around the draw of finding mystery in an outside 'other.' Whether it fetishes Europe from a North-American perspective—as Dan Brown's Robert Langdon or Tom Hanks visits the old churches of France to unearth the secrets of Opus Dei—or whether, instead, it focuses on the outside crusader from a Middle-Eastern perspective—as the Assassin's Altaïr unearths the secrets of the Templars.

These aesthetics of pervasive conspiracy are drawn out throughout the series so that the Templar other is at the helm of every major plot and turning point throughout history. The 'Order' had its hand in every power grab in every time. Alternatively: the Templars are associated with the Vatican, Abstergo, the Children of Cain, Cult of Kosmos, Order of the Ancients, the Roman Senate, the Crusaders, the House of Borgia, the Byzantine, Spanish, and British Empires, and so on. ASSASSIN'S CREED greedily relates them all and projects it on top of factual religion. You can't know what is true. But once you 'go down the rabbit hole,' or 'take the red pill'—or whichever pop reference the discourse of conspiracy bases itself on, 'the truth is out there,' and everything is shown to be significantly related.<sup>45</sup>

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44 Dray, Colin: "Look at You, You Big Silly, Says Assassin's Creed 3," *Pop Matters*, 2015; <https://www.popmatters.com/194103-assassins-creed-man-against-the-machine-2495523043.html>

45 The three references are, in order, to ALICE IN WONDERLAND, THE MATRIX, and THE X-FILES, all of which are in frequent use in conspiracy milieus, cf. J. Harambam: *The Truth is Out There*.

In short, the surface premise of *ASSASSIN'S CREED* sets out, at first, to show us that the Assassins have a utopian project, set in defiance of the Templars' opposite, dystopian project. The Assassins set themselves up as a secular alternative to the Templars' religious, conspiratorial 'New World Order.'

## DECENTRALIZED UTOPIA

However, once the series includes Templar perspectives, the binary of Templar dystopia—Assassin Utopia is broken, and their projects are increasingly decentralized.

### Breaking the Binary

While it is easy to dismiss the utopian-dystopian binary in *ASSASSIN'S CREED* as a Manichaean distinction between Assassins and Templars, the assassins are originally already a third actor. As Jade Raymond in the same interview by Magy Seif El-Nasr reminds us:

"As the Saracens and Crusaders battle one another for control, the Assassins are working to find a way to end the hostilities. They see the war as pointless. There is no reason Crusaders and Saracens should not co-exist in peace. The Assassins are not allied with either side of the conflict, nor are they driven by a desire for profit or power. In *ASSASSIN'S CREED*, Crusaders (and the Saracens) are not the Assassins' true enemy. War is—as are those who exploit it."<sup>46</sup>

While this caveat keeps intact the idea that Assassins are unambiguously on the side of historic 'good,' (they are, after all, against war and exploitation), Adrienne Shaw is quick to dispel this claim. Shaw critiques the way in which the series presents itself as a "historically and visually realistic game, yet realism is more often used to pre-empt criticism than it is to reconsider the

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46 M. El-Nasr, et al.: "Assassin's Creed: A Multi-Cultural Read," p. 13.

telos of history.”<sup>47</sup> Using ASSASSIN’S CREED III and its American Revolution-setting as an example, she notes that despite its emancipatory framing, it always conforms to the established hegemonic perspective of history, offering no “critique [on] the inevitableness of those historical events,”<sup>48</sup> beyond “the extent of the British and Patriot atrocities against [the various indigenous peoples of North-America].”<sup>49</sup> Just as with the Saracens and Crusaders, then, the Assassins (and their players) are thus positioned outside of history’s main actors. In ASSASSIN’S CREED III’s case, the half-Mohawk main player-character, “Ratohnhaké:ton/Connor’s position in the colonial world is made unexceptional despite the fact that the game uses his “outsider” perspective to tell the story.”<sup>50</sup> In so doing, Assassins are positioned as outsiders to allow the player a spectatorial and uncritical role in the pre-determined fate of history.

Furthermore, when we look more closely at the Templar project, we see a similar hopeful rhetoric as with their Assassin equivalent, *when* they are given a voice. The first time these Templars are given a voice they are also already (subversively) shown to believe in their own utopian project. The nine Templars to be assassinated as the main structure of the first game do, as a reviewer noted already in 2007, “defend their seemingly despicable work as good and just, leaving you to wonder just what the hell is going on.”<sup>51</sup> Tamir, the weapons dealer and Altaïr’s first target, states in a conversation preceding his assassination:

Altaïr: “You believe yourself different then?”

Tamir: “Oh but I am, for I serve a far nobler cause than mere profit. Just like my brothers.”

And Abu’l Nuqoud, a Damascan merchant and the fourth target declares:

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47 Shaw, Adrienne: “The Tyranny of Realism: Historical Accuracy and Politics of Representation in Assassin’s Creed III,” *Loading...* 9/14 (2015), pp. 4-24, here p. 5.

48 Ibid., p. 19.

49 Ibid., p. 18.

50 Ibid., p. 16.

51 M. Reparaz: “Assassin’s Creed Review.”

“I’ve pledged myself to another cause. One that will bring about a new world in which all people might live, side by side, in peace. A pity none of you will live to see it.”

For Abu’l Nuqoud, most poignantly, his subversion of Altaïr’s mission offers a sub-narrative to humanize them, which some players take up. Nuqoud is often read as queer, stating diegetically: “How could I finance a war in service to the same god that calls me an abomination?” and declaring: “Look at me! My very nature is an affront to the people I ruled, and these noble robes did little more than to muffle their shouts of hate.” Based on such cues, at least one fan source (the Fandom.com wiki) offers the reading that:

“Because of some of his mannerisms, such as his style of dress, his speech about people of all kinds living together, his words about not serving the ‘same god that calls me an abomination,’ the way he caresses one of his guards, and the fact that many characters refers to him as ‘different,’ it can be inferred that Abu’l was homosexual.”<sup>52</sup>

As much as there is to say about fans’ readings (especially on an open platform such as a wiki), the series’ original creative director, Patrice Désilets, echoes such an analysis. In a commentary containing production notes on the first game, Désilets adds that the production team called Abu’l—in their words—their “she-male.”<sup>53</sup>

Yet none of these Templars are initially given any agency or place in history, despite such subtextual humanizations, or their subversive voice set against the Assassin project. This has been changing in several ways. In recent games, organizations such as the Cult of Kosmos, a proto-Templar organization, presents the main force of opposition to its proto-Assassin adversary—a loose collection of mercenaries referring to themselves individually as “mishios,” including the main protagonist. The Cult would later canonically merge together with the Order of the Ancients (a similar organization

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52 Abu’l Nuqoud, Assassin’s Creed fandom wiki; [https://assassinscreed.fandom.com/wiki/Abu%27l\\_Nuqoud](https://assassinscreed.fandom.com/wiki/Abu%27l_Nuqoud).

53 “Patrice Desilets (Creative Director): My favorite character is the merchant king, Abu’l Nuqoud. We call him, affectionately, our ‘she-male.’ You know it’s fun to put a target like that in the game. I like him. [...] You’ve got to go and reach him and kill him from behind.” In: Hodgson, David/Knight, David: *Assassin’s Creed Limited Edition Art Book*, Roseville: Prima Games 2007.

in 2017's *ASSASSIN'S CREED: ORIGINS*) into the Templars. This is relevant only because the plot of the game presents the choice between the two organisations (Assassins and Templars) as an almost arbitrary twist of fate. When the player chooses their protagonist (Kassandra, or her brother Alexios), they follow the plot to find out that their sibling has ended up in the other organisation: Alexios (or Kassandra) is the main muscle of the Cult of Kosmos.

That is: whomever the player chooses, their near-identical sibling will end up serving a pivotal role for the Templars. This interchangeability we see increasingly throughout the series. Before introducing a choice of characters, the main games had already offered three Templar focalizers for the player to become. In *UNITY*, players enter a genetic memory of the advisor to Jacques de Molay, a Templar Grand Master—diegetically in *ASSASSIN'S CREED* as well as in extradiegetic history.<sup>54</sup> The memory is introduced within the game as “the final tragic hours of Jacques de Molay, through the eyes of his closest friend,” upon which the player defends de Molay against a group of assassins’ whose Utopia is described as “their anarchic delusions [which] are virulent as the plague, and less easily eradicated.

In the *ROGUE* (2014) game, players take control of Shay Cormac, who starts out as an Assassin in the Colonial Brotherhood of New York city. As the game progresses, he is betrayed, and declares his allegiance to the Templar Order instead, stating

“Uphold the principles of our Order, and all for that for which we stand. Never share our secrets nor divulge the true nature of our work. Do so until death—whatever the cost. This is my new creed. I am Shay Patrick Cormac. Templar of the Colonial of the American Rite. I am an older man now, and perhaps wiser. A war and a revolution have ended, and another is about to begin. May the Father of Understanding guide us all.”

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54 Demurger, Alain: *Jacques de molay: le crépuscule des templiers*, Payot 2002; in English: Demurger, Alain. *The Last Templar: The Tragedy of Jacques de Molay, Last Grand Master of the Temple*, Profile 2004.; Barber, Malcolm: *The New Knighthood: A History of the Order of the Temple*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2012.

It should be noted for the current argument, that Shay continues life as a Templar, including by killing Assassin Charles Dorian—in turn the father of Arno Dorian, Assassin protagonist of *ASSASSIN'S CREED UNITY*—and by inducting both his son and grandson into the Templar Order after him. Arno, to make matters more confusing, was adopted by François de la Serre: a Templar Grand Master. All of this genealogical detail serves to show how entangled the two Orders become as the series' speculative fiction.

The consequence of this entanglement is that while the Templar and Assassin orders are originally presented as binary opposite lineages, the games' universe offers many counter-examples to destabilize this indisputably and exclusively in binary opposition. One more example: the aforementioned Shay works with Templar Grand Master Haytham Kenway, the protagonist of *ASSASSIN'S CREED III*. That is: he is the first introduced character (*protos* + *agonistes*, the first actor), traditionally the main or 'good' character—as opposed to the antagonist (*anti*, against) who fights against the protagonist. In other words, the third trilogy of the game (set in the colonial era) effectively opens with a Templar 'good guy.' From the genealogical perspective of lineages: Kenway's son Connor becomes an Assassin, while Kenway's father Edward (the protagonist of *BLACK FLAG* (2013), the next main game) was also an Assassin.

What we need to take away from this is that Templar and Assassin lineages are increasingly presented as actually interchangeable throughout history, and within the same families. Rather than two opposing sides, they are two sides of the same coin: two warring secret societies trying to control the world to enact their own Utopia—almost interchangeable in which to pursue, and more importantly: always opposed to the other as dystopian. Thus, not only is the Templar vision dystopian to Assassins, the Assassin's vision is dystopian to Templars. At the same time, players are called to follow and enact their lives, invited to regard the Templar project as their own.

As a consequence, the utopia/dystopia distinction is dissolved as a matter of position. A position, furthermore, that is easily interchanged over the course of a game; and within lineages and between games throughout the fictional universe.

### **Post-secular Order**

Three things happen that further mess up the distinction between the secular Assassins and the Catholic Templars. First, the Assassin Order develops a

distinctly religious aesthetic, including temples, rituals and elaborate hierarchies. Second, the game introduces its own ‘true’ religion, revealed to the Assassin player-characters, usually at the end of the game. Third, depending on the historical period and place (most pointedly SYNDICATE’s Victorian England), religion as an institution is supplanted by other systems, such as capitalism.

To take a scene from ASSASSIN’S CREED UNITY as an example, the series saw an increased codification of Assassin rituals, with a catholic-like aesthetic, as the series progressed (both in terms of year of release, as well as the time period within the universe). Arno Dorian, adopted son of a Templar and born of an Assassin father, enters into the ‘Sanctuary’ to undergo an initiation ritual (Figure 2). Dorian is led into the basement of a church. Arriving in the hidden sanctuary, we see a high semi-circle: its walls (about 2.5 times the height of Dorian), adorned with a large marble fountain bearing, in its centre, the Assassin crest in marble and gold; at the sides of the fountain are two griffons looking outward; above the fountain, at the middle of the wall, stand marble, saint-like figures. Large, orange, open fires of various heights light the room. On top of the semi-circle, ornamental bordeaux-coloured drapes are displayed, hung over a balcony. On the platform behind it, four white hooded figures emerge: Master Assassins, their faces mostly hidden, wearing their cloaks and entering the scene toward four tall, thin thrones; behind them a backdrop of ornate stained glass and long bordeaux-coloured curtains hanging from the ceiling to cover parts of the dark stone walls.





**Figure 2.** Assassin Arno Dorian, facing his initiation ceremony in the ‘Sanctuary’ in *Assassin’s Creed Unity* (screenshot by author).

The aesthetic is arguably church-like. The Masters speak Arabic to each other, and eventually ask Dorian: “From the light you will return to the darkness; are you prepared to travel the eagle’s path?” Upon his affirmation, he drinks a potion from the gold-inlaid crest-shaped marble fountain, and starts to hallucinate—much like the folk histories of the historical hashashin portray their initiation rites. Throughout various time periods in the series, there are some variations—notably whether a finger is amputated or not. Each ends with a back and forth formula, rehearsing the creed:

Assassin: “Where other men blindly follow the truth, remember...”

Initiate: “Nothing is true.”

Assassin: “Where other men are limited by morality or law, remember...”

Initiate: “Everything is permitted.”

Assassin: “We work in the dark to serve the light. We are Assassins.”

Again, words delivered by Altaïr to the Codex ring true:

“What follows are the three great ironies of the Assassin Order: (1) Here we seek to promote peace, but murder is our means. (2) Here we seek to open the minds of men,

but require obedience to a master and set of rules. (3) *Here we seek to reveal the danger of blind faith, yet we are practitioners ourselves.*” [emphasis added]

Not only do the Assassins structure their own paradoxically secular Order along religious aesthetics, hierarchies and rituals; but another pantheon is additionally revealed to them, that undermines both Templar and Assassins’ religious positions. Without a need for much elaboration here, suffice to be said that the ‘Isu,’ or ‘ones that came before’ are an advanced species that created the pieces of Eden, as well as the human race. The main three are Minerva, Juno, and Jupiter, who together created Adam and Eve, and were revered by earlier human societies as gods (hence the names). As early as ASSASSIN’S CREED II, much of the secular nature of the Order crumbles, with the protagonist stating “You are... gods.” As is the nature of videogame gods, it is indeed difficult to deny them once they appear unmistakably before you to hand over items, or quests.<sup>55</sup>

Thirdly, finally, the religious-secular distinction is occasionally replaced entirely. Although ASSASSIN’S CREED (initially) places the onus of dystopia on religion, and that of Utopia on the secular; we find these patterns reflected elsewhere in different systems within the series. ASSASSIN’S CREED SYNDICATE, for instance, briefly shifted the series’ focus from feudal-religious hierarchies to capitalist class struggle. As Montréal-based advertisement agency Bleublancrouge explains, when describing their ad campaign for SYNDICATE:

“Created as part of the campaign for the ASSASSIN’S CREED SYNDICATE video game, which is set in Victorian England, this poster illustrates that society at the time was no longer controlled by kings, emperors, politicians or religious figures, but rather by money. Capitalism was perceived as the economic model that would improve everyone’s lives, when in fact it primarily served rich financiers who took advantage of it to rule over the lower classes. We featured a banker dressed as a king to show this shift in power.”<sup>56</sup>

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55 For which, see: Schaap, Julian/Aupers, Stef: ““Gods in World of Warcraft Exist:’ Religious Reflexivity and the Quest for Meaning in Online Computer Games,” *New Media & Society* 19, no. 11 (2017), pp. 1744-1760.

56 Print advertisement created by Bleublancrouge, Canada for Ubisoft; [https://www.adsoftheworld.com/media/print/ubisoft\\_assassins\\_creed\\_finance](https://www.adsoftheworld.com/media/print/ubisoft_assassins_creed_finance).

Similarly, other, later, iterations of the game have de-emphasized the presence on religion to more period-suitable systems of hegemony.

### **Postmodern Conspiracy**

Finally, the nature of ASSASSIN'S CREED's aesthetics of conspiracy changes, too. So far, this paper has shown that there are possible readings of the series—formally; by academics; and by game culture—in which the binary Utopia-dystopia distinction and its concurrent secularism-religion distinction are increasingly destabilized.

As a consequence, distrust is scattered. What was once a clear inside-outside distinction (i.e., the Holy Land being invaded by European-Christian Templars) has been increasingly muddled. The dissolution of these distinctions enact a postmodern development, in which binaries dissolve and things like truth and power are displaced. Again, however, the seeds of such post-modern doubt had been marginally apparent in the games' earliest utterances. Again from *Altair*:

“Over time, any sentence uttered long and loud enough becomes fixed. Becomes a truth. Provided, of course, you can outlast the dissent and silence your opponents. But should you succeed—and remove all challengers—then what remains is, by default, now true. Is it truth in some objective sense? No. But how does one ever achieve an objective point of view? The answer is you don't. It is literally, physically impossible.”

As the above readings have shown, the certainty of truth, the centralization of power, the clear threat of the outsider, and their clear distinction to the (powerless) insider have dissolved since. Templars and Assassins become increasingly intermingled, and both appear to have Utopian projects with good intentions, that present itself to the other side as a dystopia, and vice versa.

By thus placing the manipulator—regardless of which side of the coin—inside our own history, Assassin's Creed enacts an increasingly post-modern aesthetics of paranoia and conspiracy as the series develops. To remind us of Peter Knight's words:

“Where conspiracy-minded narratives of the individual and national immune system under threat might once have served to bolster a sense of (albeit restricted) communal identity, they now regularly register the far more scary anxiety that we can no longer tell the difference between Them and Us.”<sup>57</sup>

The title of this chapter, of course, is an inversion of the Assassins’ creed: “Nothing is true, Everything is permitted.” The series, other than its titular Assassins, do not follow this credo. Indeed, increasingly, ‘Everything is true,’ depending on whom you listen to—whether it is the subversive words of the Templars in the first game; or the full identification allowed to players when they are cast in the role of the incidental Templar protagonists of later games. As if to follow this call for doubt, player communities take note: data gathered on forums show that players for various reasons and from various positions choose to question who is right.<sup>58</sup> Increasingly, modern discussion topics are titled: “Some thoughts on the assassins vs templars conflict,” “Templar or Assassin (choose your side and give a reason),” “Who are right The Templar Order or the Assassin Brotherhood?” All of those were made in August 2018, approaching the release of the latest game, ODYSSEY (2018). They show an increasing willingness among players to identify with the Templar side, seen less as the ‘bad’ ‘Other’ and more as an equally interesting secret order. Rather than a full empirical analysis, here is one indicative example:

“I’m about halfway through my first play through of ROGUE, and I ask myself this question, who is right? The Templars or the Assassins? I mean, The Templars seek order and control through the Pieces of Eden. Why do they want control? To basically have peace right? Now that to me seems like a noble cause. While playing AC3 I seriously began to think why are the Templars so bad? I dunno if that was down to Haytham’s silver tongue or Connor’s naivety tbh.”<sup>59</sup>

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57 P. Knight: *Conspiracy Nation*, p. 5.

58 de Wildt, Lars/Aupers, Stef: “Pop Theology: Forum Discussions on Religion in Videogames,” *Information, Communication & Society* (2019), pp. 1-19.

59 Joshbear\_1: “Who are right The Templar Order or the Assassin Brotherhood?” *Reddit r/Assassinscreed*; [https://www.reddit.com/r/assassinscreed/comments/96ygdk/who\\_are\\_right\\_the\\_templar\\_order\\_or\\_the\\_assassin/](https://www.reddit.com/r/assassinscreed/comments/96ygdk/who_are_right_the_templar_order_or_the_assassin/)

## CONCLUSION

Religion, Utopia and the aesthetics of conspiracy run throughout the ASSASSIN'S CREED series. Through it runs a fundamental development from a unidirectional conflict between the secular utopian project of the Assassins against the religious dystopian Templars; to a decentralized conflict between two parties whose own Utopia constitutes the other's dystopia. In so doing, ASSASSIN'S CREED enacts two aesthetics of conspiracy: a modernist and a post-modernist one. First, its premise and early iterations present a modernist conspiracy: one that fears an enemy from 'without,' against which a utopian project must be leveraged to protect ourselves against it—such as a foreign invasion of Templar Crusaders. Secondly, it moves toward a postmodern aesthetics of conspiracy, which places the enemy 'within' our own society and history, whose 'topos' of Utopia overlaps with our dystopia, and vice versa. In other words, the 'not-place' of Utopia is increasingly mapped over everyplace, to be found all around us, if only we learn to unveil its conspiratorial hiddenness.

In this light, I must do some concessions after having presented such a grand, all-too-clean evolution of three central concepts (Utopia, religion and conspiracy) over the course of over 10 years of ASSASSIN'S CREED. Due to its scope, the series is bound to invite various readings, as it spans about 2450 years of speculative history throughout eleven main games (within a total of 21), and much more paraludic material—as described in the Case/Material section. While this reading is consistent with both the series' premise, its recent iterations and the paraludic material throughout, it is nonetheless inevitable (and important) that these texts themselves offer diegetic resistance and contradictions to these readings. In fact, I argue that both readings will hold, next to each other—as postmodernist thought and aesthetics do inevitably include modernist thought and aesthetics.<sup>60</sup> To bring more concrete nuance to the claims made above: first, research on online discussions has

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60 See for instance: Haber, John: "The Postmodern Paradox," *Haber Arts: Art Reviews from Around New York*; <https://www.haberarts.com/postdox.htm>; Berg, Lawrence D.: "Between Modernism and Postmodernism," *Progress in Human Geography* 17.4 (1993), pp. 490-507; Clegg, Stewart R./Kornberger, Martin: "Modernism, Postmodernism, Management and Organization Theory," *Post*

shown that groups of players can perform completely different, mutually exclusive readings of games such as ASSASSIN'S CREED, specifically in the case of religion as this author's previous work has elaborately shown.<sup>61</sup> Second, while there is notable ambivalence both in the content and reception of the series; the majority of the games, books and other materials still take the Assassin perspective as their primary, if not their sole focalizer. There are only three notable exceptions, as stated: Haytham Kenway in ASSASSIN'S CREED III, Shay Cormac in ROGUE and an unnamed Templar advisor in *The Tragedy of Jacques de Molay*.

However, I argue that a clear thread can nonetheless be found, that reveals much of how aesthetics of Utopia, religion and conspiracy are presented to modern audiences. Indeed, the topoi of dystopian forces and the suspicion of conspiracy in our own historical world has until recently been classically placed outside of our society, as much as that of the modernist Utopian reading of ASSASSIN'S CREED at the start of the paper—the Communists of the red scare, the fascists, the Jew, the Church. And just so do we increasingly see paranoia about actors placed inside of our culture—a supposed migrant re-structuring of our society from within; lizard people controlling our institutions; the dangers of party-political entryism and cultural Marxism;<sup>62</sup> much like the two sides of the Assassin-Templar coin. Having said that, the conclusion should be exactly the place to expand beyond the

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*Modernism and Management* 21 (2003), pp. 57-88; Curry, Michael R.: "Postmodernism, Language, and the Strains of Modernism," *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 81, no. 2 (1991), pp. 210-228; Harvey, David: "Postmodern Morality Plays," *Antipode* 24, no. 4 (1992), pp. 300-326.

61 See on this consequently: de Wildt, Lars/Aupers, Stef: "Bibles and BioShock: Affording Religious Discussion on Video Game Forums," *Proceedings of the Annual Symposium on Computer-Human Interaction in Play* (2017), pp. 463-475; de Wildt, Lars/Aupers, Stef: "Playing the Other: Role-Playing Religion in Videogames," *European Journal of Cultural Studies* (2018).

62 See on the perceived dangers of cultural Marxism within our societies: Webber, Esther/Wheeler, Brian: "What is a Trotskyist?" *BBC News*, 2016; <https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-politics-37025649>; Wilson, Jason: "'Cultural Marxism': A Uniting Theory for Rightwingers Who Love to Play the Victim," *The Guardian*, 2015; <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2015/jan/19/cultural-marxism-a-uniting-theory-for-rightwingers-who-love-to-play-the-victim>

reading of one text, and to theorize outward on the state of Utopia in 21<sup>st</sup> century popular culture beyond ASSASSIN'S CREED.

In its process of decentralizing religious Utopia and conspiracy, ASSASSIN'S CREED enacts the development of conspiracy theories in the West from a modernist binary to a postmodern paranoia within society. The resulting idea is to trust no-one: neither Assassin, Templar, whether they are secular or religious. We see this decentralization of conflict, I argue, in other postmodern cultural artefacts: the warring factions, and on-going interfac-tional conflict of HBO's GAME OF THRONES, for instance, have in most cases no clearly good or bad side to them—excluding the non-human white walk-ers, all other factions are humanized to trivialize such binary distinctions: the Lannisters, the Targaryens, and even the Wildlings.

It is in examples such as these that we see the postmodern development from binary oppositions in fictional conflicts to 'messier,' complex webs of contrasting interests. They should also quintessentially be read as aestheti-cizations of paranoia. On THE WIRE, an earlier example of decentralized drama that destabilizes binary distinctions of 'good and bad,' David Hodge and Hamed Yousefi note that it fits:

"in a long line of artistic and theoretical reflections on (and of) paranoid subjectivity since the 1960s [...] The popular television show THE WIRE is a key example, being centered on a dense web of connections which traverse the US city of Baltimore, unit-ing all of its diverse spheres into a violent and tragic situation that the charac-ter Omar simply calls 'the game.'"<sup>63</sup>

Whether in the case of GAME OF THRONES, THE WIRE, or ASSASSIN'S CREED, these aesthetics of (post-modern) conspiracy paranoia act to problematize the straightforwardness of utopian projects. That is, such aesthetics portray the (fictional) world as a complex web of contrasting utopian/dystopian interest. Rather than favouring one utopian project that is opposed to dystopian pow-ers—the Assassin versus the Templar project—it shows the complexity of the counteracting utopian and dystopian projects—Templars see their Utopia

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63 Hodge, David/Yousefi, Hamed: „Paranoid Subjectivity and the Challenges of Cognitive Mappig. How is Capitalism to be Represented?" *e-flux conversations*, 2015; <https://conversations.e-flux.com/t/paranoid-subjectivity-and-the-challenge-s-of-cognitive-mapping-how-is-capitalism-to-be-represented/1080>

undone by Assassins' Utopia, and so too for the mutually exclusive utopian projects of Starks, Lannisters, Targaryens, the Baltimore Police Department (think: Hamsterdam, or a safe, thriving Baltimore), Avon Barksdale, Stringer Bell, Marlo Stanfield or Omar Little. Post-modernist paranoid aesthetics enact just that: a never-ending list of actors working toward their own plural Utopoi; and nowhere does it work as well as in a complex, sprawling and ergodic game series spanning over ten years. Tellingly, it is not ASSASSIN'S CREED that is unique in its game-like structure: multiple actors followed from changing perspectives in a complex web of choices and interests. Rather, GAME OF THRONES and THE WIRE follow this game-like structure in what various others have called the "video game logic,"<sup>64</sup> or "ludic turn" of contemporary film and television.<sup>65</sup>

What ASSASSIN'S CREED increasingly draws, then, is a ludic postmodern picture of conspiracy that includes two interchangeable and veiled oppressors, that are equally ideological and battling each other's Utopia/dystopia on the edges of our own histories and societies. Both seek to control and to 'free' the people—whether from religion or otherwise—always in their own preferred way, and never with the people's consent. In the end, potentially 'Everything is true,' while nothing is permitted.

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64 Elsaesser, Thomas: "The Mind-Game Film," in: Buckland, Warren (ed.), *Puzzle Films: Complex Storytelling in Contemporary Cinema*, Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell 2009, pp. 13-41.

65 Raessens, Joost: *Homo Ludens 2.0: The Ludic Turn in Media Theory*, Utrecht: Faculteit Geesteswetenschappen 2012; see also: Simons, Jan: *Playing the Waves: Lars von Trier's Game Cinema*, Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press 2007.



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