



online

HEIDELBERG JOURNAL OF RELIGIONS ON THE INTERNET

Institute for Religious Studies - University of Heidelberg



Simone Heidbrink, Tobias Knoll (Eds.)

Religion in Digital Games Respawned

Special Issue

Volume 10 (2016)

HEIDELBERG
UNIVERSITY PUBLISHING

Online – Heidelberg Journal of Religions on the Internet, Volume 10 (2016)

As an open-access journal, *Online – Heidelberg Journal of Religions on the Internet* can be permanently accessed free of charge from the website of HEIDELBERG UNIVERSITY PUBLISHING (<http://heiup.uni-heidelberg.de>).

ISSN 1861-5813

This work is published under the Creative Commons license (CC BY-SA 4.0).



Editors:

Simone Heidbrink, M.A., Institute for Religious Studies, University of Heidelberg, Germany
Tobias Knoll, M.A., Institute for Religious Studies, University of Heidelberg, Germany

Editor in Chief:

Prof. Dr. Gregor Ahn, Institute for Religious Studies, University of Heidelberg, Germany

Members of the Editorial Board:

Dr. Frank G. Bosman, Tilburg School of Catholic Theology, Netherlands
Prof. Dr. Oliver Krüger, Chair for the Study of Religion Department of Social Studies,
University of Fribourg, Switzerland
Dr. Gernot Meier, Studienleiter Ev. Akademie Baden, Karlsruhe, Germany

Contributors to this Issue:

Frank G. Bosman
Simone Heidbrink
Mark R Johnson
Tobias Knoll
Roman Ohlendorf
Stefan Piasecki
Dennis Ramirez
Jenny Saucerman

© 2016



Table of Contents

- 01 **Towards „a New Province of Humanity“! - Introduction**
Simone Heidbrink & Tobias Knoll
- 06 **'Nothing is true, everything is permitted' - The Portrayal of the *Nizari Isma'ilis* in the *Assassin's Creed* Game Series**
Frank G. Bosman
- 27 **Playing with the legend - Ostension and Extra-Textual Production in *Minecraft***
Roman Ohlendorf
- 45 **Redemption through Annihilation?! - Game Designer's Views on Religion, Culture and Society and Its Influence on Digital Games**
Stefan Piasecki
- 74 **Praise Helix! - Christian Narrative in *Twitch Plays: Pokémon***
Jenny Saucerman & Dennis Ramirez
- 95 **Interview: Mark R Johnson, Creator of *Ultima Ratio Regum***



‘Nothing is true, everything is permitted’

The portrayal of the Nizari Isma'ilis in the Assassin's Creed game series

Frank G. Bosman

Abstract

Ubisoft's Assassin's Creed does a remarkable – though not flawless – job in presenting a well-balanced game narrative, which incorporates not only a historically justified representation of the Nizari Isma'ilis, but also implicitly corrects one of the most famous Western legends about the so-called 'Assassins'. In doing so, Ubisoft succeeds (at least partially) in discarding the stereotypical representation of Muslims/Arabs associated with Western orientalism, at the cost, however, of a multi-leveled but functionalistic view on the phenomenon of religion in the video game series with regards to the Assassin and Templar fractions.

Keywords

Assassin's creed, islam, assassins, knight templars, nizari isma'ilites

1 Introduction

Inspired by historical events and characters, this work of fiction was designed, developed and produced by a multicultural team of various religious faiths and beliefs. (Disclaimer for the *Assassin's Creed* game series)

Before you can start to enjoy your copy of one of the *Assassin's Creed* video games (2007-2014), you first encounter a disclaimer. This stresses that producer Ubisoft has taken all possible precautions to ensure that the game does not violate the religious sensibilities of the public and of players in particular. It could be argued that the number of people who actually play these games is limited in comparison to the consumers of other media, but most of our media consumption is

'second-hand'. This means that the media texts surrounding games can influence even non-players (Gray, 2010).

Disclaimers are not uncommon in video games and movies. They are used not only to protect the producers from legal action by those who might take offence, but also to underline the moral scrutiny to which the producers have subjected the potentially controversial content of their product. Ironically, this kind of disclaimer typically tends to intensify the perception of the game's controversial character by explicitly directing attention to it.

The disclaimer for Ubisoft's *Assassin's Creed* series points to a potential problem with its content. This problem is connected with the game narrative and its main protagonist. In *Assassin's Creed I* (2007) and major parts of *Assassin's Creed. Revelations* (2010) the gamer's avatar is the fictional Assassin Altaïr ibn La'Ahad (1165-1257), a Muslim Assassin from Syria who is caught up in the Third Crusade (1189-1192), which featured iconic figures such as Saladin and Richard the Lionheart.

Given that Altaïr is a Syrian Muslim and a member of the semi-historical 'Assassin Brotherhood', and that the game is set in one of the most terrible interreligious conflicts of Western history (between Muslims and Christians), Ubisoft was perhaps right to fear it might be controversial. Western culture has always been very susceptible to anthropological, ethnic, religious and Eurocentric prejudice against Arabo-Islamic peoples and their cultures. The famous Palestinian American literary theorist Edward Said (1935-2003) coined the term 'orientalism' to describe this phenomenon, claiming that 'Moslems and Arabs are essentially seen as either oil suppliers or potential terrorists' (Said, 1978).

These negative stereotypes have also found their way into Western cinema. In his famous book *Reel Bad Arabs* (2001), Jack Shaheen has contended:

The Arab World – twenty two countries, the locus of several World religions, a multitude of ethnic and linguistic groups, and hundreds of years of history – is reduced to a few simplistic images. (...) In countless films Hollywood alleges (...): Arabs are brute murderers, sleazy rapists, religious fanatics, oil-rich dimwits, and abusers of women.

The same can be said about Western video games, as Vit Sisler (2008) has argued. The already stereotypical representation of Muslims/Arabs in Western cinema is even more prevalent in video games, although this could be due to technical reasons. Non-player characters (NPCs) are often depicted by a limited number of reiterated textures, models and other visual signifiers. Sisler: 'Thus technological limitations intrinsically promote schematization, which leads to social stereotyping.' Sisler further differentiates between various game genres and their different levels of complexity of visual and narrative representation.

Adventure and role-playing games typically portray the Middle East in fantasy or quasi-historical manner, exploiting 'Orientalist' imagery, whereas action games and especially first-person shooters present the Middle East in a contemporary and decidedly conflictual framework, schematizing Arabs and Muslims as enemies.

In another article Sisler (2009) has explicitly discussed *Assassin's Creed*, stating that the sensitivity towards religion which the game play and game narrative show 'constitutes rather a pragmatic step aimed at easing acceptance of the product by global Muslim audiences.' Although Sisler is probably aware of the historical Islamic sect on which Ubisoft's Assassins have been modeled, he disqualifies the connection between history and game narrative by contending that it only serves the pragmatic goal of helping the player identify with Altaïr.

This discrepancy between the game narrative and the real, historical background of the Hashshashin Sect could actually serve a marketing purpose.

In this article I will argue differently. Ubisoft's *Assassin's Creed* does a remarkable – though not flawless – job in presenting a well-balanced game narrative, which incorporates not only a historically justified representation of the Nizari Isma'ilis, but also implicitly corrects one of the most famous Western legends about the so-called 'Assassins'. In doing so, Ubisoft succeeds (at least partially) in discarding the stereotypical representation of Muslims/Arabs associated with Western orientalism, at the cost, however, of a multi-leveled but functionalistic view on the phenomenon of religion in the video game series with regards to the Assassin and Templar fractions.

Some words about methodology. In this article I will regard video games as 'playable texts'. According to Georg Lauteren (2002) games can be regarded as such because it summarizes the two 'structural qualities' of computer games. Videogames are 'texts' because they are mediated sign systems, and are given meaning by their audience. This audience is not limited to the actual gamers and those who watch the gamers play their games, but also includes the larger culture itself of which the players and the watchers are part of. Lauteren:

The vast exchange of signs between the realm of popular culture and computer games, all serve as circumstantial evidence that there is indeed a lot of meaning produced from computer games, that they are *used* as cultural texts.

Videogames are not just 'texts', but are *playable* texts. Video games incorporated elements of contest; they can be won or lost. The 'pleasure' of gaming is derived from the uncertainty of the outcome of the game. As Lauteren points out:

To make this element of competition possible, computer games utilize an algorithmic rule system, that either governs a contest between two human players, or simply challenges the player through its implementation of algorithms to deduce and apply certain patterns of action.

Treating the video games in this article as playable texts, I will utilize a close reading of the primary sources of my research, the actual video game series *Assassin's Creed*, as well as secondary sources, material provided by critics and scholars treating the same game series. The close reading of the video game series is done by playing the games themselves (multiple times), including all possible (side) missions/quests. This 'Game-Immanent Approach' is further explained by Heidbrink, Knoll & Wysocki (2015, 68-71).

2 The First Assassin's Creed series

The Assassin's Creed series (2007-2014) is a series of single-player, third-person, sandbox, single-ending stealth games with puzzle and acrobatic elements, that is set in a historical world and can be played on multiple platforms.¹ In addition to the two main games featuring Altaïr – *Assassin's Creed* (2007) and *Assassin's Creed. Revelations* (2010) – Ubisoft has also published a number of other games in which he is the protagonist, along with a novel and a comic book.²

The first game of the *Assassin's Creed* series has two intertwined plotlines: the story of Altaïr, set during the Third Crusade, and the so-called 'Desmond Saga', which takes place in our own time. The contemporary plotline revolves around Desmond Miles, a 25-year-old bartender, who is kidnapped by a sinister multinational organization called Abstergo, which is later discovered to be a modern-day front for the Order of the Knights Templar. Abstergo (Latin for 'I cleanse') has developed a device called the *Animus* (Latin for 'spirit' or 'soul'), which allows the user to 'tap' into his or her ancestral DNA, resulting in the ability to 'relive' the lives of his or her ancestors.

Abstergo/the Templars have chosen Desmond as a test subject, because he is a descendant of a twelfth-century Assassin called Altaïr; this is the second plotline. Through Desmond and Altaïr, the Templars hope to find an ancient secret artifact which will allow them to attain world domination. Altaïr's part of the game (approximately 90 percent of the actual game playing time) is

1 For an explanation of the games' genre, see: Bosman (2014).

2 The following media provide information about the Altaïr storyline (given in order of narrative chronology): *Assassin's Creed: Altaïr's Chronicles* (game, NDS, 2008), *Assassin's Creed* (game, multiple platforms, 2007), *Assassin's Creed: The Secret Crusade* (novel, 2011), *Assassin's Creed: Bloodlines* (game, PSP, 2009), *Assassin's Creed: Revelations* (game, multiple platforms, 2010) and *Assassin's Creed: Memories* (rpg trading card game, 2014). For a detailed account of the individual games and books, see: Veugen (2011).

set during the Third Crusade in 1191. The game's main locations are the Assassins' stronghold in Masyaf (Syria) and the cities of Jerusalem, Damascus and Acre.

Ubisoft, the creator of the *Assassin's Creed* series, has tried to recreate the medieval atmosphere and architecture of these cities as closely as possible. Thus Jade Raymond, producer of *Assassin's Creed*, has explained:

From the start we worked with one historian, who dug up all this very hard to find reference material, like plans of all the cities, the layout of the land at the time, how people dressed, types of weapons that were available, as much info we could find about the actual assassins as possible. (Quoted in Veugen, 2014a)

The historical accuracy of the cities featured in *Assassin's Creed* has been praised by many critics. Commenting on the overall game series, Connie Veugen (2014b) has remarked:

The dedication to historical accuracy is evident from the fact that the *Assassin's Creed* design teams consist not only of writers and designers; they also have a team historian who is an expert on the period and historical events being depicted.

Jerusalem and Damascus are under Muslim rule, so the civilians and soldiers either speak Arabic or English with an Arabic accent. The guards in these cities wear turbans and other traditional garments. In Acre, which was occupied by Christian warriors at that time, the language is English with a British accent, while the players can overhear other Templars or Knights Hospitaller speak English with French or German accents, reflecting their origins. The guards in Acre wear Crusader outfits. In 2008 Seif El-Nasr and her team (hailing from various cultural and religious backgrounds) presented an extensive analysis of the recreation of the old cities in *Assassin's Creed*, emphasizing the accuracy of the building style and local atmosphere.

The only real objection which critics have raised to the *Assassin's Creed* series was the American accent of Altaïr's voice actor. Altaïr's face was modeled on the singer and model Francisco Randez, due to his 'Mediterranean features', while Philip Shabaz (an American of Arab-Iranian descent) provided Altaïr's voice. While Altaïr occasionally speaks Arabic, most of the time he speaks English with an American accent. Developer Jade Raymond defended this choice by arguing that the player hears Altaïr's voice through the 'living memories' of Desmond (quoted in Veugen 2014a). In the subsequent novel *Assassin's Creed: The Secret Crusade* (2011), it is made clear that Altaïr's mother was English and that she died in childbirth).

In addition to the accent, Altaïr's gestural patterns were also criticized for being inconsistent with those of a person of Arab descent. Although the average Western player is unlikely to notice

this inconsistency, people who are familiar with subtle non-verbal conversational gestures in the Middle East did report some highly improbable behavior. Altaïr's behavior is contrasted with that of Malik, another Assassin, whose mannerism and motions are perfectly in tune with local customs. Together with the accent, this has led critics to accuse Ubisoft of having created an all-American super hero in the superficial disguise of an Arab. The reasons for Altaïr's 'strange' behavior, however, are technical in nature. Whereas other characters have been completely motion captured, Altaïr is made up of individual motions so he can convincingly interact with every possible object and surface in the game. Of course there are many cutscenes which Altaïr could have handled in more authentic fashion, but this would have ruined the continuity of the game protagonist in the eyes of the gamers (Veugen, 2014a).

In the next sections, however, I will move beyond these superficial criticisms. In order to compare the narrative of the first *Assassin's Creed* series with the historical 'Assassins' of the twelfth century and the Western legends surrounding them, it is necessary to give a short history of the Nizari Isma'ilis and a more detailed outline of the Altaïr storyline.

3 The Nizari Isma'ilis

The roots of the Nizari Isma'ilis, known in Western legend as the 'Assassins', can be traced back to the beginnings of Islam.³ When the prophet Muhammad died in Medina (632), he was succeeded by the four so-called 'Rightly Guided' (*rashidun*) caliphs: Abu Bakr (+634), Umar (644), Uthman (656) and eventually Ali (+661), Muhammad's nephew and son-in-law. However, Ali's authority was challenged by the Syrian governor Mu'awiya (+680). After Ali's murder, Mu'awiya seized power and founded the Umayyad Caliphate (661-750). But not all Muslims accepted Mu'awiya's authority, some arguing that the Prophet's successor should come from Ali's family. Gradually these Muslims came to be known as the *Shi'at Ali* ('the party of Ali'), or Shiites.

The figure of the imam is paramount for Shia Islam. He is the sole successor of Muhammad, and therefore shares in the same spiritual power. This fixation on Ali's bloodline has caused numerous smaller and bigger schisms within the Shia, two of which are important for the history of the Nizari Isma'ilis. When Imam Ja'far ibn Muhammad al-Baqir died in 765, the *imamiyya* ('the followers of the imam') split into two different groups because of a dispute over his succession: the majority supported Musa ibn Ja'far al Sadiq (+799) and developed into *Athna'ashariyyah* (or Twelver) Shia, while a minority backed Isma'il ibn Ja'far (+755), even though Ja'far's son apparently died before his father. Isma'il's followers, designated as Isma'ilis, believe that the true

3 This paragraph is based on: Bartlett (2001), Burman (1987), Daftary (1998, 1994), Lewis (1967) and Mirza (1997).

imam did not die, but went into ‘hiding’. Due to this concept of ‘hiding’, the nature and identity of the true imam is not known by all the faithful (or by none at all). But he nevertheless rules his people from his secret hiding place. This guarantees a continuous line of succession between Ali and a particular imam, even in times of crisis and chaos when it seems that there is no official imam who is in charge.

The second schism took place within the Isma’ili sect upon the death of Imam Tamim Ma’add al-Mustansir bi-Ilah (+1094). The majority chose the side of Tamim’s younger son al-Musta’li bi-Ilah (+1101), while a minority gave allegiance to his elder brother Nizar al-Mustansir (+1095). During Nizar’s rule, though he went ‘into hiding’ in the same year the schism took place, the Nizari Isma’ilis left the Shia Fatimid Caliphate (909-1171), which had been founded by the Isma’ili Imam Muhammad ‘Abdul-lah al-Mahdi (+934). From 1095 the Nizari Isma’ilis developed into the ‘Assassins’ of Persia and notably Syria.

The Nizari Isma’ilis were a small sect within Shia, which was itself a small minority within Sunni-dominated Islam. Constantly on the run from other Islamic rulers, but nevertheless zealous and with a strong missionary outlook, the Nizaris developed a unique strategy which proved to be very helpful in their survival, but also gave rise to the legends that were to surround them throughout their history. In the twelfth century the Nizaris *da’is* (‘missionaries’) captured numerous mountain forts in Persia and Syria, notably the iconic forts of Alamut and Masyaf. These impenetrable forts were places of refuge where the *da’is* could retreat from the outside world in case of danger, while the *fida’is* (‘those who sacrifice themselves’) methodically assassinated anyone who stood in the way of their freedom or independence. Within the forts the Nizaris aspired to be self-sufficient in terms of water and food supplies. They built wells and planted large orchards full of fruit trees.

The history and legends of the Nizari Isma’ilis are closely connected to two legendary leaders: the *hujjas* (chief representatives of the hidden imams) Hassan-i-Sabbah (1050s-1124) of Alamut (approximately 100 kilometers from present-day Tehran) and Rashid ad-Din Sinan (1132/5-1192) of Masyaf (Western Syria). Sabbah was born of Twelver parents but was converted by a local *da’i* just before 1072. In 1088 Sabbah, thoroughly trained as a Nizari, seized Alamut by infiltrating the castle and winning the majority of the inhabitants over to his interpretation of Islam. Until his death, Sabbah sent out *da’is* to occupy other mountain fortresses in Persia, resulting in the capture of two dozen interlinked forts in the region.

While the Nizari Isma’ilis began their expansion into Syrian territory in 1103 with the establishment of a base in Aleppo, they seized their most famous fort, Masyaf, in 1140. Closely connected to Masyaf and its legends is the reign of Rashid ad-Din Sinan (1162-1192/3). Caught between the slowly retreating Crusader armies of the Latin kingdom of Jerusalem (1099-1291) and

the advancing power and influence of the Arab General Saladin (1137/8-1193) in the whole region, Sinan succeeded in establishing more freedom, independence and influence than would have seemed possible with an army as small as the one he commanded.

The autonomous state of the Nizari Isma'ilis did not last long. In 1256 the fortress of Alamut was captured by the Mongol army. The Syrian Nizaris survived for some time, however, because of their alliance with the Mamelukes of Sultan Baybars (1233-1277), who successfully halted the Mongol invasion in 1260 at the battle of Ain Jalut. But the Nizaris were increasingly incorporated into the Mameluke state, while Baybars himself acted as chief *da'i*. This marked the ending of the Nizari Isma'ilis as an autonomous power, although they have survived as a community to the present day and are currently under the rule of Prince Karim Al Hussaini, Aga Khan IV (* 1936).

4 The story of Altaïr ibn La'Ahad

The story of Altaïr, the protagonist of the first *Assassin's Creed* game, leans heavily on the history of the Nizaris. Altaïr's story begins in 1165, when he is born to his Nizari father Umar ibn La'Ahad and his Christian mother Maud, who died in childbirth. His name, Altaïr ibn La'Ahad means 'the bird, son of no one' in English, and is a reference to his in-game ability to distinguish between friend and foe (called 'eagle vision'), his ability to climb to vantage points in cities (called 'eagle points') and to one of the possible explanations of the word 'Alamut', i.e. as 'Eagle's Nest' (El-Nasr, 2008).

His father Umar is executed during Saladin's historical first siege of Masyaf in 1176 by Saladin. According to the game narrative, Umar is sent to Saladin's tent in order to bring the general a note of warning. When someone sees him, Umar succeeds in escaping, but not without killing a nobleman in the process. Saladin and Sinan then manage to reach a kind of truce on the condition that Umar is executed. This part of the *Assassin's Creed* story conflates a number of separate historical events: two failed assassination attempts on Saladin, one in 1175 and another in 1176, including 'collateral damage', and Saladin's siege of Masyaf, including the subsequent truce between Sinan and Saladin, the reasons for which are still unclear (Burman, 1987, p. 117) According to some reports Saladin did actually raise the siege at Masyaf because an assassin left a note in his tent without being noticed (Daftary, 1994).

Sinan, referred to in the game only by his historical nickname of *Al Muallim* ('the mentor'), favors the young Altaïr and quickly promotes him to the ranks of the Assassins. However, Altaïr's fate changes dramatically in 1191. The then 26-year-old warrior fails miserably in his attempt to acquire an ancient artifact from the Temple of Solomon in Jerusalem, and is humiliated by the grand

master of the Templars, Robert de Sablé, who actually held this position from 1191 to 1193. Jerusalem had been occupied by the Crusaders since 1099 when the famous Godfrey of Bouillon (1060-1100) took the city during the First Crusade.

Having returned to Sinan, Altaïr is punished by *Al Mualim* for his failure (which caused the death of one of his brothers and the mutilation of another) and stripped of his rank. Altaïr is given the chance of rehabilitating himself by taking down nine Templar enemies of the Brotherhood, both Muslims and Christians, some of whom are historical figures, such as Garnier de Nablus (+1192), the tenth grand master of the Knights Hospitaller, William V of Montferrat (+1191), lieutenant of Richard the Lionheart, 'Master' Sibrand (+ 1192), first grand master of the Teutonic Knights, and ultimately Robert de Sablé (+1193), who has already been mentioned.

Ubisoft apparently chose these victims because they actually died in the years 1191-93, fitting them nicely into the game narrative as victims of assassinations by Altaïr himself. According to Burman (1987, p. 100), however, only ten assassinations were carried out by the Nizaris in the period 1103-1213 (not including the two failed attempts on Saladin), with only three of the victims Christians. Daftary (1994, p. 94) even claims that 'fewer than five Frankish personalities may have actually been killed by the *fidai's* during the entire period of the Crusaders' presence in Outremer.' From a historical point of view none of Altaïr's assassinations can be linked to the Nizaris. William's son, Conrad of Montferrat was killed in 1292 by two murderers disguised as Christian monks. This murder was attributed to Sinan's Nizaris, but all murders in that period were likely to be attributed to the famous Assassins. Some historical sources even claim that Richard the Lionheart or Saladin himself were the instigators of Conrad's murder (Daftary, 1998, p. 144).

During the game Altaïr discovers that the nine victims – both Christians and Muslims – are not deliberately prolonging the war, as Sinan claims they are, but are working towards peace, although in a very ambiguous way. Veugen (2014a) points out that the two warring factions in *Assassin's Creed* are not Muslims and Christians, but Templars (recruited from both faiths) and Assassins (predominantly Muslims), thus defying the Crusader cliché.⁴

Eventually Altaïr finds out that *Al Mualim* himself is also a Templar, and is trying to obtain the ancient artifact for himself, misleading both Templars and Assassins. After killing Sinan, Altaïr takes over the leadership of the brotherhood, dedicating his life to reforming it and to studying the mysterious artifact, called 'a piece of Eden'. At the end of his live, fearing the invasion of the Mongol hordes, he retreats to a secret vault hidden in the evacuated Masyaf castle, where he dies soon afterwards.

4 There are two exceptions to this rule. Altaïr's mother (Maud) and wife (Maria Thorpe, ex-Templar) are both Christians.

The Altaïr of Ubisoft seems to resemble the historical Nizaris very closely, although some historical elements, names and dates have been adjusted to fit the game narrative. Most importantly, however, Ubisoft has ensured that the game narrative would not become one-dimensional. In *Assassin's Creed*, Altaïr and the NPCs are not divided into 'good guys' and 'bad guys' along ethnical or religious lines. The Muslims of *Assassin's Creed* by no means fit the stereotypes Shaheen and Sisler have problematized. In the next paragraph I will look more closely to the legends surrounding the Assassins, and to the way in which *Assassin's Creed* deals with them, so as to be able to consider more closely the imagery provided by the game series concerning stereotypes of Arabs/Muslims.

5 The Assassin Legends

The Assassins have a very distinct image in Western culture, i.e. as professional, secretive murderers. The English and French word 'assassins' is thought to have derived from this sect. Cultural examples are: *Alamut* (Vladimir Bartol, 1938), *The Walking Drums* (Louis L'Amour, 1984), *The List of Seven* (Mark Frost, 1993), *The Children of the Grail* (Peter Berlings, 1991-2004) and *Prayers for the Assassins* (Robert Ferrigno, 2006). Dan Brown gives a very informative but highly negative and stereotypical description in *Angels and Demons* (2000):

The notorious Muslim assassin ('his people did not celebrate Christmas') has a voice 'metallic and cold, laced with arrogance (...) [and an] accent. Middle Eastern, perhaps?' He has a well-earned reputation for secretiveness and deadliness. 'He [is] a powerful man. Dark and potent. Deceptively agile'. And he has an assassin pedigree of which he is very proud. His ancestors 'were renowned not only for their brutal killings, but also for celebrating their slayings by plunging themselves into drug-induced stupors. Their drug of choice was a potent intoxicant they called hashish', hence the name Hassissin: 'the followers of hashish'. (Compilation by Dunn and Bubeck, 2006, p. 156)

This very negative imagery of the Nizaris is based on reports of Crusader chroniclers such as John Burchard of Strasbourg (+ after 1194), Jacques de Vitry (+ 1240) and Arnold of Lübeck (+ 1211/14). In his report, Burchard, traveling through Syria as the ambassador of the Emperor Frederick I Barbarossa (1122-1190) at Saladin's court, writes about a group 'Heyssessini', who terrorized both Muslim and Christian leaders by assassinating their targets in a most spectacular way. Burchard speaks about a 'prince' in an impenetrable mountain fort, who is training peasants' children to become the perfect Assassins. As a reward for their unconditional obedience to him, this prince promises them access to 'paradise'. Burchard also writes that the Assassins knew no law,

consumed pork (forbidden to Muslims) and slept with all women, including their mothers and sisters.

Jacques de Vitry, bishop of Acre, follows Burchard's report, but adds some interesting details. According to Jacques, the Assassins' *senex* (from *sheik*, 'old man'; that is Sinan) promised his pupils that they would go to paradise after they died (*in paradise post mortem*). Those who lost their lives while carrying out a mission were revered as saints and martyrs. Arnold von Lübeck adds another important detail to the already growing corpus of legends about the Nizaris. According to him the 'Old Man' inducted his candidate-Assassins by giving them a certain potion, which allowed them to experience the heavenly bliss promised to them for eternity upon faithful completion of their (suicidal) mission. Both Burchard and Jacques de Vitry claim that the Assassins were trained in all kinds of martial arts, philosophy, ethics, history and a number of different languages.

Arnold von Lübeck also added the famous 'leap of faith' or 'death leap' element to the Assassins legend. The loyalty of the Nizaris to their leader was so great that they were prepared to throw themselves from walls and cliffs to meet a certain death if he so commanded. William of Tyre (1130-1185) includes an interesting anecdote in his chronicle. In 1194 Henry II of Champagne (1166-1197), successor of the Conrad of Montferrat who was allegedly killed by the Assassins, arrived at Masyaf for a meeting with Sinan. To demonstrate his power, Sinan ordered his devotees to throw themselves off the fortress walls. This made such an impression on Henry that he left the Assassins unharmed.

Eventually it was the famous Marco Polo (1254-1324) who gave the Assassins legend its modern form (as it can be found for instance in *Angels and Demons*). Marco Polo visited the remnants of the Persian Nizaris' forts on his travels and wrote a very lively report on the Assassins' 'procedures'. Casually mixing up the Syrian and Persian Nizari groups, he claimed that the Old Man had beautiful gardens in his mountain fort, carefully shielded from the outside world and populated by the most beautiful maidens. After the Old Man had chosen his candidates for an Assassin mission, he would drug them with opium. Deeply asleep the candidates would be brought to this secret garden where they could indulge in all carnal pleasures upon awakening. The happy candidates thought they had reached paradise. But after a number of days, Sinan would let them take the opium again and would bring them back to the public part of his castle. When the candidates awoke, they begged the Old Man to let them go back to paradise. The Old Man then promised them to this upon completion of his assassination mission.

Daftary (1994) distinguishes five different dimensions in the Western legends of the Nizari Isma'ilis: the training legend, the paradise legend, the libertinism legend, the leap of faith legend and the opium legend. In the first *Assassin's Creed* games, all these legendary elements have been more or less interwoven into the game narrative, mostly in a critical manner. The game designers

even hint at Marco Polo himself. When Altaïr builds a huge library in Masyaf, he sends his son Darim to invite Niccolò and Maffeo Polo to Masyaf. When they arrive, Altaïr tells Niccolò stories about his life, which Niccolò later passes on to his son, Marco, in the form of a journal.

Training. Altaïr and his fellow-Assassins are rigorously trained in all kinds of military tactics and fighting skills, but no other training is provided. As Daftary (1994, p. 98) points out, ‘Burchard’s detailed account on recruitment and training of the *fiida*’s has to be taken as an imaginative and exaggerated construction based on rumors.’

Paradise. The legend of the promise of paradise is discussed in the game narrative, but in a very subtle way. In *Assassin’s Creed*, Al Mualim cries to Robert de Sable who is besieging Masyaf: ‘My men do not fear death Robert, they welcome it and the rewards it brings.’ As soon as Altaïr takes over leadership of the brotherhood from *Al Mualim*, he abandons the ritual of ‘the cutting off of the finger’. The amputation of the Assassins’ middle finger was necessary to allow the ‘hidden blade’ (a specially concealed weapon) to function, and it was also used as an initiation ritual. No historical evidence for this practice has been found. Intriguingly, Altaïr removes the necessity for cutting off fingers by redesigning the hidden blade. As a justification, he mentions that this practice was ‘a false promise of paradise’, a well-hidden reference to the paradise legend found in the Crusader chronicles.

Leap of faith. The leap of faith is one of the key characteristics of the *Assassin’s Creed* game play. In every major installment of the series, the player has to control his avatar to climb high buildings, towers, treetops or rock formations in order to get a good indication of the strategic situation in a specific game location. These locations are referred to as ‘eagle points’. Every time Altaïr has scaled an eagle point, he can jump down unto a pile of straw without sustaining any injuries. The sound of an eagle is heard while he jumps.

This is a clear reference to the corresponding Assassin legend, but with a distinctive twist. The chroniclers were convinced that the *fiida*’s were actually jumping to their deaths on the Old Man’s orders, but modern research has suggested that these ‘leaps of faith’ were staged in order to intimidate enemies (Daftary 1994). Leopold Hellmuth (1988) has suggested that the story derives from a late version of the Alexander romance, in which Alexander intimidated envoys of the Jews, whose country he was about to invade, by ordering some of his soldiers to jump into a ravine. In *Assassin’s Creed* the leaps are clearly also staged. At the beginning of *Assassin’s Creed*, Altaïr has to perform such a leap in order to convince the attacking Templars commanded by Robert de Sablé to retreat from Masyaf. Before the three assassins, of which Altaïr is one, jump down, Al Mualim cries out: ‘Show these good knights what it is to have no fear. Go to God.’

Use of intoxicating drugs. The use of drugs is one of the most notorious myths surrounding the Nizaris. As Daftary has pointed out (1994), it is almost impossible to believe that the *fiida*’s

were ‘high’ during their missions, which mostly required very long periods of waiting and observation before the Assassins struck with deadly precision. The reason for the association with drug use can probably be found in Sunni literature on the Nizaris. Apart from more or less neutral terms such as *Isma’iliyya* and *Nizariyya*, the Sunni authors also used more negative designations such as like *malahida* (‘heretics’), *batiniyya* (loosely translated as ‘esoterics’) and even *hashishiyya* (‘hash eaters’). *Hashish* is Arabic for cannabis, which was used intensively in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries in many countries in the Middle East, especially among the lower classes. *Hashishiyya* is therefore probably not a reference to the actual use of intoxicating drugs, but a more general term to denote ‘low-class rabble’.

It was in the abusive senses of ‘low-class rabble’ and ‘irreligious social outcasts’ that the term *hashishiyya* seems to have been used metaphorically in reference to the Nizari Isma’ilis during the 12th and 13th centuries, and not because the Nizaris or their *fida’is* secretly used hashish in a regular manner, which in any event would not have been public knowledge. (Daftary, 1994, p. 92)

There is no indication in *Assassin’s Creed* that the Nizaris used drugs, although there are two subtle references to the legend. When *Al Mualim* wants to punish Altaïr for disobeying his orders, he stabs him in the abdomen with a knife. Sinan calls this ‘the sleep of death’, from which Altaïr will only awaken after an indefinite amount of time. This mirrors the effect of the ‘opium’ mentioned by Marco Polo and other chroniclers. In addition there is another reference to the mind-manipulating powers which the Old Man supposedly possesses over his drugged devotees. The ancient artifact which Altaïr has to steal from the Templars (but which is obtained by *Al Mualim* himself) gives its owner the power to control the minds of the people.

6 The 5th legend: ‘taqiyya’ and ‘qiyama’

The last Nizari legend contained in the Christian chronicles is the accusation of libertine behavior. The accusations Burchard made that the Assassins worshiped Sinan as their God (instead of Allah), consumed pork and gave themselves over to all kinds of debauched sexual activities are possibly connected to two (misinterpreted) theological concepts of the Nizari Isma’ilis: *taqiyya* and *qiyama*.

Taqiyya is a broader Shia principle of precautionary dissimulation of one’s true religious beliefs in the face of danger. (Daftary, 1994, p. 6) This concept made it possible for the Nizari Isma’ilis to appear to change sides quickly, as they actually did in their fluctuating alliances with both Christian and Muslims rulers. For their Muslim critics and for the Christian chroniclers this concept led to all kinds of misunderstandings about the true content of Nizari faith and practices.

Imam Hasan II (reign 1162-1166) initiated a religious revolution in the Nizari communities of Persia and Syria. In 1164, in the presence of representatives from numerous Nizari territories, Hasan proclaimed the *qiyama* ('resurrection'). This eschatological concept of the 'Last Days' in which all men would be judged by God, was interpreted by Hasan in a spiritual way, according to the Isma'ili method of *ta'wil* (esoteric interpretation). According to Daftary, the *qiyama* was

...essentially held to mean the manifestation of the unveiled truth in the person of the Nizari imam. Only the Nizaris were now capable of comprehending spiritual reality, the immutable truths hidden behind all religious laws and, as such, Paradise was made real for them in this world. (Daftary, 1994, p. 41)

This proclamation dispensed Nizaris from the obligation to observe the ritualistic ('external') commandments formulated in the Qur'an, such as praying and fasting. The paradise and libertinism legends of the Christian chronicles are likely to have been distorted echoes of this concept of *qiyama*. The Nizaris' 'paradise', however, was a 'heaven brought to earth' rather than a traceable *locus* where devotees could experience all kinds of physical pleasure. Burchard's view of the Islamic paradise, for example, was based on a very 'carnal' interpretation of the concept of 'paradise' in the Qur'an (Daftary, 1994, p. 99). Not even all the Nizaris themselves seem to have fully understood the content of this doctrine. Thus Muslim sources relate that Sinan had to deal personally with a group of Syrian Nizaris who had misunderstood the *qiyama*, and were indulging in libertine practices (*idem*). Nevertheless the Nizaris annually celebrated the proclamation of the *qiyama* with great festivities (Mirza, 1997, p. 81).

The Nizari doctrines of *taqiyya* and especially *qiyama* have been taken up in an interesting way in the *Assassin's Creed* game narrative, namely in the *Assassin's Creed* itself. The Creed emphasizes three simple moral tenets that focus on ensuring a successful mission, on achieving mastery of emotions and on the safety of the brotherhood:

1. Stay your blade from the flesh of an innocent.
2. Hide in plain sight.
3. Never compromise the brotherhood.

These tenets cannot actually be found in the historical documents of the Nizaris, but have been derived from the novel *Alamut* (1938). In all of the installments of the game series these three tenets are summarized by the so-called 'Maxim': 'Nothing is true, everything is permitted'. This maxim seems to be a far cry from the *taqiyya* and *qiyama* doctrines of the historical Nizaris. In *Assassin's Creed II*, protagonist Ezio Auditore da Firenze explains that the maxim is not a doctrine to be followed, but merely a conclusion reached from observing the world.

To say that nothing is true, is to realize that the foundations of society are fragile, and that we must be the shepherds of our own civilization. To say that everything is permitted, is to understand that we are the architects of our actions, and that we must live with their consequences, whether glorious or tragic.

Altaïr himself, after taking control of the Assassin brotherhood, develops a critical view of his own creed, calling it ‘the three ironies’:

1. The Assassins seek to promote peace, but commit murder.
2. The Assassins seek to open the minds of men, but require obedience to rules.
3. The Assassins seek to reveal the danger of blind faith, yet practice it themselves.

Assassin's Creed does not feature libertine Nizaris as the old chronicles did, but transform the accusation of libertinism into a kind of postmodern liberalism, which allows a modern audience to embrace the Assassins as medieval champions of individual freedom and autonomy. The defining point of difference between Templars and Assassins in the *Assassin's Creed* series is that the former want to establish world peace by forcing order and discipline onto society, while the latter accept that chaos and anarchy are necessary to guarantee individual freedom and liberty.

Although the games [sic] takes place within a historical context which draws attention to the 'Occident' versus the 'Orient', the writers of the story circumvent that altogether by making the main character, an extension of the player, stand for something outside of that binary: freedom. (Mesri)

7 Religion in ‘Assassin’s Creed’

The Nizari concepts of *taqiyya* and *qiyama* do have a certain place within the game narrative of *Assassin's Creed*, but in the games they do not function on a theological level.⁵ In the *Assassin's Creed* game series revolving around Altaïr religion has a rather difficult and differentiated position. There are three different kind of levels on which religion is addressed in *Assassin's Creed*: on the level of Altaïr’s story, on the level of Desmond’s story and on the level of the meta narrative of the game series itself.

The first level of ‘religion’ in *Assassin's Creed* is used in the context of the historical setting of the game series. Using the historical background of the Third Crusade, Ubisoft cannot avoid utilizing the institutionalized religions of the two fighting fractions: Islam for the Assassins/Nizaris

5 I would like to thank Tobias Knoll for his thoughts on the subject of religion in the *Assassin's Creed* game series.

and Christianity for the Crusaders/Templars. If Ubisoft would make a game set in the middle ages and even during the Third Crusade, the omission of religion altogether would make the setting implausible (to say the least). Jade Raymond has remarked on the topic of religion in *Assassin's Creed*:

Knowing that our subject is controversial by nature we have dealt with religion as a purely historical background element. We cannot completely avoid religion because it was the impetus for the war. We have, however, worked with cultural experts throughout production to make sure that we treat sensitive topics with respect. 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 *Assassins' Creed*, Crusaders (and the Saracens) are not the Assassins' true enemy. War is — as are those who exploit it. (Quoted in El-Nasr , 2008, p. 13)

At this level, (institutionalized) religion is used by Ubisoft as an integral element of the historical setting, but also as a source of conflict (between Muslims and Christians) and as a tool of power. It is however *not* used as a signifier or identity marker for stereotyping the Muslim or Christian characters of the game's narrative. The nuance of Ubisoft's game narrative is exactly, as I have pointed out earlier in this article, that religion is not the prime reason for the ongoing conflict between Assassins and Templars. The Muslim and Christian identity of the Assassins and Templars is not set in stone (some Assassins are Christian, and visa versa), and is presented as more or less coincidental. Ubisoft does not describe the Assassins as 'the bad/good guys', nor as Muslims per se; nor the Templars as 'good/bad guys' or as Christians per se.

The second level on which religion has its place in the game narrative of *Assassin's Creed* is as seen through the eyes of Altaïr/Desmond, that is, the player. Because of the complex game narrative of *Assassin's Creed*, three epistemological levels can be differentiated: a) the player, who controls (b) Desmond, who is reliving the memory of (c) Altaïr. The view on religion by (or through) this 'trinity' is more postmodern. Altaïr is skeptical about the creed of the Assassin brotherhood, claiming it is not a (religious) doctrine, but more a way of live. To quote Jade Raymond again:

[Altaïr] does not have any religious beliefs. He is more of a spiritual guy. And I think that is also your role in the game, you are not taking sides. As an Assassin, you are a third party. And the Third Crusade is really this feuding for power with all of these guys on both sides of the fence and you are on the outside trying to stop the Third Crusade. (Quoted in Veugen, 2014a, p. 12)

Altaïr is no Muslim, he is not religious, as Raymond makes perfectly clear. The same applies to Desmond who has no pronounced faith either. This almost ‘atheistic’ or ‘agnostic’ characteristic - based on the player perspective - of Altaïr/Desmond makes it possible for players of any religious denomination to play and enjoy the game narrative, because it takes no sides. The same principle that helped Ubisoft to overcome the Hollywood stereotype of Arabs/Muslims, helps the game company to attain the largest group of potential players.

The third level on which religion is used in the *Assassin's Creed* game narrative, is the level of the meta narrative of the game series. While the meta narrative of the *Assassin's Creed* series is revealed in *Assassin's Creed III* (no longer featuring Altaïr, but another ancestor of Desmond), numerous hints are given in the Altaïr-games. The ‘apples of Eden’ (also called ‘pieces of Eden’), which are the ‘treasure’ Altaïr is trying to find (and through him and Desmond both the Assassins and the Templars), are a reference to the ‘forbidden fruit’ of the Biblical garden of Eden. According to the book of Genesis, the first men – Adam and Eve – were flung out of paradise by God because they transgressed on of his prohibitions, not to eat from the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil.

In the *Assassin's Creed* series up to number 3 a meta narrative unfolds itself about the history of the earth. Eventually Desmonds finds out that mankind was made as a slave race by almost omnipotent beings from space, called ‘Those Who Came Before’. Due to cosmic disaster, mankind freed themselves from slavery by stealing powerful technology from these super beings: the Apples of Eden. When Desmond is wondering about the greatness and incomprehensibility of Those Who Came Before, Desmond’s father says:

‘We saw the Nephilim there. We seemed like grasshoppers in our own eyes, and we looked the same to them.’ [Numbers 13:33] Imagine trying to explain all of this to a two-year-old. To a grasshopper. When they said the will of the gods was unknowable - they meant it. Literally.

Assassin's Creed links the First Civilization to the mythological *Nephilim* of Numbers 13:33 and the mythical *Elohim* of Genesis 6:1-5. These ‘supermen’ were not real gods, but an advanced human race which created mankind in its own image for the purposes of slave labor.

On this third level, Ubisoft’s meta narrative is highly critical on the phenomenon of (institutionalized) religion. Religion is mainly a man-made, immanent tool of power for the alien super race in order to maintain control over their creatures even when their own society has collapsed by cosmic disaster. There is no supernatural truth behind (institutionalized) religion, nor any metaphysical basis.

8 Conclusions

I have attempted to argue in this article that Ubisoft's *Assassin's Creed* game series does an excellent job in presenting a balanced narrative about the historical Nizari Isma'ilis during the Third Crusade. Ubisoft has refrained from using the stereotypical Hollywood cliché about 'the' Arab/Muslim – the stereotyping that was problematized by Said, Shaheen and Sisler. It has done so by eschewing one-dimensional identifications of ethnicity and religion, and by deliberately constructing a more complex moral framework for both Templars and Assassins. The in-game Templars are not identified exclusively with the Christians, nor are the Assassins with the Arabs. And while the game narrative sometimes seems to suggest that the moral high ground belongs to the Assassins, the Templars also are given more than enough narrative space to make the player consider the justice of their motives.

Assassin's Creed refuses to use the stereotyped division between good guys and bad guys based on ethnical or religious divisions. Altaïr and the Assassins, as well as most of the Templars, are multilayered personalities who are not reduced to cultural clichés. And while the developers sometimes mix up places, names and dates to match Altaïr's game narrative, the broader historical context is maintained in a mature fashion, honoring the rich and complex history of the Nizari Isma'ilis in Syria at that time.

In doing so, *Assassin's Creed* debunks almost all of the traditional Assassin legends, thus adding to a more realistic and historically viable view of the Nizari Isma'ilis. There are hints of the traditional legends 'invented' by the Christian chroniclers of the Third Crusade and afterwards – paradise, leap of faith, use of intoxicants, training - , but these are corrected to reflect the insights of modern research on their historical antecedents: Altaïr who forbids the amputation of fingers because it is a 'false' promise of paradise, the staging of the death leap to impress enemies, and the substitution of alleged use of drugs by the mind-controlling abilities of a power-hungry tyrant.

However, the depiction of Rashid – *Al Mualim* – Sinan as the power-hungry tyrant is far removed from the historical figure and the nature of the actual obedience which the *fidai's* gave their leader. The game narrative is not friendly to Sinan, but Sinan being one of the most revered figures in Nizari history, his evilness is not reduced to the fact that he 'belongs' to the Islamic faith or that he is of Arab ethnicity.

Religion, especially in its institutionalized form, is handled differently by Ubisoft. I have differentiated three levels on which religion has its role in the game narrative of *Assassin's Creed*. On the first level, religion is used in the historical context of the Third Crusade in which the game narrative takes place. On this level religion – may it be Islam or Christianity – is not used as a

signifier or identity marker. And this last part is exactly the reason Ubisoft succeeded in overcoming racial and ethnical stereotyping.

On a second level, the level of Altaïr/Desmond/the player, religion is treated in a more atheistic, agnostic or even skeptical fashion. Altaïr seems to criticize the traditional ways of the Assassin Brotherhood when he is growing older. Desmond has no religious affinities at all, or at least, the game makes no comment on this. This broadens the opportunities for players from different religious, ethnical and cultural backgrounds to identify with the game protagonist (Altaïr/Desmond) more easily.

On a third level, the level of the meta narrative of *Assassin's Creed*, religion is treated in a very critical way. Religion is nothing more than a power tool of the omnipotent beings who created man and religion for the sole purpose of ensuring a race of obedient slaves. No 'real' religion is present, that is, there is no reference to a God (only fake godheads manipulating mankind), to the sacred, the transcendent or the numinous. Ubisoft, on this level, has a very functionalistic, postmodern and almost scientifically 'external' view on religion.

In short, Ubisoft has succeeded very well in overcoming the ethnical stereotyping of 'the Arabs' that is perpetrated in most Western cinema productions and video games, but it has failed to do the same with regard to religion. While Ubisoft has resisted the all-too-simplistic identification of 'race' (Arab) and 'religion' (Muslim), religion is treated as nothing more than an ingredient of a historical background for the game narrative, or as tool of mass control by powerful beings. This functionalistic approach to religion mismatches the careful and well researched approach towards the Nizaris which is so characteristic for the rest of the game series.

Literature

Bartlett, W.B., 2011. *The assassins. The story of Islam's medieval secret sect*. Sutton: Stroud.

Bosman, F.G., 2014. *What is your game? Proposal for an integral classification system of video games*. Available at: <www.academia.edu/7999429> [Accessed 21 October 2014].

Burman, E., 1987. *The Assassins. Holy Killers of Islam*. Wellingborough: Crucible.

Daftary, F., 1994. *The Assassin legends. Myths of the Isma'ilis*. New York: I. B. Tauris.

Daftary, F., 1998. *A short history of the Ismailis. Traditions of a Muslim community*. Princeton, New York: M. Wiener.

Dunn, J., Bubeck, C., 2006. *The Gospel according to Dan Brown*. Colorado Springs: Victor.

- Gray, J., 2010. *Show sold separately. Promos, spoilers, and other media paratexts*. New York: New York University Press.
- Heidbrink, S., Knoll, T., Wysocki, J., 2015. 'Venturing into the Unknown' (?) Method(ological) Reflections on Religion and Digital Games, Gamers and Gaming. In: idem (eds.), *Religion in Digital Games Reloaded*, Online Heidelberg Journal of Religions on the Internet, volume 7.
- Hellmuth, L., 1988. *Die Assassinen legende in der österreichischen Geschichtsdichtung des Mittelalters*. Vienna: Verlag der österreichischen Akademie der Wissenschaften.
- Lauteren, G., 2002. The Pleasure of the Playable Text: Towards an Aesthetic Theory of Computer Games. In: Mäyrä, F., ed. *Proceedings of Computer Games and Digital Cultures Conference* Tampere: Tampere University Press.
- Lewis, B., 1967. *The Assassins. A radical sect in Islam*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Mesri, S., 2014. Assassin's Creed Series. *Orientalism in modern Pop Culture*. Available at <<http://modernorientalism.weebly.com/assassins-creed.html>> [Accessed 29 October 2014].
- Mirza, N., 1997. *Syrian Ismailism. The ever living line of the imamate, AD 1100-1260*. Richmond: Curzon.
- Shaheen, J., 2001. *Reel Bad Arabs. How Hollywood Vilifies a People*. New York: Olive Branch Press.
- Said, E., 1978. *Orientalism*. New York: Vintage Books.
- Sisler, V., 2009. Video Games, Video Clips, and Islam. *New Media and the Communication of Values*. In: Pink, J., ed. *Muslim Societies in the Age of Mass Consumption*, Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, pp. 231-258.
- Sisler, V., 2008. Digital Arabs. Representation in Video Games. *European Journal of Cultural Studies*, 11(2), pp. 203-220.
- El-Nasr, M., Al-Saati, M., Niedenthal, S., Milam, D., 2008. Assassin's Creed. A Multi-Cultural Read. *Loading*, 2 (3). Available at <<http://journals.sfu.ca/loading/index.php/loading/article/view/51>> [Accessed 21 October 2014].
- Veugen, C., 2014b. Using Games to Mediate History. In: Egberts, L., Bosma, K., ed. 2014. *Companion to European heritage revivals*. Heidelberg: Springer Open.
- Veugen, C., 2014a. Altaïr ibn-la'Ahad. Arab Assassin or All-American Game Hero. *Magazine Maatschappelijke verbeelding*, 2. Available at: <www.maatschappelijkeverbeelding.nl/inhoudsopgave/essay/altaïr-ibn-la'ahad.html> [Accessed 22 October 2014].
- Veugen, C., 2011. *Computer Games as a Narrative Medium*, Amsterdam. Available at <<http://veugen.net/dd/index.html>> [Accessed 22 October 2014].

Biography

Dr F. (FRANK) G. BOSMAN is a cultural theologian at the Tilburg School of Catholic Theology in the Netherlands. His dissertation in 2014 dealt with the German Catholic and Dadaist Hugo Ball. Bosman is the author of many articles and books about the relation between culture, theology and faith, and has focused on the role of religion and religious themes in video games.

Tilburg School of Catholic Theology
Nieuwegracht 61
3512 LG Utrecht
The Netherlands
f.g.bosman@tilburguniversity.edu
www.frankgbosman.nl