

ASSASSIN'S CREED FRANCHISE



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Assassin's Creed

Franchise

AS Component 1: Investigating the Media

A Level Component 1: Media Products, Industries and Audiences

Subject Content:
Media Industries
Audiences
Media Contexts

PRODUCT CONTEXT

- From 2022 the requirement is to demonstrate knowledge and understanding of the *Assassin's Creed* franchise in terms of the relevant video games industry and audience issues it illustrates.
- At least one extract from a chosen game from the franchise must be studied in relation to industry and audience.
- The *Assassin's Creed* franchise is published by Ubisoft and encompasses 12 incarnations of the game, plus spin-offs. It is an action adventure, open world game, played from a third person perspective; each game is set in a historical setting with a new story and time period.
- In 2021 the franchise recorded sales of 155 million units since its introduction in 2007. This was helped by the launch of *Assassin's Creed Valhalla* in 2020 which sold more units in its first week than any other game in the series. However, games in the back catalogue of the franchise continue to be popular.
(www.videogameschronicle.com)

PART 1: STARTING POINTS - MEDIA INDUSTRIES

Historical Contexts:

Video games are a relatively **new media form**. Consider the exponential **growth** of this form since the 1970s, the rapid **technological development**, the construction of "the gamer" and the difficulty of **regulating** or monitoring the impact of such a fast paced industry.

Economic Contexts:

- Video games are culturally and financially significant across three major territories (Japan, Europe and the USA). The release of new gaming **technology** or games from popular franchises can be major **economic events**. It would be useful to explore the way that games and technology (and specifically those from within the *Assassin's Creed* game **franchise**) have been marketed and received across the three major territories.
- In 2021 the value of the global video games market was estimated to be \$138.4 billion increasing from \$52.8 billion in 2012. Mobile gaming is the fastest growing area. (www.statista.com).
- Other strategies, in addition to games sales are employed to increase revenue including production and distribution models.
- Ownership is another significant element related to the financial success of a games franchise.

Consider processes of production, distribution and circulation and how they shape media products:

- Video games' production techniques have evolved and become increasingly innovative as the industry has become more competitive and the demand for games has increased.
- Being part of a franchise is a production model that both increases economic viability and establishes a brand identity for the audience.
- Advances in technology have shaped video games by the inclusion of more complex gameplay, highly developed graphics and advanced CGI.
- In terms of **production** the games in the franchise are part of a multinational development which is typical of game production in larger studios such as Ubisoft.

Consider the relationship of recent technological change and media production, distribution and circulation:

- Video games develop and expand to reflect advances in technology. The decision to release *Assassin's Creed III: Liberation* on PS Vita was to

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tap into the increasing popularity of **mobile gaming** (smart phones, tablets etc.). The PS Vita was designed with many features usually associated with smart phones (touchscreen as well as Wi-Fi, 3G and Bluetooth capability).

- This release of this game, as part of a well-known and popular **franchise**, may be seen as an attempt to bring high game **production values** to the burgeoning new mobile gaming arena. The game was originally exclusive to the PS Vita but was later (2014) released in a modified HD version across a large range of consoles and **platforms** (including PS3, Xbox 360 and Microsoft Windows).
- Other games in the franchise have also adapted to technological developments. For example, *Assassin's Creed Valhalla* was released in 2020 to coincide with the launch of new consoles including PlayStation 5 and Xbox Series X.
- Newer games in the franchise have introduced cross-generational gaming enabling data to be transferred from earlier generation consoles and cross-play and progression carrying progress between different platforms.
- The opportunities to distribute and circulate games and to distribute additional content have expanded, leading to increased revenue for the franchise.
- The games themselves have also developed in line with changes in technology. For example, *Assassin's Creed Odyssey* offered a more immersive experience for players than previous games.
- In 2021 it was announced that the new game to be released in the franchise, *Assassin's Creed Infinity*, inspired by the success of games like *Fortnite*, would be a fully live service game. This would expand the franchise and enable the games to time jump and include multiple historical settings rather than the single setting of the existing games. This would also ensure the longevity of the franchise and the ability to add new content rather than launching a completely new game.

Consider the regulatory framework and the role of regulation in global production, distribution and circulation:

- **Video game regulation** differs around the world but is becoming standardised across many European countries.
- In the **UK** until July 2012 video games had been regulated by the BBFC. They are now largely regulated by the **Video Standards Council (VSC)** applying the **PEGI** system (Pan European Game Information). The PEGI system can be discussed in terms of its process (age ratings as well as visual

descriptors of content) and also its attempt to harmonise

- the protection of children across Europe.
- Consider the effectiveness of PEGI (possibly in comparison with the BBFC or the American ESRB system in terms of authority and compliance).

Consider the impact of digitally convergent media platforms on media production, distribution and circulation, including individual producers:

- *Assassin's Creed III: Liberation*, a **handheld game** could be linked to the full PS3 **console version** of the game (owning both versions would unlock additional game content).
- The use of **convergence** has developed further across the most recent games in the franchise. This is significant in terms of promotion/marketing and circulation and facilitates the development and re-release of games incorporating more complex elements.
- The convergence between social media platforms promotes gamer engagement and identification with the game across the fan community.
- Digital convergence is important to Ubisoft as an individual producer in a competitive market, it also benefits fans as individual producers of game content, for example through gameplay videos.
- However, there are some possible risks including piracy and leaked content.

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Consider theoretical perspectives:

Regulation – Sonia Livingstone and Peter Lunt

- Consider the impact of **convergence** and **diversification** in media on regulatory practices. New technology opens up new opportunities and arguably new risks that complicate regulation.
- Questions that might be discussed in relation to Livingstone and Lunt include:
 - Should regulation be more flexible?
 - Should industries self-regulate?
 - Should individuals be empowered to make their own decisions about the products?
 - How might regulation become problematic where individuals lack the required media literacy to make informed decisions?
 - How can the consumer-based and citizen-based regulatory model be applied to the video games industry?

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Cultural Industries – David Hesmondhalgh

Use Hesmondhalgh to explore the way in which cultural industry companies might attempt to **minimise risk and maximise audiences**:

- The video games industry is designed to make a profit, they operate in a competitive market. One of the ways they minimise risk is through genre-formatting, this is evident in the *Assassin's Creed* franchise. The marketing of a new game uses audience recognition of the game and the brand as part of the franchise. Audiences therefore know what to expect.
- The sequel formula of the franchise model gives audiences clues of what to expect, but enough differences through themes and setting to ensure anticipation and buzz around the launch of a new game.

Hesmondhalgh also put forward the idea that the largest companies operate across a number of different cultural industries:

- The video games industry is dominated by large multi-national conglomerates. Ubisoft is the fifth largest video game company but is now also in competition with tech companies including Facebook, Google and Amazon who have recently become major players in the games industry backed by huge financial reserves.

PART 2: STARTING POINTS - AUDIENCES

Social and Cultural Context:

- Considering video games in relation to how they reflect **society** is a useful way of exploring them in terms of **social and cultural significance**. The representation of female characters, under-representation of women in video game development and an assumed minority of female video games players are areas that could be explored.
- The *Assassin's Creed* franchise has made adaptations over the different versions of the game to address changes in society and culture and audience expectations. There are examples of **female protagonists** in the later games (Aveline and Cassandra). Consider whether they subvert or reinforce expectations of female characters in games and how audiences may **respond** to this.

Consider how the producers of your chosen game from the franchise target, attract, reach, address and potentially construct audiences:

- The brand identity of the *Assassin's Creed* franchise is a key strategy for targeting audiences. A fan community already exists and gaming audiences have a preconceived idea of what to expect from a game in this franchise. This will be used in the marketing of a new game.

- As a result of developments in technology, the games are distributed across a range of different media platforms which facilitate the targeting of diverse audiences.
- Games in the franchise may attract audiences through creating a sense of identity, for example through identification with characters in the game or interacting with online fan communities.
- Games producers construct audiences through the decisions they make about characters, narratives and gameplay. For example, *Assassin's Creed Odyssey* offers players a choice between playing as a male or female character, Alexios or Cassandra, allowing for different interpretations of the narrative.
- Games in this franchise have broadened their appeal, by, for example the inclusion of female protagonists and different historical settings.

Consider the interrelationship between media technologies and patterns of consumption and response:

- The distribution of games in the franchise across different platforms is a strategy to increase audience consumption. This might be also considered as an attempt to draw gamers from different **platforms** to purchase additional hardware and adopt new gaming habits.
- Gamers might be being encouraged to have a more complete or satisfying experience by using a range of interlinked products that offer exclusive downloadable content. This is only made possible through **convergent technology** and gamer "buy-in" to the value of the exclusive content.
- The franchise has a well-established fan community enhanced by digital convergent platforms facilitating interaction and responses to the game to be shared. Fans can play a role in the future development of the franchise.

A Level Only Consider the way in which different audience interpretations may reflect social and cultural circumstances:

- The unique interactive and escapist experience provided by video games influences interpretations as gamers are part of a fan community made up of participants from diverse social and cultural backgrounds.
- Players may also make choices about video games selecting those that reflect aspects of their identity, for example in relation to the *Assassins Creed* franchise, those that feature a female avatar, or that take place in a particular historical setting that is of interest to the gamer.

Consider theoretical perspectives: Media effects – Albert Bandura

- Several games in the franchise have received an 18 rating from PEGI due largely to violent content.
- Consider audience response to violent video games in terms of Bandura's arguments about observation and imitation and vicarious consequences. Explore the "Bobo Doll Experiment" and discuss how relevant this is to the audiences targeted by the game. Are audiences likely to imitate the behaviours portrayed in the games? What might be imitated?
- A useful discussion might be had in relation to the active role adopted by a player of video games. Question whether Bandura's conclusions are invalidated or made more relevant if audiences are choosing to commit acts of violence in a video game rather than watching/imitating violent acts.

A Level Only

Fandom - Henry Jenkins:

- Discuss the significance of **fan culture** (and in particular **online fan communities**) when exploring the success of video games. This discussion may focus on the way video games have evolved closely alongside the **internet**. Video games offer **social experiences** (online multiplayer options) as well as communities outside of the core game experience. Fans may be passionate exponents of a game or
- the harshest critics and can often impact the development of games directly.
- The developments in video games technology have expanded the ways in which fans can interact with games producers and the fan community, creating a **participatory culture**.
- Video games are interactive, enabling fans to construct their identities through the participatory online experience and the role-playing environment.