



## Assassin's Creed – Case Study

### Introduction

With more than 20 years of experience in the video games market, Ubisoft strengthens its position as a top player in the industry by taking a head on approach on next-gen gaming experience. Focusing on strong brands, in-house development and a global distribution network, Ubisoft has succeeded in producing innovative, high-quality titles as well as gain in-depth customer knowledge. In a market dominated by franchises and sequels to already established titles, Ubisoft takes on the adventure of reinventing its already known brands, while in the same time creating new successful titles every year. "Pushing innovation and realism as never before and allowing players to experience incredible emotional journeys: these are the challenges that Ubisoft teams take up daily."<sup>1</sup> Drawing on the internal development capacities and the success of its already established franchises, Ubisoft is in the ideal position of being able to produce new creations, a factor considered by the company management as essential for winning market share and ensuring strong long term growth.

One of the latest new intellectual properties created by Ubisoft recently was Assassin's Creed, an action/adventure game for which the developers "chose one of History's most troubled and bloody times: the Third Crusade."<sup>2</sup> Officially launched for Xbox 360 and PlayStation3 on Nov 16, 2007, Assassin's Creed delivers an innovative and exciting gaming experience through a compelling story taking place in a realistic and extremely interactive environment.

Only one month after the official release, Ubisoft officials were forced to adjust their expectations related to the success of Assassin's Creed, as the title sold in more than 2.5 million copies worldwide, becoming the fastest-selling new videogame intellectual property in the US ever. Initially estimated at 3 million copies, Ubisoft sales forecasts for 2007-2008 were pushed forward towards the 5 million unit mark in order to match the unexpected success of the new title.

What were the factors that drove the unexpected success of Assassin's Creed and which was the most important one? Was it the strength of Ubisoft as one of the major players on the market and the title's advertising budget? Was the market offering an opportunity uncovered yet by other publishers? Was it the next-gen technical and the artistic attributes of the game? Was it the community reviews? Was it...?

### Market Context

The year 2007 represented a high growth year for the video games industry, which was estimated by PricewaterhouseCoopers to surpass the music industry in terms of global spending<sup>3</sup>. While all areas of the industry showed dynamic growth in 2007, from hardware to software and distribution channels, a DFC Intelligence report showed that in terms of stock market performance, there were only four "high flying" companies.<sup>4</sup> The names standing out as high performers were Activision, GameStop, Nintendo and Ubisoft, all serving quite different segments of the video game market food chain.

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.ubisoftgroup.com>

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.ubisoftgroup.com>

<sup>3</sup> <http://arstechnica.com/news.ars/post/20070623-report-video-game-spending-to-surpass-music-spending-this-year.html>

<sup>4</sup> [http://www.gamasutra.com/php-bin/news\\_index.php?story=16690](http://www.gamasutra.com/php-bin/news_index.php?story=16690)





The hardware sector was dominated by the dynamic growth started in the previous years by the three new gaming consoles, namely the Nintendo Wii, Sony PlayStation 3 and the Microsoft Xbox 360. While Nintendo Wii was taking the industry by surprise, having tremendous success with its casual platform and its casual games targeting the casual gamers (pun intended), Sony PlayStation3 and Microsoft Xbox 360 struggled to appeal to the hardcore gamers with pricey consoles that offered highly advanced games in terms of technology and technical requirements. While in the case of Nintendo's Wii console the hardware took the lead by providing an innovative gaming experience for family and friends and thus becoming the top selling system of the year, in the case of Microsoft's Xbox 360 and Sony's PlayStation 3 the game titles were actually the ones fueling the success of the platforms. Microsoft's highly anticipated Halo 3 managed to snatch the highest grossing opening day in video game history, counting no less than \$170 mil in revenues 24 hours from its official launch. Despite this success, the Xbox 360 occupied the second place in worldwide console install base. Sony's PlayStation 3, although it had a few exclusive and high quality titles, due to high pricing and confusing product range only managed to settle for the third position.

In terms of game titles, 2007 saw the success of both epic games, as well as the casual games, both types powered by the success of the gaming consoles they were produced for. The Nintendo Wii fueled the financial success of several Mario series (Mario Party 8, Super Mario Galaxy, Super Paper Mario or Mario Strikers: Charged). The top 10 sellers in 2007 were in their vast majority Nintendo's own titles, with only two outsiders: Red Octane's Guitar Hero III: The Legends of Rock and Capcom's Resident Evil 4. Microsoft's Xbox 360 best sellers of 2007 were mostly epic games, with Halo 3, Call of Duty 4, Assassin's Creed, BioShock and Ghost Recon Advanced Warfighter 2 all present in the top 10. Sony's PlayStation 3 featured an assortment of sports and epic games in the top 10 sellers of 2007, having among the bestsellers titles such as Madden NFL 08, MotorStorm, NCAA Football 08, Call of Duty 4, Assassin's Creed, Guitar Hero III and Tom Clancy's Rainbow Six: Vegas.

Despite the frantic competition between the gaming consoles, in 2007 the PC took the lead as revenue generating platform for video games, mainly due to its versatility in satisfying both the hardcore and the casual gamers' needs. While in 2007 the big revenue generators included epic games like World of Warcraft, Halo 3, Call of Duty 4, and Mass Effect, a true mass market game platform should play both the epic games and the simple, casual games.<sup>5</sup>

"DFC Intelligence forecasts that 2008 will be far and away the biggest year ever for the game industry. Simple games, complex games, portable games, PC games, Wii, Xbox 360, PS3, consumers will be buying it all. It is all about reaching the consumer in the right place with the right product. If 2007 showed us anything, it is the game business is clearly an entertainment industry, not a technology industry. Products that are fun and exciting are not necessarily the most complex. The companies that fail to grasp that basic concept will struggle in the years ahead."<sup>6</sup> Looking back at the names that DFC Intelligence mentioned as having most healthy financial results on the stock markets in 2007, we notice that Nintendo, Activision and Ubisoft were all represented with titles in the top 10 bestselling video games of that year. Clearly, the correlation of bestselling titles and very good perception on the financial markets show that these companies have managed to master the success formula on their respective niches, be it fun and exciting casual games on an innovative console for Nintendo, sequels of previous epic successes for Ubisoft and Activision and new intellectual property titles such as Ubisoft's Assassin's Creed.

<sup>5</sup> [http://www.gamasutra.com/php-bin/news\\_index.php?story=17174](http://www.gamasutra.com/php-bin/news_index.php?story=17174)

<sup>6</sup> [http://www.gamasutra.com/php-bin/news\\_index.php?story=17174](http://www.gamasutra.com/php-bin/news_index.php?story=17174)



## Project Overview

Assassin's Creed is the next-gen game developed by Ubisoft Montreal that redefines the action genre. While other games claim to be next-gen with impressive graphics and physics, Assassin's Creed merges technology, game design, theme, and emotions into a world where the main character instigates chaos and becomes a vulnerable, yet powerful, agent of change. The setting is 1191 AD. The Third Crusade is tearing the Holy Land apart. Altair, the main character (meaning "The Flying One" in Arabic), intends to stop the hostilities by suppressing both sides of the conflict. He is an assassin, a warrior shrouded in secrecy and feared for his ruthlessness. His actions can throw his immediate environment into chaos, and his existence will shape events during this pivotal moment in history.<sup>7</sup>

Interviewed by GamePro in November 2006, Assassin's Creed Producer Jade Raymond revealed the source of inspiration for Ubisoft's new intellectual property. "Patrice Desilets, our Creative Director, as well as some other key members of our Creative team read a book about the Assassins and then started to do a lot of research about the clan and the 3rd crusade. The more we discovered about these people, the more we wanted to make the game. Even the Assassin Motto *Nothing is True, Everything is Permitted* fits the game medium perfectly. We developed our main character, Altair as a forward thinking missionary of sorts, on a mission to end the 3rd crusade."<sup>8</sup>

Assassin's Creed introduced an innovative next-gen gaming experience through the means of a stunning graphical engine (one of the most photo-realistic engines ever made), a highly fluid, multi-dimensional and responsive environment, as well as realistic and intuitive character controls. Patrice Desilets, the Creative Director of Assassin's Creed, told GamePro that "it was important to the whole team to create a game that is cohesive and believable. Assassin's Creed is based on historical events, the game play uses actual social rules, the Assassin's moves are all modeled after what is actually possible for a highly trained athlete and we did not want to break this by saying that he could take out 50 enemies at a time or receive multiple blows to the head without dying."<sup>9</sup>

Talking about the conception and development process of Assassin's Creed, Jade Raymond emphasized Ubisoft executives' confidence in their teams and their willingness to take creative risks in what was the biggest next-gen and new intellectual property project of the company at that time. Blending and balancing creative freedom and market considerations were, in Raymond's opinion, the right ingredients to creating a top quality product.

## Branding

By offering lively characters, compelling storylines, breathtaking environments and innovative game play, Ubisoft strives to totally immerse gamers in its creative universes. In terms of brand experience, Assassin's Creed brings gaming to the next level through its unprecedented freedom of action and highly realistic environments.<sup>10</sup> Assassin's Creed is a taste of the future of the action/adventure genre and the future of successful brand identity in the gaming industry. Everything from the storyline to the control scheme has been designed as a framework around which to build any number of unique experiences to sell under the Assassin's Creed brand.<sup>11</sup>

Although branded as a new intellectual property, Assassin's Creed does rely on the development team's experience with previous action/adventure best sellers, such as the Prince of Persia latest

<sup>7</sup> <http://www.ubi.com/UK/Games/Info.aspx?pld=6399>

<sup>8</sup> [http://www.gamepro.com/news.cfm?article\\_id=85121](http://www.gamepro.com/news.cfm?article_id=85121)

<sup>9</sup> [http://www.gamepro.com/news.cfm?article\\_id=85121](http://www.gamepro.com/news.cfm?article_id=85121)

<sup>10</sup> Ubisoft 2007 Annual Report

<sup>11</sup> <http://360.kombo.com/article.php?artid=11705>



sequel. Bringing together old and new, Assassin's Creed had from the very beginning all the ingredients to become a successful brand. It made the promises of a compelling story and an innovative gaming experience and, based on the company's experience, it delivered on both those promises. Assassin's Creed development team showcased the game's unique experience before the game was officially launched, through developer interviews and live demos at various events that actively involved the gaming community and collected useful feedback.

The storyline in Assassin's Creed proved to be a controversial topic since Ubisoft has been marketing the game as an epic set during the 3rd Crusades, while the released version unveiled connections to the present times. However, the storyline is basically just a framework that will allow Ubisoft Montreal to create future games in any number of different eras, tie them all together and sell them all under the Assassin's Creed brand. The open nature of the story allows for future sequels that are easily integrated in the general Assassin's Creed brand, benefiting thus from a now already established franchise.

Drilling down to the more technical details of branding, Assassin's Creed is a trademarked name, and thus provides for a defendable long term brand. Using only two short and easily pronounceable words, Assassin's Creed is a brand name easy to remember. Associating the brand name with the brand image (the symbol associated with the name and the image of Altair, the main character) creates an easily recognizable compound marketing element. The brand name and imagery is reinforced by the game's motto: *Nothing is true, everything is permitted*. The tagline *Experience the power of the Assassin* provides a powerful description of the product's experiential, and thus emotional, benefits.

## Positioning

Assassin's Creed was positioned as the next-gen game that will redefine the action/adventure genre through a new gaming experience. Ubisoft did a great job of combining emotional benefits with functional benefits in the positioning of Assassin's Creed. The game motto, *Experience the power of the Assassin*, defined upfront the emotional experience that the gamer will engage into. In order to facilitate that experience, Ubisoft also defined a loose set of rules, through the Assassin's Motto: *Nothing is true, everything is permitted*. The positioning of the title's compelling story was done defining the historical context in which the game was framed into: "The setting is 1191 AD. The Third Crusade is tearing the Holy Land apart. You, Altair, intend to stop the hostilities by suppressing both sides of the conflict."<sup>12</sup>

In a nutshell, we could define the emotional experience that Assassin's Creed was communicating as *power through freedom*, two of the most cherished or sought for human attributes. The emotional positioning was properly supported by the functional benefits that the game offered, such as a realistic and responsive environment, the power to influence the crowds, the freedom offered by the movement and the combat system, as well as the ability to define one's own experience based on personal decisions taken within the game.

Along the unique gaming experience offered by Assassin's Creed, Ubisoft also positioned the title as a new intellectual property, thus differentiating it as a new and innovative creation on a market dominated by sequels and already established franchises. The game positioning was backed up by the company's positioning through its declared long term goal of bringing new concepts and franchises into the market every year.

Assassin's Creed was targeted mainly towards the hardcore gamers by the developer's choice of platforms. Positioned as a next-gen game on a next-gen platform, Assassin's Creed was focused

<sup>12</sup> <http://www.ubi.com/US/Games/Info.aspx?pld=5919>





initially on the market covered by the PlayStation 3 and the Xbox 360. The choice was obvious, because the advanced technology of the game required an advanced platform to allow the full enjoyment of the title's emotional experience. On top of this, 60% of Ubisoft's sales were coming from new generation console titles, a segment where the company had a significant and stable customer base.

## Communication

Communication was done during a long period of time (the four years of the game development), through a precise tension building ("a grueling media campaign of slow reveals and hidden secrets"<sup>13</sup>), and through a vast number of channels. "From specialist front covers to TV coverage on BBC, from quality trade marketing actions to an enormous media campaign – all of these key ingredients helped propel the game to number one," said Ubisoft UK boss Rob Cooper, exemplifying the title's UK marketing campaign.<sup>14</sup>

"The marketing campaign was superb. It activated at the right time and with the right messages, with pre-launch and post-launch mechanics. One of our objectives was to treat the campaign as a movie launch. We believe that this objective was met," mentioned Ubisoft Marketing Director Jon Rosenblatt in an MCV interview.<sup>15</sup>

The communication campaign was made efficient by using a lot of tools that appealed to the gaming community and the general public. Knowing from research that a key factor for a game purchase is the graphics quality of the title, the communication campaign used 100% game play footage in the TV creations, in order show exactly how the game looks and feels like. The community was not only told or shown things in an attempt to raise awareness and generate preference and purchase intention, but it was actually involved in the marketing campaign through an affinitive program entitled 1191ad. More than 28,000 gamers took part in this initiative and generated more than 5,700 pieces of content, all based around the universe of Assassin's Creed.

Considering the community feedback on the communication campaign, the smart choice of using relevant female evangelists to promote Assassin's Creed was highly appreciated in the predominantly male gaming community. Jade Raymond, the title's producer, and Kristen Bell, an actress involved in the game, proved that "pretty girls can sell anything." Moreover, attention to production details also proved to be a successful communication tool, as the community reacted to the marketing materials by saying that, for example, "using Massive Attack on your adverts delivers instant cool."

"Finally, a key learning was organizing a hands-on event at London's flagship HMV store on Oxford Street. We had only communicated on the event a week in advance, and it was a testament to the product that HMV on a Saturday afternoon was completely packed-out, with every single person patiently waiting (many for five hours or more) for their hands-on. This is a practice we will certainly look at repeating in the future," commented Jon Rosenblatt.<sup>16</sup>

## Impact

<sup>13</sup> <http://arstechnica.com/reviews/games/assassins-creed-review.ars>

<sup>14</sup> <http://www.mcvuk.com/news/28959/Ubisoft-New-IP-is-a-serious-business>

<sup>15</sup> <http://www.mcvuk.com/interviews/221/How-to-market-your-game>

<sup>16</sup> <http://www.mcvuk.com/interviews/221/How-to-market-your-game>



Even in pre-released form, Assassins' Creed won more than five industry awards in 2006 at the E3 Media and Business Summit, including honors from IGN (Best Action Game, PS3 Game of the Show, Best PS3 Action Game, Best PS3 Graphics), Games Critics (Best Action/Adventure Game), GameSpot (Best PS3 game of the show), GameSpy (Best PS3 game of the show) and GameTrailers (Best of Show).<sup>17</sup>

Assassin's Creed marketing campaign proved the fact that generating hype actually works. Although Ubisoft spent millions on the marketing campaign, the main driver of the success of the game was the "slowly building buzz. Developer interviews, official behind-the-scenes video blogs, expo appearances - a year of gradually disseminating information. Or lack of information. It could be that the company's masterstroke was to hint from the very beginning that the game's apparent Holy Land setting did not tell the whole story. Through teaser trailers at E3 and X06, we saw glimpses of futuristic scenes, there were rumors of time travel, genetic memory, all well stage-managed and artfully perpetuated by Ubisoft's marketing machine."<sup>18</sup>

The stunning graphic details of Assassin's Creed showed that technology and the experience that it can create and facilitate are extremely important in the industry. "The evocations of Damascus, Acre and Jerusalem are minutely detailed, writhing with character and cleverly constructed to offer a paradise of acrobatic free-running possibilities. The crowd system, too, is a sometimes awe-inspiring success, with hundreds of seemingly unique characters lining the streets, shoving, chatting, reacting..."<sup>19</sup>

Assassin's Creed also proved that reviews don't really mater. Along the praise for stunning graphics, compelling story and a control system allowing character freedom and mobility, the title was often blamed for repetitive game play and long cut-scenes. While not benefiting from extremely positive reviews, Assassin's Creed and its success did no heavily rely on the hard core community appraisal, but rather on the mass community word of mouth.

Although launched as late as mid November 2007, Assassin's Creed managed to secure its presence in 2007 top 5 bestselling titles for both the Xbox 360, as well as the PlayStation3, the only two platforms that it was actually produced for at that time. A courageous initiative from Ubisoft to launch an original intellectual property title among a vast mass of sequels of already established games, Assassin's Creed managed to sell more than 2.5 mil units in the first four weeks. "Assassin's Creed is the fastest-selling new IP on next-gen consoles – to have achieved that in November, up against blockbuster licenses and triple-A sequels is phenomenal," said Ubisoft Marketing Director Jon Rosenblatt in an interview.<sup>20</sup>

Assassin's Creed showed to the game industry that original titles can sell amidst a plethora of already established games and sequels. Thus, the creative risk that Ubisoft executives took generated significant financial rewards in a market where publishers don't often undertake this type of initiative because of high costs and uncertain returns. "The success of Assassin's Creed suggests that this timidity may have cost the industry millions. It seems that, fed an interesting concept, the public will take a gamble on a new franchise. Of course, not every original game will be backed up by such an extensive marketing campaign. Not all original titles will have the imaginative scope of Ubisoft's project. But then, most titles won't need to sell anywhere near five million copies to make a handsome revenue."<sup>21</sup>

<sup>17</sup> [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Assassins\\_Creed#Awards](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Assassins_Creed#Awards)

<sup>18</sup> [http://blogs.guardian.co.uk/games/archives/2007/12/13/what\\_does\\_the\\_success\\_of\\_assassins\\_creed\\_mean.html](http://blogs.guardian.co.uk/games/archives/2007/12/13/what_does_the_success_of_assassins_creed_mean.html)

<sup>19</sup> [http://blogs.guardian.co.uk/games/archives/2007/12/13/what\\_does\\_the\\_success\\_of\\_assassins\\_creed\\_mean.html](http://blogs.guardian.co.uk/games/archives/2007/12/13/what_does_the_success_of_assassins_creed_mean.html)

<sup>20</sup> <http://www.mcvuk.com/interviews/221/How-to-market-your-game>

<sup>21</sup> [http://blogs.guardian.co.uk/games/archives/2007/12/13/what\\_does\\_the\\_success\\_of\\_assassins\\_creed\\_mean.html](http://blogs.guardian.co.uk/games/archives/2007/12/13/what_does_the_success_of_assassins_creed_mean.html)

