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Dario Compagno

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# Standing on the Shoulders of Giants: A Semiotic Analysis of Assassin's Creed 2

Dario Compagno

## 45.1 Semiotics and Game Studies

Since semiotics came to existence in Europe as a discipline, it has had a single aim, however variously defined that of understanding *how meaning works*, by studying how different combinations of words, images, and other expressive means *make sense*. Instead of focusing on cognitive and other biological processes that could play a role for meaning making, semiotics starts from the final product: a written text, a multimedia object, or an expressive artifact of other kind. The fundamental question addressed by semiotics is the following: for what reasons does this text or artifact have the sense that it has, and not another one?

European semiotics was born from linguistics and literary criticism, and its first models derived from the analysis of written and oral texts, such as fairy tales and short novels. Is it possible to apply these analytical models to something that is not a text? For example, to a painting, a song, a movie, or a video game? Yes: expressive artifacts are comparable from a standpoint that sees them all as *récits*, narratives. This does not imply that a photograph makes sense in the same way a novel does. Most probably there are no expressive artifacts sharing fewer common traits: novels are temporal, “diegetic,” based on language; photographic pictures are spatial, “mimetic,” based on vision. And still, the main idea of European semiotics is that of finding in narratives, a common denominator for all forms of human expression (Barthes 1966). Common denominator permitting to compare radically different means of expression, and so to make traditional criticisms (of literature, art, music, games, etc.) and cultural analysis converge.

Are video games different from any other form of cultural expression, and therefore *special*? Sure: in the sense that they have a *proprium*, a specific difference, some distinctive features making them capable of realizing unique meaning strategies and sense effects. But this is true also for *every* other form of expression: each one has

its specific difference, that should be understood and respected; but then if everyone is special, no one is. It would not make sense to generalize to everyone but one: to all forms of expression, communication, art, but games. And in fact games are “exchanged in the market of culture,” adapting themes and strategies from other forms of expression (or *languages*, as semiotics calls them). Within game studies, researchers have isolated the specific *proprium* of video games: the rules. Games “work,” make sense, because they use regulated patterns of interaction within them, producing a particular kind of narratives. Some scholars call them interactive narratives, while others prefer not to use the term “narrative” at all for games; still, from the perspective of semiotics, there is no reason to isolate games as outcasts of culture.

Jesper Juul, game scholar, originally tried to defend the idea according to which in games there is a narrative layout that does not interact with the core rule-based meaning-making systems in games (Juul 1998). To prove his point, he produced a clone of the game *Space Invaders*, in which he substituted the approaching alien spaceships with instances of the Euro currency. What Juul did not recognize, was that the player of his game was actually shooting at the Euro currency, and this had an enormous impact on *the whole sense* of the game. This is especially true being Juul Danish, and being Denmark one of the European states not adopting the common currency. Juul’s game was actually a counter-proof to his own argument, showing that the narrative layout does matter greatly for how games make sense. Later, Juul (2005) changed his main argument, trying to prove that the narrative layout in games plays an important role for their meaning, but that it could still be thought as an autonomous layer, separated from the second (and dominant) one: the rules. However, we do not believe that one can simply separate rules and narration—as two different ingredients making the object video game.

If a rule has to make sense, it has to be presented to the player in a way he or she can understand it. The player has to grasp the rule as a “human rule,” part of a rule-based exchange. Rules are a very important component of many everyday activities, to the point that for Ludwig Wittgenstein (1953) every act of language or of expression could be thought as rule driven. In order to understand a rule, we humans need to associate some narrative affordances to it, that is, we need to build a representation of what *aims and means* this rule presupposes. A rule that is only mathematically represented would not be a rule at all, if not for a computer perhaps (but it would be easy to question if we could really talk of “rules” in that case). Starting from means and aims, we do spontaneously find narrative roles: that of the protagonist, those of the antagonists and helpers, that of the sought object (Greimas 1987). *A basic narrative is nothing but the representation of a rule-based process.*

It would be naive to think at narratives as a messy layer with no regularities, given that, for many scholars, the main role of narratives is exacting that of structuring experience. In video games, we players act within a set of regulated roles and expectations giving sense to what happens on the screen and to what we do. A paradoxical “nonnarrative” game would simply not make sense, and a “nonnarrative” description of rules and games would end up into nothing but a technical description of design or programming implementations. Technical descriptions not only are unrelated to the cultural potential of games (“what the game means” in a

larger sense, including what social consequences it could produce, what cultural references it recalls, and so on) but do not even grasp the pleasure of the game itself (“what the game means” to its player, why it is different from any other game). The main aim of semiotics applied to video games is then: *for what reasons does this game have the sense that it has, and not another one?*

## 45.2 Barthes’ Method

Among the methodologies developed within semiotics, that used by Roland Barthes in his book *S/Z* is perhaps the most comprehensive (Barthes 1970). Barthes played from the very beginning a major role in building a consciousness for semiotics as an autonomous discipline. For *S/Z*, he selected a set of concepts capable of providing a comprehensive understanding of the short novel *Sarrasine* by Honoré de Balzac. His specific aim was to describe how a text becomes *readable*, that is, not requiring any particular conscious effort by the reader to be understood. A readable text *flows*, everything in it looks understandable and easy. The opposite of such a text is called *writable* by Barthes. Writable texts give the impression of not communicating one well-defined message. In order to “work,” writable texts require a more active participation by the reader, needed to complete missing passages and blank spaces. Barthes differentiated five different analytical perspectives (he called them *codes*), that could be used separately or together to unveil how reading works, and in particular to understand and describe what produces readability or its opposite, “writability.” These five analytical perspectives shall not be seen as autonomous components in texts (as if they were five well-separated blocks, building meaning) but as complementary ways to approach any object of study.

Let us now describe briefly the five codes or analytical perspectives used by Barthes in *S/Z*, before applying Barthes’ method to a game, *Assassin’s Creed 2* (Ubisoft 2009)—abbreviated as *AC2* from now on. None of these codes are more important than the others: each one describes a dimension that is crucial for meaning. Still, Barthes differentiated the first two codes (*enigmas* and *actions*) that are responsible for building readability, from the remaining three codes (*semes*, *symbols*, *references*).

1. *Enigmas*. The attention and interest of the player has to be stimulated. Games pose questions to players, and through the development of the game these questions will eventually be answered. In *AC2*, we find some clearly defined questions (*Who is the Prophet? Who Ordered the Death of Ezio’s Father?*), answered as the player proceeds. In other abstract games, it could be a matter of regulating the information given to the player<sup>1</sup>; more important, in some games it could be asked to the player to give personal answers to enigmas, and not just to discover the correct ones.

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<sup>1</sup> One of the most important features of the game *Tetris* is that the player does not know what pieces will fall after the next one.

2. *Actions*. The easiest thing to describe in a game is the actions performed by the avatar and the other characters (in more abstract games, there is still something going on, on the screen, that can be described in terms of actions<sup>2</sup>). Apart from what happens on-screen, we need also to pay attention to what happens off-screen: the player actions, fundamental component of interactivity. We will look at how small actions compose larger narrative sequences (it is the death of Ezio's father that makes his quest begin) and build meaningful structures (the death of Vieri is an anticipation of Borgia's defeat).

By looking at actions and enigmas, we can describe how the game moves forward ("pulled" by the will to know how it will end; "pushed" by the actions building on the top of each other). Enigmas and actions define a linear evolution. Every kid knows that at the end of a story all questions will be answered and the evil characters will be defeated by the hero<sup>3</sup>. Umberto Eco (1979) calls *open stories* those that are not complete in this sense; still this is not the case of *AC2*, where most enigmas are solved and most actions are completed (the open ones ask to be completed in the following episodes of the game series).

3. *Semes*. By analyzing meaning, we end up with differential units called semes ("little meanings" as Barthes 1970 referred to them)<sup>4</sup>. Semes are not necessarily physical properties, they are just the result of differential analysis; semes are also never primitive, and each seme could be analyzed further in other contexts<sup>5</sup>. In games and stories, semes distribute themes through characters, places, environments, objects; looking for semes, we can find tensions between characters or changes in mood that suggest a narrative turn (for example, Ezio Auditore becomes an outcast from a nobleman he was, and his transformation happens gradually as he encounters thieves, prostitutes, weapons,...).
4. *References*. *AC2* evokes Italian history, architecture, art and everyday life, the Christian tradition, the Templars, the alchemical tradition, and many other sets of knowledge. *AC2* also builds a unique science fiction world of reference elaborating on some biological ideas (lived experiences are passed from father to son, thanks to their perfect inscription at a micromolecular level, in the DNA). When we talk about *realism* for a fictional world, it is its references that we are discussing, judging if they are well-chosen and well-related with one another. This is also why a certain representation of Italian Renaissance would be considered realistic for a given reader, living in a given age, and not for another one.
5. *Symbols*. Some elements in games are like "black holes," attracting interpretation and bringing it beyond the game itself. When we adopt what Eco (1984) calls the *symbolic mode* of interpretation, we look for affordances leading to

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<sup>2</sup> Albert Michotte (1946) experiments proved that we humans attribute agency even to the movement of abstract geometric figures.

<sup>3</sup> Rhetoric figures may give the impression of altering this linear evolution (for example by preponing or postponing an event in a flashback or premonition), but readers should not be fooled by figures, and most stories and games are linear and complete in the end.

<sup>4</sup> For example, to differentiate a ketch from a sloop, we should point out that the first is *two-masted* while the second is not. The difference between a ketch and a yawl is instead that in the first the mizzenmast is *forward of the rudder post* while in the second it is not.

<sup>5</sup> About semic analysis see Eco 1979, 1984; Greimas 1966; Rastier 1985.

other texts and other stories. As the wolf in *Red Riding Hood* may stand for a multiplicity of different things (sexuality, violence, emancipation), so events and characters in *AC2* allow for complex readings. Here, we will propose two symbolic interpretations of *AC2*.

By looking at semes, references, and symbols, we aim to detach ourselves from the game evolution. We prefer to connect elements that were not necessarily adjacent in the first place. We look for details and thresholds, changes in mood and allusions, oppositions and transformations constructing an architecture of references. If this architecture is solid, then some of its elements will become symbols, cues to start an indefinite interpretation. Still, symbolic interpretation is interesting only if it is grounded on the semes and references we found in the game, otherwise, it is just a play of amusement totally unrelated with the game itself. Having introduced the five codes, let us see what we can find in *AC2*.

## 45.3 Assassin's Creed 2

Barthes suggested to analyze the text (or game, in this case) step-by-step, using codes as aids. Step-by-step analysis permits to read the details without being conditioned by an *a priori* general idea that we may have about the game. The analyst looks for an estrangement (*ostranenie*) focusing just on the details, and only at the end he or she depicts a global picture. We have performed elsewhere a complete step-by-step analysis of *Assassin's Creed 2* (Compagno 2012). Here, we will focus on ten points worth of interest on their own. For clarity, we will make reference to the five codes by Barthes to organize the presentation of these ten points.

### 45.3.1 Semes

#### 45.3.1.1 The Title: *Assassin's Creed*

How can an *assassin* have a *creed*, an organized set of beliefs? Does not the act itself of slaughtering other human beings go beyond any social norm? Actually, assassins differ from killers exactly because of the fact that they have some “noble reasons” to do what they do, being these reasons grounded into religion, politics, or other causes. Every assassin has a creed as motive. Therefore, an assassin is literally *guided* by his or her creed, and the title of our game shows it clearly: the subject is the creed, while the assassin is just a possessive phrase, just a means to the creed's ends. It is the creed what really “acts,” while the assassin follows reasons he or she may not be able to grasp entirely. The term “assassin” has its origin in a tale by Marco Polo: someone called *The Old Man of the Mountain* used to kidnap warriors and use their strength for his ends. He reproduced the Eden on Earth, locked the kidnapped warriors in it, and after having given them enough time to get an habit to

this Eden's pleasures (among which its *hashish*, from where the word "assassin" is said to come from), he abruptly took them away from it. To let them enter the Eden again, he demanded for some services, usually involving killing.

It is easy to see why the title is nothing but the entire game synthesized in two words: Ezio is preceded by the creed (by the sect of the Assassins), who move him around like a puppet. At the end of the game, Ezio will be left on his own, with many questions and very few answers. Minerva, final goal of his quest, will state that it is not to Ezio that she wants to talk, he is nothing but an intermediary, needed to deliver a message. Desmond, second main character of the game, does not have a much different destiny. Desmond uses a technological device called Animus to revive Ezio's memories. Imprisoned for some reasons he cannot understand during the first episode of the *AC* series, Desmond is freed at the beginning of this second episode, again for reasons that are not fully explained to him. In the end, it is faith (the creed) and not reason guiding both Ezio and Desmond.

#### 45.3.1.2 The Presages of Ezio's Radical Transformation

The very first scenes in which Ezio is our avatar present him in a detailed and coherent way. He is happy, rich, the leader of a group of young men. His family is powerful and influential. When his mother Maria was giving birth to Ezio, his father told him that the nobility of his very family name (Auditore) should inspire him to fight. Several other elements in the game's first scenes talk about Ezio's character: Ponte Vecchio, location of our first encounter with him, the fictional Palazzo Auditore, the clothes he wore, the actions he performed, the people he met (the equally noble Vieri and the beautiful Cristina) all lend to Ezio senses that characterize him in a certain way.

This until his father's death. There were some signs of the turn. Generally speaking, such a happy beginning cannot but lead to a sad turn. More specifically, there are *three presages* in the prelude anticipating what life Ezio will live. The first can be found in the dialogue between Ezio and his brother Federico, at the very beginning of the game: "It is a good life we live, brother."—"The best. May it never change."—"And may it never change us." If these words proved true, Ezio would have had a happier life (and married Cristina, perhaps), but we would have had no story to play. Not much later, Ezio's father Giovanni scolded his son for his exuberant behavior. Giovanni concluded his speech by saying: "Your behavior is unacceptable! It... It... It reminds of myself when I was your age." And as in youth, so in maturity Ezio will have to walk in his father's steps, becoming an Assassin. *May we never grow old*, says Federico. *But no one remains young forever*, answers Giovanni. We begin to understand that something will go wrong. Third presage: Giovanni asks Ezio to deliver some letters. The receivers are people Ezio would not have dared to mix with until then: dirty, poor, talking foul language, addressing Ezio as he was one of them. What is the reason why the game is letting us interact with them? Is it particularly fun to deliver letters? No, this is just a taste of the life Ezio

will live, and the game is building a player capable of understanding and appreciating the story he will play.

After Giovanni's death, Ezio will have to learn from thieves, prostitutes, corrupted soldiers, and mercenaries the skills needed in his new life. The noble young guy living in Florence will become a nomad and outcast. Monteriggioni, Ezio's new home, will look nothing like *Palazzo Auditore*, and all happiness will seem to be lost. Again, the setting in which the character acts is like an external mirror showing their inner traits and states.

## 45.3.2 *Actions*

### 45.3.2.1 *Vieri's Death*

The death of Vieri, against whom Ezio was scuffling on Ponte Vecchio, marks a second important narrative turn. In Monteriggioni, after having fled from Florence, Ezio has to take the game's most important decision. He has to choose between either keep fleeing, maybe to Spain, bringing his young sister and his catatonic mother Maria with him. Or he can stand against Vieri and the Pazzi family, following his uncle Mario to battle. *Maria or Mario*, choice that has huge consequences on the game's symbolic structure (see below, § 3.5.2). And Ezio chooses: he abandons his mother in Monteriggioni and rides to San Gimignano, where he will kill Vieri. Vieri is the first of Ezio's two doubles or *doppelgangers*—the second one will be Rodrigo Borgia. Vieri and Ezio share many semes (they are both noble and young), but they are members of two symmetrical and opposite lines of blood: the Assassins and the Templars.

We can subsume all the actions preceding Vieri's death in a series labeled *Seeking Revenge*. It is the series identity what gives sense to the smaller actions composing it. His father and brothers executed, his mother violated, Ezio's first actions are to kill those who betrayed him (Uberto Alberti); then he flees, and hunts the instigators of his father's death. Every step makes sense because it is preceded by something and followed by something else. The same actions, if linked differently, would have had an entirely different meaning.

When Ezio wants to go further, by looking for the puppeteer who moved the Pazzi family, all changes again. The slaughtering of his father was only a step into another, greater series of actions, that of *Fulfilling a Prophecy*. This second series changes the meaning of all the actions composing it—including the ones we interpreted before as simple revenge. Now that we begin to understand why Ezio's father Giovanni was killed, we give a different role to everything. In a sense, is it *good* that Giovanni was killed, because this will lead to the battle between Ezio and Rodrigo Borgia. It is this main series of actions that permits, at the end of the game, to give a role and a meaning to everything, and therefore to obtain a "readable" interpretation of the story told.



Before Vieri's death, we are playing a *novel* (or a *Bildungsroman*), that is, everything revolved around the main character's life and family. After Vieri's death, we are not anymore in a novel about Ezio's life, but in another story: an *epic* in which the hero (or superhero) has to save the world. These two phases in which the game is divided give it much of its sense and dynamics. The player is lured by a smaller series of actions he can understand, and then he or she slowly discovers to be playing something much bigger.

#### 45.3.2.2 Verticalness, Horizontalness and Social Control Personified

In *AC2*, there are several classes of anonymous characters: doctors, guards, prostitutes, mercenaries, merchants, heralds, monks, and many more people just walking on the streets. None of them is there without a role: they mediate between the game appearance and mechanics. Mercenaries are there *to be* hired, heralds *to be* robbed, guards *to be* evaded. The rules of the game manifest themselves in the professions of the people. And their presence builds up some *operable boundaries*: ways to follow, barriers to cross, areas to avoid, and aims to reach. Ezio does nothing but to "flow" on invisible rails traced by the people: some "attract," some "repel," others "channel" because they permit to pass through spaces that would otherwise block the way. The first skill the player has to learn is how to see these boundaries, by recognizing the professions of the people. As the sailor learns how to read the waves and the winds in order to move the ship in the direction he or she wants, so Ezio has to learn how to get close to his victims, using pedestrians, prostitutes, and monks to pass through the guards.

People are much more important than walls. Walls are easy to climb and there are no dead ends for Ezio. Most important: when Ezio climbs up a building, *the way of playing changes*. In *AC2*, there are two very different spaces: the first *horizontal space*, at the ground level, and the second *vertical space*, on the roofs and ledges. These two spaces have nothing in common, however easy it may look like to step from the one to the other.

Let us begin by describing the horizontal space. Using a term from Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari (1980), we could speak of a *striated space*, that has its well-defined rules and habits. Whenever Ezio walks at the ground level, he has to respect the laws of the city: he is a citizen, has to conform to the *norm* and show respect for it. The norm is incarnated by the *normal* people, knowing what is right and what is not. If Ezio does something unusual, the people are ready to point it out: first by simple comment, then by proper action (they move away, flee, shout or even call the guards). Given that there is no norm without sanction, the guards are receptive to this alarm sign. Normality is really *played* in *AC2*, we can feel its weight at every moment. The art of the Assassin is that of acting without being noticed, escaping social sanction. This asks for what we could call an *horizontal intelligence*. A skilled player is able to perceive the particular occurrence of the social norms (of the game rules) at any given moment, understanding what to do and how. Ezio is like a pencil

connecting dots in a given order. So Ezio's actions at the ground level are relatively constrained, by the quests he has to achieve and by the people delimiting his path.

Quite the opposite is true up on the roofs. Up there Ezio is a *nomad*, much more free to go wherever he pleases. He is already outside of the social norm, in an uninhabited, *smooth space*. The fact itself of climbing up the buildings characterizes the way we play *AC2*, we feel like we are doing something out of the ordinary. Moreover, players need to develop a *vertical intelligence* associated with this new space. Often, we are on the roofs because someone is chasing us: we have just to care about not getting caught, by running fast and finding a way across the buildings. This is already enough to radically change *AC2*'s way of playing: the action is faster, less reflexive, and more practical skills (hand-eye coordination) are required. The physics of *AC2* contributes to this second, vertical way of playing. Gravity is a kind law in *AC2*, permitting Ezio to do things that would be impossible in reality: long jumps, crazy falls, miracles of equilibrium. This is why while playing on the roofs, the player feels much less constrained than at the ground level. There are no precise lines one has to color within, and several alternative passages are open to Ezio at every given time. This produces a sense of freedom, amplified by the fact that eventual falls are almost never lethal. Mistakes are expected by the game and no single action can kill us. What is asked, on the contrary, is a certain creativity in finding quick solutions: where to jump, where to land, where to fight, where to hide.

This antinomy between a *smooth* and a *striated* ways of playing characterizes *AC2* and gives a rhythm to play, alternating moments in which we have to pay attention and understand where we are, to other ones in which we can try and forget entirely where we are (what is our precise position on the map), just living as if our getaway could get us anywhere. There is a particularly spectacular action in *AC2*, usually giving an end to getaways, in which this feeling of freedom is most intense: the so-called leaps of faith. Whenever Ezio jumps off the highest spots of the city, and lands dozens of meters below, entirely safe, in a hay wagon, we players feel great. In those few seconds between the jump and the landing, the player feels like he or she is flying, completely detached by the (social and physical) laws governing the world of *AC2*.

### 45.3.3 *Enigmas*

#### 45.3.3.1 **The Prophecy and Ezio's Destiny**

*AC2* is structured by two main enigmas. The first one regards only Italian Renaissance (is "immanent" to Italian Renaissance). Throughout the game, Ezio meets a number of characters helping him to find a powerful technological object called the Apple. Among them, his friend Leonardo da Vinci, his uncle Mario, the brothel owner Paola, and the thief Rosa. The game does not give us any definitive clue of their true identity until a very precise moment. In Venice, when Ezio finally has the Apple in his hands, after having taken it from Borgia's ones, we learn that almost

everyone Ezio met is an Assassin. Ezio was nothing but a piece in a greater game, his actions carefully followed by the assassins, who wanted to train him as one of them. This training takes time, so they decided to keep him in ignorance, and to help him in secret every now and then. The aim of the assassins is that of fulfilling an ancient prophecy, written down by Ezio's ancestor Altaïr. This prophecy says that one day, "in the floating city," a person will have the Apple in his hands; this person will be the only one able to open the vault, hidden location in which something will happen—but the prophecy does not say what. The first main enigma of the game, around which everything else revolves, is then *Who is the prophet?*

What the assassins did not know, was that Ezio himself was the prophet. So, when they found him fighting Rodrigo Borgia in Venice, they were surprised as he was. We should also remember that Ezio would not have been in Venice if Rodrigo Borgia and the Templars did not lure him there. Since the death of Ezio's father Giovanni, every step taken by the Templars did nothing but bring Ezio closer to where he *had to be*. Rodrigo Borgia is responsible for bringing the Apple to Venice: He erroneously thought to be the prophet himself, but his actions turned against him. The prophet's identity is then the crucial information in Italian Renaissance, the single most important piece of information "pulling" the characters' actions and building the architecture of enigmas.

Everything conspired to fulfill the prophecy. The assassins, the Templars, and chance made Ezio reach Venice at the exact time he had to. But if this is true, then *there is no chance nor freedom in the game's world*, everything occurred as it had to occur: there is a force controlling all events. Barthes (1966) wrote that narratives are the language of destiny, and it is true that events acquire in narratives a meaning that goes beyond that of their mere existence. In a game like *AC2*, we are given the possibility to *play* such a destiny. Let us now see how this controlling force is represented in *AC2*.

#### 45.3.3.2 Metalepsis: Minerva's Plan

In *AC2*, there is a greater plan responsible for everything that happens both in Italian Renaissance and in Desmond's present. There is a "transcendent" will determining the course of events in Ezio's and Desmond's lives. The second main enigma structuring the game's meaning is: *What is the Content of the Prophecy?*

After Ezio obtains the Apple, he is able to locate the vault in Rome. He goes there, fights and defeats Rodrigo Borgia (Pope Alexander VI) one last time, entering the vault. And there he finds Minerva. Ancient goddess, she is actually an alien, most probably coming from Jupiter, member of a highly developed civilization. Minerva and the other aliens (the memory of which is recalled in myths) were the creators of the human species. They wanted to use humans as slaves, controlling them with some technological artifacts like the Apple. But the humans freed themselves and fought a war against these "gods." Most important, Minerva foresaw a catastrophe that will cause all forms of life to disappear from Earth. This catastrophic event will

happen around the year 2012. So, put aside the hasty feelings between humans and aliens, she decided to leave a message to someone in 2012. Thanks to the information she gives him, this person will at least be able to save something of the world.

In the blink of an eye, in the vault, we understand that *Minerva is speaking to Desmond*. Desmond never thought, even for the shortest moment, that someone in the Renaissance could be aware of his presence there. Disembodied vision, “transcendental glance,” Desmond was physically nothing at Ezio’s times. But Minerva was instead aware of his presence there; she knew not only that Ezio would be there that day but also that Desmond would be there with him. The way in which the player is lead to understand that Minerva is talking to Desmond, and not to Ezio, is a masterpiece of game design.

Minerva is speaking to Ezio. At a certain moment, she begins *to look at us, at the virtual camera*. Ezio is confused, and tells Minerva that he does not understand what is going on and what she wants from him. Minerva answers that her words are not addressed to him. But isn’t Ezio alone in the vault? He does not know anything about Desmond’s existence. We players (and Desmond too) are in doubt: Minerva is talking *to whom*? For a short while, we players may have the very unpleasant sensation that Minerva is talking *to us*. And this must have been the exact same sensation felt by Desmond: he was not there, how come she addresses him? Isn’t Desmond epoch unaccessible from Ezio’s one? This moment of *AC2* is a true masterpiece because it creates an indeterminacy between Ezio, Desmond, *and the player*. The game manages to produce a real sense effect on the player, that is presumably the very same one Desmond could have felt. Desmond is a *voyeur*; someone who observes without being observed, but Minerva crashes this expectation in the blink of an eye<sup>6</sup>. Desmond’s identity changes, he is now an agent, directly interacting with Minerva. Game designers obtained this sense effect with much care, using dialogues and above all Minerva’s sudden direct glance to the virtual camera.

“Enough! I do not wish to speak with you but through you. You are the prophet. You’ve played your part. You anchor him, but please be silent! That we may commune,” says Minerva to Ezio. After Minerva tells her story and delivers her message, she looks again at the virtual camera, and she adds: “It is done. The message is delivered. We are gone now from this world. All of us. We can do no more. The rest is up to you, Desmond.” The name “Desmond,” pronounced by Minerva, removes any residual doubt. At least from the perspectives of Desmond and the player: very explicit statement indeed, but also quite obscure for Ezio’s ears.

This is the reason why only Ezio could enter the vault: because Desmond is his descendant and so the message needed to be inscribed in Ezio’s DNA (and not in Borgia’s one) in order for Desmond to access it much later in the future. Minerva could not send this message directly to Desmond in 2012, so she found a way to “send a postcard.” Technically what happens here is a *metalepsis*, as Gerard Genette (1972) called it. The two planes in the game (Ezio’s Renaissance and Desmond’s present) should not have met; but they do because there is a third, higher perspective, from which they are not separated at all. This perspective is Minerva’s plan.

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<sup>6</sup> The similarities between Desmond and the real player are discussed further in § 3.5.1.

**Table 45.1** Chronology of the events related to Minerva’s plan

Remote past	1191	1499	2012
Minerva foresees the catastrophe	Altaïr finds the Apple and begins to write the Codex	Ezio enters the vault and meets Minerva	Desmond relives Ezio’s memories and receives Minerva’s message

In a remote past, Minerva predicted the catastrophe. She predicted also that Ezio would enter the vault and that Desmond would relive this memory. She actually did more than that: she acted in a way that *caused the events to turn* in this exact way. What she “foresaw” was actually produced by her own actions, as in every temporal paradox. She loaded some information in the Apple, and waited for Altaïr to find it and read it<sup>7</sup>. It is Altaïr who actually created the prophecy, by writing it down. In 1191, he found the Apple and began to extract information from it, producing the Codex. Ezio deciphered the Codex in 1499. And all this lead to Desmond receiving Minerva’s message in 2012 (Table 45.1).

Are these four independent fictional worlds? No: they coexist as elements of a greater plane, Minerva’s plan. Minerva’s plan is the perspective from which everything makes sense; moreover, it is also the cause producing the happening of all events. In a sense, Minerva is really the “god” of the game’s world, and this world’s development is nothing but the realization of her will. Altaïr, Ezio, and Desmond are just puppets in Minerva’s hands. The Templars and the Assassins also are all puppets. There is no good and evil, the Templars are by no means less necessary than the Assassins.

### 45.3.4 References

#### 45.3.4.1 The Apple

The apple is the main object in the game. Deleuze (1972) would say that the Apple is the “*object = X*,” that connects all codes, so to let a comprehensive sense emerge from their independent evolution. The apple is an element in the action series, because it is the sought object, guiding the actions of the assassins and Templars who both want it; it is part of the series of enigmas, because it is the apple that will determine who is the prophet; it is a symbol, connecting Ezio to the vault and to Minerva. The apple “flees” and the subject hunts it, bringing narration forward; given that the apple flees in multiple directions, the subject itself multiplies. Only when the subject finds the apple, he will find himself, his real identity (see § 3.5.2).

More generally, in our culture the apple has a strong cultural identity. There is a rich thesaurus of references, semes, and conventional symbols related to it. In

<sup>7</sup> We see Altaïr retrieving information from the Apple at the very end of the first episode of *Assassin’s Creed*.

the Christian tradition, the apple is linked to the Eden, and more precisely to the original sin. The apple was the only thing denied to the first two humans, Adam and Eve; therefore the apple was *the only thing they could desire*. The apple is first and foremost a symbol of desire itself, it is the purest incarnation of the desired object (close to Jacques Lacan's *object a*). In order to reach the apple, Adam needed Eva's help—we could say that pure desire has to be mediated by sexual desire. The Christian tradition assigns many semes to the apple, most of them negatively connoted. The apple connotes Eve: transgression, sin, exile, illegality are all semes that Ezio has to acquire in order to become the prophet.

These conventional symbols and semes exist only because the game makes reference to the Christian tradition. The Apple is the fruit of Eden, and has traveled from Palestine (the Holy Land) to Rome (Temple of Christianity), in the hands of the prophet. Created by a god, it cannot but bring to God, or at least to a representation of it. Prohibited fruit, because it gives the possibility to distinguish good and evil, and therefore the responsibility to judge: and assassins do nothing but judging.

#### 45.3.4.2 Science and Faith

Does this reference to the Christian tradition mean that *AC2* carries a religious message? If anything, the opposite is true. There is a great semantic opposition grounding the entire meaning of *AC2*, that between *science and faith*, and there is no doubt that science wins every single time. The Animus is the instrument of truth, or to be more precise of *scientific truth*. The Animus permits to *see* what happened in the past, and so to find out the truth by means of direct confirmation. There is an implicit set of values behind *AC2*. The Animus works because the *soul is organic* and is inscribed in every single cell's DNA. There is no struggle between spirit and matter simply because spirit is matter. Not even Karl Marx could have given a stronger image of materialism. This apparently "innocuous" presupposition of *AC2* is actually the strongest incarnation of a strong philosophical idea.

In *AC2*, the past does not need to be interpreted because you can just see it with your own eyes. To see is to know, and also the classical philosophical struggle between *seeing and knowing* finds a sharp "solution" in *AC2*. There is nothing to know that cannot be seen. But then we are at odds with any mystical and religious tradition. There is only one truth: this is what *AC2* is stating. And the astonishing fact is that if we play the game uncritically, we do not even notice this implied statement. In fact, materialism grounds much of our contemporary culture, it is a presupposition, mostly accepted and not discussed. "*AC2* is just another sci-fi game, it does not convey any message," one could say. But sci-fi novels and games do convey messages, and *AC2* is no exception.

In our world dominated by science, or by a mythology of science, someone may even ask what other truths there are, if not the scientific one. Well, truths are linked to the way we find them, and to the aims we have (our *will to know*, as Michel Foucault would call it). Therefore, there are several kinds of truths, according to

the means and ends of their existence. Scientific truths are truths *to be discovered*, political truths are truth *to be conquered*, truths of faith are truths *to be learned*.

Sight is nothing but one, very specific way of acquiring knowledge. It is a very recent idea that of science being able to understand everything, and so—why not?—to help the constitution of the perfect political community, or to give the foundations for ethics. Scientists, or maybe just science-fanatics, believe that progress could not but make us aware of this general “truth.” But, carefully looking, this idea does not lead to the best of all possible worlds. Do we really want a political state based on science? For example, a state based on Marxist materialism? Because, for years, Marxism was thought to be science as much as relativity theory. Instead, there is a great difference between the truths that can be proved scientifically, and those regarding human community. Political truths have to be fought for and imposed, because you cannot “prove” the goodness of a political idea as you would do for a chemical statement. The instrument of politics is the gun, as Mao Zedong said, not the microscope. The same goes for religious truths. For religion, it is a matter of learning: you believe what you were told to believe when you were young. If you were born in Italy, it is very unlikely that you will become a Buddhist later in life, as it is if you were born in Saudi Arabia.

In *AC2*, the only real truth is the scientific one. The Pope himself does not believe in anything but science. Ezio asks him what he does expect to find in the vault. The Pope’s answer is God. And he adds: “A more logical location than a kingdom on a cloud, don’t you think? Surrounded by singing angels and cherubim. Makes for a lovely image, but the truth is far more interesting!” The Pope continues: “You know nothing, boy. You take your image of the Creator from an ancient book; a book, mind you, written by men! I became Pope because it gave me access. It gave me power! Do you think I believe a single goddamn word of that ridiculous book!? It is all lies and superstition, just like every other religious tract written over the past ten thousand years!”

Let us just recall another kind of truth: the hermetic one. Hermetic truths are truths *to be kept hidden*. They are “truths” only as long as they remain secret; if you bring them to the light (if you make them interact with other kinds of truths) they cease to exist. Eco is probably the scholar who best understood and explained the hermetic discourse of truth (see Eco 1990 and the novel *Foucault’s Pendulum*). If scientific truths need sight to be discovered, religions need books and politicians guns, alchemists need just a lot of time to kill. The hermetic discourse may interact with the religious, political, and scientific ones: let us think at the Renaissance philosophers bridging Christianity and the Cabala, at the power of sects, or at the relationship between alchemy and early modern Physics. Still, the hermetic discourse is nothing but a game of signs, a play of amusement as Ch.S. Peirce would call it, working only until we want to. No need to say that the hermetic discourse plays absolutely no role in *AC2*, where magic is nothing but ancient forgotten science.

### 45.3.5 Symbols

Symbols permit us to give a deeper interpretation to the game. Above all, we can try and understand better *what links Desmond to Ezio*. In order to obtain an answer, we have to build two *metaphors*: we will try and look for *other stories and ideas* that can be related to *AC2*. Does this mean that these interpretations have to be recognized by the player in order to appreciate the game? Absolutely not. But then, do these interpretations add nothing to the game but an arbitrary new perspective? According to us, this is also false. After having seen the analogies, it is difficult to go back to the game and entirely erase them from our memory, as if they were completely preposterous. The reason is that these interpretations are *suggested* by the game: there are elements that invite an aware player to ask himself a few questions that go beyond the borders of the game, but that are not less interesting and, we believe, legitimate.

#### 45.3.5.1 Assassin's Creed 2 As a Meta-Game: The Animus Is a Console

The first thing that comes to our mind if we try and understand what links Desmond to Ezio (*what does it mean* for Desmond to become Ezio) is that Ezio is actually Desmond's *avatar*. Desmond is playing a video game and the Animus is nothing but a very sophisticated *console*. How else could we describe their relationship? Desmond is not just watching a movie from Ezio's perspective. It may seem so, given that the Animus is supposed to retrieve memories that are inscribed in Desmond's DNA once and for all. But actually, Desmond has *some freedom*—just a little bit. We can see it clearly whenever Desmond, through his avatar Ezio, finds the “glyphs” in Renaissance Florence. These glyphs are part of the world reconstructed by the Animus, but they did not exist in Ezio's Florence. In fact, it was a character living and acting in 2012 (Desmond's time), the so-called Subject 16, who introduced these glyphs in the virtual reconstruction produced by the Animus. Therefore, what the Animus actually does is to build a virtual reconstruction *based on* the memories inscribed into Desmond's DNA. And in fact, the player can choose to complete tasks and quests in slightly different ways.

At the same time, Desmond is not at all free to do whatever he wants, playing with Ezio's memories. Quite on the contrary, there is a path to follow, a precise evolution of events has to be repeated without possible variations. The aim of the Animus is not that of letting Desmond have fun, but of exploring Ezio's real memories and find something within them. The goal is to revive Ezio's life until he finds the vault, so that its location may be known in 2012. Therefore, there is an interaction between freedom and fate, between the availability of some free choices and the need to follow a precise path. Does not this *ring a bell*? Any player should be familiar with this exact sensation. In fact, what we are talking about is nothing but *the experience of gaming itself*.



It would take too much time here to state clearly why only some games imply this exact experience, granting a small freedom within well-defined boundaries. Anyway, we can safely say that many games work like this: there is a story the player has to follow, requiring him or her to pass through certain checkpoints (Juul 2005); at the same time the game allows for several minor choices to shape the game progression. What is the Animus then if not a console, allowing Desmond to play Ezio? This reading is of course “outside of the text”: Desmond does not feel like he is playing at all. Still, can we really say that the experience of gaming is not represented in the game, and that it does not contribute to its meaning?

If we accept this perspective, we can now ask ourselves what *AC2* is saying about gaming. First and foremost, it is saying that too much play detaches us from the real world and risks to make us go insane. It is called *bleeding effect* in *AC2*: the memories of the player (Desmond) get mixed up with those of the avatar (Ezio). If Desmond plays for too long, without pauses between playing sessions, he will begin to feel like his life does not belong only to himself anymore. He can begin to see things that are not there, remember events he did not live, etc. It is a very pessimistic view on gaming (especially if suggested by a gaming company like Ubisoft!) but we should not forget how powerful the Animus is, far beyond the possibilities of today’s consoles. If we could live another life for a while, to the point of forgetting the fact that we are not our avatar, would not we risk to suffer similar consequences?

Second point *AC2* suggests about games: By playing, we can learn things and acquire skills that may become useful in our real life. Desmond is doing a sort of accelerated training, and at the end of less than 40 h of connection to the Animus, he becomes able to move and fight like Ezio did. This phenomenon resembles the computer-mediated training of Neo in the film *Matrix*, after he is awakened by Morpheus. Therefore, *AC2* presents playing as not something bad *per se*—it is just preferable not to play for too long and to take pauses every now and then.

The idea of learning from games brings us to the last and most important consequence of this first symbolic interpretation of *AC2*. How many things have *we players* learned from the game? For hours, we have seen extremely detailed reconstructions of Florence as we imagine it should have looked like in the Renaissance. Of course, we should not see *AC2* as an accurate historical reconstruction. It is more like those novels that mix together actual historical notions and fictional characters and events. The Auditore, if they existed, did not play any role in the Pazzi’s conspiracy. Lorenzo de’ Medici was attacked inside of Santa Maria del Fiore, at the very moment he was receiving communion, and not outside of the church; it was the poet Angelo Poliziano (and not Ezio) to save him.

However, it is not the accuracy of *AC2* what matters. It is much more important to notice that *the player is there, controlling Desmond as Desmond is controlling Ezio*. The game represents within itself the relationship with the real player. For this reason, we can talk of *AC2* as a *meta-game*, representing (within its fictional world) gaming itself. *AC2* “theorizes” about what it means to play a video game, giving us some hints to think at the very act we are performing. Other arts and languages already produced such meta-representations (we could think at Federico Fellini’s *8½* for cinema, or at Marcel Proust’s *Recherche* for literature), but this is one of the first blockbuster games to do so.

### 45.3.5.2 *Assassin's Creed 2 As a Psychoanalytic Session: The Animus Is a Couch*

There is a second metaphor through which we can read *AC2* “with new eyes.” Actually, this second metaphor is much more interesting than the first, given that it permits to assign a new role to almost *every* major element in the game. Then we can come back to the game and use what we have seen with this metaphor to get a better grasp of the game itself. The point of departure is again the relationship between Desmond and Ezio. We can try and see it as analogous to the relationship between the Ego and the Id in Sigmund Freud’s theory of subjectivity (Freud 1923). If we are ready to take this step, then the rest comes along by itself: *AC2 is a psychoanalytic session, a journey into the unconscious.*

How does a psychoanalytic session start? Someone looks for an analyst because he or she needs help to find a solution to a certain unpleasant situation. The analyst makes his or her patient sit on a couch. Then the analyst will aid the patient to enter the unconscious, a representation of his or her past. There are several figures “living” in the unconscious. First, the Id, representing the subject’s pure will. Then the superego, paternal figure of reference, guiding the person in life but also capable of causing feelings of guilt. What does the analyst look for? Usually a traumatic event that caused an unbalance in the patient. Often this event occurred during early childhood, and it may be linked to the triangular relationship father-mother-child, and to the peculiar process Freud called Oedipus complex. Again, what is the subject fighting? Mainly repression: a force keeping some memories outside of consciousness. Finally, what would be the best outcome of a session? The happening of an epiphany, by which a certain repressed memory comes to consciousness, and causes the trauma (with its unpleasant consequences) to be overcome.

How does *AC2* start? Desmond meets Lucy, and needs her help to escape from Abstergo, where he is kept prisoner. Lucy makes him sit on the Animus. Then Desmond enters a reconstruction of Italian Renaissance, that is built starting from his own past memories. In Italian Renaissance, Desmond meets his ancestor Ezio. Later, he meets Giovanni Auditore, Ezio’s father and figure of reference, the death of which will cause Ezio to suffer a great remorse. What is Desmond looking for in Italian Renaissance? An event that occurred in Ezio’s life, the memory of which has gone lost. Against whom are Desmond and Ezio fighting? The Templars, who want to keep some information (the location of the vault) for themselves. What happens at the end of the game? Desmond relives Ezio’s meeting with Minerva, and some crucial information emerges from Italian Renaissance, becoming available to Desmond in 2012.

The parallelism is stunning. Let us be sure to have grasped the main correspondences building an analogy between *AC2* and a journey into the unconscious (Table 45.2).

Desmond and Ezio are “the same person” in two different worlds. They are linked by their DNA, that in *AC2* is said to register the memories of the past. Thanks to the Animus, these past memories can be accessed from the present (2012) by Desmond. The journey into the unconscious, in Italian Renaissance, starts. Ezio is

**Table 45.2** Instances of Assassin’s Creed 2 and instances of the psyche

Assassin’s Creed 2	Psychoanalytic theory
USA, 2012	Conscious life
Italian renaissance	Unconscious
Desmond	Ego
Ezio	Id
Giovanni, Maria	Superego
Animus	Couch
Lucy	Psychoanalyst
Templars	Repression
Minerva	Repressed memory

the *active half* of the subject: it is Ezio who actually acts and fights. Desmond on the contrary is the *passive half*, he watches and reflects, trying to give a meaning to Ezio’s life. This relationship recalls the way in which Freud analyzed the subject into an instinctual Id and a conscious Ego. The Id produces the Ego to acquire consciousness and gives a meaning to its life, and so Ezio needs Desmond to receive Minerva’s message and understand what it means.

The first drive guiding Ezio is the will to avenge his father’s death. Freud wrote that the child (if male) engages a symbolic battle with his father to conquest the mother. The Oedipus complex terminates successfully if the child identifies with his father: the child acquires a stable personality, that results in a stable superego, internalization of the father figure, representative of cultural norms and roles. But if Italian Renaissance is Desmond’s unconscious, how is his superego characterized? The father is dead: there is no father figure to refer to. Giovanni has been killed by Uberto Alberti before the Oedipus complex could conclude. Ezio (the Id) had to take his father’s place too early, without having had the occasion to fight against him and mature. Ezio’s mother, Maria, after the death of Giovanni becomes aphonic. To Freud, also the mother plays a role in the constitution of the superego. And what mother figure do we find? A very weak one, voiceless, incapable of telling Ezio what is right and what is wrong. The only role Maria plays in *AC2* is that of remembering Ezio the death of his father, therefore incarnating the feelings of guilt. There are all the signs of an Oedipus complex that did not resolve well: a weak superego, made of a dead father figure and of a mother figure without a voice, leaving the subject without a guide in his life.

Ezio finds in his father’s emanations—the assassins—a help to resolve his Oedipus complex. He has to find a new father, a surrogate that he can fight and win. First, he tries with Vieri. Right outside of Florence, Vieri tells Ezio that he has killed his father Giovanni and that now he will possess his mother Maria. Therefore Vieri presents himself as a double of Ezio, as the person who stole the Oedipus from him. But Vieri is too young and weak: his death will only constitute a step in Ezio’s journey to cure. Rodrigo Borgia is a more radical and powerful double. Rodrigo knows where the vault or crypt (from Greek: *kryptós*, “what is hidden”) is and how to open

it: with the apple. To give a symbolic interpretation to the vault and to the apple is easy: the vault is the most inaccessible place in the entire unconscious, beneath the Sistine Chapel, at the center of Borgia's kingdom. It is the mother's womb, and it is there that Ezio has to go. The apple is the transitional object permitting the epiphany: it is an object related to the remote origins of the world (of the subject's childhood), hunted by both assassins and Templars. The apple is the memory of the mother's breast.

But then, what are Desmond and Ezio looking for? What was the trauma they are trying to overcome? They are searching for a new mother figure, *the real mother*, that repression has hidden deep down in the unconscious. Ezio has to forget Maria and accept the fact that his real mother was Minerva (presented in the game as the mother of humanity). The most important moment in all *AC2* happens when Ezio decides to abandon Maria in Monteriggioni, and he joins his uncle Mario in his fight against the Templars. It is then that the subject *chose*: the fake mother Maria will be replaced by the real mother Minerva. The subject chooses to fight repression and retrieve the real memories of his past. First he has to get the apple, symbol of the mother; then he has to defeat Rodrigo Borgia and obtain the staff, phallic symbol if any. With both the apple and the staff, he can relive his Oedipus and meet Minerva.

For the Christian tradition, Maria is a virgin. *Mother without father*, important figure in the Nativity. But then how can the unconscious have chosen this fierce name to represent a weak, voiceless and absent mother? Well, if we pay attention, it is true that in the birth of Jesus the father is hidden but much more powerful than the mother. Between God and Maria, it is clearly only God the one who matters. Therefore, Maria is a reasonable name for a fake mother figure. In mythology, we find a second famous virgin: Minerva. Minerva is born from Zeus alone, *daughter without a mother*. It is easy to see why there is no greater female figure than Minerva: she is wise, strong, and above all she did not even need a mother to be born.

What is happening? Ezio is substituting a fake mother figure with the real one. And when he manages to do so, the subject is cured: the message from Minerva passes across the unconscious and reaches Desmond (the Ego), telling him what to do—how to live his life (the mother tells her son that he is special, the only one capable of saving the world). We can finally understand what the trauma was. Minerva wanted humanity to stay in Eden forever, we learn this from the short in-game movie called *The Truth*; in other words, she wanted her child never to grow and leave the nest. Hyper-protective mother, Minerva's behavior was unbearable by Desmond, and for this reason he chose to hide the memory of her deep down in the unconscious, substituting it with a much weaker, catatonic mother figure.

The player helped Desmond to retrieve his past and to heal. Everything in the game acquires now a new role. For example, why did not Ezio marry Cristina, or Caterina, or Rosa? Because of the fact that he was not able to accept his real mother figure: all girls seemed too alive if compared to the catatonic Maria. Why did Ezio need to choose his uncle Mario over Maria? Because the name of the fake mother figure had to be mangled in order for the cure to start. Why does Minerva speak only to Desmond, and refuses to address Ezio? Because only the conscious self is capable of understanding, while the Id acts without being able to reason.

## 45.4 Conclusion

We have used Barthes' methodology to dissect and reassemble *Assassin's Creed 2*. We found that there is a hidden framework responsible for what appears to be the "readable" meaning of the game, as well as elements with the potential of extending the interpretation of it. Codes that are by no means specific to video games shape its sense, as they do for all other forms of expression. The specificity of video games lays in the way the codes are declined, and new expressive strategies invented. Video games are a powerful form of cultural expression that will become more and more complex and influential; underestimating gaming specificity could lead to poor critical analysis.

It would however be a bigger mistake to pretend that computer games came into existence from nothing, as a brick of *Tetris*, and do not interact with culture as a whole. This overestimation contributes (unintentionally) to the idea that computer games are not worth studying, not of interest to anyone but to specialists who design them. Game scholars defending the complete autonomy of the medium believe to be revolutionaries, but their position is actually *reactionary*, going back to the times when every language had to be studied on its own. The real "inactual consideration" today is that computer games are a fully fledged language, comparable to the other much older forms of human expression.

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**Dario Compagno** is a postdoctoral researcher at the Université Sorbonne Nouvelle in Paris, working on how to combine semiotics and data analysis for understanding digital media. Dario’s research interests include digital games theory and analysis: on the subject he has published *Dezmond. Una lettura di Assassin’s Creed 2* (Unicopli 2012) and edited *Computer Games between Text and Practice* (E/C 5, 2009) with P. Coppock. He has published papers on semiotic theory and philosophy of language. He works also as a consultant for marketing research and communication analysis.