

“We don’t need anyone to tell us what to do.”

The power relations in *Assassin’s Creed II*

Bachelor’s thesis

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<p>Tiivistelmä – Abstract</p> <p>Videopelit ovat länsimaissa yksi suosituimmista vapaa-ajan harrastuksista. Sen lisäksi, että ne vaikuttavat pelaajiinsa sekä negatiivisesti että positiivisesti, videopelit peilaavat ja kritisovat yhteiskunnan rakenteita ja arvoja. On perusteltua tutkia videopelejä ja niiden välianimaatioita, sillä niistä välittyvät pelin tekijöiden ideologiat esimerkiksi hahmojen valtataistelujen myötä.</p> <p>Tämän tutkimuksen tavoitteena oli analysoida <i>Assassin’s Creed II</i> –videopelin hahmojen välisiä valtasuhteita. Nämä hahmot kuuluivat assassiiniin ja temppeleihin. Työssä tarkasteltiin kolmea välianimaatiota käyttäen multimodaalista sekä elokuvallista analyysimetodia. Multimodaalisen metodin avulla tarkasteltiin eri moodeja, muun muassa kieltä, kehon liikkeitä sekä proksemiikkaa. Elokuvallinen analyysimetodi sisälsi leikkausten, ottojen ja kuvakulmien tutkimista. Lisäksi tutkimusnäkökulmaksi otettiin myös vallan lähteet Fraserin (2001) mukaan.</p> <p>Tutkimuksen tulokset osoittivat, että hahmojen valtasuhteet rakentuivat yhtä aikaa sekä multimodaalisten että elokuvallisten keinojen avulla. Jokainen välianimaatio sisälsi hahmon, joka oli valta-asteikolla muita korkeammalla, ja tämä eroavaisuus tuotiin esiin muun muassa hahmojen liikkeissä ja puheissa sekä kohtauksessa käytetyissä kuvakulmissa ja ostoissa. Välianimaatioissa assassiiniin ja temppeleihin väliset valtasuhteet muuttuivat assassiiniin eduksi, ja pelin tekijöiden nähtiin kannattavan heidän ideologiaansa vapaudesta.</p> <p>Tämän tutkimuksen saavutus on kattava analyysi valtasuhteista kahden eri analyysimetodin keinoin. Jatkossa aineistoa voisi laajentaa koskemaan kokonaista peliä, ja lisäksi aineistosta voisi tehdä multimodaalisen transkription hahmottamisen helpottamiseksi.</p>	
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## 1. INTRODUCTION

Playing video games has become a popular pastime, as 64% of U.S. households own a device used for playing video games (ESA 2018: 4). This is immensely important as video games affect the players (Barlett, Anderson & Swing 2009). According to Bogost (2008: 136) video games reflect both real and imagined social and cultural systems, and act as arguments on whether or not they work in the world. Studying the video games uncovers the aforementioned systems, which could be seen as ideologies that the video games convey to the player.

The present study focuses on the power relations between characters in cutscenes, i.e. non-playable cinematic sequences, in the video game *Assassin's Creed II* (Ubisoft Montreal 2009). For this study, three cutscenes were chosen for a detailed analysis. Cutscenes convey the game makers' ideological views (Ensslin 2012: 123) and as such can be studied to reveal what the game makers wish to convey to players and how. As the *Assassin's Creed* series has sold over 100 million games as of September 2016 (Reparaz 2016), the series' persuasion has a large audience. Thus, the ideologies present at micro level within a video game connect to the ideologies at macro level.

Moving to the concept of power, it has been defined in relation to affecting the other party (Van Dijk 2008, Castells 2013) and the present study follows this definition. Discourse studies are prevalent within the scope of studies on power, and the present study presents a multimodal approach to the field. The aim is to provide an encompassing analysis on the power relations between characters belonging to Assassin and Templar orders, by using multimodal and cinematic approaches. Additional focus is on the different sources of power, as presented by Fraser (2001: 25). As the data is cinematic, choosing a multimodal approach along with analysis on the cinematic aspects allows for inclusion of the whole context within discourse.

Video games have been studied from the point of view of narration (e.g. Jørgensen 2010), historical accuracy (Shaw 2015) and persuasion (Stamenković, Jačević & Wildfeuer 2017), but the aspect of power has not been studied yet. Hence the present study is an important addition to the field, offering inspiration and background information for future studies.

The following section presents the theoretical background, and it is followed by an overview on the research questions and methods of analysis. These lead to the analysis and lastly the discussion on the possibilities for further studies.

## 2. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

This section will give an overview to the recent studies related to video games and persuasion, and then define the concept of power. As there have not been many similar studies before, also persuasion in movies will be discussed as it is closely related to persuasion and power within video games. After that I will discuss cinematic theory, cutscenes and explain more about the game *Assassin's Creed II*.

### 2.1 Persuasion on video games and films

Hall (2001) discussed the circularity of power and how movies have the power to mark or classify people, items and issues. This field of study of rhetorical power of movies has also recently been transferred to game studies, to research how video games persuade players. The question of how is important, as it has already been established that video games do have effects on players, both positive and negative (Barlett, Anderson & Swing, 2009).

Video game characters have been studied from the point of view of narration (e.g. Jørgensen 2010, Schröter & Thon 2014) and reading game-fiction (Atkins 2003). Whereas the *Assassin's Creed* series has been studied from the point of view of history (Dow 2013), how assassins are portrayed in the game series and how it compares to history (Bosman 2016), questioning and playing with history (Menon 2015), linguistic representation of ethnicities (Kulcsár 2018) and historical accuracy and representation (Shaw 2015), there has not yet been a study on the characters themselves or on the power relations within the cutscenes.

Dal Cin, Zanna, Fong (2004) studied how people's attitudes are affected by narratives both in books and visual materials. The focus was on the individual differences and the role those differences can play in narrative persuasion. This difference was called "transportability", which derives from term "transportation" that was defined as "a convergent process, where all mental systems and capacities become focused on events in the narrative" (Green & Brock 2000, cited in Dal Cin 2004: 181). In other words the study is about immersion in to the narrative. Dal Cin et al. (2004) suggested that by identifying with characters in books and, especially important for this thesis, in movies and other visual materials leads to positive associations with certain beliefs expressed by these characters. It is also mentioned that these positive associations should influence the unconscious associations one has regarding, for example a minority, and perhaps affect behavior as well. Noteworthy is that possibly a preference for a certain genre leads readers to advocate certain beliefs, and perhaps this might be stretched to game genres, or games within a series that often share some principles. Dal

Cin et al. (2004:186) found in their study that features of both the narrative and the reader determine narrative persuasion. Also that the extent, to which people are transported varies from person to person, and different narratives vary in their transportation. The effect of transportation on attitudes was apparent even when taking into account pre-existing ones. Their study was not focused on the immediate scope of the present study, but the results of Dal Cin et al.'s (2004) study are relevant for the study of persuasion, and what implications video game characters with power might have.

Going towards video game studies, Stamenković, Jačević, & Wildfeuer (2017) studied persuasion within the Metal Gear Solid video game. He studied the persuasive power and rhetorical strategies from the point of view of discourse aims and multimodal meaning making patterns, to see how the game persuades player to think and act in accordance with anti-war arguments. This study can be seen as related to or even confirming Dal Cin et al.'s (2004) study. Stamenković et al. (2017: 1) argue that “the video game and its multimodal construction follows specific discursive aims of persuading the players to follow this specific position and to convince them to act and play accordingly”. It was found that speech and text combined with cutscenes and certain gameplay strategies were used to persuade the player towards pacifism and to warn about the horrid consequences of war (Stamenković et al. 2017: 12).

Procedural rhetoric was the core term for Bogost's (2008) paper on rhetoric of video games. He defined procedural rhetoric as persuasion by rules of behavior and processes rather than words or images (p.125). According to Bogost (2008: 136) while playing video games we explore worlds where we are constrained by sets of rules, through which we realize and judge the game's meaning. Bogost expresses the idea that video games reflect social and cultural systems, both real and fictional, and argue how these systems work or not. He uses the term *video game literacy* and explains it as building this kind of understanding of those arguments of systems, uncovering them and reflecting how they fit to our lives. This video game literacy gives us new means to create, support and question the surrounding systems, which are more than just ideological; they are any and all social and cultural sets of processes.

Persuasion is related to power in that through persuasion one party wishes to have an effect on the other party's actions or thoughts. The present study touches on the subject of persuasion with mentions how persuasion is apparent in the *Assassin's Creed II*, and furthermore how the game tries to persuade the player. The aim of the present study however is to study power relations between characters and for that purpose the definition of power will be provided in the following section.

## 2.2 Definition of power

We have already seen some aspects of *power*, by rhetorics or persuasion, but its definitions vary between scholars. Castells (2013: 10-11) defines power as “the relational capacity that enables a social actor to influence asymmetrically the decisions of other social actor(s) in ways that favor the empowered actor’s will, interests and values”. He sees power as a relationship that is built through discourses, where one actor to a degree complies with having power over them, but always with a possibility of resistance that alters power relationships. Moving from power to social power, Van Dijk (2008: 9,18-20) defines social power “in terms of *control*, that is, control over one group over other groups and their members”(italics in the original). According to him power can also be used for good intentions, such as teacher teaching children, but when the control is against the controlled others’ interests, it is essentially power abuse which leads to social inequality and injustice. He uses the term *dominance* to define this power abuse, where fundamental norms and values are infringed to one party’s interests. He adds that it also covers the discourse function of power, such as manipulation or indoctrination. These definitions offer the basis for the present study, but the following definition of power is the core foundation of the analysis.

Fraser (2001: 25) defines power as “the capacity of one party to produce an intended effect on another”. Though his definition is in relation to mediating as a neutral party between two conflicting parties, it is with the following clear distinctions that I set this as a base for my study. Fraser (2001: 26) distinguishes three sources of power: personal, positional and potential power. Personal power includes power granted through age, financial resources, expertise, control of emotions and power from knowing the other party’s biases, values and habits. Positional power is concerned with power determined by colleagues, moral correctness, having law or tradition or ritual on one’s side and lastly by being indifferent to outcome and thus being able to affect the other party. As for potential power, it is the ability, and knowledge of the possibility, to inflict damage to the other party. Aforementioned sources of power can be possessed by the conflicting parties, and they can be used to try to persuade the other party to agree, according to Fraser (ibid. p.26).

To summarize, there are several ways to define power, but all of them are related to affecting the other party. The present study is interested in how power relations are apparent in video games, and for this target power is seen as encompassing Fraser’s (2001) and Van Dijk’s (2008) definitions. Thus control and producing an intended effect are core terms in understanding power.

### 2.3 Cinematic theory

Some important terms for analyzing multimodal media are shots, participants, gaze and camera angles. There are several types of shots used in cinematics. According to Hayward's (2001: 328-329) book on key concepts of cinema studies, close-up shots where a subject fills the screen can have the connotation of intimacy or suspense, and they can stress the importance of a character or an item. Medium close-ups have a character or several characters shown from the chest upwards, and these shots with several characters in them can suggest intimacy or coming together, and it can be used to juxtapose a pair of people against an individual in another shot. Medium shots show the character from the waist up, and these shots are often used to show the distance between characters. Characters have their whole body visible in medium long shot, and in long shot their surroundings are clearer along with a possible stress on the meaningfulness of the environment. According to Kress and Van Leeuwen (2006: 148) this long shot can be realized as impersonal. Hayward (2001: 141) explains that framing produces particular readings and for that reason camera angles, size and volume play a significant role within a frame.

According to Kress and Van Leeuwen (2006: 48) participants can be divided to interactive and represented participants – the ones who make and receive the media, and the ones who are pictured or portrayed within the media. Within video game discourse interactive participants would be anyone involved with the making of the video game and also the players, whereas represented participants would be the characters within the game. Represented participants are related to the concepts of gaze and camera angles, and their implications in multimodal analysis. According to Kress and Van Leeuwen (2006: 117-118) direct gaze from represented participant to viewer makes the interaction a direct address, and an act of something, often demand. Camera angles are used to portray characters or items in a certain way: a low angle makes characters look commanding and awesome, whereas a high angle makes them seem small and insignificant (ibid.: p.140). Kuhn and Westwell (2012: camera angle) contradict Kress and Van Leeuwen's view by saying that "there are no hard-and-fast rules about the meanings of different angles (a character shown in low angle does not necessarily suggest that he or she is powerful and overbearing, for example; nor does a view from a high angle always indicate vulnerability)". They continue with a mention that certain film angles' meaning can be derived from their place in the film as a whole. Kress and Van Leeuwen (2006: 140) take the concept of camera angle forward by adding the participants: if represented participant is seen from a low angle, they have power over interactive participants and with a high angle vice versa. If the angle is at eye level, there is no power difference between interactive and represented participants.



## 2.4 Cutscenes

Cutscenes are very prevalent in *Assassin's Creed II*. Hancock's (2002) article discusses cutscenes, their purposes and how to effectively use them. Hancock's (2002: 1) definition for cutscene is "any non-interactive storytelling or scene-setting element of a game". Klevjer (2014: 301) has a similar definition for cutscenes: "A cut-scene is a cinematic sequence that suspends regular gameplay in order to convey plot, characterization and spectacle". The uses for cutscene are diverse: they can be used for introducing a new character, foreshadowing, pacing the game, presenting background information, showing effects of one's actions, rewarding the player, setting the mood or scene for the whole game, or portraying important conversations. Cutscenes are also often important for creating emotional connection to the characters and the story of the game. (Hancock 2002: 3) Nevertheless, some players feel that there should be as few cutscenes as possible and they should be skippable. But Ensslin (2012: 123) points out that cutscenes convey information in a sequenced and organized way according to the game makers' ideological and aesthetic views, and as such they are important signals of how the game is meant to be understood. Skipping cutscenes might then give a narrower view of the game, and certainly for an analysis of a video game it is vital to study cutscenes.

To connect cutscenes to the video game analyzed in this study, I will explain shortly how *Assassin's Creed II* uses cutscenes. The *Assassin's Creed* –series as a whole uses cutscenes heavily within the games and in *Assassin's Creed II* these cutscenes are often used as a way to present background information, to foreshadow upcoming events and to reward the player for his/her actions. Cutscenes relay the plot at every key point of the game, making the playing experience and the game very cinematic. In this way Ensslin's (2012) notion of game makers' ideological and aesthetic views being conveyed through cutscenes, is very true for *Assassin's Creed II*.

### 3. PRESENT STUDY

This section presents the aim of the study along with the research questions, then moves to a description of the game *Assassin's Creed II*, and after that the description of data and lastly looks at the methods used in analysis.

#### 3.1 Research questions

The aim of the present study is to analyze the power relations between characters within *Assassin's Creed II*. To achieve an encompassing analysis of the issue of power, the research questions are:

- Who holds the power in the cutscene?
- What multimodal and cinematic aspects are used to convey the power?
- What are the sources of power, following Fraser's (2011) framework?

#### 3.2 Assassin's Creed II

*Assassin's Creed II* is the second installment in *Assassin's Creed* series, developed by Ubisoft Montreal and was released in 2009 and 2010 for different platforms by Ubisoft. The game was immensely successful with over 9 million copies sold. *Assassin's Creed II* is an action-adventure and stealth game set in fictional history as well as present day. The game follows Desmond Miles in 21<sup>st</sup> century as he relives the memories of his ancestor Ezio Auditore da Firenze, living in Renaissance Italy, through a machine called Animus. Ezio begins the game as a young man unaware of the centuries-old struggle between Assassins and Templars. Only after his father and brothers are betrayed and hanged at the hands of traitors, Ezio finds out that his father was an Assassin trying to uncover a Templar plot to have peace through ultimate control. Ezio joins Assassins who fight for every man's free will, in order to have his vengeance against the Templars responsible for the fate of his family. In 21<sup>st</sup> century Desmond applies the skills learned in Animus to uncover secrets that might bring peace to the battle between Templars and Assassins.

For the present study, the story and character of Ezio Auditore is more relevant. The fight between Templars and Assassins is seen as a fight between good and evil. The game's 'creed' is summarized in these two quotes from Ezio: "We don't need anyone to tell us what to do" and "Choose your own way" (appendix 3: lines 12, 15-16). The same idea is present throughout every game in the series, and as such can be assumed to be what the game makers wish to relay to people. It is also somewhat contradictory, because the game sets rules within which the game must be played (Bogost 2008: 136). For example killing the person Ezio is supposed to protect will result in desynchronization, in

other words starting the gaming sequence over. However there is reasoning within the game for these rules: because playing as Ezio is explained as being memories, the player must act according to the rules in order for the memory to happen the way it happened in the fictional history. One of the greatest restrictions that are also related to the fight between Assassins and Templars is that in this particular game the player cannot choose to play as a Templar. However there is a later installment in the *Assassin's Creed* series that requires the player to play as a Templar, and as such the series allows for the player to choose a side. Lastly it is important to briefly address the languages of the game. As Ezio lives in Italy, to make it more believable the characters speak some Italian words occasionally and most of the lines are in English, but spoken with an Italian accent. One sentence that is repeated often in the game is in Latin: "Requiescat in Pace. (Rest in peace.)" (appendix 3: line 6-7), which is influenced by the prevalence of Catholic church in Italy, and the role of church in death.

### **3.3 Data**

The data is from the PC-version of the game *Assassin's Creed II* with the sole focus on cutscenes that happen between gaming sequences, as those cutscenes are same for every player, and as was quoted earlier, Ensslin (2012) sees cutscenes as important signals on how the game is to be understood. She mentions several times throughout the book, that a mere study of cutscenes is not enough to understand the multimodal complexity of video games, as there is no gaming interaction happening within them. Unfortunately the scope of present study does not allow for a study of the whole game.

As an avid fan of *Assassin's Creed* series, I wanted to study one of my favorite games: *Assassin's Creed II* further. I have played through the game myself, but turned to a YouTube-video, that contained all the cutscenes present within the game, because of the easy accessibility and navigation. From all the cutscenes I chose ten that seemed to include power relations between characters. Of these ten, three cutscenes were picked because they are the most related to the research questions and versatile from the point of view of analysis. Due to copyright issues the YouTube-video was left out, and I played through the game again to make sure that the chosen cutscenes were exactly the same as in the video. These three cutscenes have a great importance in the progression of the plot by presenting the narrative structure of presenting problem, catalyst and resolution. Additionally they include character development as all three cutscenes revolve around Templars and Assassins, and the issue and manifestation of power. The cutscenes chosen began and ended with gameplay, so the lines between cutscenes were clear.

The data was handled in the following way: as the game already provided subtitles, they were written down and supplemented with spoken utterances not present in subtitles to form transcription of the speech. These transcriptions can be found in the appendices 1-3. Then screenshots were taken from the key moments where camera angles, facial expressions and shots needed closer attention, and these screenshots are available within the text as figures. These pictures from the video game act only as references to the source material and I recommend the reader to find the original source in order to see the full context.

The first cutscene (appendix 1) sets the mood and motif for the whole game, and connects players emotionally with the characters. In the cutscene Ezio witnesses the hanging of his father and brothers in the hands of a Templar, who had plotted for this in order to gain control over the city. The second cutscene (appendix 2) is from around the middle of the game, where Ezio follows a Templar to their meeting, and witnesses the Master Templar killing the other Templar for not acting in a desired way, after which Ezio is captured and must break free. Cutscene three (appendix 3) is towards the end of the game, and in here the scale of power has shifted more towards Ezio and Assassins. In this cutscene Ezio kills a Templar and afterwards lectures the people on the streets about the importance of thinking for themselves, and relays the creed of Assassins and quite possibly the ideology that the game makers wish to convey to the players.

### **3.4 Methods of analysis**

I will use multimodal discourse analysis and terms provided by movie analysis as the methods for studying the data. Multimodal discourse analysis is interested in community's semiotic manifestations and its meanings (Kress 2012: 37). According to Kress (*ibid.*: 37), language is only one means of representation and meaning-making and to be able to find the meaning of the maker of the text, we should consider all the modes present at the text. The different modes can be for example proxemics, gesture, posture, music, speech and head movement (Norris 2004: 11). Norris warns about studying the modes separately and drawing conclusions about the meanings by themselves, as the modes work together to form meaning (*ibid.*: 52). Thus the different modes will be analyzed with a focus on how they work together to convey a meaning. As for language used within multimodal media, Kress and Van Leeuwen (2006: 129) see it as a medium of closeness: colloquial language use indicates closeness between people, and formal language indicates that the people have social distance between them. As such, the mode of language goes beyond the mere literal meaning of words, and towards multimodality in itself.

As the data is cinematic and the method for studying it is multimodal, I will also bring a cinematic point of view that is concerned with shots, gaze and camera angles, which were introduced earlier in section 2.3. These key concepts of cinematic studies will be used to provide additional analysis of the cinematic side of the data. All in all the analysis consists of linguistic choices, multimodal modes and cinematic effects used to portray power differences.

## 4. ANALYSIS

### 4.1 Cutscene one: Last man standing

Before starting the analysis, a reminder of the power dynamics between Assassins and Templars is in place. Assassins have been fighting Templars for centuries and both are secret orders to be indoctrinated in. Templars' goal is to achieve peace through complete domination over everyone, whereas Assassins wish to free people from such oppression, so that everybody has a freedom of choice.

In first cutscene a Templar named Uberto Alberti (hereafter Uberto), who was a trusted friend of Ezio Auditore's (hereafter Ezio) father Giovanni Auditore, can be seen standing on a hanging stage. He speaks with authority over the people while asking if the Assassin Giovanni Auditore (hereafter Giovanni) has any proof that he is innocent of treason. Uberto's words "In the absence of any compelling evidence to the contrary, I am *bound to pronounce* you GUILTY. You and your collaborators are hereby sentenced to DEATH." (Appendix 1: lines 7-8, italics added for emphasis) show false compassion for the Auditore family. The viewer knows it to be false compassion as the mission before attending the hanging was to bring Giovanni's documents to Uberto, and in that cutscene Uberto acknowledged that those documents prove that there is a conspiracy against Auditore family and the whole city, promising to take care of everything so Giovanni will be freed. Uberto has the power to sentence someone to death, and this power is acknowledged by the mob as they do not resist the hanging. Giovanni's yell "YOU are the traitor, Uberto" (Appendix 1: line 9) has no effect on the hanging process, and as there is no panning of camera to the crowd, it seems like there is no reaction from the crowd either. Uberto is clearly in charge of the situation as the three Auditores are hanged right after he gives a hand signal. The crowd can be seen shaking their fists towards the stage, as if they are cheering. The man standing all this time behind Uberto is Rodrigo Borgia, who later on in the game is revealed to be the mastermind behind everything, known as the "Maestro", "Spaniard", or Grand Master of Templars.

The sources of power present here, according to Fraser (2001, p.26) in Uberto's case are personal and positional power. Uberto's personal power comes from his social status and financial resources. Uberto is a wealthy man judging by his clothing and jewelry, and his ability to pronounce people guilty of charges makes his social status as a practitioner of law apparent. Positional power comes from him having the law on his side and him appearing to be morally correct in hanging these traitors that conspire against the whole city. Uberto additionally makes it clear that he has the law on his side by claiming that he is "bound to pronounce you GUILTY" (Appendix 1: line 8).



Figure 1: Uberto's lie (screenshot original)

To analyze the multimodal and cinematic aspects of the cutscene in relation to power, I will start with Uberto. Uberto is centered, and standing on stage, in front of the people. The angle of the first shot is low and the shot itself is a long shot. It is introductory to the whole cutscene, and the context of Uberto's claims of treason. The low angle is used to implicate Uberto's position of power. When Giovanni tells about the documents that were delivered to Uberto, Uberto lifts his hands in the air to elaborate his words of "I'm afraid I know nothing of these documents" (Appendix 1: line 4), while facing the crowd to show his innocence (Figure 1). This also juxtaposes the bind Audiores and Uberto who is able to freely move around. Uberto is very conscious of the people in front of him and can often be seen looking at them. Uberto turns towards the crowd to say the word "GUILTY" (Appendix 1: line 8), and the crowd is the third participant in this discourse, first two being Uberto and Giovanni. Uberto turns this declaration personal towards Giovanni at the end, when the words "to DEATH" (Appendix 1: line 8) are said with an emphasis on the word death with a direct eye contact. The shot is a close-up, so the player can really see Uberto's emotions in his face and with close-up the scene has the maximal emotional connection to the player. The angle is eye-level, and according to Kress and Van Leeuwen (2006 p.140) it means there is no power difference between represented and interactive participants. While Giovanni shouts about "we" taking Uberto's life (Appendix 1 : line 10), he is not even looking at Giovanni and instead calmly moves his hand downwards in front of him to signal the hangman to move the lever. The calmness can be seen as a source of power as he is in control of his own emotions. The medium close-up shot of the hand movement juxtaposes Uberto and the Audiores seen in the next shot, in addition to their different emotions.



Figure 2: Close-up of Giovanni (screenshot original)

During the cutscene Giovanni and his two sons stand on the stage with ropes around their necks and hands bind behind their backs, clearly not dominating this situation. Only Giovanni speaks anything, his sons just stand submissive, sometimes lowering their heads, or slightly moving their hands. The shot is often a medium close-up of Giovanni when he speaks and this gives Giovanni the power over his sons who do not speak and are seen less on camera. Giovanni's last words are heard as the camera zooms in his face to a close-up shot for maximal intimacy before the hanging on a medium shot (Figure 2). The linguistic choices of Uberto are distancing: he uses the word "collaborators" (Appendix 1: line 8) for Giovanni's sons and takes the crowd as a third participant in the conversation. Whereas Giovanni is always speaking directly to Uberto, challenging him as "the traitor" and "one of THEM" (Appendix 1: line 9) – them being Templars.

Moving towards the end of the cutscene where Uberto has seen Ezio in the crowd, Uberto signals with his whole hand to guards, as if he was swiping Ezio away. As a big guard flings Ezio's sword away, Uberto moves his hand downwards in front of his face and says "Abbatetelo! (Put him down!)" (Appendix 1: line 15), signaling killing Ezio. Ezio is heartbroken, and it can be heard from his voice cracking as he calls out to his father, in addition to his rage towards Uberto. Ezio draws out his sword to confront the guards. This is shot from a low angle, but it does not indicate that Ezio has power in this scene, and as such is an important reminder that the cutscene should be analyzed as a whole. The heavily armored guard walks to Ezio and hits his sword away, making him look weak. Ezio looks at the guards as they come near, and the camera panning to the thief and courtesan show which way the story will go next, and persuading the player to act accordingly after the cutscene ends.

To conclude the cutscene "Last man standing", Uberto had power over the Auditore family, which was exceptionally clear from Uberto ordering the hanging of Giovanni and Ezio's brothers. Uberto's power sources were personal and positional, and he used body movements to emphasize



his speech and actions. Cinematic aspects added intimacy and juxtaposed freely walking and powerful Uberto and the blind Auditores waiting to be hanged. Even when Ezio cried out for revenge, Uberto was in charge ordering guards to kill the young man.

#### **4.2 Cutscene two: With friends like these**

The characters present in cutscene two “With friends like these” (Appendix 2), are Jacopo de’ Pazzi, Rodrigo Borgia, Emilio Barbarigo and Ezio Auditore (hereafter Jacopo, Rodrigo, Emilio and Ezio respectively) in addition to some guards who are left unnamed. There are several people having power over others in this scene, with Rodrigo being the most powerful one on many levels. Emilio is Rodrigo’s subordinate, but after Jacopo having messed up previously, Emilio is higher on the rank than Jacopo. Ezio is acting alone and despite his violence, his source of power is not acknowledged. The cutscene shows Jacopo meeting Rodrigo and ending up being scolded. After trying to shift the blame on others, Rodrigo stabs Jacopo and reveals that he has been aware of Ezio’s spying this whole time. The guards capture Ezio and he kills them in order to break free.

First I will analyze the sequence with Jacopo, Rodrigo and Emilio from a multimodal point of view. Jacopo is clearly not in a position of power within this cutscene and it is portrayed well multimodally. While explaining himself in the beginning, Jacopo is rarely looking Rodrigo directly in the eyes, and his posture is bent down. Jacopo wrings and moves his hands while explaining, which can be seen as a sign of nervousness. These manners change for a moment, when he tries to convince Rodrigo that he has no fault, with more frankness in the way he meets Rodrigo’s eyes and talks to him. The posture changes quickly to a more apologetic and humble one with hunched back and hands in front of his chest accompanied by a more hesitant and gentle tone in his voice. Emilio Barbarigo enters the picture for the first time, and he is not hesitant to mock Jacopo. Emilio might see himself higher in the hierarchy now than Jacopo and thus dares to be blunt with him. Jacopo answers more readily to Emilio and his posture is not closed anymore, but glances at Rodrigo to see if it is all right to talk back to Emilio. Jacopo’s tone of speech is not apologetic or gentle anymore, which can be seen as a sign of a power struggle. He uses his right hand and upper body to make the speech livelier, while calling Emilio’s weapons “garbage”, to save his own face (Appendix 2: line 8).

Rodrigo’s position of power is the highest among the Templars, which is also apparent from Jacopo’s address “Maestro” (Appendix 2: line 1). Rodrigo’s posture is straight and as he appears taller than Jacopo, there is an air of authority around him. He is wearing a dark cape that covers his head and it makes him look more intimidating as his whole face is not visible. The mode of gaze is

used to portray power differences, where Jacopo only glances at Rodrigo now and then, but Rodrigo holds eye contact on Jacopo throughout the whole conversation after his first reply. Rodrigo later cuts Jacopo off mid-sentence and yells “Enough!” (Appendix 2: line 9), signaling that he has the authority to stop this conversation and put people in their place. Rodrigo’s anger is heard in his tone of voice as he emphasizes the words “inaction” and “incompetence” (appendix 2: line 9-10) that describe Jacopo’s work (Figure 3). Rodrigo does not move around much: he moves his head to make the speech livelier and emphasize his anger, and then steps closer to Jacopo to appear more intimidating. The action of putting his hand on Jacopo’s shoulder is not one of kindness or sympathy, but of a warning before he puts his blade through Jacopo. After this Jacopo looks horrified at his bloodstained hands and bends over pleading, while Emilio looms over him laughing and pushes him to the ground. Jacopo crawls towards Rodrigo and Emilio, desperately promising “I can fix this... Only, spare me...” (Appendix 2: line 16) and his gaze is upwards, begging. Rodrigo swings his sword high to strike Jacopo, enhancing the image of power. Rodrigo looks at his sword and says to himself “What a mess...” (Appendix 2: line 18), which could be seen as an implication of the whole situation.



Figure 3: Rodrigo scolding Jacopo (screenshot original)

Moving to a cinematic analysis, the conversation starts with a medium shot that shows Jacopo bending forward with his posture closed and Rodrigo in front of him with his face hidden in the cape. Much of the conversation between Jacopo and Rodrigo is shown in medium close-ups, showing the multimodal modes of proxemics, head movement, hand movement, gesture and posture clearly. The sudden cut to Rodrigo’s face, as he shouts “Enough!” (Appendix 2: line 9) works to move the focus of power to him. His next words are all heard during the next shot, which is a rather long one in duration, and it emphasizes the body movements and the words spoken (Figure 3). Next the camera shows a long shot of the two, with some guards in the back and this shot gives expectations that something is about to happen. Soon the shot changes to a close up of Jacopo’s

stomach and we can see the blade entering him with blood coming out. This shot is used to shock people and to build the image of the main villain as a dangerous character. As Jacopo falls to the ground, the camera follows making the angle a very low one. In here the low angle is used to showcase the power difference between characters. Rodrigo's swinging of the sword is shot from the lowest angle within this cutscene and shows the ultimate power Rodrigo has at the moment over Jacopo's life.

Next is the analysis of the part with Ezio. Using a long shot, a new sequence of the cutscene is introduced where Rodrigo acknowledges Ezio. With Ezio captured, Rodrigo and Emilio turn from Jacopo's body towards Ezio, with Rodrigo ridiculing Ezio's youth and planning. Long shots show the distance between Ezio and Rodrigo, and they indicate how Rodrigo does not see Ezio as worth his time. This is further apparent by Rodrigo ordering his own guards to kill Ezio, while he leaves to attend to other business. Ezio resists the guards and tells them he will spare their lives if they release him, to which the guards laugh, but are quickly killed by the player using a hidden blade.

Lastly I will look at Fraser's (2001: p.26) sources of power that are found within this cutscene. Rodrigo holds personal power through financial resources that enable him to do what he wants. Rodrigo also holds personal power over Ezio, as he shows knowing the Assassin's habits and biases. Rodrigo has positional power granted through his position as a Grand Master in Templars, and this positional power is also something that Emilio holds. Rodrigo's greatest source of power is perhaps potential power, the ability and knowledge of the possibility to inflict damage. Ezio does not hold this power even though he kills the guards at the end of the cutscene. The Templar guards did not believe he could kill them and thus this source of power was not acknowledged.

To conclude this cutscene, Rodrigo was the character with most power with Emilio following in the power rank between characters. Jacopo had lost his rank in the Templar order and acted in a humble and apologetic way towards Rodrigo. The multimodal aspects of Jacopo: his closed posture, wringing of hands and lack of eye contact confirmed his words. Rodrigo was made powerful through his gaze and words in addition to the shots and film angles used when he was in the picture. His sources of power were personal, positional and potential power. Ezio's power is not acknowledged and thus he does not hold power in this cutscene.

### **4.3 Cutscene three: Mob justice**

In this cutscene there are three participants: the dying Girolamo Savonarola, Ezio Auditore and the crowd gathered. The cutscene is divided into two parts: the death of Girolamo Savonarola and Ezio

talking to the crowd. Before the cutscene begins, player must jump into the bonfire and Girolamo Savonarola's suffering, and this jump triggers the cutscene. First I will look at the multimodality of the whole cutscene before moving onto cinematic aspects and the sources of power.

The white space, within which Ezio and Girolamo are, is a memory space where time does not pass at the same speed as normally in the game, which is evident from the fact that after killing Girolamo Ezio is able to talk shortly with him. The space acts as a gateway to death and the whiteness makes it neutral towards the end of each dying Templar. Ezio is crouched over Girolamo, holding his head as they converse for some sentences and this position makes Ezio powerful (Figure 4). The dying man's last words are with Ezio, and he pleads "It's you... I knew this day would come. Please... show mercy" (appendix 3: line 4). Ezio replies only "I have." (Appendix 3: line 5) and continues with a rite of passage in Italian and Latin, during which he lays Girolamo's body down. As most of the dialogue is in English with an Italian accent, the lines in Italian are mostly used to add authenticity, intimacy and emphasis. The only phrase in Latin in the game is "Requiescat in pace. (Rest in peace.)" (appendix 3: line 6-7) and it can be seen coming from the influence of catholic church in Italy. In this cutscene's case the Italian rite of passage with the Latin phrase is used for intimacy and emphasis on the sacredness of the situation. The words "Va' ora. Che sia il tuo Dio a giudicarti. (Go now - that you may be judged by your God.) Requiescat in pace. (Rest in peace.)" (Appendix 3: line 6-7) indicate that Girolamo passed in Ezio's arms, and that he leaves the final judging to God despite taking justice in his own hands. Ezio shows his maturity and respect to the dying Templar by saying "Requiescat in pace", even though their ideologies are vastly different. This can be seen as adding to Ezio's power in relation to the Templar side, who before were shown mercilessly hanging Ezio's family or killing Jacopo.

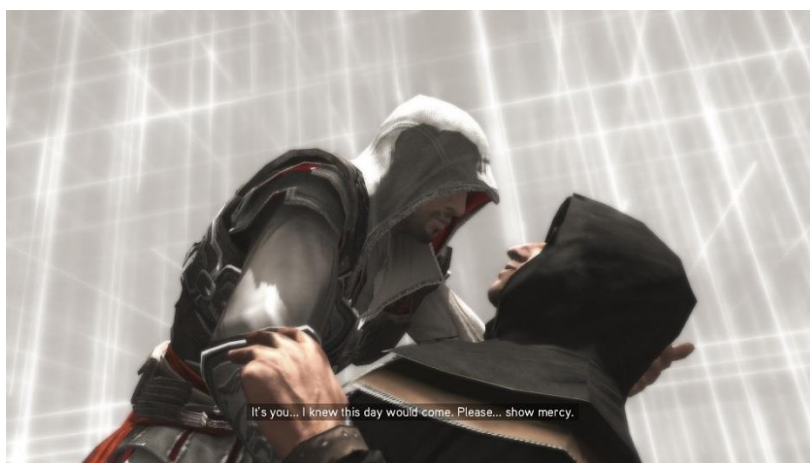


Figure 4: Ezio and the dying Templar (screenshot original)

After Girolamo's death, Ezio jumps on the stage in front of the people, lifting his hands to calm the restless crowd while shouting "Silenzio! Silenzio!" (Appendix 3: line 8). Ezio is alone on the stage, and as he begins telling his life story, an emotional piano and string music can be heard on the background. Ezio moves around a great deal: he walks back and forth and moves his hands to emphasize words such as "vengeance", "mind", "consumed", "wisdom" and "answers" (Appendix 3: line 10-11). These are the key words in his story. Ezio continues by stretching his arms out as a sort of invitation as he says "We don't need anyone to tell us what to do." (Appendix 3: line 12) implying that he is one of the people even though he stands in front of them giving guidance. The declaration "We are free to follow our own path" (Appendix 3: line 12-13) is the whole game's ideology in one sentence, and Ezio wishes to relay that message to the whole city, to persuade the crowd to think for themselves. At the same time Ezio as a character is relaying the message from the game makers to the player, which can be seen as the ideological views they wish to convey to the player.

The mode of gaze is important in this cutscene. Ezio holds his gaze in the crowd, but not focusing on anyone special until he motions to the friends that have appeared time and time again through the game. He holds power over the crowd by staying focused on them as a whole and also by appearing as one of them through his body language and use of "we". Ezio's words are straightforward, somewhat reprimanding when he mentions the people giving their free will away, but also humbling as he denies the position of a leader by saying "Do not follow me. Or anyone else" (Appendix 3: line 16). The crowd parts a way for him as he jumps down from the stage to walk to his friends, and the people follow him carefully with their gaze, appearing respectful. This makes Ezio very powerful, that he has the respect of the people even though he does not ask it himself. The ending, where Ezio's uncle lays his hand on Ezio's shoulder is a touching finish to a touching cutscene.

To analyze the cinematic aspects, I will start from the sequence between Girolamo and Ezio. The camera goes around the pair, showing Ezio from a low angle, further accentuating his position of power. The shot is a medium shot, showing both men rather closely but focusing on the distance between them, which brings out the power relations (Figure 4). After the assassination, camera focuses on crowd for a slight moment before showing Ezio. The cutscene uses long shot several times, for example to introduce the whole situation or focus on the crowd to show the effect of Ezio's speech. A medium shot of Ezio shows the body language clearly while also allowing a focus on the mode of gaze, and several shots of Ezio from a low angle emphasize the high position on the stage and the power that he has. It also places the player as one of the crowd members, appearing as

if Ezio is speaking also directly to him /her. One of the most important lines “We don’t need anyone to tell us what to do” (Appendix 3: line 12) is delivered through a medium close-up shot that makes the scene intimate and powerful by setting the player’s focus on Ezio’s face and words. The camera panning over the crowd shows them being somewhat uncertain or even vulnerable, which is emphasized by the usage of a high angle. In the end of the cutscene Ezio and his uncle Mario are shown together with Mario’s hand on Ezio’s shoulder, and the medium close-up shot here suggests intimacy and coming together.

Lastly the sources of power are analyzed. Clearly Ezio is the only one within this cutscene that holds power, and his power sources are personal, positional and potential. Ezio’s personal sources of power stem from his social status and expertise as an Assassin and a fighter for freedom. Positional power for Ezio is derived from moral correctness and as the crowd saw Ezio killing Girolamo, there is also potential source of power present.

In conclusion, Ezio holds the power in this cutscene and his sources of power are personal, positional and potential. Ezio’s power is made powerful by his position in relation to others, him being the only one speaking and by his persuading words. The cinematic aspects highlight his position of power through camera angles and shots.

## 5. CONCLUSION

The aim of this study was to study the power relations of characters within chosen cutscenes of *Assassin's Creed II*. Two methods of analysis, multimodal and cinematic approaches, were combined to form a comprehensive view of the portrayal of power. The cutscenes were also analyzed from the viewpoint of sources of power, as defined by Fraser (2001).

As the scope of the study was limited, only three cutscenes were chosen for analysis. These cutscenes had versatile power relations, in addition to their importance for the plot progression. The results showed that the portrayal of power was made by combining multimodal modes with cinematic aspects, which often happened simultaneously within a cutscene. The sources of power were various in each cutscene, with personal power being the most common. The whole multimodal context became very important in order to analyze correctly what the implications of cinematic effects or linguistic choices were. This confirmed Kuhn and Westwell's (2012: camera angle) claim, that there are no clear rules on the meanings of film angles, as a high angle did not always mean that the character was submissive. It also became apparent that, as was pointed out by Ensslin (2012), cutscenes relay the ideological values held by game makers. These values for *Assassin's Creed II* were freedom from oppression and choosing one's own truth.

To reflect on the present study, achievements and some possibilities for improvement will be addressed here. The greatest achievement in the present study is combining several methods of analysis to form a coherent and encompassing insight into the power relations within my data. The multimodal and cinematic theories complemented each other adequately as the power was manifested multimodally and cinematically at the same time. With the sources of power I was able to give the aspect of power a theoretical base. There is also the contribution of my research into the field of video game studies: as the analysis of power on video games has not been done before, further studies can be inspired by this study.

There are some issues that can be improved, and one of them is finding another point of view of studying the data. As power is a difficult and ambiguous term and there have been few studies that combine power and video games, it was difficult to reflect directly this study against other studies and their results. Nevertheless, the present study can act as a starting point for further research on the relation between power and video games. To improve the methods of analysis further for future studies, it would be beneficial to make a multimodal transcription of the data, so that the reader can see within one figure the words that are being said, facial expressions, tone of voice and the body movements at a given moment. It would also be beneficial for the process of analysis to have a

video that consists only of the data being analyzed in order for it to be easier to navigate. This form of data requires familiarizing oneself with copyright issues, which is recommended here to everyone.

In conclusion, the present study's methods of analysis allowed for a comprehensive insight into power relations through linguistic choices, multimodal modes and cinematic effects. Additionally for further studies analyzing power relations in video games, it would be advantageous to find an analysis method that could allow a more direct reflection of the analysis and results.



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## APPENDICES

### Appendix 1 : Cutscene “Last man standing”

Transcription conventions:

\* \* direction of speech

< > not subtitled, only heard utterance

[ ] subtitled, but not spoken

( ) translation already provided in subtitles

- 1 Uberto Alberti: “Giovanni Auditore, you and your accomplices stand accused of the crime of
- 2 treason. Have you any evidence to counter this charge?”
- 3 Giovanni Auditore: “Yes. The documents that were delivered to you last night!”
- 4 Uberto Alberti: “I’m afraid I know nothing of these documents.”
- 5 Ezio Auditore: “He’s lying!”
- 6 Ezio Auditore: \*to himself\* “I need to get closer!”
- 7 Uberto Alberti: “In the absence of any compelling evidence to the contrary, I am bound to
- 8 pronounce you GUILTY. You and your collaborators are hereby sentenced to DEATH.”
- 9 Giovanni Auditore: “YOU are the traitor, Uberto – And one of THEM! You may take our lives this
- 10 day – but WE WILL have yours in return! I swear! We wi-”
- 11 Ezio Auditore: “FATHER!”
- 12 Uberto Alberti: “There! Grab the boy! He’s one of them!”
- 13 Ezio Auditore: “I’LL KILL YOU FOR WHAT YOU’VE DONE!”
- 14 Uberto Alberti: “Guards! Arrest him!”
- 15 Uberto Alberti: \*to a guard\* “Abbatetelo! (Put him down!) ”
- 16 Thief: \*to Ezio\* “You’d better run, boy. And fast!”

**Appendix 2** : cutscene “With friends like these”

- 1 Jacopo de' Pazzi: “I am sorry, Maestro! I did all I could, but the Assassin proved too strong.”
- 2 Rodrigo Borgia: “Clearly. Else the others would be here with you... To say nothing of the fact that  
3 Firenze remains in Medici hands.”
- 4 Jacopo de' Pazzi: “It's Francesco's fault! His impatience made him reckless. I tried to be the voice  
5 of reason-”
- 6 Emilio Barbarigo: “More like the voice of cowardice.”
- 7 Jacopo de' Pazzi: “You're one to talk, Signor Barbarigo. Had you sent us quality weapons, instead  
8 of this garbage you Venetians call ar-”
- 9 Rodrigo Borgia: “Enough! We put our faith in your family and you repay us with inaction and  
10 incompetence. Then, when asked to account for your failures, you make excuses and insult us? How  
11 do you expect me to respond?”
- 12 Jacopo de' Pazzi: “I don't know...”
- 13 Rodrigo Borgia: “It's alright. I do.”
- 14 Jacopo: “No... please... don't...”
- 15 Emilio Barbarigo: “<Hahaha.> Please don't what?”
- 16 Jacopo de' Pazzi: “I can fix this... Only, spare me...”
- 17 Rodrigo Borgia: “No.”
- 18 Rodrigo Borgia: \*to himself\* “What a mess...”
- 19 Rodrigo Borgia: \*to Ezio\* “So sorry to have claimed your prize, Assassin! Did you honestly think I  
20 wouldn't expect you to follow? That I didn't PLAN for it? We've been at this a lot longer than you!”
- 21 Rodrigo Borgia: \*to guards holding Ezio\* “Kill him.”
- 22 Ezio Auditore: \*to guards holding him\* “I know you're only doing as you're told. So if you release  
23 me, I will spare your lives.”
- 24 Guard: “Hah! Listen [to this one he-] ”

**Appendix 3 : cutscene “Mob justice”**

1 Girolamo Savonarola: “[Infelix ego, omnium auxilio destitutus, qui cœlum terramque offendi: quo  
2 ibo? Quo me vertam? Ad quem confugiam? Quis mei miserebitur? Ad cœlum levare oculos non  
3 audeo. Quia ei graviter peccavi. In terra refugium non ivenio. Quia ei scandalum]”

4 Girolamo Savonarola: \*to Ezio\* “It’s you... I knew this day would come. Please... show mercy.”

5 Ezio Auditore: “I have.”

6 Ezio Auditore: \*chanting over Jacopo’s dead body\* “Va’ ora. Che sia il tuo Dio a giudicarti. (Go  
7 now - that you may be judged by your God.) Requiescat in pace. (Rest in peace.)”

8 Ezio Auditore: \*to angry mob\* “<Silenzio! Silenzio!> [People]. Twenty-two years ago I stood  
9 where I stand now - and watched my loved ones die, betrayed by those I had called friends.  
10 Vengeance clouded my mind. It would have consumed me, were it not for the wisdom of a few  
11 strangers, who taught me to look past my instincts. They never preached answers, but guided me to  
12 learn from myself. We don’t need anyone to tell us what to do. Not Savonarola, not the Medici. We  
13 are free to follow our own path. There are those who will take that freedom from us, and too many  
14 of you gladly give it. But it is our ability to choose - whatever you think is true - that makes us  
15 human... There is no book or teacher to give you the answers, to show you the path. Choose your  
16 own way! Do not follow me. Or anyone else.”