

Visiting 15th Century Italy with my 15-Year-Old Son

Joey Skee (March 25, 2010)



Gaming lessons from the Boot.

Recently, my daughter Akela and son Lucca got into a conversation about Florence's [Basilica di Santa Maria del Fiore](#) [2], discussing the architectonics of the church's cupola. Akela noted that Renaissance architects did not have [the ancient Roman formula for cement](#) [3] and as a result [Filippo Brunelleschi](#) [4] ingeniously devised [a two wall solution](#) [5] for the structure, a detail she had learned in her introductory art history class. Lucca concurred, elaborating on the cupola's interior of stone arches, frescos, and its crowning lantern. He was familiar with il Duomo because he had scaled to the very top, an achievement he accomplished as a player of the video game Assassin's Creed II.

Lucca had already been talking about the places he "visited" playing this third-person, action game, like [la Piazza della Signoria](#) [6], [la Basilica di Santa Croce](#) [7], and [il Ponte Vecchio](#) [8]. He



had also “traveled” to Venice, San Gimignano, and Forlì. When [the New York Times’ review](#) [9] noted the game’s “luscious detail and natural, ennobling proportions and styling of the environments,” I asked my son to be my tour guide to fifteen century Italy.

Revenge is the game’s narrative premise with the lead character, Ezio Auditore da Firenze, locating and assassinating the conspirators who falsely accused and executed his father. [Rodrigo Borgia](#) [10], who would become Pope Alexander VI, is the villainous adversary.

With the controller securely in Lucca’s hands, our cloaked avatar strode assertively through the cobble stone streets of Florence, circa 1497. To my surprise this involved repeated shoving of others so as to pickpocket their florins. Along the way, we encountered inviting prostitutes, pugnacious condottieri, saltimbanci selling nostrums, and pestering giullari.

I asked Lucca to linger so I could sift through the cacophony of this virtual Renaissance. Slowing down our pace to that of a leisurely passeggiata, I heard the same looped patter of a lovers’ quarrel and the public announcement concerning the plague in the mouths of different background characters at various points during our stroll. Characters spoke in English with an Italian accent and in Italian with a decidedly contemporary Milanese accent. My son had already learned such [choice phrases](#) [11] as cazzo, pezzo di merda, figli di puttana, and vai a farti fottere.

A player also moves through this virtual landscape by scaling building façades and leaping from one rooftop to another. From those heights, the panoptic view of the city is stunning. As Auditore/we stood at the pinnacle of [Giotto’s Campanile](#) [12], I was reminded of a photo I had taken as a tourist 25 years earlier from the very same vantage point.

At one point, we walked about the main character’s villa taking in the impressive art collection including notables like Sandro Botticelli’s [The Birth of Venus](#) [13], Leonardo da Vinci’s [Lady With Ermine](#) [14], Andrea del Verrocchio’s [Baptism of Christ](#) [15], among other masterpieces of the Italian Renaissance.

Throughout our journey the slashing, stabbing, and hacking continued with spurts of crimson blood flowing graphically on the screen.

I’m too much of a boomer to find video games of real interest. As a parent, I’m troubled by the ways video games normalize killing, albeit virtual, and make war a form of entertainment that has the potential to desensitize youth to violence. Deeply worrisome is the militarization of American popular entertainment—what has come to be known as “[militainment](#)” [16]—which was exploited [to sell the Bush administration’s invasion of Iraq](#) [17] and is used as [a Pentagon recruitment tool](#) [18] targeting young people.

In our home, Lucca’s gaming is a series of negotiated settlements concerning frequency, duration, and types of games.

One parental consolation of Lucca playing Assassin’s Creed II has been his sudden knowledge of and interest in Italian history and culture. He is now conversant in [the Pazzi conspiracy](#) [19], [Savonarola and the Bonfire of the Vanities](#) [20], [the Borgia regime](#) [21], and, of course, [Renaissance architecture](#) [22]. When I suggested that we visit contemporary Florence, Venice, and San Gimignano, Lucca responded not with a teenager’s insouciance but with enthusiastic affirmation. That’s a lesson in gaming I appreciate.



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- [3] <http://www.romanconcrete.com/docs/spillway/spillway.htm>
- [4] http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Filippo_Brunelleschi
- [5] http://www.amazon.com/Brunelleschis-Dome-Renaissance-Reinvented-Architecture/dp/0142000159/ref=ntt_at_ep_dpi_1
- [6] <http://www.visitflorence.com/florence-monuments/piazza-della-signoria.html>
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- [12] <http://www.operaduomo.firenze.it/english/luoghi/campanile.asp>
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