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Everywhere in the media, there are signs. In each and every sign is a code, image, or even another sign; this is the foundation of semiotic analysis. Semiology, the study of signs and signifiers, is especially useful in analyzing media forms such as advertisements and films, where the signs are used for the explicit purpose of changing the audience's perception about a given topic or commodity. In *Media Analysis Techniques*, Arthur Asa Berger explains semiotic analysis and employs the strategy on an advertisement from the French company Fidji's perfume. While Berger's analysis is accurate for most visual and nonvisual media, video games are an example of where semiotic analysis does not necessarily function in the same way it would for traditional media. Some of the signs and signifiers Berger uses in his case study do exist in video games, but some do not; Toby Fox's late 2015 release *Undertale* is an example of a game where certain semiotic principles do not always apply.

Berger addresses many positive aspects of semiotic analysis. It works well for at least most, if not all, media. It also permits interpretation of diverse media by breaking down any visual into digestible components and signifiers. For example, in print advertisements, ad agencies use signs to make their audience feel a certain way toward the product. A jewelry agency may print an ad with a happy couple to code for the

happiness associated with both wedding bands and with proposals. As such, the product comes to signify happiness, and viewers come to desire both the product and the way they perceive the product. Berger then proceeds to do a case study of a French Fidji perfume print ad. A young woman holds a bottle, a snake adorns her neck, and an orchid sits in her hair. Berger provides examples of how a semiologist would interpret the image. He comments on the color scheme, the woman's ethnicity (Polynesian), the orchid, the snake, the bottle, and the crucifix in the bottle's presentation. For each of these, he connects subtleties in culture to the presentation, and how codes relate French conceptions to the advertising. For example, Berger states that flowers are, "the sexual apparatus of a plant," and that the flower imagery is, "used to describe a woman's becoming physically developed and… sexually receptive" (157). Berger also notes that many of the signs encode for the same signifier "to help get the message across" (160).

Although Berger does well to identify such signs, he fails to comment on how loose some of these signs can be, and on other connections the audience might make. For example, Berger notes the woman's race as Polynesian, and connects her race to the French painter Gauguin's "'escape' to paradise," to Polynesia (157). However, Berger fails to comment on how island cultures are fetishized in the media, how the "paradise" also has to do with sexual objectification of women from the region. Essentially, the ad codes to French women that, if they buy the perfume, they will be just as "exotic" and sexually desirable as a Polynesian woman are in French society. And while Berger briefly describes the connection the French have to Polynesia as

“fantasies of natural love and sexuality,” Berger seems to miss the major consideration of fetishization that the French in particular have with Polynesia, especially because that fetishization may be a product of the historical colonization of the French in the region (157).

Berger also fails to comment on how signs can have multiple meanings. When commenting on the warm color scheme, Berger simply writes, “Red is commonly used to suggest passion.” While that is true, he fails to dive deeper into the symbol. Red lips and nails not only suggest passion, they also suggest sexuality, danger, femininity, and lipstick (another product marketed to women for beauty). The sensual nature of red is not just “passion” but much more, bordering on alluding to the female genitalia as well. What red signifies exactly is different to each person, but the general perception of red, red nails, and red lips is a “rosy” and feminine woman. Berger oversimplifies the purpose of red and how important the color is to the overall design.

Life experience plays a large part in analysis of signs, which is another concept Berger fails to note. Indeed, many, if not most, of the signs seen in media are made by a lifetime of exposure to society and advertising. However, it is still important to note that not everyone makes the same connections. This is important to note, because the way that an individual interprets an advertisement dictates the effectiveness of that ad. When Berger suggests that *some* of the audience associates the snake with the myths of Medusa and of the Garden of Eden, he may be correct, but Berger does not offer any alternatives. For example, an individual may think of an encounter with a snake from their childhood, or secular individuals may miss the Eden imagery.

Finally, Berger fails to mention how to apply verbal signemes. He lists “paradoxes generated” as a verbal signeme. Without more clarification, it is hard to imagine what a paradox could signify. If he means that paradoxes are encoded in some verbal signemes, he never provides an example. If Berger is insinuating that the the signeme *is* the the paradox, it is not clear how he proposes they function that way. Either way, a paradox is a self-contradictory statement, something that requires thought, whereas signemes are recognizable patterns that code for other, more subconscious meanings. Without further clarification, it is hard to imagine how a paradox can be a code for a subtler meaning.

Berger’s list of signemes is certainly comprehensive for visual and audio media, but what of interactive media, such as *Undertale*? Video games in general defy certain semiotic principles. What images and signs are on the screen are not always as important as the journey the player has taken to get there. For example, a snapshot of a moment in any given video game does not give a viewer much of a sense of the game, because up until that point, the player has been immersed in the imagery and lore of the game. In addition, graphic limitations mean that games cannot perfectly imitate reality (yet), so whatever information is on the screen is not necessarily a perfect reproduction of a real-world equivalent.

Undertale is a particularly good example of this, due to the 8-bit graphic style. The viewer must look at the 8-bit characters, called sprites, and then interpret their real-world equivalents. Therefore, the reader must do an extra step to reach whatever association the developer wants the player to make. However, the 8-bit aesthetic itself is

a signifier. Berger lists “design” as a visual signeme; for video games, the equivalent is graphic engine (the way the graphics are). The 8-bit graphics induce a certain nostalgia, especially in older players, for the games of the past. Younger players experience the game as a retro title, much in the same way that retro music and retro fashion exist. Because of the 8-bit style, the graphics do not necessarily code for a real-world equivalent, but rather for a feeling. The audio is also nostalgic of retro games, enforcing the connection.

Undertale is certainly a commentary on the state of modern games, but that commentary is more easily understood by actions than by visuals. For example, *Undertale* is praised for the ability to “spare” enemies, instead of mindlessly killing them (even though players can still do that if they choose). Undertale also features several different endings and pathways that are determined by player choice. For example, the “genocide” run is significant because, not only does it assume the player has completed other endings of the game, it is also self-referential of the player. The character are aware that *this is not the first time the player has experienced the game*. Thus, it serves as a commentary on violent games and on player choice, on whether players can even be trusted to take the moral option for the sake of entertainment. That commentary would not be possible through semiotics alone. The theme of choice has a much different tone than it would have even in a movie; in film, the audience is a spectator, whereas in the game, *you* make the choices in the first person. Therefore, the commentary can be interpreted differently.

Undertale features the game equivalent of the paradox: fourth-wall breaking. Characters directly reference the player, not the main character, at certain instances. At other times, the player's save file, the lifeblood of modern gaming, is literally *deleted and rewritten* by characters within the game, making it seem like they also exist as real entities. At certain points, if the player does not follow a direction because they know the story, some of the characters will remark that the player *must have played the game already*. This feeling cannot be derived from semiotic analysis, but is instead the product of player involvement in the game. In the "genocide" run, when the protagonist/villain character slays Flowey, there is an emotional component where the player now realizes they murdered a character capable of addressing them from *within* the game. That relationship is experiential, which is something semiotics cannot necessarily account for.

Another pivotal moment is encountering what has been dubbed as "Photoshop Flowey" at the end of a neutral or peaceful playthrough. Flowey transforms into an amalgamation of different visual effects, none of which follow the traditional 8-bit format the game had been in before. Although there are images on the screen to be analyzed, what is more important to the protagonist is the transformation. The experience of a giant, unexplainable monster appearing in a battle and breaking the rules of the game is evocative. If someone who has played the game is shown an image of Photoshop Flowey, they have a very different reaction than someone who has never played the game. Personal experience changes the way the player interprets the image before them, not a preconceived societal notion.

Photoshop Flowey is not the only moment in the game where prior interaction with the game is important for understanding the story. In the final fight against Sans in the "genocide" run of the game, Sans ultimately becomes tired of fighting the player. He removes the player's ability to fight, therefore acknowledging that he is in a turn-based video game. He states, "one of your turns, you're just going to kill me… i've decided it's not gonna BE your turn. ever." Without the context of knowing how to play the game, Sans' actions would not make sense. In this case, removing the player's ability to act is what causes the response, not any visual or audio cues.

Berger is in no way wrong, and semiotic analysis works very well for more traditional media. It is video games that are often outliers. Certain games fit more into analysis than others, but most defy some semiotic principles by definition. It is the first-person (as opposed to third-person) perspective of the player that causes problems. When viewing an ad, the audience is the third person; all impressions are directly and indirectly shown to them. In a video game, the player is *in* the game, and must *experience* the message it is trying to pass on.