What Is a Game?—A Ludo-Semiotic Approach

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Abstract

In this diminutive essay, I propose a schema that may specify the behavior we associate with playing games, and I emphasize in particular the function of the factor of *chance*. I also suggest a blending model accounting for the important intentional properties of participating and watching games—the dynamic phenomenology of *ludic* semiosis.

Keywords: game dynamics, ludo-semiotics, semantics of chance, semiotic blending in games

When I received the issue of LASS dedicated to the theme of *play*,[1] I was struck by the eight American authors' richly unfolded theoretical and empirical use of the term and the concept of play in various semiotic and behavioral fields, and by the idea that this should have happened in semiotics much earlier, since the human use of signs is *per se* a basic form of 'play'. Now, in what sense is this the case? Well, first of all in the sense that there is an element of freedom and indetermination (cf. the French meanings of *jeu*) in the very use of signs; there is a framed space-time of reduced determination, where more outcomes will depend on chance than in a non-playful reality. Secondly, because it would appear to be evident that social life as we know it contains crucial moments of semiotic dynamism where things are 'at play' (*en jeu*), and in particular, moments dependent on political and economical habits such as the democratic procedures of election, or the general logic of market-based competition. However, to my astonishment, I found no attempt at really analyzing athletic, Olympic, competitive games or even board games, such as chess—the recurrent comparative referent when we speak of 'language games' or the arbitrariness of signs. It strikes me that there is an element of deep human interest involved which readily escapes us, a metaphysical dimension of plays and games that is essential to human passion, in love and warfare as well as in everyday communication, that we need to approach as a cognitive-semiotic phenomenon characterized by a particular schematization to discover. Motivated by these thoughts and the urge to grasp or at least approach this all-important meaning-making principle, I therefore set forth to attempt a

cognitive-semiotic modelization of it.

There is a minor terminological uncertainty regarding *plays* and *games*. Children *play*, and so do musicians and actors in theatres. What is common to plays but not to games is the players' fictional[2] and more or less theatrical, ritual, and narrative roles; the roles in games are different, in a sense even anti-narrative, and certainly anti-ritualistic, because the sequence, contents, and outcome of their events are essentially unknowable beforehand—they do not have a *script* but instead a set of formal *rules* determining which acts are possible, and how they 'count' in deciding the result. Pure *plays* do not have 'results' (they are a-telic); what 'counts' in them is only the *aesthetics* of ways to follow a script. Pure *games,* by contrast, are result-oriented (telic) and develop more functional, *strategic* methods for optimizing the players' results—hence their concepts of *winning and losing*, which are irrelevant in pure plays. Many forms of ludic behavior, or rather of ludo-semiotic systems, however, present characteristics of both plays and games— concerns for both the beauty and the result.

Forces, winning, losing, and chance

We *play games*, chess, poker, and table tennis…, and some such *games* are considered as forms of sport, while others seem more elusive, like Wittgenstein's famous 'language games', or the card game of solitaire. In mathematical logic, there is a respected discipline called game theory, but it is mainly concerned with logical and rational decision making. Semiotics—the study of meaning in the human (and animal) world—might instead wish to develop a discipline of *ludo-semiotics* to better understand the real forms and semantics of experienced ludic phenomena; the following is humbly intended to contribute to such an endeavor.

Whereas plays are (more) fictional, games are (more) 'artefactional': the latter do not offer imaginary simulacra of the experiential world but instead a sort of artificially restricted and framed world defined by explicit *rules and roles* that do not mimic anything otherwise experiential but just rule out things that do not *count*. Games in this sense, for example soccer, take place in specialized and limited spatial scenarios, unfold in limited time frames, imply agents and typically have emphatically marked beginnings and endings that comprise formal decisions determining participants as ending up either *winning* or *losing*, whatever that may mean—some agents winning, others losing: truly a strange concept.[3]

There are games for only one agent, such as solitaire, and antagonistic games that dually oppose singular or collective agents; and there are games that oppose multiple agents, such as competitions and lotteries. Or in fact even democratic elections. The goal of a game may be described as, for an agent, obtaining some decidable formal achievement, typically a numerical advantage over other agents; this advantage is then accepted by the community as a victory and interpreted as a manifestation of superiority of some kind.

A *player* is a participant human agent; inter-agentively, there can be adjuvant and

opponent player-agents, as is the case in narratives; there can be critical narrators, namely referees, umpires, judges, linesmen, etc. who have the authority to decide what 'counts' and what does not 'count' in a game; there are non-human circumstantial factors,[4] and in particular one, which is universal: *chance*, or contingency. In principle, as mentioned, it is never given beforehand what the outcome, the result in terms of winner and loser,[5] of a game will be. There is in a game, just like in a scientific experiment, an epistemic factor of *not-knowing*, which is phenomenologically essential to the interest of every match. The undecidedness of course structurally contradicts the narrative status of games; nevertheless, some narratives, such as crime fictions, are readily read or watched as open-ended games, which explains their non-literary and rather sport-like popularity.

Each agent is influenced by other agents (if there are such) and by chance; so an agent 'wins' due to his skills, luck, and the skills and luck of co-agents. By 'skills' is meant specialized competence, knowledge, experience, physical force, endurance, concentration, commitment, etc. If co-players are rated as possessing equal skills, the game is generally regarded as maximally interesting, either seen from the outside or from the point of view of the agents themselves (who will then call it a 'challenge'). Why, however, does a game at all 'interest' agents and observers? This is an anthropological as well as psychological question. Why do sports and other publicly highly attended games of competition exist in most or all societies? We might suspect that the answer has to do with the manifestation of this major objective circumstance, *chance*, an existential factor that all games constantly and overtly foreground, however in a restricted and specialized area—whereas it plays a more chaotic, covert but still overwhelmingly important and dangerous role in our personal lives. In archaic societies and cultures, such as that of the Aztecs, ball games are religious events, offered to honor the gods; in modern societies, they are often linked to collective (e.g. national) celebrations. Chance is a dynamic factor in the perspective of human intentional works, fights, strivings, projects, and desires, and in the 'ludic' framework, it acquires a transcendent status in the shape of an instance attributing authority to the agents, and more importantly, attributing transcendent status to the *community* of the agents.

This dynamic aspect of chance, and of course of the agentive entities involved, may invite for a force-dynamic schematization of the concept of game. There is a dynamic opposition of forces, a fight, an attempt by qualified agents to achieve a certain goal X despite categorized obstacles, objective or intersubjective; there is an obligation for the players to follow rules of access to X, and there is only a *chance* to reach this goal. Chance contributes substantially to the balance of agentive forces, of which typically *only one* passes the barrier of obstacles and 'wins' access to X, the victory and its trophy.[6] The schema describing the basic 'logic' of games may therefore be a version the forces-and-barriers model that is common in cognitive semantics. In a dual game (opposing two individual or collective agents, Ag and Ag') the dynamical configuration may thus be the following (Fig. 1):

Fig. 1
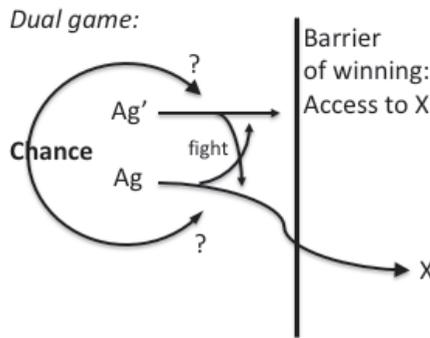
Both agents are 'in the hands' of chance. If the relation of the agentive forces is unequal, the importance of chance diminishes, and so does the interest of the match in question.[7] This proves the vital ludo-relation between chance and interest.

The importance of time

There is a significant difference between watching a match in real time and reading a report or watching a recording of the same match. Real time experience is even necessary in order for the observer, as well as for the participant, to feel the openness of the interventions, negative or positive, of chance—the 'bad luck' or the 'inspiration', the *duende*, or what else commentators like to call this essential aspect of an ongoing real-time display of the game. *Chance and presence* are the core co-existing *metaphysical* meaning makers in a game: the objectively active, intervening chance, and the subjectively active, passionate presence. This metaphysical quality—the 'magic', the feeling of transcendent forces intervening — is an aspect that often creates an affective bond of observers to singular 'blessed' players or teams, as manifest in the phenomenon of supporter communities and the 'hysteria' of fans. Ball games are particularly marked by this 'hysterization', probably because the ball is a very 'nervous' entity that circulates fast between the agents as a direct incarnation of chance—the ball is the deictic finger of destiny, so to speak.

The temporal aspect of games as experiences is thus important. Observers and commentators working in real time give reasonably accurate accounts of the emotional here-and-now experience of a game (e.g. soccer, football etc.), and a semiotic blending topology may describe the process of meaning production in the phenomenological perspective of an Ag supporter (where Ag counts as his own supporter). Every Ag act must react to an Ag' act, so the *present* act of each agent must be intended as a response referring to the situation created by the other in the immediate past. To understand the present act is to blend it with the situation it refers to and of course add the schematic presupposition that it expresses an intention to 'win', rather than to 'lose'. If this is taken into account, we obtain a mental space network as the following (Fig. 2):

Fig. 2

REAL TIME BLENDING OF GAME EXPERIENCE:
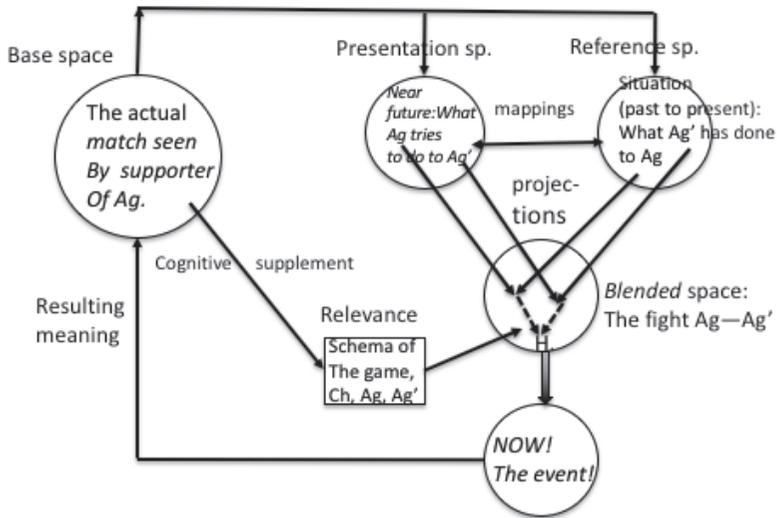
In this model, the schema shown in Fig. 1 is inserted as the relevance maker in the stabilizing supplement to the blend, that is, the element that makes it possible to make sense of it: namely the introduction of the factor of *chance*, which is not present in the mental input spaces. Every event in the extended sequence of things happening in a game will correspond to a new run of the blending network (as a circular process in real time). In this sense, the experienced match is sometimes a series of more or less brilliant instants, 'NOWS', concatenated by the continuity of deictic time but each punctuating the continuity as markers of its anti-narrative, quasi-poetic stops.

Games can induce addiction, as they induce fervent and delirious enthusiasm, probably due to the fact that this feeling of being in contact with chance 'itself' is strong and compelling, and our minds can want to be and stay in the gaming state of intense, interrogative presence, to *take* chances, asking, even begging, for signs of acknowledgment from the instance that rules these chances, but which has no name, maybe in the same key as religious believers become addicted to praying; contingency, presence, and *not-knowing* (French, *le non-savoir*) are aspects of the same basic human attraction, the sometimes irresistible need to stand before the alter of absolute Authority, be judged, and maybe symbolically die.

Notes

1   *Language and Semiotic Studies*, Vol. 4, No. 2, 2018: The Play of Signs/The Signs of Play, guest-edited by Deborah Eicher-Catt, of the International Communicology Institute.

2   Musicians play instruments, but they also 'play' the emotional roles that musical signs indicate and imply.

3   The mythical biblical opposition of *Cain and Abel* may be an early but emblematic account of

a sports competition; games may then universally be understood as sacrificial competitions, which would explain their religious affinity.

4 It is common to hear sports commentators talk about *magic* when referring to remarkable events during the unfolding of matches such as soccer games. In a sense, they may mean this literally.

5 Schematically, the binary opposition of winner and loser is related to the one opposing the states of being UP or DOWN, or being IN or OUT. For the better or the worst, it may be one of the world's most important schemas for inter-human evaluation.

6 By contrast, the losing agents are often described as 'humiliated', 'destroyed', 'wiped out', etc.—a remarkable hyperbolic emphasis is thus generally placed on winning and losing, characterized in terms of lethal violence, interpersonal or collective, even when no physical harm is done. Warfare seems to be the conceptual source of game playing.

7 The sacrificial aspect may be relevant: one of the agents, who demonstrably deserves to win, must lose, be sacrificed and symbolically die, in order for the winner to win.

About the author

Per Aage Brandt (pab18@me.com) is Adjunct Professor at the Department of Cognitive Science of Case Western Reserve University, USA. He studied with Greimas in Paris (Sorbonne Thesis 1987) and was the founder of the Center for Semiotics (1993) at the University of Aarhus, Denmark, and of the Journal *Cognitive Semiotics* (2007). He was a Fellow of the Centre for Advanced Study of the Behavioral Sciences at Stanford, CA. He is also a poet and a jazz musician.