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Doors and Keys. First Steps into a Semiotic Model for “Playership”

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Computer games have a very peculiar semiotic nature. They are a hybrid between traditional forms of textuality (like novels and movies) and everyday actions. The most important feature in computer games is the possibility for the player to intervene in a pre-designed environment. Both player's freedom and game design have to be taken into account: if traditional texts lack readers' active intervention, in real life there is no mundane predestination. Computer games combine *authorship* and *agency* into a new semiotic form of activity that could be called “*playership*”.

Understanding computer games in terms of stories and games (or of fiction and rules, as in Jesper Juul's recent model) is not satisfactory for many reasons. For first, the concept of narrative has undergone in the twentieth century some deep modifications that cannot simply be “repressed” by referring to a simpler idea of what narratives are. Secondly, the other pole of the opposition – the rules – is often considered as something specific to games while cultural rules are as pervasive as narratives. Every action has some “rules” organised in social practices, and every medium too has its own “reading” practices.

1. “Playership”, between Authorship and Agency

There are two important paradigms emerging from the twentieth century's philosophical reflection on language. The first is the structural understanding of narratives; the second is the analytical theory of action. The structural models for narratives are based on the grounding concept of *enunciation*. Written enunciation, as it has been understood by Jacques Derrida and others, is what characterises texts, detaching what is said by its author's intentions. Despite the explicit dismissal for the concept of author, we believe that this model successfully applies to all forms of expression that are interpreted as having an author. In fact, what characterises narration in all its forms is a gap or swerve between an evident level of actions, realised by some characters, and an instance organising and ruling the world in which the characters live and act. *Authorship* is fundamentally the recognition of a “deeper” level of

decisions beyond the apparent one of narrated action. Characters are “paper people”, without real intentions, because there is an author choosing for them. This leads to the fact that all *texts* – as novels and movies – are ruled by a *fate*, meaning that fictional characters are not free to take choices, but are driven to act by a stronger power. Structuralism looks for who is “really” thinking for us, for the instance beyond the apparent worlds, even if this “deep” instance is not connected with the individual traditionally referred to as author.

The analytical model for actions is instead based on the grounding concept of *intention*. An action can be considered as such only as long as an intention is recognized “behind” it, as Elisabeth Anscombe has shown. We should not believe that intentions are something “private” and related to a psychological reality that cannot be fully understood and described. Intentions are something that we “see” in everyday actions. It is important that in perceiving and realising *agency* we never split a “real” instance of decisions from the perceived person realising an action, as instead we do in reading texts. Agents are agents as long as there is no author choosing for them and turning them into “paper people”. Agency is strictly linked with *freedom*, with the idea that a person could have done otherwise and that the choices he or she made have had real effects on the development of the world – so, in order to see something as action, we cannot connect it with a certain fate or other form of determination. Moreover, for analytical scholars actions have to respect some “rules” organised in cultural “games” or *practices*. It is only the respect for these rules to make actions meaningful.

We should not believe that the “world of actions” is something remote and detached from the “narrative worlds”. Paul Ricoeur wrote that *every action turns into a narrative* with time. Whenever we reflect on a person's action, we are necessarily attributing some intentional aims to it. But when we consider a larger picture, and we put that action into a system including other actions, the intentional effects aimed by the individual agent merge with others and produce non-intended effects. As fictional narratives put characters into a story, so everyday actions are all part of

stories (and eventually of History, the institutional set of “important” stories). If we should appreciate this connection between narratives and action, we still need to pay attention to their differences. Above all, the authorial instance is present in narratives but absent in actions – as long as we consider actions as such, as essentially free and autonomous. We could compare texts and practices in this way:

Texts (<i>Authorship</i>)	Practices (<i>Agency</i>)
Author	
Narration	Narration
Characters	Agents

The difference between the two is the presence or absence of *an instance taking decisions* and turning agents into powerless characters – while in both models there is a “narrative” component: a connection of the parts into a meaningful whole. Are computer games better understood as *texts* or *practices*? The fact is that computer games are hybrids, that cannot be explained by referring to only one of the two paradigms. In fact they are created artefacts, with an authorial instance. Game stories and rules are both prepared by designers and are felt by players as additional constraints to their actions. Still players are not characters *tout court*. Playing actions are an essential parts of computer games: a description of what happens on the screen would be insufficient if it did not take into account the fact that a certain character in the game world is actually an avatar, *i.e.* is linked with a player taking real decisions (and so realising agency). It is insufficient to say that Link defeated Ganon and saved Zelda, because this could happen also in a movie. And it is also insufficient to say that the player defeated Ganon and saved Zelda, without referring to Link, because we could be describing a real action in the same way. Players are not agents *tout court*, because they play in a created world. To understand “*playership*” we need to describe both the textual and the practical dimensions of play. *Players are agents in front of an author* – bizarre and unique experience, that is actually specific to (even if not necessarily exclusive to) computer games:

Computer games (“ <i>Playership</i> ”)
Author
Narration
Agents

2. Openness and Interactivity

We have remarked that authorship corresponds to the existence of a *fate* ruling a certain world, in which people are “paper people” not realising effective intentional actions. On the contrary, our understanding of everyday practices is grounded on agents’ *freedom*, on the idea that intentions exist and are meaningful because people could have done otherwise. If computer games are in this sense a hybrid of texts and practices, are they ruled by a fate or not? What is more powerful: designers’ authorship or players’ agency? Computer games are *interactive* in the sense that some alternatives *opened* by the designers are then *closed* by the players.

Umberto Eco used the concept of *openness* to describe the fact that a writer or director may choose not to explain a certain relevant detail in a novel or movie. As for example in a detective story in which in the end it does not become totally clear who the culprit is. Openness is what really breaks the text’s fate and the author’s rule – it goes against the idea that in a text there must be one precise “closed” development. Furthermore, in an open novel readers feel that they are *reading*, because the real instance of decisions beyond the fictional world is intentionally refraining from taking a decision. So readers suddenly “see” that beyond textual appearance there is an instance taking decisions, and eventually they are induced to think at some possible alternative endings and so they may see themselves as potential authors. But in traditional open texts readers cannot take real decisions: openness is determined by the author, and an open detail will remain open eternally. On the other hand, in interactive texts like computer games, players *can effectively close what has been intentionally left open*. The point is then to understand *what* players can really choose.

We have suggested elsewhere a typology of five *kinds of playing actions*. We called *fated actions* those in which the role of the player is simply to live a certain predetermined life. For example in *The Legend of Zelda*, there is a destiny of the same nature of the ones we can find in traditional (closed) novels. Another kind of playing actions are *essential free actions*, in which players can take a few real decisions, effectively determining one among some alternative developments of the game world. For example in *Fable* the player can become a good or an evil hero, and this is a real open alternative that will have to be closed by playing. In this paper we want to better understand the distinction between these two kinds of playing actions. It is most important to describe *the connection between game appearance and the real structure of alternatives behind it*. A game may appear to give some freedom to the player,

while actually it is not allowing any free choice. On the contrary a game may appear to be “linear” in the sense of forcing the player into a precise destiny, while actually it permits some authentic choices.

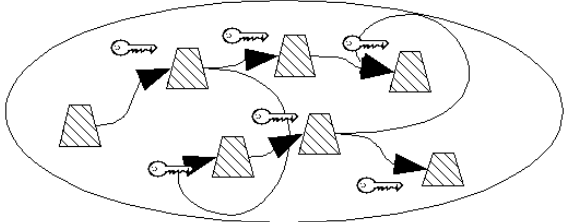
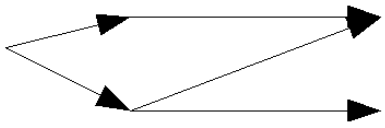
3. Sketching a Model for Playing Actions

Algirdas Greimas developed a model (called Generative Trajectory) to understand traditional texts, based on four steps of increasing abstraction. We will now draw the sketch of a model for understanding freedom and destination in computer games – *i.e.* what we have called “playership” – resembling in some ways Greimas' one. Our aim at the moment is only to highlight the gap or swerve between what the player perceives to be doing (the “shallow” choices he or she believes to be taking) and a “deeper” structure in which player's actions may of may not realise real choices.

If superficially a game may consist of a variety of different actions – slaying monsters, solving puzzles, jumping to platforms – at a higher degree of abstraction everything that happens in a game world can be seen as consisting in the completion of a certain *quest*. Players need to do something in order to obtain something, and Greimas described the

At an even higher level of abstraction, the path through the doors can be reduced to a simpler path highlighting only *the effective alternatives* that can be taken by players. It is important to note that players can never immediately “see” this “deeper” level of decisions. In computer games as well as in every traditional text there is an “immanence filter”, that does not permit to perceive the real reasons behind what happens at a more “shallow” level. Will my action irreversibly affect the development of the game world? Could I have finished the game without killing the final boss? This cannot be known, if not by replaying a game more than once.

A last, highest level of abstraction can be defined, selecting the most important differences between the “deeper” paths that the player can effectively undertake. These differences can be thought as more or less characterised *value oppositions*. These values are what gives a meaning to a game and to player's intervention as a whole. If in some computer games players play within a certain system of values, but cannot actively choose one among them (for example in any game in which in the end the hero ends up standing on the “good” side), in some other games players really choose one among the available values. This is the deepest and most important sense of “interactivity”: the free closing of a very important openness.

Levels of abstraction	
<i>Game world appearance</i>	Slaying monsters, solving puzzles, ...
<i>“Shallow” structure of doors and keys</i>	
<i>“Deep” structure of alternatives</i>	
<i>Game values</i>	Good / Evil, Freedom / Tyranny, ...

quests or “narrative programs” in terms of competences and performances. Metaphorically, every play action can be seen as consisting in the opening of a *door* by means of a *key*, moving towards another door: to defeat Wario is “the same thing” as to slay Sephiroth or M. Bison. Greimas' quest model aims to describe also the reasons why a certain act is undertaken, but we will not take this into account in this paper.

In this sense *Fable* is very different from *Zelda*. In *Fable* to a variety of game actions corresponds a uniform abstract progression (of “doors” and “keys”), to which corresponds in its turn one simpler but real bifurcation, that is ultimately linked with the opposition between Good and Evil. On the other hand, in *Zelda* the player has necessarily to impersonate the “good” ones.

3.1 Deep Nodes

If we conceive the “deep” structure of possible alternatives in a game as a tree graph, what matters the most are the *nodes* defining its disjunctions. A tree graph is probably adequate only for the games called by Juul games of *progression*, and it is only to those that we will pay attention for now. Eco suggested to trace the possible alternatives in a text by means of modal logics. Still, in traditional texts these alternatives are only potential alternatives, because as a matter of fact everything in a novel has been chosen (or left open) once and for all. On the other hand what can be traced in computer games are the paths that players can effectively take.

3.2 Nodes and Knots: a Typology of Doors

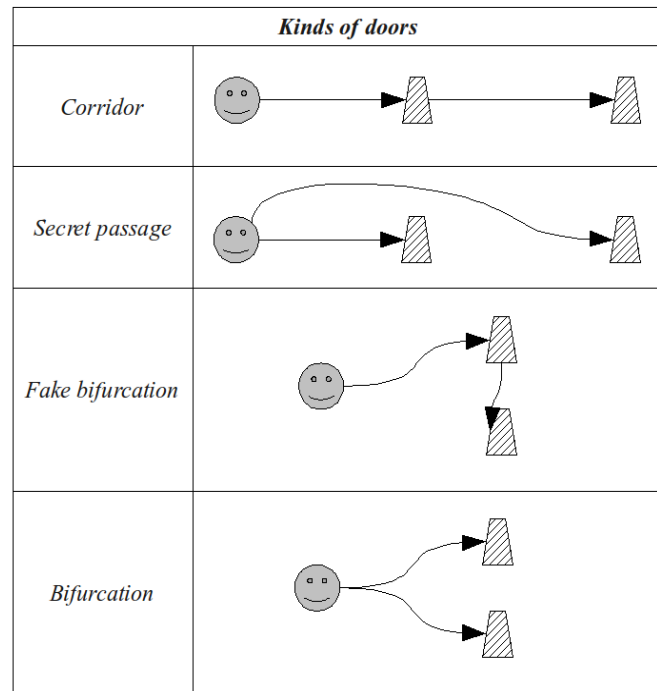
We want to focus on the fact that to the player these nodes turn into *knots*. Players may follow intricate threads but they do not know where these will lead them. Let us draw a very simple typology of doors, describing how the “deep” nodes become “shallow” knots, by taking into consideration two variables: if the “deep” play structure is open or closed – that is, if there is a real choice that the player has to take or not – and if the “shallow” game structure appears to be open or closed – that is, if the game appears to offer an alternative. The combination of these two variables defines four kinds of connections between the real, “deep” game structure and its “shallow” (however already abstract) appearance. These four kinds could be called *Corridor*, *Fake Bifurcation*, *Hidden Path*, and *Bifurcation*:

		“Deep” structure	
		Closed	Open
“Shallow” structure	Closed	<i>Corridor</i>	<i>Secret passage</i>
	Open	<i>Fake bifurcation</i>	<i>Bifurcation</i>

Opposing a “deep” and a “shallow” dimension resembles the distinction of story and plot (or discourse). The idea of story in this sense has nothing to do with the “fictional”

characterisation of the game mechanics. We have already abstracted in the first place all the specific cultural and “fictional” features of games, and we are comparing two abstract levels in which what remains of games is simply a structural “topology”.

Each of these four kinds of connections can be thought as a relation between two (or more) doors and the playing perspective. In a *corridor* the player perceives just one door, and has access only to it; in a *secret passage* the player perceives just one door, but actually has access to another door; in a *fake bifurcation* the player perceives two doors, but actually has access to just one of them; in a *bifurcation* the player perceives two doors and has access to both of them:



These are relations between “deep” and “shallow” play structures, between real choices (nodes) and apparent ones (knots). Games may realise some or all of these relations in a variety of ways. Fighting games are often corridors, some car races and many first person shooters adopt secret passages, puzzles of any kind are fake bifurcations, some graphical adventures and many strategy games have bifurcations.

3.3 Keys as Figures of Interaction

In Rhetoric there is a concept called *ordo naturalis*, meaning usual or normal order. The rhetorical figures are perturbations of the *ordo naturalis*. Heinrich Lausberg identified four basic variations: *adiectio* (addition), *detractio* (subtraction), *transmutatio* (displacement), *immutatio* (replacement). We could try to apply this idea to computer games, and in particular to the transformation of “deep” nodes into “shallow” knots.

In order to understand the deep structure of alternatives offered to players, just one grounding concept is needed – that of door. Doors are organised in linear or multi-linear *successions*. It is different instead to consider the relation between *keys* and doors. Keys and doors are both elements that have to be available *at the same time* in order to move on. A key and a door constitute the prototypical and minimal form of *combination*.

A typology of relations between doors and keys can give us a general idea of how the deep structure of a game is turned into a second structure that is perceived by the player. The *ordo naturalis* of interaction, the “original” game situation, could be conceived as a player having *one* key and needing to go through *one* door, door that can be opened with the key owned by the player. By *adiectio* and *subtractio* game designers can produce eight combinations of game situations. These eight combinations can be further described by means of three basic actions: *Open*, *Find*, *Choose*. In fact every *adiectio* to the *ordo naturalis* corresponds to the necessity for the player to *choose* one key or one door among many, while every *subtractio* corresponds to the need for the player to *find* a key or a door:

What we are looking for are the basics of a “grammar” that could be used to describe the *quality* of interaction in computer games, by reducing their complexity into a very limited amount of structural possibilities. The issue is to identify what really matters in designing interaction, which kind of basic concepts can highlight the most important differences. So if it is true that quests have to be completed (every door has to be *opened*), it is the specification of the required *competence* that is at stake in building the more “shallow” interactive structure of games. To *find* and to *choose* are then two very abstract concepts that may help to sort many kinds of more concrete game actions.

3.4 The Values at Play

What we have suggested until now, is to analyse the connections between a “shallow” and a “deep” structure of choices in computer games. But why doing all this? Ricoeur wrote that structural analysis is useful if and only if it permits to obtain a better *understanding* of some cultural objects.

Let us take two very different games, for example *Fable* and *Warcraft 3*. Let us drastically reduce their differences by seeing them as a matter of completing quests, that is finding keys and opening doors. Let us go “deeper”, seeing that in *Fable* the player can effectively choose to become good or evil; while in *Warcraft 3* the player changes side more than once, but this is not under his or her control. Even if both games represent the clash of Good and Evil, they do this in a very different fashion. In *Fable*, the player can consciously affect a system of values, realising an *essential free action*; in *Warcraft 3* the opposition between Good and Evil is at the roots of the game but is no “at play”, the player realises only *fated actions*. From a semiotic perspective, this is something that really differentiates games: which kind of freedom is given to players, which values are at stake and how players can affect them.

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