

The Relationship Between Signs and Context: Semiotic Meaning-Making in Digital Games

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Digital games constantly ask players to interpret signs in order to act, yet many signs encountered in games are far removed from recognisable real-world symbols and contexts. In this abstract, a sign means any element that a player can read as meaningful. A symbol is a more specific kind of sign whose meaning depends on convention, learned association or repeated use. This distinction is important because meaning is not contained in the symbol alone. It is produced through the relation between the sign, the thing it seems to refer to and the person interpreting it (Peirce 1992; Chandler 2007). Games connect signs to simulations, in which signs are interpreted based on how they behave within an enforced rule-based system (Frasca 2003; Kücklich 2003).

The Symbol Grounding Problem argues that arbitrary symbols do not have meaning by themselves unless they are connected to perception, action or experience (Harnad 1990). Games often make this process visible. Players may encounter abstract or unfamiliar symbols and gradually understand them through interaction. This does not mean that other media are “passive” while games are “active.” Interpretation is always an active process. What makes games distinctive is that interpretation has consequences inside the system. A player’s understanding can be confirmed, challenged or revised through play. This makes gameplay a constant process of meaning-making through action, feedback and adjustment (Herman 2000).

Games employ signs within contexts that can either stabilise or destabilise meaning. Conventional symbols are those with widely shared associations, whereas unconventional symbols lack established referents. Conventional contexts are familiar scenarios that cue predictable expectations, while unconventional contexts are surreal spaces that disrupt interpretive stability. Combining these variables produces four situations: conventional symbols in conventional contexts, conventional symbols in unconventional contexts, unconventional symbols in conventional contexts and unconventional symbols in unconventional contexts. These combinations shape the

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interpretive work players must do to understand what symbols mean and how they should be acted upon.

In conventional symbols within conventional contexts, meaning is immediately legible. Mainstream game interfaces often rely on familiar elements, such as coins signifying currency or reward, because shared cultural and genre conventions make them easy to understand. Players draw on denotation to infer function without much experimentation (Eco 1976). Meaning is stabilised because both the symbol and the context point in the same direction.

Conventional symbols placed in unconventional contexts disrupt this stability. Familiar signs lose their ordinary purpose when placed in strange or impossible environments. For example, a realistic mountain floating in a cosmic void becomes symbolically open because it cannot serve its usual environmental or navigational function (O'Reilly 2014). This shifts attention from denotation to connotation, where meaning depends more on association, atmosphere and reflection (Chandler 2007). In gameplay, this ambiguity can encourage players to ask why a familiar image feels meaningful even when its practical role has been removed (Aroni 2025). Surreal arrangements of conventional signs can therefore create uncertainty without becoming meaningless.

Unconventional symbols within conventional contexts rely on context to become understandable. When players encounter unfamiliar shapes, icons or objects within familiar task structures, they often infer meaning from behaviour rather than appearance. This mirrors the Symbol Grounding process, where arbitrary tokens gain meaning through consistent use and repeated outcomes (Harnad 1990). Even abstract objects can become legible if they reliably produce expected effects. This lets games remain playable while still challenging familiar visual or symbolic expectations (Sicart 2008). The result is an interpretive situation where the object may look strange, but its function becomes clear through use.

Unconventional symbols in unconventional contexts create the highest interpretive demand. In surreal games where both the symbols and the environment lack stable referents, players must experiment to understand what matters. They test hypotheses about patterns, rules and consequences (Neiva and Romano 2007). Because neither the symbol nor the context gives an immediate answer, meaning becomes exploratory and personal (Bruchansky, 2011). However, this does not mean that meaning is unlimited. It can still become stable inside the game through repetition, feedback and player learning. Recent work on video game semiotics also suggests that meaning in games is not relegated to just images, they extend to movement, action and practice within the game world (D'Armenio 2024). In these cases, interpretation becomes part of play itself rather than only a step before play begins.

Meaning-making in games also depends on the alignment between actions, outcomes and systemic coherence. When players can discern how actions affect the system and see their consequences integrated into a larger frame, the experience becomes meaningful play (Salen and Zimmerman 2004). Interpretation therefore involves the integration of visual signification and procedural signification, where rules express arguments through behavioural constraints and affordances (Bogost 2007). Meaning emerges when players recognise that symbols, systems and outcomes jointly communicate values or concepts.

These interpretive dynamics vary depending on how familiar or unfamiliar symbols and contexts are. When symbols are unfamiliar but contexts are conventional, players tend to infer meaning from system behaviour, forming associations based on consistent outcomes. Conversely, when symbols are familiar but contexts are strange, players draw on cultural associations to make sense of ambiguous situations. When both symbols and contexts are unfamiliar, interpretation requires players to form hypotheses about meaning through exploratory interaction. What first appears unconventional may also become conventional within a particular game as the player learns its internal logic.

These differences illustrate how games can structure meaning-making as a situated and iterative process rather than as a predetermined decoding task. By altering the stability of symbols and contexts, designers can influence whether players rely on shared cultural codes, functional inference, embodied interaction or experimental reasoning. Games therefore provide a distinctive medium for exploring how symbolic systems operate when subject to interaction, uncertainty and invention. By coordinating representation, context and systemic behaviour, games enable players to experience meaning as something constructed, tested and revised.

KEYWORDS

semiotics, symbols, signs, meaning-making, interpretation, context, ambiguity

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