

Are Themes Really Conceit? A Semiotic Proposal

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INTRODUCTION

An ecologist studying the representation of nature on Indian schools played the board games *Meadow* and *Petrichor*. She felt disconnected and detached from the game while reading the rules, during the play, and refuses to agree that by playing *Meadow*, a player would understand that the game is about constructing local ecosystems bottom up. Similarly in the case of *Petrichor*, it is difficult to buy in the idea the theme evokes the feeling of attachment towards nature or even understand the entanglement of crop-cycles and water-cycles. The ecologist felt that the themes were a deceit, designed to adhere to the UN-SDG goals and does not offer any meaningful interaction with the topic or the game. On the contrary, when the same two games are played with a gamer, he immediately understands the meaning intended by the game designers. He is able to integrate the theme with the mechanics and gameplay to produce the meaning. If the theme is supposed to be the content of the ludic form, exposing the internal logics, why does it do it selectively to certain players? How are themes related to a player's meaning-making in tabletop games?

In modern tabletop games, themes are an indispensable game design element. They have a marketing function: luring the fandom of a particular franchisee to the tabletop game (Shipp 2024). A generic theme might invite players who are looking to engage with a theme's content. For instance, one can hope that players who wish to engage with the theme of nature prefer the ecology themed games like *Meadow*, *Wingspan*, *Biotopia*, *Petrichor*, *Photosynthesis*, and so forth. Themes also do ludological work, which forms the central thread of this abstract. Themes expose, hint, and communicate at the logics of the game world aiding the player make meaning through play (Shipp 2024). A theme entangles with visual elements, gameplay, actions, and even the meta-game by helping players develop and understand metaphors it stretches and maps onto the more formal aspects of game.

Shipp conceptualises themes in board games in relation to a subject and setting: "Theme in board games is a subject in a setting with an uncertain outcome" (Shipp 2024). Furthermore, they articulate the layers to which a theme can

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percolate: actions, visuals, opt-in and baked-in thematic elements. The venture of developing themes is an effort to use themes as a design element which is mapped with mechanics and the emergent gameplay. Gutschera, Elias, and Garfield view the functioning of themes akin to the literary device of 'conceit', an extended metaphor (Elias et al. 2012).

A conceit as a literary device is a juxtaposition of seemingly incongruous concepts. Treating a game theme like a conceit implies that themes most of the times, an incongruous design element used produce meaning in excess to what the formal system can produce. The theme, then attempts to produce meaning which the ludological system was never capable of producing on its own. When viewed themes as conceit, it creates an anti-thesis. The conceit is supposed to bring in juxtaposition of incongruous concepts, however, themes-as-conceit warns of freely bringing in the incongruity. Conceits which are standard affords players to understand the gameplay better, but lack in producing newer meanings or intensifying the meaning (Elias et al. 2012). On the other hand, if the conceits are non-standard, unique, they produce unique meanings, but will give players a hard time in understanding the logics of the game. While the themes as an extended metaphor is interesting, perhaps viewing themes as a conceit needs more development.

Themes as conceit is a fairly fertile ground to deliberate on the ludological functions of theme; but it puts the idea of a theme in a procedural frame. It assumes that players will produce de-finite and pre-determined meanings when the player engages with the gameplay. Secondly, in the cases of educational games, and framification, themes and thematic elements often reduce and distort the meaning emerging out of gameplay rather than producing the excess of meaning. While the idea of metaphors in games is interesting, the idea of conceit limits the functions of themes in games.

Perhaps the semiotic approach where play is seen as a modelling activity is of import. Thibault, through Lotman, conceptualizes play as a secondary modelling system, a language capable of describing and reinterpreting reality in distinctive ways that primary linguistic systems cannot replicate (Thibault, n.d.). Unlike metaphors or conceits, which assume a predetermined mapping between design elements and player understanding, Lotman's theory of modelling systems offers a nuanced understanding of how themes function within games. Lotman posits that play is not only just a form, but it does not have content as well. This position allows us see themes not as a content that fills the ludic form, it can be seen as a form itself; a form that entangles itself with the ludic form. Dhamelia and Dalvi argue that players shape the ludic form while being in the structural rule sets (Dhamelia and Dalvi 2024). From this viewpoint, players while playing the game, model the gameplay where the thematic form and the ludic form entangle to create newer meanings. To this end, Amabel Holland argues that viewing the game mechanisms as metaphors provide a semiotic foundation than treating themes as metaphors (Hollandspiele 2025).

The Lotman's approach allows to view the ludological functions of the theme beyond the ones related with conceit, like montage and collage. The semiotic approach affords to view themes helping players model the gameplay rather than the theme being the model of gameplay.

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