

# Understanding Play Practices: Contributions to the State of the Art

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## PANEL ABSTRACT

Semiotics draws inspiration for its qualitative methodologies from many fields of scientific and cultural discourse. It aims to understand cultural production and interpretation practices by way of core theoretical notions such as narrativity, enunciation, encyclopedia, and textual openness. A continual refinement and renewal of these notions is driven by comparative analyses of problematic empirical objects. One such object is computer games which are among the hottest contemporary objects of study in new media semiotics.

A central theoretical notion used today to understand computer games is practice, which is seen as standing in opposition to the more traditional notion of text.

Panel participants will discuss gameplay practices from various theoretical standpoints, with the common goal of describing these practices in ways that open for dialogue and interaction with theoretical approaches by other disciplines and fields of study.

The panel will open by discussing how, in computer games, the reader-text interface has been radically reconfigured, opening up for more effective forms of player agency. Some contemporary play practices will be discussed on the basis of video footage of actual game sessions, highlighting the role of player bodies in gameplay space. The role of keys in RPGs will be foregrounded to show how effects of player action in games may be

constrained by game objects. Finally, we shall focus on gameplay practices that go beyond single computer games - in commercial and political Alternate Reality Games. The focus will be on how A-R games create innovative mimetic relationships with real life, engaging players in transworld-transmedia practices.

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## PATRICK J. COPPOCK

### VIDEOLUDIC TEXTS AS SITES OF ENACTIVE PRACTICE: REFRAMING THE TEXT-PRACTICE DICHOTOMY

#### ABSTRACT

In classical literary theory it has been pointed out by several authors (Iser 1974, Eco, 1984) that the activity of reading fictional texts involves readers in interactions with at least

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two types of intentional agency embedded in the text: i) an implicit (or model) reader inscribed in the text by the empirical author to guide reader interaction with the text, and ii) an implicit (or model) author that emerges in the course of text as a trace that embodies the style, voice, or persona of its author.

Interactive ludic texts and play practices they facilitate are complex blends of tangible and non tangible cultural artefacts. Their development, distribution and fruition involves many different types of explicit and implicit author-player agency. They may also exercise considerable persuasive power. Consequently, interactive videoludic texts must be conceived of as holistic game spaces where gameplay practices become enactively entangled with many other forms of social and cultural practice. This is especially the case in online games that engage players in real-life holistic play spaces all over the world.

This paper will discuss some theoretical and practical consequences of understanding videoludic practice in this way.

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#### DARIO COMPAGNO

##### DOORS AND KEYS. FIRST STEPS INTO A SEMIOTIC MODEL FOR "PLAYERSHIP"

#### ABSTRACT

Semiotics has focused for years on the concept of text, which at one and the same time both constrains and opens up objects to interpretation. Today, texts are constantly being paired with practices: social activities of cultural production and consumption. This paper argues for combining the structural concept of *enunciation* with its analytical counterpart - *intention* - in understanding computer games. The ways in which we think of the person behind a book (an author), or of someone in front of us (an agent), are in fact quite different. Our everyday actions, understandable only in terms of their desired effects, with time become parts of stories: all these effects build up networks of coincidences, combining to serve higher aims. Entering into a constructed world like a computer games *immediately* turns our actions into

narrations, offering us freedom or a fated end. The player is an agent situated in front of an author, a bizarre and unique experience. To argue for this, we will draw the sketch of a model describing the connection between the game world's appearances with its real decision structure.

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#### AGATA MENEGHELLI

##### BEING IN TUNE. A SEMIOTIC ANALYSIS OF PLAYER-GAME MACHINE INTERACTION IN RHYTHM GAMES.

#### ABSTRACT

This paper presents a semiotic analysis of the interaction between player and game machine in rhythm games, aiming to highlight some dynamics of ludic experiences in this genre. The corpus for analysis is composed of several video-recorded game sessions of "Dance Dance Revolution" (Konami, 1998, arcade) , "Donkey Konga" (Nintendo, 2003, Gamecube) and "Guitar Hero" (RedOctane/Activision, 2005-2007, PS2 e Wii).

The importance of the corporeal, perceptual and social dimension in rhythm games is the focus of this study, considering the interaction between gamer and game as a kind of translation. The gamer has indeed to translate audiovisual stimuli coming from the machine into corporeal movements. In a similar way, the machine translates the player's corporeal movements into audiovisual output. This particular bilateral process constitutes an excellent example of transmodal translation, involving different sensory canals. So, in order to play well, the gamer has to learn to *tune in* and relate to the machine in a corporeal, synesthetic way.

It will be shown how playing a rhythm game not only creates a close relation between gamer and game machine but also a complex network of social relationships between players and their audiences.

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#### **ALESSANDRO CATANIA**

#### **IMMERSIVE MEDIA PLAYGROUNDS: ARGS AS TRANSMEDIA CONSUMPTION PRACTICES.**

##### **ABSTRACT**

By focusing on contemporary tie-in Alternative Reality Games (ARGs) associated with popular film and television franchises (*The Lost Experience*, *Heroes Evolution*), this paper examines playful consumption practices encouraged by patterns of transmedia content deployment in contemporary digital entertainment media.

I will first illustrate how ARG's viewers/participants are openly challenged to engage in playful consumption practices and puzzle-solving activity to collectively parse different parts of the dispersed narratives. By leading viewers to consume all ancillary extensions of media products, ARGs promote new consumption patterns of interrelated texts across multiple media.

Secondly, by describing ARG's pervasive multiplatform textuality I will argue that the study of these hybrid games and their play practices could benefit from considering games as forms of media practice rather than focusing on their textual dimension. This will ultimately allow me to further articulate the game/play and text/practice oppositions that are crucial to game studies and critical for a full understanding of contemporary gaming experiences.

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#### **GABRIELE FERRI**

#### **ON PETROLEUM AND THE UNCANNY: CRITICAL AND SATIRICAL GAMING PRACTICES**

##### **ABSTRACT**

*World Without Oil* (PBS, 2007) is an alternate-reality game set during a petroleum shortage; *Oilgarchy* (Molleindustria, 2008) simulates the management of oil-production industries. Analyzed with ludological concepts, they seem completely different. Yet, it will be shown how a combination of semiotics of practices and procedural criticism highlights a similarity in their meaning-making processes: both of them rely on an effect of "uncanny similarity" between in-game and out-of-game assumptions.

To argue for this, two concepts are needed.

One, from pragmatist semiotics, is the notion of habit – the tendency to act in certain ways in certain situations. Both games support a TIAG habit ("This Is A Game", defining the ludic situation) and a TINAG one ("This Is Not A Game", acknowledging similarities with everyday life).

The second is the notion of quest, from narrative semiotics, redefined as a procedural manipulatory device rerouting players' interpretations. Quests, here, provide the premises derailing TINAG expectations towards TIAG settings.

It will be argued that these games rely on uncanny similarities between TIAG and TINAG assumptions and the dissonant ethical stances they support.

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

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## ABSTRACT

Semiotics has focused for years on the concept of text, which at one and the same time both constrains and opens up objects to interpretation. Today, texts are constantly being paired with practices: social activities of cultural production and consumption. This paper argues for combining the structural concept of *enunciation* with its analytical counterpart - *intention* - in understanding computer games. The ways in which we think of the person behind a book (an author), or of someone in front of us (an agent), are in fact quite different.

Our everyday actions, understandable only in terms of their desired effects, with time become parts of stories: all these effects build up networks of coincidences, combining to serve higher aims. Entering into a constructed world like a computer game *immediately* turns our actions into narrations, offering us freedom or a fated end. The player is an agent situated in front of an author, a bizarre and unique experience. To argue for this, we will draw the sketch of a model describing the connection between the game world's appearances with its real decision structure.

## INTRODUCTION

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.

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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.

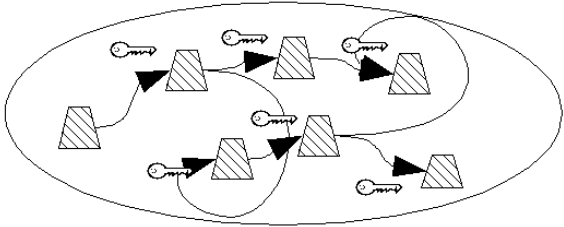
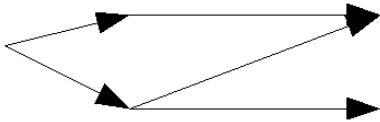
We have suggested elsewhere a typology of five *kinds of playing actions*. We called *fated actions* those in which the role of the player is simply to live a certain predetermined life. For example in *The Legend of Zelda*, there is a destiny of the same nature of the ones we can find in traditional (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 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.

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”,

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

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.

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

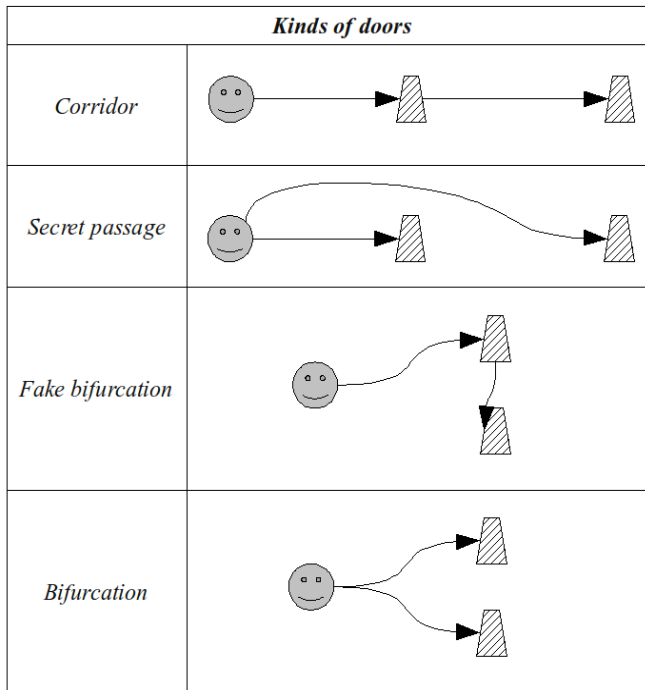
We want to focus on the fact that to the player these nodes turn into *knots*. Players may follow intricate threads but they do not know where these will lead them. Let us draw a very simple typology of doors, describing how the “deep” nodes become “shallow” knots, by taking into consideration two variables: 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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# Narratives, Agency and Immersiveness: Reflections on ARGs and Transmedia Practices.

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## ABSTRACT

This paper looks at this specific type of tie-in ARG, intended as an industrially and marketing-driven media product, and suggests a theoretical *parcours* to explore how some of the most crucial issues in games studies are articulated within ARGs. In particular, I will first argue that the narrative component has a crucial relevance in ARGs. Secondly, I will consider how narratives are articulated by investigating the fit between interactive control and user agency. Finally, I will discuss the notion of immersiveness and suggest that the study of these kind of hybrid game experiences can benefit from a broader articulation of such notion. By describing ARG's pervasive multiplatform textuality I will argue that the study of these hybrid games/plays could benefit from considering games as media practices rather than focusing on their textual dimension. This will ultimately allow me to further articulate the game/play and text/practice oppositions that are crucial to game studies and critical to a full understanding of contemporary gaming experiences. [a]

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## Keywords

transmedia, ARG, immersiveness, narratives, agency

Within contemporary entertainment media industry, cross-platform multimedia re-purposing –the simultaneous development of products for film, TV, video gaming, etc.– has become a ‘corporate house rule’ [3]. The sophistication of these cross-media connections is best exemplified when they give rise to multi-channel storytelling: television –or other media– texts simultaneously unfold across multiple platforms with each medium contributing to the overall experience of media consumption. Narrative and media theories have named this pattern of content deployment

‘transmedia’ [6].

Amid many transmedia ancillary products, games are becoming increasingly relevant. Building on the proliferation of viral and pervasive transmedia extensions, producers of recent successful television shows such as *Lost* (abc, 2004–) and *Heroes* (NBC, 2006–), are associating gaming experiences known as Alternative Reality Games (also ARG) with their franchises. In an ARGs ‘dozens, hundreds or thousands of players come together online, form collaborative social networks, and work together to solve a mystery or problem’ [9] by piecing together different parts of a transmedia instalment scattered across a multiplatform environment.

When engaging in such collaborative puzzle-solving activity, viewers/players have to look for significant clues by consuming a multiplicity of interrelated media texts. On the one hand, this illustrates how this type of tie-in ARG is mainly exploited as an hybrid marketing tool that openly challenges viewers to explore all ancillary extensions of a transmedia franchise thus maximising exposure and potential advertising and merchandising revenues [14]. On the other hand, this points to a complex multiplatform engagement that adds an explicit note of playfulness to the cross-media consumption practices required to consume transmedia content. *Heroes 360 Experience*, for instance, the ARG of the popular TV series –later renamed *Heroes Evolutions*–, the name of which already emphasises the surrounding nature of this pattern of content deployment, gives participants the possibility to enhance their media experience by downloading wap applications, subscribing websites, finding passwords from the TV show to have access to extra Heroes-related contents on the web, etc.

ARGs have been rather widely discussed in recent scholarship. In particular McGonigal has written extensively on ARGs using theories of performance and play, as well as collective and participatory intelligence [9;

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11]. ARGs have also been discussed as an example of media convergence, cross-media entertainment, fan cultures, etc. [12; 6; 1]. ARGs, however, have been seldom discussed in relation to some of the crucial issues in games studies, notably game narratives and interactivity.

## NARRATIVES

ARGs allow the viewer to explore an extended narrative storyworld and acquire in depth knowledge of such narrative space. The viewer can explore many levels of the show/text, surf media for pieces of its narrative universe and engage in playful consumption practices by putting different pieces of the storyworld together. The reference to the unique storyworld provides the crucial interpretative path which allows players to link different transmedia extensions and clues.

Narrative coherence, however vague and fluid it might be, also regulates the industrial logics of transmedia and multiplatforming which aim to tap the emotional residue from previous or similar narrative experiences [7]. By exploiting successful shows and narrative universes, producers allow for an enhanced engagement to follow a significant, however thin, narrative thread running through the products spread across multiple platforms.

In this respect, the logics of wringing the product's narrative potential with transmedia extensions is very similar to the logics of adaptation. The unique appeal of the movie *Street Fighter: the Legend of Chun Li* (Andrzej Bartkowiak, 2009), or of videogame *Enter the Matrix* (Atari, Shiny Entertainment, 2003) comes from their position as an extension of these specific narrative universes. Moreover, this is not only true from an industrial perspective but also in terms of consumption pleasure in user-generated content: only a few days after the release of the *Star Wars - The Force Unleashed* (LucasArts, 2008), the cutscenes of the game were available on YouTube on user-generated playlists to watch as a movie, thus bringing the narrative component to the forefront while sacrificing interactive control.

It may be argued that the social networking and collaborative puzzle-solving effort is the most crucial aspect of ARGs that describes them better than their narrative coherence. While this may be true from a general point of view, I argue that such collaborative effort is always directed and patterned in accord, even if partial, with the narratives intended as a narrative centre of gravity rather than as a rigid structure. And in fact, even when the practices of play and transmedia consumption intersect the practices of fan cultures, *fan fiction* [b] tends not to 'transgress the main narrative framework' [14] of the original corporate-controlled product.

Whatever the theoretical approach of a study of ARGs is, we cannot fail to consider how the narrative reference to a known storyworld provides the organisational principle around which consumption practices and transmedia content –both user-generated and corporate-controlled– are organised.

## AGENCY

But how does the player/viewer explore the transmedia storyworld? In other words, how is storytelling articulated and what is the place of the player/viewer? [c]

In terms of control –meaning the ability of the participant to determine narrative developments– this type of tie-in ARG gives the player almost insignificant control over the narratives. While such inability to influence the course of the story is usually associated with a reduced interactivity and thus substantiates the claims about more interactive media –such as the internet– being somehow better than “passively” watching a TV show, I argue that this kind of product is meant to enhance other components of the gaming experience.

In a study on the audience engagement with the *24* (FOX, 2001-) and *Spoons* (BBC, 2002-) transmedia storyworlds, Elizabeth Evans [5] discovered that the participants did not value interactivity as automatically “good”. The interactive control of gaming was not privileged over the kind of immersion available from watching a television series; instead a combination of the two was desired in different forms. The participants willingly give interactive control up as they don't want the “responsibility” to decide the course of the story. On the contrary, participant want to “be there” when the story unfolds [d].

The kind of engagement desired in transmedia franchises and ARGs therefore privileges immersion over narrative control and interactivity. This combination of low user control on narratives and strong immersive components points to a necessity to further articulate –and possibly rethink– the relations between interactivity, agency and immersiveness.

## IMMERSIVENESS

Immersiveness is either a hype-word or a very specific idea of immersion in a virtual environment. In the former case the notion has no theoretical consistency; in the latter its uses are limited to a very specific category of texts/games. Immersiveness should therefore be redefined in a slightly broader context and sense, perhaps losing some of its explanatory efficiency, but probably allowing us to understand more complex media practices such as ARGs.

The scholarship has identified many different categories of

immersiveness. There is a sensory immersion –the experience of entering into a 3D environment–, a psychological immersion –when the player confuses game and reality–, a spatial immersion –if the simulated world is convincing enough for the player to believe he is actually there [2]. But we can also consider strategic immersion, as associated to mental challenge –multiple choices, puzzles, etc.– and, in particular, narrative immersion. This latter kind of immersiveness occurs when players become invested in a story. Ryan [16] tells us that one measure of narrative immersion is the reader’s mental detachment from the real-world surroundings to inhabit the fictional universe.

If we look at immersiveness, ARGs seem to go beyond the simple narrative immersion by creating mixed realities where the narrative storyworld merges with the real one. The participant inhabits the fictional storyworld and simultaneously inhabits the real world as this narrative universe overlaps with the real everyday life space. The show is then transformed into something that resembles a game but goes beyond those boundaries too, as it crosses over into real life and erodes the boundaries between fact and fiction, in accord with the logic of “this is not a game” typical of ARGs.

Despite the loss of control over the narratives, this is precisely the sensation ARGs aim to produce: the “illusion” that players are contributing to an emergent narrative. Such illusion is created by blurring the line between programme and media place to create an inhabitable space that pervades consumers’ everyday lives. Immersiveness is therefore something more than the illusion of a simulated environment and incorporates the complex effects created by media and narrative scenarios surrounding the subject [10].

## CONCLUSIONS

With the proliferation of hybrid promotional/narrative content, a fruitful approach to games has to focus on the industrial and consumption practices that make these media products appealing rather than interrogating textuality. Whereas traditional notions of textuality assume that a text is ‘singular, unified, and autonomous, these forms of transmedia entertainment are propelled by a centrifugal force that guides the viewer away from the immediate textual experience toward a more pervasive sense of textuality’ [8]. The investigation of ARG as texts reveals its theoretical pitfalls when ARGs’ narratives not only bridge through different platforms but also eventually merge with the spaces and activities of everyday life.

Moreover, ‘the structural aspects that games share with other media regarding their industrial context of production reveal that different forms of digital entertainment should not be conceptualised as an isolated issue, but as part of a

broader context of media’ [15]. With Nick Couldry [4] we should theorise media as an open set of practices and decenter media research from the analysis of text content. Considering videogames as a media practice, thus, would imply not only attending to videogame consumption –or the practice of playing games–, but also to how the gaming practice is related to other media practices [15].

It is precisely at the intersection of these media practices that ARGs exploit the potential of transmedia and frame the consumer/viewer’s behaviour allowing “playfulness” to permeate different media practices. It may be argued whether the “gameness” quality is lost in this kind of environment, even though its practices can still be described in terms of control and immersiveness. This would be the topic for future discussions. Either way, even if the textual nature of the games and ARGs radically differs, an approach that emphasises media consumption practices can be useful to understand both and can indeed shed some light on the increasingly frequent cross-over of videogames and other new media forms, such as ARGs.

## NOTES

1. The paper is an extended version of the talk for DiGRA 2009 conference in London as part of *Understanding Play Practices: Contributions to the State of the Art* panel. The paper does not aim to provide an exhaustive analysis of ARGs, rather, in the “ARGonauts”’ own slang, it aims to provide a “rabbit hole”, a point of entry, for games studies to explore these media products.

2. *Fan fiction* is the term used to describe those stories that take place within the narrative universe of the original work, or simply linked to the work’s narrative canon, which have been created by the fans of such work rather than by the official authors. Fan fiction is thus defined as it is positioned and articulated in relation to the narrative canon of the original work without officially being part of it.

3. The fit between interactive control and game narratives is a crucial issue in game studies that has long fuelled the debates between narratological and ludological approaches. Further articulation of this point in relation to ARGs is therefore necessary.

4. Murray (1997) describes this desire of the subject to be projected into other dimensions, alternative realities, as the “sweet otherness” that makes narrative compelling.

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# On Petroleum and the Uncanny: critical and satirical gaming practices

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## ABSTRACT

The semiotic notion of *practice* is an important supplement to ludologic and procedural studies, allowing more situated analyses without losing a general focus. Its adequateness will be tested describing the *meaning-making strategies* of two games, Oiligarchy and World Without Oil. A practice-based analysis let us keep track of how players' interpretations, expectations and assumptions are re-routed during gameplay.

## Author Keywords

Semiotics, practice, pragmatism, interpretation, assumption, moral, values.

## INTRODUCTION

Oiligarchy (Paolo Pedercini, Molleindustria, 2008) is a Flash-based management game; World Without Oil (Independent Lens, ITVS Interactive, CPB, 2007) was an online *Alternate Reality Game* that was played in May 2007 - both dealing with oil extraction and consumption. While they may seem different, both of them generate a sense of uneasy, uncanny similarity between what happens during gameplay and what could happen to the real world. Ludology alone cannot find a common mechanics between the two titles and a narratological analysis stalls after noticing common thematic elements. An interdisciplinary approach combining the semiotic notions of *practice* [8], *assumption* and *habit* [15] with *diegesis* [7] from narratology will be used alongside ludology [9, 10] and procedural criticism [1, 14] to explore *meaning-making strategies* in Oiligarchy and WWO.

## LUDOLOGICAL INSIGHTS

A ludological analysis [9] describes Oiligarchy as a game of resource allocation and management, requiring players to optimize certain variables in relation to simulated events. Specifically, it represents an oil-extraction corporation; the main parameters to be considered by players are placement, number and size of oil rigs, the amount of money to be spent for lobbying and some special actions like interfering in foreign politics. Players, in a tutorial, are instructed to maximize profits "by any means necessary". However, the winning strategy for the first half of the game - building as many rigs as needed - becomes impossible to sustain in the

last part. Trying to continue using it leads to worse and worse scenarios, ending with a massive nuclear war. To avoid such conclusion, players should change tactics: gradually diminishing oil extraction and stopping their political interferences. This practice eventually leads to a situation in which the player's avatar retires because oil is not a necessity anymore.

Alternate reality games are, from a ludologic point of view, games of progression, designed to be played only once by a large number of users at the same time. Their main mechanics usually consists in gathering and decrypting informations across several media - occasionally requiring physical performances to be executed in the real world to access some clues. No significant competition takes place amongst players: they need to cooperate and coordinate their efforts to complete difficult challenges. Like many other ARGs, World Without Oil features a *trailhead*, or prelude: in this case, eight fictional characters learned about an imminent oil shortage and started preparing for it while documenting their activities. Usually a trailhead contains the first puzzle of the sequence constituting the game. On the contrary, the *creative agenda* [2] suggested to the participants of WWO focused on exploring the simulated reality rather than on the game itself. Users were asked to roleplay inside the *diegesis* [7] defined by the prelude, writing blogs and diaries as if an oil crisis was really underway. Every player-generated contribution was accepted as real in the game world - in the same way *tabletop* roleplayers' sentences are treated as *performatives* in gaming situations. The setting of WWO rapidly became richer in details, as users imagines demonstrations, riots but also novel ways of living, travelling and working without fuels.

## DISCURSIVE POSITIONING

In addition to the anomalies in game mechanics that have just been highlighted, it is also difficult to position Oiligarchy and World Without Oil in relation to journalistic and entertainment *discourses* [16]. In both games, several combined factors - contextual, intertextual, thematic and semantic - point in different directions.

*Context* and *peritext* [7] support the ludic nature of the two video games. Oiligarchy is accessible from several popular

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websites collecting Flash-based games and is discussed on forums containing game-related threads, such as high scores, solutions and requests for help. On the other side, the context of WWO is more complicated because ARGs, by convention, do not acknowledge themselves as "games". However, its main web site stresses its playful nature - beginning with the chosen tagline: "Play it - before you live it".

Narrative and figurative elements fleshing out the ludological mechanics of both games share several thematic traits with texts pertaining to journalistic discourses. Real-world places and times and news-published stories are part of the premise of WWO and are referenced in the first part of the gameplay in Oiligarchy.

*Intertextual* and *interludical* knowledge suggests that a frequently employed strategy to distance games from news discourses is to include clearly fictional elements. For instance, a computer game detailing an extraterrestrial invasion would probably be perceived as fictional even if the representation of planet Earth would be completely realistic. Neither WWO nor Oiligarchy use such strategy. A second possibility - also intertextually supported - is to let players face accurate representations of real-world problems while their simulation is tuned to be solvable with a series of appropriate decisions. This would preserve the non-burdening and entertaining values of such games, characterizing the player's avatar as a hero. WWO negates such a possibility: players, neither individually nor collectively, do not have the power of ending an oil crisis - only to roleplay how they cope with it. Oiligarchy, instead, is a game that can be solved; but only within a particular set of axiological, ethical assumptions. Staying true to the quest assigned at the beginning ("maximize profits by any mean necessary") leads, as a secondary consequence, to the end of the world. A positive ending, the "retirement" scenario, is technically a defeat for players who adhere to the original premise.

### **SEMIOTICS OF GAMEPLAY PRACTICES**

To account for the the ambiguous features of Oiligarchy and WWO, we need also to consider - from a semiotic point of view - the *gameplay practices* they support.

Recent semiotics consists of a wide set of theoretical tools to understand and describe meaning-making processes. Its focus is not on a specific subject's experience nor on a quantitative statistic study. It rather concentrates on describing how meaning-making is supported by elements of significative objects - such as written texts, audiovisuals, physical artifacts or computer games - on which an interpretive activity is applied.

When a semiotic analysis deals with human subjects, readers, users or players, they are not considered as single, empirical, actual beings. It focuses instead on the other side of the medal: those mechanisms that, embedded in the

studied object, try to build an ideal user and to govern the reader/text cooperation.

While recognizing the openness of many texts and the potentially infinite quantity of personal, idiosyncratic interpretations [4], a semiotics of computer games chooses to limit its study to elements that are explicitly in the gameplay and to the strategies building a model player. It will be also considered how some supports, actantial and procedural configurations of the gaming system, attract the ideal player towards different assumptions and dispositions to act or interpret.

Gameplay practices are, thus, an unavoidable horizon for every study of games, yet it is difficult to have a clear picture of them without narrowing the focus and losing track of other general features. In generative semiotics, practices have been defined as "signifying series of organized somatic behavior, the realizations of which go from simple social stereotypes up to the programmations that are algorithmic in form (and that can permit, where it is called for, recourse to an automaton)" [8]. So, a specific task for a game semiotician is to explore how - in a certain system - those algorithms and automata are organized in relation to a model player and to some ideal practices. After that, it may be appropriate to pass the burden of describing actual gaming practices to digital ethnographers and anthropologists in order to validate our hypotheses and to account for unexpected, deviant gameplay.

### **Intradiegetic and extradiegetic dispositions**

Considering how model players are disposed to enact certain gameplay practices is an interesting heuristics for game analysis that will help us to better understand Oiligarchy and WWO. It will be shown that some key dispositions to interpret and act, supported by both games, aim for practices outside conventional gameplay. For this specific analysis, two set of tendencies will be considered: *intradiegetic* and *extradiegetic play*. The former implies a separation between other activities and gameplay-related practices and interpretations; the prevalence of this assumption positions a system amongst the discourses of entertainment. Extradiegetic play, on the other hand, allows practices suggested by the game system to interpret, to relate to, to act on other semiotic objects from the outside.

In previous works [5], as well as in other literature dealing with Alternate Reality Games [11, 12, 13], intradiegetic and extradiegetic sets of assumptions were labeled "*This is a Game*" and "*This is Not a Game*". However, further insights suggest that such convention might have been inappropriate as too much *computer-centered*. For instance, while computer-based gameplay practices usually do not involve elements other than those actualized by their specific software, the same is not true for different types of play practices, such as children's make-believe games. Finding a simple boundary, a necessary and sufficient

condition, to discriminate amongst games and not-games is a much more difficult task that would probably require a more complex, holistic approach. The study of these two tendencies and of the crucial re-routing moment between them will let us focus on how both games make sense.

Intradiegetic assumptions are first supported in the tutorial at the beginning of Oiligarchy. "World War II is over and the future looks bright for the West. Your new office is on the top floor of one of the biggest oil companies in the world. Your task as CEO is to turn that black sticky stuff by any means necessary. [...] Now you know the basics and you should be able to run a booming business. At least, until the oil production will start to decline. At that point, things might get a little crazy..." This short text primes the initial expectations, tactics and objectives for gameplay practices, also drawing a strong moral disposition inside the *diegesis*. Obtaining the maximum profit is, thus, a *euphoric* [8] objective, a value so strong to cancel the ethical implications of what is done to accomplish it ("*by any means necessary*").

The algorithmic procedures governing Oiligarchy are set up so that following the "optimal" strategy suggested in the tutorial yields good results until the oil availability starts to decline. After that moment, two key parameters enter the game: on one side oil exhaustion, the degree to which natural reservoirs have been used; on the other side oil addiction, an index representing how dependent from fossil fuels Western societies are. An ideal gameplay practice, as primed by intradiegetic assumptions and by the "profit as the supreme good" set of values, will keep on maximizing oil extraction to satisfy addicted societies in spite of the impending scarcity. This will conceivably attract players towards more aggressive policies to keep the offer/demand ratio in check. Finally, in the second half of the game, algorithms in the simulation stop allowing such gameplay practices - leading to a final scenario involving a global nuclear exchange.

That could be a turning point in experiencing Oiligarchy, a re-routing of assumptions and practices. The moral priming given by the tutorial may have framed certain in-game actions allowing players to consider them as positive even if culturally shared values would stand against them. However, bringing the game to a scenario with a nuclear "mutually assured destruction" conflicts not only with extradiegetic ethics, but also with the previously-assumed intradiegetic one - as the end of the world is clearly also the end of the game.

Players may, afterwards, re-play Oiligarchy - this time ignoring or re-interpreting at least part of the originally proposed quest for maximum profit. Several phases of trials-and-errors are plausible at this point. Given the implicit failure of the intradiegetic "maximize the profits" stance, users are thus supported in their experiments with other alternative, extradiegetic strategies - until they reach

the one rewarded with a more optimistic final scenario.

A similar semiotic mechanism is at work also in World Without Oil. Alternate Reality Games are a relatively recent phenomenon but it is already possible to trace some hypotheses on their prototypical form. Their main game mechanics include following a cross-media distributed narrative, solving puzzles to obtain some necessary informations and finding hidden links to proceed from one segment to another. It is possible to identify a degree of *procedural authorship* [14] in ARGs even if the algorithms regulating them are relatively simple and often enacted by human game-masters rather than implemented in software. Hidden links are an example of this procedural simplicity - as the corresponding algorithm may be a basic if-then clause causing certain clues to appear on screen when, for instance, the mouse cursor hovers on a specific area. Other algorithms may not exist in software but be implemented in human practices - as actual actors and performers may be used to interact with players.

Even if they are distributed across different media and played by many users at the same time, conventional ARGs still feature an intradiegetic narrative development, regulated by the game-masters' procedural authorship through intradiegetic puzzles. A significant difference separating video games and ARG gameplay practices is the fact that the latter allows extradiegetic competences and resources to be used as tools to solve in-game problems. For example, the famous "I Love Bees" ARG presented to its users a set of times, dates and geographic coordinates identifying pay phones scattered across the United States. They rang at the specified times and, if somebody answered, he would have heard a fragment of narration. Also, small tasks - like providing a correct password - or more complicated missions - such as recruiting a number of people and have them show up in person at the phone location - were usually required.

WWO takes this semiotic, meaning-making strategy a step further. Diegesis [7] is established with the premise, the trailhead of WWO telling about the impending oil crisis. It is also regularly re-proposed, revamped with announcements reporting the current (intradiegetic) fuel prices and highlighting some particular events amongst those imagined by players on their blogs. Users expecting a common ARG are quickly frustrated by the lack of explicit challenges. There are no centralized intradiegetic puzzles proposed to every participant. Few generic real-world missions are proposed ("try to create a vegetable garden on your rooftop") but there are no mysteries and no puzzles to be solved. Procedural authorship is different from other ARGs: instead of suggesting shared tasks to the community, the trailhead is used to turn each participant's everyday practices into specific problems to be solved.



## FIGURES OF UNCERTAINTY AND UNCANNY

Oiligarchy and WWO adopt similar strategies to erode the independence of intradiegetic gameplay practices. First of all, both game systems are organized so that knowledge and data originating from within the ludic diegesis are not sufficient nor effective. On one side, the mission and the moral assumptions suggested by the tutorial in Oiligarchy - make money no matter what - are misleading and prelude to the end of the world. On the other one, WWO does not even provide detailed procedural guidance except for the trailhead and relies on the know-how that users may obtain from other sources and share amongst themselves.

Also, both games discourage a "suspension of players' disbelief" - as there are no completely implausible narrative elements, at least in the key parts of their unfolding. At the same time, both systems may reach, through gameplay practices, certain configurations bearing intertextual similarities with *disphorically* [8] charged topics of journalistic discourse - such as wars in Middle East in Oiligarchy or Katrina-like civil unrest in WWO.

Finally, the degree of control that users, through gameplay practices, may exert over the narrative unfolding of the two games is limited. In Oiligarchy, only a few final scenarios are possible - the end of the world, a dystopian recession or, hopefully, the obsolescence of oil extraction - but players cannot experiment further. Agency [14] is, in this very specific sense, even more limited in WWO - whose participants could do almost anything except directly solve the energy crisis: the focus is not on a heroic solution for the catastrophe but rather on imagining, describing and sharing ideas and stories of survival.

These three procedural and semiotic figures support meaning-effects of ambiguity, as if these games were oscillating between journalistic and entertainment discourses. A gap of uncertainty, of uncanny similarity between reality as narrated in the news and as simulated the games, emerges when intradiegetic and extradiegetic assumptions clash, collide or overlap [6].

## CONCLUSIONS

So far, it has been shown how Oiligarchy and WWO generate ambiguity and uneasiness by supporting, at first sight, gameplay practices based on intradiegetic assumptions - while actually extradiegetic are the most adequate ones. After having sketched some remarks on how gaming practices in the two games are rerouted from intradiegetic to extradiegetic expectations and values, we can now focus on the *conceivable consequences* of these meaning-making strategies. The pragmatist semiotic notion of *habit* is crucial to represent such consequences for players. C.S. Peirce defined habits as tendencies to interpret, act or perceive in similar way in the future [15]; their utility for this analysis is that they are not fixed, deterministic rules but rather flexible dispositions.

Interpretive processes, according to Peirce's model, produce other signs (process of semiosis) and habit-changes, modifications of someone's tendencies towards action. It is now finally possible to give a more satisfying description of Oiligarchy and WWO as systems designed to promote the grounding of new habits. When intradiegetic assumptions fail to yield the expected results, their rerouting also produces certain habit-changes. Through the games, players explore risks (war for more oil reservoirs, as represented in Oiligarchy), difficulties and their possible solutions (such as ideas for more fuel-efficient transport, as they were crowdsourced in WWO). Such systems operate as premises on which new, potential habits for dealing with a future without oil are developed. Or, in other words, quoting a blog post<sup>1</sup> that was part of the WWO game, to "hope for the best but prepare for the worst".

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