Exploring the Meaning Potential of Image Schemata in Fictional Games

Doris C. Rusch
DePaul University, College of Computing and Digital Media
243 S. Wabash, 60604 Chicago, IL
drusch1@cdm.depaul.edu

ABSTRACT
This paper explores how the experiential structures of image schemata can impact the meaning of fictional games. Tying up to previous work on “experiential metaphors” (Rusch 2009) and their role in abstract games (Begy 2010), this paper investigates how image schemata can impact the relationship between a game’s theme and meaning; how image schemata can facilitate experimentation in the design process; and how image schemata can help to identify dubious subtexts in fictional games.

Keywords
Image schema, metaphors, experience, game design, fictional games

EXTENDED ABSTRACT
By way of three examples, this article explores how the experiential structures of image schemata can impact the meaning of fictional games. An image schema is “a dynamic pattern that functions somewhat like the abstract structure of an image, and thereby connects up a vast range of different experiences that manifest this same recurring structure.” (Johnson & Lakoff 1980; Johnson 1987). Many concrete experiences can share the same underlying structure, e.g. thesis-writing and pregnancy are both experiences characterized by a “build-up” phase, growing tension, followed by an instance of release. The structure is abstract, but we recognize its experiential content in its various manifestations. Experiences that are vastly different on the surface can thus feel similar. (Rusch 2012)

Image schemata do not only play a role in understanding and structuring real-life, but also gameplay experiences. Begy explored how “experiential metaphors” (Rusch 2009) – i.e. metaphorical projections of image schemata – can facilitate the interpretation of abstract games (Begy 2010). Without recognizable fictional dressing, the key to an abstract game’s meaning can be found in its formal, affective structures. The affective component is essential as it distinguishes the image schematic approach from procedural rhetoric. (Bogost 2007; Treanor et.al 2010; Treanor et.al 2012).

Tying up to Begy’s work, this paper explores image schema’s role in:
1) the mapping between theme and meaning: An analysis of American McGee’s Grimm: Little Red Riding Hood shall illustrate how a game’s theme (e.g. rebellion against fairyland’s cuteness) can be supported by the core mechanics (soiling fairyland through moving, butt stomping and peeing) but still be undermined by its underlying image schema. The analysis will reveal
why the gameplay has an obsessive, compulsive feel to it, far removed from
the anarchic romping suggested by fiction and core mechanics.

2) facilitating experimentation: The design process of Elude, a metaphorical
game about depression, illustrates how the initial definition of the game's
image schema facilitated collaborative design and experimentation without
risking to lose the game's vision. With the structure firmly in place, a play-
space was opened up for systematic, paradigmatic explorations of different
fictional dressings. These explorations revealed significant nuances in
meaning and enabled the identification of a mapping that best supported the
game's experiential and conceptual goals.

3) identifying dubious subtexts: Depending on the fictional mapping, the
implied meaning in an image schema's experiential structures can create an
ethically charged subtext to the game. An analysis of the Christian real-time
strategy game Left Behind: Eternal Forces shall illustrate this idea by closely
analyzing the game's "conversion" gestalt, how it establishes an antagonistic
force and suggests a straightforwardness in action that eliminates room for
reflection and doubt.

Through exemplary study of the interplay between a game’s image schemata and its
fictional dressing, this paper aims to raise awareness for a so far under-explored aspect of
meaning-generation in games. Understanding how experiential structures can impact a
game’s interpretation is crucial for the deliberate design of games that are coherent in
terms of message and experience.

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