



ROOT, Woodland Ideologies in a Fantasy Game

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ABSTRACT

In this paper I reconstruct and outline some realisations of different forest ideologies, through the analysis of the digital adaptation of the boardgame *ROOT - A Game of Woodland Might and Right*. In particular, I use a semiotic square to map the different semantic fields and core strategies of the four different factions of the game, each featuring a different way to engage with forests. The analysis allows me to identify some key ideologies that, embedded in the game, reflect larger conceptualisations of the relationship between humans and woodlands. In the conclusion, the paper highlights how games, encompassing both a rule structure and a narrative layer, can offer a vantage point for the analysis of ideological constructions. Future research could apply similar methods to other games in an attempt to map the many ways in which forestry spaces, and our relations with them, are constructed.

CCS CONCEPTS

• Applied computing → Media arts; • Human-centered computing → Empirical studies in HCI.

KEYWORDS

woodland, ideology, sustainability, gaming, semiotics

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1 INTRODUCTION

Throughout history, humanity's relationships with woodland have been manyfold. Forests have served as ideal places to gather resources (game, wood, berries etc.) as well as a space to hide (from bandits to the *maquis*, it has been portrayed as an idyllic space (the Garden of Eden) or as a place for danger (in innumerable fairy tales). A variety of forest ideologies can then be detected in innumerable cultural artifacts, ranging from the Roman mosaics of the Villa Romana del Casale to the VR game *The Forest* by Endnight Games. In this paper we aim to reconstruct and outline some of these ideologies, using as a starting point the boardgame *ROOT - A Game of Woodland Might and Right* designed by Cole Wehrle and published by Leader Games and its 2020 digital adaptation by

Dire Wolf Digital. Digital games have often been used for cultural critique and analysed from an ecocritical perspective [4]. Similarly, boardgames, despite being often overlooked, can be fascinating entry points for socio-cultural critique [11] and several studies have focused on the cultural roles and ideological messages that they contain (e.g. in relation to colonialism [3]).

We selected ROOT for our analysis because of several reasons, the main one being that its game mechanics are particularly apt to represent different possible attitudes towards forest spaces. Many games contain one main forest ideology (described openly or through procedural rethorics [2]) or two, presented in opposition to each other. ROOT, however, has four. It is a strategy game in which four different factions struggle for controlling a forest, represented by the board. Each faction follows different rules and victory conditions, making it an *asymmetrical* game and constructing four different ways to engage with the in-game woodland. Both the game mechanics and the representational level of ROOT cooperate in constructing four specific ways of interacting with the woodland – and therefore of conceiving it. In this paper we will analyse these modes of interaction, in the attempt to reconstruct the underlying forest ideologies.

In our analysis we have decided to focus more specifically on the digital version of the boardgame. The digital version is very faithful to the original, although it presents some extra content in the tutorial that we believe might reinforce our analysis. As all the materials included in the board game are also present in the digital game the analysis of the digital version can be extended to the original board game as well.

2 METHODS

There are many possible ways to investigate the ideological positions emerging from playful media. Different methodologies can be used to look into the ideological assumptions and messages expressed both in the narrative layers of games or within their rules and gameplay. Methods inspired to deconstruction [12], discourse analysis [8] and critical theory [10] have all been used to this end.

In our paper we chose to make use of a semiotic methodology. Semiotics can provide some useful tools for textual and discourse analysis. Its tradition, drawing both from structuralism and post-structuralism, is particularly indicated for systematic analysis and the creation of typologies – and is well suited for the object of our study: a game that provides four different factions and ways to interact with forest spaces.

In particular we will base our analysis on the construction and use of a semiotic square. This heuristic tool was developed by Greimas [9] as a way to outline and explore the basic semiotic oppositions emerging in a text. It is structured as an axis of contraries (A vs B) that form a basic opposition, and developed in a second axis of subcontraries (not-A vs not-B) that expand the opposition. The



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square, once built, allows to map the different semiotic positions emerging from a specific text. The semiotic square has been later expanded beyond simple textual analysis as a tool capable to propose deep schematizations of larger cultural context. Floch's square of valorisations, for example, has been used in marketing to explore how users value different facets of a product or an experience [7]. Similarly, the square of veridiction by Greimas and Courtés has been used to explore the discursive workings of deception and secrecy [5].

The use of Greimas' square is not new to the study of games. In recent years it has been proposed as a key instrument for a semiotic analysis of games and play [13] and it has been used to map and systematise different game elements [1], the valorisations connected to different mobility practices [14], and to define the structures of gamification [6].

We argue, hence, that while probably not exhaustive on its own, the semiotic square can provide us with some insights on how the representations of forests in ROOT emerge from different ideological positions towards woodlands.

To create a semiotic square of ROOT, the first step is to highlight the four factions of the game. As they both participate in the meaning-creation mechanisms of the game, we will look both into the game mechanics and the narrative devices that define them. While ROOT does not possess a defined plot or a storyline, many of the descriptions, images and names present in the games provide strong thematisations.

In our analysis of the different elements defining each faction we will try to identify some deep semantic oppositions that we can use to build the square. Once the square is constructed, we will be able to position the different game factions around it, together with the strategies that are implied by their gameplay. Around this base we will then reconstruct the forest ideologies of the game and map them.

3 RESULTS

3.1 ROOT factions and semantic fields

The first faction in ROOT is that of the **Marquise de Cat**. Players using this faction side with cats attempting to maintain hegemony over the forest. The virtual player mat contains the following description: "You have conquered the forest. Now you must build a kingdom worthy of your name". The game tutorial (Fig. 1) goes a bit further and introduces the idea that the Marquise "exploits the forest" to fuel her "economic and military machine".

Perfectly in line with these descriptions, the semantic field of *building* is strongly connected with the themes of the faction. The marquise special rules are named "The Keep" and "Filed Hospitals", which are both buildings that players can edify within the forestry spaces.

As for the game mechanics, they focus on collecting wood (even if this appears to be a quasi-infinite resource in the game and does not affect the forest in itself) and reward with victory points the construction of structures such as sawmills. The rules and narrative, hence, seem to be both strongly oriented towards the idea of "building".



Figure 1: Tutorial description of the Marquise de Cat



Figure 2: Tutorial description of the Eyrie Dynasties

The second faction is the **Eyrie Dynasties**. Players using this faction represent bird families engaged in reconquering the forest. The player mat description states: "In a moment of weakness the Marquise descended. Now you have rallied your strength and are poised to recapture your birthright". The tutorial of the digital game insists on similar themes (Fig. 2) by mentioning "glory" and an "once-great aristocracy". Here the main theme is that of *heirloom*, highlighted by the faction name as well as by the idea of "birthright" and "aristocracy". The continuity through family appears in the themes and game mechanics of the faction through the key concept of "roosts", which are nests that allow the recruitment of new soldiers. The rules award victory points in exchange of the creation of *roosts*, and the faction strategy is focused on the recruitment of large armies and leaders. Other elements of the faction however, such as the creation and collapse of different governments and the succession of different leaders are only tangentially related to this theme. This game mechanics, however, do not focus on the relation of the faction with woodlands, and are therefore not meaningful for our analysis.

The third faction is the **Woodland Alliance**, composed by foxes, mice and rabbits fighting for independence. While the mat does not contain any faction description, the game tutorial (Fig. 3) describes the Alliance as an "upstart" and mentions unity and the need to "revolt against their oppressors". The central semantic field here is that of the *rebellion*, which is closely reflected in the faction themes, which are organised around special rules such as "Outrage" and



Figure 3: Tutorial description of the Woodland Alliance

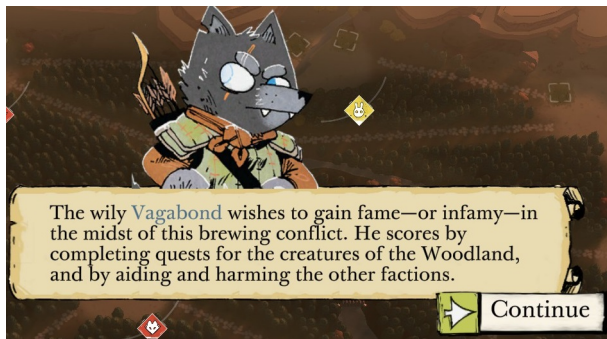


Figure 4: Tutorial description of the Vagabond

"Guerrilla War" or actions such as "Revolt" and "Spread Sympathy". The game mechanics reward spreading sympathy (which translates in positioning "sympathy tokens" on clearing controlled by other factions) and allow to easily overtake enemy bases through riots.

The fourth faction is the **Vagabond**, and consists in a single unit, with no bases, continuously travelling through the forest. The mat description states: "You wander the woods, seeking to secure a place in the new society that is taking shape". The tutorial (Fig. 4) seems to go in a slightly different direction, mentioning "fame" and "infamy", but also insists on the need for diplomacy of this faction. The idea of *wandering*, besides the description and faction name, is reinforced by the themes (with the special rules being "Nimble" and "Lone Wanderer") and by the game mechanics which allow movements outside the clearings and paths into forest zones that are not reachable by any other player. A certain amount of freedom is also ensured by the fact that the Vagabond is the only faction that can ally itself with others, and choose, eventually, which relations to have with all other factions. Other key rules regarding the vagabond concern the creation, trade and use of items of equipment. While these require indeed to move and explore the woodland, they are not necessarily strongly related to the idea of wandering.

3.2 Identifying polarities

Using this as a starting point, we have a rough map of the different semantic fields presented in the game. If we look at the different factions, it is possible to individuate two semantic polarities that

emerge particularly strongly from the opposition between the Marquise de Cat and the Vagabond, as their defining semantic fields are respectively those of *building* and *wandering*. If we move towards a higher level of abstraction, this can be framed as the semantic opposition between **standing** and **moving**. The Marquise core concepts and strategy are related to building and fortifying, that is to build things that stand still. The Vagabond, on the other hand, need to wander swiftly through the map in order to win.

We can use this opposition to articulate our axis of contraries (standing vs moving), and then built that of subcontraries which, according to Greimas concept, will be composed of **not-standing** and **not-moving**. If the axis of contraries was based on the opposition between the Marquise and the Vagabond, the new positions can be occupied with ease by the two remaining factions. The Woodland Alliance in the "Not-standing" position, due to their rebellious nature, and the Eyrie Dynasties in the "Not-moving", in relation to their attachment to their birthright and tendency to nest. Both these positions, again, emerge rather strongly from the game mechanics and narrative devices of both factions.

3.3 Assigning strategies

Now that we have constructed the base of our square, we can easily see how the game strategies that correspond to each faction can also be positioned around the square. The strategy of the Marquise, organised around the theme of standing, is one of **Fortification**, where the faction constructs buildings to reinforce its positions and gather resources. The strategy of the Eyrie Dynasties, related to not-moving, is a strategy of **Nesting**, in which the faction occupy space to multiply and thrive. The strategy of the Vagabond pivots around moving and is one of **Wandering**, in which they collect items, encounter other factions and escape danger. Finally, the strategy of the Woodland Alliance, related to not-standing, is oriented towards **Rioting** and overthrowing enemy positions.

In this way, the first layer of the semiotic square is completed: around it we have four different semantic positions (standing, moving, not-moving, not-standing), four key strategies (fortifying, wandering, nesting and rioting) and, of course, four factions (Fig. 5).

3.4 Reconstructing ideologies

Finally, on these bases, one last layer can be built around the square: the one related to forest ideologies. These ideologies are related to the ways in which the woodland is used and acquires value for each faction according to their key strategies. While reconstructing these ideologies, we look both at the core semantic fields and strategies of the single faction, but also to the general picture, so to identify ideologies of the same order of magnitude.

Hence, we can reconstruct four ideologies:

- **Production** – where the forest is seen as a resource for growth.
- **Reproduction** – focusing on the biological preservation of native species.
- **Liberty** – seeing the wild as a space of personal freedom and escape from society.
- **Liberation** – where the forest hosts political opposition.

These ideologies are clearly represented in each action. The Marquise de Cat adheres to an ideology of production, in which the

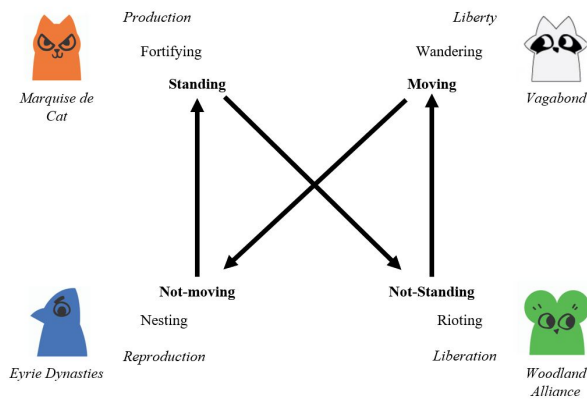


Figure 5: The semiotic square of Root, from basic oppositions to forest ideologies.

forest is a space for both acquiring materials and edifying all sorts of buildings in the effort of constructing a functional economy. The Eyrie Dynasties follow an ideology of reproduction, focusing on maintaining their species and heirloom by roosting in the forest spaces and increasing their numbers. The Vagabond adheres to an ideology of liberty, in which the forest becomes a space for isolation from others, but also of travel and personal realisation. Finally, the Woodland Alliance is clearly moved by an ideology of liberation, where the woodland becomes fertile ground for insurrection and rebellion.

The forest ideologies that we have reconstructed starting from ROOT, however, clearly exceed the game, and are part of the vast palette of existing approaches and conceptions of woodlands that permeate human cultures. *Production* ideologies, for example, are clearly expressed in the silviculture industry and more in general in the forestry sector. The ideology of *Reproduction* is upheld by wildlife parks, bird sanctuaries and similar spaces devoted to the conservation of biodiversity. *Liberty* ideologies can easily be traced to the writings of Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau or to the life of the like of Christopher McCandless. Finally, the ideology of *Liberation* can be famously found in the story of Robin Hood - as well as in all sort of outlaws and *maquis* that oppose, more or less openly, the dominant political power.

These ideologies, among the many that can be found in human cultures, can also be traced in other games and ludic artifacts. Many games, for example, adopt an ideology of production when it comes to forest spaces which, for example in strategy games such as the *Age of Empires* series, are seen mainly as resources to be harvested to fuel the construction of armies, fleets and buildings. An ideology of reproduction is present in games such as *Shelter* (Might and Delight, 2013), in which the players control a mother badger in the attempt to care and protect her cubs. A game like *Eastshade* (Eastshade Studios 2019), in which the player controls a wandering artist in beautiful woodlands, is instead linked to an idea of liberty. Finally, the ideology of liberation is present, for example, in games that represent a faction using the forest as a base to fight off invaders, such as the Night Elves in *Warcraft 3* (Blizzard, 2002).

4 CONCLUSION

The four ideologies we have reconstructed in this paper are certainly not the only ones existing. Different cultures, times and societies produce very different ideological takes on nature and on the relationships and place of humans with(in) it. Nevertheless, the game we have analysed offered a remarkable vantage point to analyse both the surface structures that represent some forest ideologies (game strategies and mechanics) and the deep semiotic tensions that shape them. Future research could expand this model by analysing other forest ideologies emerging from different games and game mechanics. The variety of multiplicity of the medium, as well as the many different representations of forests that they feature, is likely to offer a rich and diverse ensemble of ideological delineations.

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