

What's a Ludeme?

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The word 'ludeme' does not (yet) appear in any dictionary and therefore has not established claim to any agreed definition. The purpose of this article is to explain my personal interest in it, to justify my use of it, and to offer some thoughts towards its definition. This is a revised version of the original article posted on my web site The Incomplete Gamer in 2007.

1 Introduction

A *ludeme* is an element of play, comparable to, but distinct from, a game component or instrument of play. Kings, queens, bishops, knights, rooks, pawns, and a chequered board, all constitute the instruments of play or the components of the game of Chess. Ludemes are the conceptual elements of the game, most typically equivalent to its 'rules' of play. For example, whereas the material piece shaped like a horse and designated 'knight' is a component of the game, the distinctively skewed move of a knight is a ludeme of the class 'rule of movement'. But other types of ludemes also exist. For example, the name, referend and associated connotations of 'knight' – those of a chivalric courtier – may be said to constitute a thematic ludeme.

A characteristic property of ludemes is their propensity to propagate by passing not only from one game to another (the long diagonal move of the bishop is not unique to Chess but occurs also in continental Draughts) but even between games of entirely different classes. Thus the thematic ludeme of a knightly figure is not unique to Chess but also occurs in card games. Similarly, but perhaps more abstractly, it might be said that whereas an actual chequered board is an instrument of play, or game component, the idea of chequering a board so as to render diagonal moves more comprehensible is itself a conceptual component or ludeme.

2 Memes and Ludemes

The passage of ludemes from one game or game type to another brings to mind the definition of a *meme*, such as this from the *Oxford English Dictionary* [2]:

A cultural element or behavioural trait whose transmission and consequent persistence in a population, although occur-

ring by non-genetic means (esp. imitation), is considered as analogous to the inheritance of a gene.

The term was coined by Richard Dawkins in *The Selfish Gene* (1976). In his own words [3]:

The new soup is the soup of human culture. We need a name for the new replicator, a noun which conveys the idea of a unit of cultural transmission, or a unit of imitation. 'Mimeme' comes from a suitable Greek root, but I want a monosyllable that sounds a bit like 'gene'. I hope my classicist friends will forgive me if I abbreviate mimeme to meme... Examples of memes are tunes, ideas, catch-phrases, clothes fashions, ways of making pots or of building arches.'

If Dawkins proposed the term in 1976, Alain Borvo could well have first published the term 'ludeme' in 1977, as Pierre Berloquin implies.¹ But it doesn't follow that he was directly influenced by the Dawkins 'meme'. In this connection, Thierry Depaulis notes:²

Now, whoever invented the word, it must have been coined in the 1960s or early 1970s when structuralism reigned in France and put into fashion words like phoneme, morpheme, grapheme, mytheme, lexeme, and the like. (Whence 'mimeme', certainly influenced by the same philosophical background.) I am not in error in saying that the man who invented 'ludeme' thought of it as a 'ludic micro-structure' or 'basic component of a game structure'.

3 Phonemes and Ludemes

In retrospect, my understanding of the term ludeme as expressed in the *Oxford Guide to Card*

¹The first recorded use of the term 'ludeme' is in Alain Borvo's 1977 analysis of the card game L'Alouette [1, p. 18], in which he credits the term to Pierre Berloquin. Berloquin later agreed to this claim in online postings.

²Personal correspondence.