

Notes on Frogger

In the computer game, the frog stands on the edge of the bank wanting to get to the other side. It is faced with a stream of logs flowing in both directions. If it chooses just the right moment to jump it will land on, and be carried along by, a log. By jumping again, and again at just the right moment, it can land on another passing log. In this way it can cross the river. Having crossed one river, it moves to another level and another land complete with new choices and challenges.

Frogger is about choice, chance and change. It is also a narrative of irreversibility. There is no jumping back. Equally, each new jump opens up new options - new hopping opportunities arise as a consequence of that first leap. The landscape ahead (from the frog's perspective) is always changing.

There are four ways in which this game is useful as a metaphor of practice-embedded agency.

1. It allows and is animated by the frog's choice - to jump or not to jump, that really is the question.
2. The options that confront the frog are not of its own making. It is faced with a stream of logs the properties and characteristics of which are beyond its control. (this is also a limitation - see later). By making one jump, or by staying still, the frog changes the range of future options that it confronts. The options are arguably there anyway: what changes is the frog's position in relation to them.
3. The path is irreversible: there is no turning back - the logs behind have been swept on by the flow.
4. Having completed part of the course, the frog reaches a new 'level': it crosses a threshold and arrives in a new land of challenge. The point is that jumping can have cumulative consequences. There are thresholds. Not all jumps are of equal consequence.

For purposes of our argument, the game is also limited in the following important respects;

1. Why does the frog want to cross the river in the first place? Why not just stay on the bank? Or turn round and go home another way? The construction of goals lies outside the game.
2. The frog has a history that it brings with it to the bank. It, or at least its animator, has more or less experience of hopping safely. - part of the game is about building up experience: higher score, more familiarity, learning tricks and techniques. This experience is invisible until the frog starts hopping, but it is still 'there'. This is one important source of frog inequality.
3. In real life, frogs have what Weber called different 'life chances'. Given the game that lies ahead, some are better equipped - from tadpole stage onwards - than others. Perhaps they have bigger feet or better grip. Sometimes they advance by accident: by luck they get a run of large, slow moving logs on which to travel. The point is that chances are not equally distributed, even if some are genuinely random or to do with serendipity and 'luck'. Also

important, some real-world logs represent (for a particular context/culture) the 'mainstream' route, well worn path across the river. Other paths and destinations are more deviant, extreme and socially risky.

4. In real life, frogs can sometimes make (and break) their own luck. One well placed jump - into a job, a relationship, a country etc. - opens up a new, favourable, stream of future opportunities. The reverse is also possible. Whether a situation (outcome of hopping) counts as favourable or not has to do with the frog's background, aspirations and culture. What is the rich life for a frog?
5. To go back to the bank: why did the frog jump when it did? Earlier, I said it had a 'choice'. Thinking about that further, the frog has the option of staying or jumping. Each option has different consequences, risks and uncertainties attached. This looks like a nice simple 'decision'. What makes the electrical energy course through its legs? History and culture, rational calculation, psychological propensity, whim, previous history, fear. ...these are all possible explanations. I don't know if we need to argue about which is the more important. The practical point is that the frog is impelled by some injunction so strong that it jumps or stays.

Why jump?

"whereas philosophers and social investigators once cited mental entities such as beliefs, desires, emotions, and purposes, practice theorists instead highlight embodied capacities such as know-how, skills, tacit understandings, and dispositions" (Schatzki, p7 in edited collection.). If we go along with this, the frog's desire to cross the river is a culturally embodied 'disposition'. That is all very well but how do these dispositions work out collectively. And how do individual jumps relate to the process of disposition making?

Why cross the river? - Frog dispositions

Pred is useful on this point. "choreography is about the movement of persons in time and space and their conjunction at stations or stops where groups meet and dissolve." Individuals 'choose' activity bundles - under constraints of 'coupling' what can be combined, authority, and capability constraints. An 'activity system' might, for example, consist of employment roles that exist beyond the persons filling them. They make time demands on their holders, often at fixed temporal locations. p209. (Pred 1977). In other words, frogs jump but under constraints that are themselves the outcome of previous jumping.

Where do the logs come from?

From a practice-theoretical point of view, (rather than from the point of view of the individual frog) the game has a number of limitations. Opportunities are themselves structured - whether practices (logs) exist or not, such that the frog can jump onto them or join them, even momentarily, depends upon the actions of previous and current frogs. In the game, frogs do not make logs and that is a problem.

Frog choreography

Population systems and activity systems include human, natural and technological 'populations' each of whose 'individuals' in a 'kind of ballet' spins out a trajectory from that space time 'point when they come into being unto that point where they [either] become transformed' - as when a tree becomes a piece of furniture- or cease to exist' p213 (Pred 1977)

Frog choreography has to do with their collective movement in time and space, and with the outcome of such collective movement (again this is really about how frogs make logs) and what this means for the future. For Pred, the river, the bank, the logs are as much part of the ballet as the frogs. Even so, he allows and he writes about projects like the project of crossing the river.

The river crossing as a social project

The project ' consists of the entire series of simple or complex tasks necessary to the completion of any intention-inspired or goal-oriented behaviour' . The tasks of a project require sequencing in a certain way, e.g. there are steps involved in preparing a meal, organizing a wedding, etc.

Frogs, paths and projects

But for Frogger, the more important point is that ' the ordinary individual is not only created by society, or socialized, but creates herself, purposeively or habitually adding action elements to her path by internally reflecting upon or in other ways drawing upon what she has been externally exposed to, thereby contributing (usually unknowingly) to social reproduction and the perpetuation or transformation of society' s structural relationships' Pred 1981: 12)

As a result, the details of social reproduction are spelled out ' by the intersection of particular individual paths with particular institutional projects occurring at specific temporal and spatial locations' p10(Pred 1981).

There are also important, dialectic, intersections between the ' daily path' (the daily crossing of a river) and the life path (threshold crossing, cumulative effects, big jumps etc.). For example, Pred (1981b) writes about the ' jump' of marriage in which the life paths of two adults converge. See also Kaufmann (1998).

... not sure where this leads..

Kaufmann, J. C. (1998), *Dirty Linen: Couples and their laundry*, London: Middlesex

Pred, A. (1981b), ' Of Paths and Projects: Individual Behaviour and its Societal Contexts' , in Golledge, R. and Cox, K., eds. *Behavioural Problems in Geography Revisited*. London: Methuen

Pred, A. (1977), ' The choreography of existence: comments on Hagerstrand' s time-geography and its usefulness' , in *Economic Geography*, 53:207-221.

Pred, A. (1981a), ' Social Reproduction and the Time-geography of Everyday Life' , in *Geografiska Annaler*, 63 B:5-22.

Schatzki, T., Knorr Cetina, K. and von Savigny, E. (2001), *The Practice Turn in Contemporary Theory*. London: Routledge University Press.