

Chapter 10

The Path is the Goal!



Our one sentence conclusion about the nature of paths was that they follow an internal logic of the underlying network even if this comes at the price of being slightly longer. Does it imply that our paths will be the same? Does it imply that our behavior will be deterministic and totally constrained by the network? Before contemplating these questions let's think a bit about the scenario when there is *no* network.

If you have ever walked through a public park you may have noticed that besides paved ways there are many unpaved path segments which are clearly used by people according to the trampled grass (despite the “Keep off the grass!” warnings). In fact, modern parks are paved only after a few months of public usage and the paving follows the trampled paths of people. In this case, there is no network which dictates the logic for the paths. But after a few months of public usage, a clear network is formed. What happens here? Well, people start using the park in their own way. None of them use it in the same way since they usually enter and exit at different points of the park, thus their behaviour inside the park is different. They will have varying preferences about the things in the park. Some people are interested in the statues, others seek benches under shady trees or the public workout areas. The network which is finally paved emerges from the summation of people's interactions with the park. But this doesn't mean that they will start to use the same paths after they are paved. The network of paved segments in the park can be easily reconstructed after a few hours or days of walking depending on the size of the park. In fact, such maps are usually placed at the entrances showing the main attractions and roads inside the park.¹ This map acts as a kind of public information. What about the paths? Well, the paths still belong to the people. The paths describe the habits of the people and tell us about them. About their favourite places, the location of their home and even about their health, if they prefer long or short walks. They still use the park in their own special way.

¹See Fig. 10.1.

Fig. 10.1 The official map of Central Park in New York City. [With the permission of the Central Park Conservancy]



Similarly to your specific footprints in a public park, your paths seem to define you in a more general way. We have seen that there is not too much choice in shortest paths while long paths may be boring and unfollowable. The game of expressing yourself lies somewhere in between. How do you communicate? Where do you choose to transfer? What kinds of lovely and memorable detours have you taken in your life? These small detours seem to define you. Your paths are you. People can be identified by a short sequence of consecutive web pages they visit or by simply observing the movement path of the mouse. Even without their fingerprints or retina scans. The way people choose their letter changing words in the word-morph game seems to be unique and specific for each person. That is the power of paths. It is understandable that most studies considering paths in various systems simply suppose that shortest paths are used. Well, that is the simplest, clearest and most rational way of thinking. Even if they detect detoured paths by measurements, they usually argue that there is something missing in the network model. There should exist some twist in the network (e.g., adding weights to the edges which will stretch or shorten them), which will explain the real-life paths as shortest paths in a modified system and the world will be understandable again. But this way of thinking eliminates the possibility of choice from path selection and sterilizes the problem by eradicating all forms of life and spice from the scenery. **Our take-home message in this book is that detours are not bugs, they are a feature.** A detour is like a signature. A detour is something that adds the spice, which adds the story, which adds the logic, which adds the choice, which adds vitality, which adds the meaning to the sequence of paths. What are the most important strategic core points of your life against which you relate all your events? What is the internal logic or the underlying hierarchy of your life? What are your core messages? These can be many things, your family, your friends, your hobbies, your career, money, power even alcohol or drugs.

It seems that we cannot change our starting point in life and neither its end. As Eric Berne, the famous psychiatrist sarcastically said: “life is mainly a process of filling in time until the arrival of death, or Santa Claus, with very little choice, if any, of what kind of business one is going to transact during the long wait”. But still, these little choices tell us who we are. By choosing these intermediate points and taking our small but specific detours, we are allowed to make a difference. Our path is more important than our destination. *The path is the goal.*

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