

An Introduction to Videogame Genre Theory. Understanding Videogame Genre Framework

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Paraphrasing Eco, the "playing contract" should allow players to instantly recognize a genre. Videogames use resources from the fertile field of popular culture, exploiting models, pre-worked materials, well-known heroes, stereotypes, and myths. Since genres have multiple meanings, functions, production models and audience expectations that evolve through time, it is important to understand if a videogame genre framework exists or if there are just labels or marketing tools used by the game producers. Finding out if there is a blueprint for videogame genres requires the understanding of specific elements and their arrangement. Being aware that it is not possible to present an exhaustive genre categorization but only a general structure of the videogame genres, this paper uses the genres' framework identified by Aaretsch, Smedstad and Sunnanå (2003) and integrates interviews with professionals. It also reviews the general and the specific genre literature and analyses the role and the characteristics of several elements that articulate the videogame genres.

Keywords: genre theory, genres, popular culture, videogame

Introduction

Videogames are now available in a variety of forms, being connected to TV game consoles, to desktop applications, website games portals or to specific servers on the Internet. They can be played on consoles, handhelds, tablets or mobile phones, either by a single player, or with a few partners (multiplayer) or at a large scale with many other players online (MMORPG-Massively Multiplayer Online Role Play Games). There are games that provide a direct insight into the story (first person) or an indirect one (third person), with or without a story, with or without a score, games that require intellect or body movements only.

Like the television, videogames are a technological mediated experience, globally embraced, beyond age, gender, religion, culture or geographical territory, being strongly supported by a large variety that consists, as David J. Bolter and Richard Grusin suggest (1999, p. 88), in titles that promote action games with violence (*Half-Life, Killer 7*), strategy (*Spore, Civilizations*), role-play (*The Sims, World of Warcraft, Mass Effect*), games based on stories (*Bioshock, Heavy Rain, The Last of Us*), erotic (*7 Sins*), play-cards (*Solitaire; FreeCell*), puzzles (*Tetris, Portal, Candy Crush Saga*) and skill testing games or simulations (*Wii, FIFA*) or educational/serious games (*DragonBox*). Moreover, videogames, as television, have the ability to create enjoyment and to generate pleasure (Fiske, 1989, p. 85) by ensuring a status for the player,

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giving him or her with power through the control they have over the course of the gaming. All this is proving the presence, as described by Spiridon, of the "essential production germs of the popular culture" (2013, p. 176), using formal models or containers such as genre, characters, stories, environment, setting, etc., trying to turn a wider audience to various types of videogames. As McQuail argued about the production of mass communication (1999, p. 181), the videogames genre too can be connected with the selection of the content and the control of the access by interpreting the needs and interests of the audiences.

Acting as a transmission belt between producers and players¹, different videogame categories become, paraphrasing Umberto Eco, a "playing contract" out of which players should instantly recognize a genre of game, characterized by a particular style. Yet, the studies focused on reception take into consideration very few genres that are popular mainly among hard-core players and usually linked with some ideologies (Anderson, 2010; Bryce & Rutter, 2002; Kennedy, 2002; Tisseron & Gravillon, 2010). Thus, there are multiple playing motivations, going beyond Yee's classification (2006) to achievement, socializing and immersing: some people play for recognition, others for reaching a performance, something they cannot have in real life or, others just for fun. Different sets of skills are used by people driven by countless motivations, all of them being members of those very large mass-audiences for whom the videogames are designed using these ever-present motives that are, in fact, the building blocks of the usage of media, regardless of its type.

Gamers are usually very familiar with the genre of digital games, with a few favorites in their repertoire, exactly as it happens in the case of cinema movies or TV series. Inspired by the logic of film, academics analyze different criteria for ranking the videogame genres, attracted by their narratives, types of experience, structure, engagement or support (Hertz, 1997; Newman, 2004; Nieborg & Hermes, 2008; Wolf 2001). Even though several typologies are deployed sometimes in problematic ways (lack of unique, clear criteria), technological developments led to an expansion of the genres of videogames and their overlapping. For example, playing *Halo* (Bungie, 2001), ensures to the player, as Aarseth demonstrates (2004, p. 363), a multimodal genre experience due to its multiple characteristics: it is an action game ("*science fiction combat game*") mainly played in the first person ("*FPS*"), but occasionally a third person ("*third-person driver*") that has components of puzzle and strategy. The situation is similar from this perspective to the one of the literature at the middle of the previous century, as observed by Todorov: "genre having dissipated" (1976, p. 159), games do not belong anymore to a single, clearly defined genre. Actually, we are witnessing changes or mutations of videogame genres, as a system which is in continual transformation. The legitimacy of the study of videogame genres stands in the fact that "it is not the "genres" that have disappeared, but the genres of the past have been replaced by others" (Todorov, 1976, p. 160).

¹ Cf. Chandler (1997): "The relative stability of genre enables producers to predict audience expectations".

The importance of the videogame genres revolves around players who can or cannot be attracted by the producers towards new launches, influencing the industry. As Apperley shows, there is a correlation between the player's interest towards a genre variety and the game industry's revenue: although reaching eight billion dollars in 1982, it only took two years for consumers to become dissatisfied with the rehashed and poorly designed generic videogames and to make the industry struggle to survive (2006, p. 9). In this context, understanding why people actually turn to various types of videogames cannot be separated from the investigation of the game genres. Therefore, genres should serve as a communication bridge between producers, players and academics. It becomes crucial to analyze if there is a videogame genres framework, even if they can be seen as "fuzzy" categories that "cannot be defined as necessary and sufficient conditions" (Chandler, 1997), or if there are just labels or marketing tools acting as triggers for audiences. To achieve this objective, firstly I will link this paper with pre-existing studies, then, I will reflect on the genres by reviewing and underlining theoretical and empirical gaps. The main proposal of the paper is to provoke discussions and inspire critical approaches that could bridge theory and practice.

Reflections on the Genre

Genres are units that can be described through an abstract analysis based on pre-set criteria or through an empirical observation of specific characteristics, being nothing but a "codification of discursive properties" (Todorov, 1976, p. 162). However, as Chandler points out, it is difficult to make a clear-cut distinction among genres because there are no rigid rules (Chandler, 1997), being actually "systems of expectations and hypothesis" (Neale, 2000, p. 158) that circulate among the audience, industries and academics. Supporting this point of view, genres can be defined, according to Spiridon, as stable structures and repetitive rules and conventions that function as a "transmission belt between producers and their receptors" (Spiridon, 2013, pp. 92-100). They are firstly and foremost a boundary phenomenon (Glendhill, 2000, p. 221) that should teach us not only about videogame kinds but also about the cultural work of producing and receiving them. In other words, genres should provide "means for contextualizing/locating/situating" (Kress, 2010, p. 116), in the context of what Chandler (1997) stressed as specific of the contemporary theory: both genre forms and functions are dynamic. Following Aristotle's *Poetics*, Brenda Laurel considers that genres are "a collection of information that includes the ethics and "the rules of conduct" for different story types." ([1991] 2014, p. 163), which work as frames applied to genres' functions: fix of meaning in a modal, generic and discursive form (Kress, 2010, p. 122). Nonetheless, as Todorov argues, the definition of genres is historically and discursively relative (1976, p. 164). Jane Feuer defines the genre as (quoted by Chandler, 1997) an abstract conception rather than something that exists physically in the world. In this context, the considerable theoretical disagreement about the definition of a specific genre comes as no surprise.

Two definitions of genre are suitable for the purpose of this research. According to Duff, the genre is "a recurring type or category of text [...] defined by structural, thematic and/or functional criteria" (Duff, 2014, p. xiii). It completes in fact Todorov's definition, adding to his conventionality (structural, thematic and or functional criteria) and institutionalization (Todorov, 1976), the "recurrence" as a key descriptor for genre.

Some of the genres are transmedial (S.F., horror, historical, adventures, and romance), while others are more specific (talk-show, shooter). However, the genres differ by the degree of standardization (Spiridon, 2013 p. 96). The familiarity with a genre enables audience to generate feasible predictions about events in the story.

Practitioners and players make use of their own genre labels (*de facto* genre), as Kress observes, having a solid standing in ordinary usage (2010, p. 115). Usually, labeling a popular genre is based on its title, either sport or children's, role-play or leisure game. Good examples are genre and sub-genre recommendations proposed by www.mmohuts.com: Parlor (Edutainment|Microgame|Music|Party|Puzzle), Misc (Art|Board|Browser-based|Cutscene|Eroge|Movie-based|Music|Non-linear|Pinball|Side-scroller), Platformers/Action Games. Indeed, some may not meet the academic criteria, because, as Aarseth argues, "what works well as a sales term might not work at all as a theoretical perspective" (2004, p. 363). Nonetheless, there is also *genre in actions* available on the sites where audiences and even producers interact with one another (Clearwater, 2011, p. 37).

Before reviewing the specific literature about videogame genres, I remind that they deliver gratification and pleasure for the receptor, thus explaining why players specialize in genres. Following this logic, the veteran Daniel Cook industry acknowledges that when players discover that a game fits their entertainment needs nicely, they return to the store seeking another similar game (2007, p. 1). In the same way, producers lower the risk of delivering against popular genres. Therefore understanding the industry's point of view is a milestone for this paper.

Videogame Genres: The Industry's Point of View

In its early developmental stage, the game industry settled into several sets of genres that everybody recognizes sports, strategy, racing, fighting, action, and role-playing. As the designer Ernest Adams emphasizes, the entire value chain was influenced by this: "the retailers began organizing their shelves along these lines. Publishers created product plans based on them. Gamers learned to prefer one genre over another and to identify themselves as fans of shooters or platformers or real-time strategy (Adams, 2009, p. 1). The same designer argues that videogame genres are determined by gameplay only: what challenges the player and what actions does he take to overcome those challenges. Cezar Vârtosu, the realization manager of Ubisoft Romania, reinforces the importance of the gameplay: "games must embrace the movie industry lesson 'show, don't tell', and, more important, games must respect

their specifics: 'play, don't show'" [face-to-face interview, Bucharest, September 2014]. Both practitioners are aligned with Salen and Zimmerman's opinion about the importance of the game mechanics: "the goal of a successful game design is meaningful play, but play is something that emerges from the functioning of the rules" (2004, p. 168). Adams does not see the mechanics as an end in themselves, but as means to achieve an end, considering that all the other game attributes (setting, audience, theme, and purpose) are independent of the genre (2009, pp. 2-4). The same opinion is shared by Andrei Istrate, the co-founder of the Romanian Game Developers Association and former lead level designer of Ubisoft Romania, who distances himself from a game-setting that could confuse people usually more familiar with movies or books. Even if he recognizes the importance of meeting the audience expectations, Istrate keeps the audience, theme and game objective separate from the genre: "a shooter is a shooter, even if it targets kids. If a designer creates, for example, a *Call of Duty* for kids, he moves away from the realism, rather approaching it through fantasy: instead of guns with ammo, it can have guns with flowers and funny sound effects (like meow-meow), with neither dramatic killing and agonizing characters nor blood, but simple disappearance or turning the fallen characters into statues" [Istrate, face-to-face interview, Bucharest, August 2014].

In the essay "My name is Daniel and I am a genre addict", Daniel Cook observes that in "the game industry a genre is a common set of game mechanics and interface standards that a group of titles share", adding further that "genre speaks [...] less to setting, plot, or other typical categories" (2005, p. 1). A couple of years later, Cook analyzes the genre lifecycles in the attempt to understand changes in customer needs over time (2007, p. 3). He reinforces the fact that similar game mechanics define the characteristics of gaming value, despite all of the industry's effort spent on innovation, branding, packaging and licenses (2007, p. 1). Cook's lifecycle approach, following the economic pattern of any industrial good (introduction, growth, maturity, decline, niche), shows that genres evolve over time as "players discover, fall in love, grow bored and then move on to other forms of entertainment" (2007, p. 2). This genre lifecycle approach can be applied to most of the games including RTS, text adventures, graphical adventures, 2D platformers and others, yet, it has some limitations, the most obvious relating to innovation (2007, p. 2). In the end of his essay, Cook suggests that for delivering value to players, the industry should deliver the right level of game mechanics for a specific audience segment (2007, p. 4). Cristian Tănase of Ubisoft Romania embraces the same direction considering that when creating a game a producer must deeply understand the audience in order to meet their skills and expectations. He adds that a game must be "easy to understand but hard to master", giving the players a sense of progress. It is easier to use popular genres, following well-known paths and to rearrange the "same bricks" in different ways, like in a huge Lego game. Tănase concludes that sticking to the popular genres lowers the risks for the industry, yet it inhibits any other innovation other than

technological¹ [Tănase, face-to-face interview, Bucharest, September 2014]. Game designer Sid Meier brings clarifications about the way of appropriating a game idea to a genre in his answers for the Richard Ruse's interview: "first figure out what your topic is and then find interesting ways and an appropriate genre to bring it to life as opposed to coming the other way around" (Ruse, 2001, pp. 21-22). According to Tănase, the same happened with *Assassins' Creed*, for which the starting point was a mechanic that allows *parcour*. The historical layers have been added later, followed by the game universe created to fit an action-adventure sandbox type of game [Tănase, face-to-face interview, Bucharest, September 2014].

Finally, I would like to make a short reference to the taxonomy proposed over thirty years ago by Chris Crawford, when the field was "too young and the sample too small" (1984, p. 19). His contribution is the observation that the basis of classification is not constant but varies during the history and is influenced by the available technology (1984, pp. 39-40). Even with Crawford admitting that his taxonomy becomes obsolete or inadequate in a short time (p. 40), it still can be useful due to its simple criteria, focused on mechanics: skill and action (Combat, Maze, Sports, Paddle, Race, Miscellaneous) and strategy games (Adventures, Dungeons and Dragons (D&D), Wargames, games of Chance, Educational and Children, Interpersonal games) (Crawford, 1984, pp. 19-40).

Summarizing how the industry understands and uses videogame genres, I should stress that the approach is player-centric, focused on mechanics and game design patterns that deliver particular play-experiences.

Videogame Genres: The Theoretical Gap

Paraphrasing Derrida's statement about the text (1980, p. 65), videogames "cannot belong to a genre, it cannot be... without genre". Every videogame belongs to "one or several genres, there is no genreless" videogame. However, most of today's videogame genre lists are a "heuristic remnant" (Aarseth, 2004, p. 363) of the period when technology allowed producing quite simple, non-complex games. Clearly, if we want to analyze videogame genres we need better typologies than the one proposed by Miller (2004, pp. 212-213): strategy games (*DayZ*, *WOW*), adventures (*Beyond Good and Evil*), with sub-genre mystery-adventure (*Nancy Drew*), shooter (*Quake*, *Doom*), puzzle (*Myst*), fight (*Mortal Kombat*), simulation (*The Sims*, *Civilization*), and platform (*Donkey Kong*). Inspired by the Library of Congress Moving Imagery Genre-Form Guide, Wolf proposes a very extensive classification of the videogame genres under 42 categories, taking into account the dominant characteristics of the interactive experience and the games' goals and objectives on one hand, and the nature of the game's player-character and the player controls on the other hand (Wolf, 2001, pp. 116-117). Although this list covers a lot of games, it has some weak points: the labels are not built in the same way, some having an

¹ Cf. Apperley (2006, p. 9): "The expectation is that the stability of genre will be tempered by innovation; this innovation may be technical, not necessarily stylistic".

adjective added as a descriptor next to the noun (criteria are not unique, nor mutually exclusive), *Adaptation*, *Educational* or *Management Simulation* working on a different rhetoric level than their denominator. Some categories such as *Pinball*, *Pencil-and-Paper* or *Text Adventure* are not general enough but rather close to some specific recognizable games with particular elements. Moreover, it is debatable if *Platform* is still a category per se since most of the videogames are multimodal, played within a universe that allows masterful level design. In addition, allocating abstract board games under *Abstract* and not under *Board Game*, Wolf builds his list rather around the interface than around the mechanics. An answer to this issue could be the very radical systematization proposed by Aarseth, using a very clear criteria: *digitized* versions of traditional games (card, board, dice, mechanical arcade games such as Pinball) and *games in virtual environments*, based on a simulation of a physical world, not necessarily our own, and usually much less complex (Aarseth, 2004, p. 364).

Poole proposes, based mostly on the mechanics, nine types of games: Shooter, Racing, Beat'em up, Strategy, Platform, Sport and Simulations, Adventure, Role-play (RPG) and Puzzle (Poole, 2000, pp. 35-58). The first three are not mutually exclusive, being driven by conflict. They could have been grouped under an Action umbrella. Also, Sports (simulating various traditional sports) can be included in Simulations.

An interesting approach has been developed by Egenfeldt-Nielsen, Smith, and Tosca who "propose a genre system based on a game's criteria for success". They reduce videogame genres to four types: Action, Adventure, Strategy, and Process oriented games (2008, pp. 41-44). Current hybridization and mutation of the videogames require further combination of those four main types.

Echoing Apperley (2006) and Arsenault (2009) on their observation about multiple levels of categories conflated together, I tend to agree with Arsenault's idea of the "Genre Illusion" when the *genre* is an umbrella word bundling disparate concepts under a single name, giving the false impression of unity (Arsenault, 2009, p. 157). A few examples to support this "illusion" are *serious*¹, *casual*² or *expressive*³ games. Nonetheless, I do not embrace the technology-dependent taxonomy (Sony's Eye Toy: Play, Kinect, console or mobile game), even though it may influence some features of the game.

Having no intention to enter the debate of narratology versus ludology, I consider very valuable Murray's observations, underlined in her essay *From Game-Story to Cyberdrama* (2006). Her view is player-centric, stressing that a game has greater emphasis on the actions of the player while a story has greater emphasis on the plot (p. 9). For fueling the new genres growth from the

¹ Cf. Bogost (2007) critique in *Persuasive Games*.

² Juul defines (2010, p. 5) this games as "easy to learn to play, fit well with a large number of players and work in many different situations". Yet, this can be applied to the so-called hard core games (i.e. *DayZ*).

³ *Expressive game* is an emergent category characterized by flexibility and openness, letting the players expresses themselves through the game (Juul, 2007).

community practice and for elaborating new expressive conventions, Murray recommends not to enforce legacy genre boundaries, but to enhance the practice within this new medium (p. 10) and to think of "the characteristics of stories and games and how these separable characteristics are being recombined and reinvented within the astonishingly plastic world of cyberspace" (p. 10).

Following Duff's genres tirade, based on structural, thematic and functional criteria (2014, p. xiii), videogame genres should be assessed as Arsenault suggests: a "phenomenological, pragmatic deployment of actions through the gameplay experience" which is "partly functional and partly aesthetic" (2009, p. 171). In this light, I embrace Järvinen conclusion from the chapter dedicated to the videogame genre framework in his PhD thesis: [genres] "are found in the junction of game themes, system behaviour, emotions and moods" (2007, p. 333). Therefore, in the next section, I attempt to identify some simple components of an elementary grammar of videogames genres.

Addressing the Theoretical Gap

Practically, the videogame genres were built on multiple perspectives (gameplay, story theme, context or player's performance), not always mutually exclusive. Most classifications use "too many, arbitrary, incompatible or overlapping criteria generating a multi-dimensional typology" (Aarseth, et al., 2003, p. 48). With a pretty lacunar literature and no empirical evidences, building a genres "blueprint" with mutually exclusive frameworks that would only take us half of the way. Even if not in the scope of this paper, it is equally important to find some proper labels, recognized by scholars, industry and audience, built on the same semantics, labels that could evolve if a new context or development requires it.

Particular milestones for the genre frameworks have been identified by Aarseth et al. (2003) and grouped under five headings: Space, Time, Player-structure, Control and Rules. However, since videogames are rooted in the meanings as well as in the mechanics and the performance, adding a plot layer would permit the integration of the transmedial genres, easily recognized by the audience in other narrative media like books, TV or cinema, genres such as horror, adventure, war or romance. For compatibility, I followed the same methodology as the one proposed by Aarseth et al. (2003, p. 49): "the dimensional categories and their values are gathered by taking two similar games [...] and then try to describe the difference between them in a principal way. If this is possible, the principle is extracted and applied to other games. If there are games that do not fit either categorical value, a third value is introduced, or if this is not possible, the dimension is rejected as too arbitrary. The process is repeated until a suitable list of categories and values has been compiled. This list then becomes the typology". For introducing The Plot, I populated a grid against two axes: the plot expression mode and the plot statement, evaluating sixteen narrative games and eight non-narrative games. I

guided my analysis by the extended Tobias' plot list (1993), built up on specific patterns, serving as a foundation for some genre. Those plots are easily recognized by the audience because beyond rules and mechanics, it has supportive values common with other media genres conventions: props, sound effects, genre pillar character (i.e.: soldier, detective, zombie). The plot, as pointed out by Denis James Ryan, Gameloft Romania [face-to-face interview, Bucharest, April 2015], can break the story down a little bit and add some different facets to the general genre. Yet, those should still allow the player to recognize the main genre.

The Plot criterion is not limited to the videogames with a narrative pattern.

Conclusions and Area of Future Contribution

Videogame genres are built on multiple perspectives that depend on the observer and his or her agenda. For the industry, genres are player-centric built focusing on mechanics and game design patterns that deliver particular play-experiences. For scholars, genres are tools that allow examining, deconstructing, and comparing games. Thanks to genre conventions, any player can start playing immediately and very easily, any new game that is part of a genre family previously experimented (even reading or discussing about). As Aasenault observes, it is very easy to "jump into new 3D Shooters and look around, walk, crouch, reload our gun, change weapons, and so on, much more easily than the very first time we laid eyes on one" (2009, p. 171).

As in any other popular culture artifacts, some of the genres are strongly standardized by clear features while others are less. However, before "importing" a genre, any scholar should make a distinction against other types of categories such as style (i.e.: realism, graphics, setting), history of production, the technology used, player typology or structure. The most difficult task is to find criteria that are mutually exclusive, applicable to a large set of videogames, unconditioned by the historical moment. Reviewing the literature and embedding opinions of professionals, respecting how genres conventions are acting in combination or modules (Spiridon, 2013, p. 95) and based on the Tobias' plot list (1993), I added The Plot to the five headings proposed by Aarseth, et al., (2003). As long as this criterion is in harmony with all videogame features, it permits videogames to integrate the transmedial genres, easily recognized by the audience in other narrative media like books, TV or cinema, genres such as horror, adventure, war or romance.

For future development of the topic, it is necessary to run an empirical study applied on an extended corpus of the videogames. In addition, it is equally important to find proper labels, recognized by scholars, industry and audience.

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