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# What Defines Video Game Genre? Thinking about Genre Study after the Great Divide

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## Abstract

This essay explores questions concerning genre theory as they can be applied to videogames and interactive entertainment. The essay begins by discussing some of the limitations of current videogame genre theory by looking at the ‘narrative vs. ludology’ debate and considering its effect on videogame studies. Against this backdrop, the current state of videogame genre theory is discussed in more detail. Next, the state of genre theory and practice in other fields of inquiry is explored, especially those aspects which are applicable to a modern audio-visual medium such as videogames. Finally, the essay concludes with a series of recommendations about the future path of videogame genre study.

## Author Keywords

Genre theory; videogame genre.

## Introduction: The Question of Boundaries

In his discussion of how *Halo: Combat Evolved* mixes genre conventions, Aki Jarvinen playfully admits that: “Even though a ludologist deserves a slap in the face every time s/he compares a game to a movie, I cannot help myself...” (Jarvinen, 2002, para. 6). I mention this casual remark since, in a way, it speaks to how videogame studies has been affected by a larger theoretical debate concerning the essence of video games as a medium: the ‘narrative vs. ludology’ debate. Ludologists have argued that gameplay is paramount. The role of the player and his or her decisions and actions distinguish videogames from any other medium. Consequently, the medium is seen as being defined primarily through the concept of interactivity and simulation rather than interpretation and representation and such elements as rules, goals, and outcomes are held to be more important or more central than story, character, theme or meaning. While it has focused analytical attention on the medium in very positive ways, the debate has sometimes been particularly contentious and divisive; leading one prominent commentator to describe it as the first “schism” in the field (Newman, 2004, p. 91). An unfortunate by-product has been what Jarvinen alludes to: a significant hesitance to consider any resemblance between videogames and other media, especially film and literature. More specifically for my purposes here, I feel that this hesitancy has not only artificially limited the

manner in which genre has been discussed in videogame studies but, more generally, it has restricted the way genre theory is understood as a broad concept.

In the following discussion, I would like to consider genre as a concept, how it has been used within videogame studies—including how it has been affected by the ‘narrative vs. ludology’ debate—and how research in the field of videogames and interactive entertainment may benefit from genre theory as it has evolved in other fields which look at similar forms of cultural expression.

### **Genre Theory and the Essence of Videogames**

Mark Wolf (2001) has produced one of the first and most complete academic considerations of genre in videogame studies. In his opening discussion, Wolf provides a brief overview of genre theory in other disciplines, particularly film studies. After discussing the role that iconography, narrative structure, theme, and the socio-cultural context has played in the genre analysis of film, Wolf admits such approaches have limited applicability in a discussion of videogame genre “due to the direct and active participation of the audience in the form of the surrogate player-character, who acts within the game’s diegetic world, taking part in the central conflict of the game’s narrative” (p. 114). The theoretical underpinnings of Wolf’s argument are more clearly evident in his discussion of iconography:

“While some video games can be classified in a manner similar to that of films (we might say that *Outlaw* (1978) is a Western, *Space Invaders* (1978) science fiction, and *Combat* (1977) a war game), classification by iconography ignores the fundamental differences and similarities which are to be found in the player’s experience of the game. *Outlaw* and *Combat*, both early games for the Atari 2600, are very similar in that both simply feature player-characters maneuvering and shooting at each other in a field of obstacles on a single, bounded screen of graphics, with cowboys in one game and tanks in the other.”

Wolf, p. 115 (2001)

As we will see, the tendency to privilege player activity (or ‘gameplay,’ or ‘interactivity’) over all other aspects of a videogame has limited what some authors believe can be (or should be) included in the analysis of a single title or an entire genre. Wolf does not completely dismiss categorizing strategies that consider iconography or theme but argues they have a secondary role in a proper classification system.<sup>1</sup> And by examining the games he uses as examples, it is not difficult to understand his point.

When looking at these two titles, the western and combat themes do seem incidental since the gameplay (shooting) is so similar in both cases. With games from that era, the setting, theme, and even backstory (when present) often had little inherent relationship to the gameplay.

Wolf's examples present an interesting problem for genre analysis and reflect more general questions concerning the essential nature of videogames and whether elements like narrative, subject matter, theme or art design are indeed integral or essential aspects of the medium. For example, Markku Eskelinen would conclude his essay on the current situation of videogame scholarship—for the inaugural issue of *Game Studies*—by bluntly stating that narrative elements such as cut-scenes:

“...are just uninteresting ornaments or gift-wrappings to games, and laying any emphasis on studying these kinds of marketing tools is just a waste of time and energy. It's no wonder gaming mechanisms are suffering from slow or even lethargic states of development, as they are constantly and intentionally confused with narrative or dramatic or cinematic mechanisms.”

Eskelinen, para. 34 (2001)

Indeed, the seemingly minor or secondary nature of non-gameplay elements has also led to questions concerning how interpretation and meaning are theorized with respect to interactive media. For example, Espen Aarseth asks whether or not videogames can even be properly considered as 'texts':

“Games are not ‘textual’ or at least not primarily textual: where is the text in chess? We might say that the *rules* of chess constitute its ‘text,’ but there is no recitation of the rules during gameplay, so that would reduce the textuality of chess to a subtextuality or a paratextuality. A central “text” does not exist—merely context.”

Aarseth, p. 47 (2004)

Aarseth then argues that the representational aspects or “the semiotic system” is what is “most coincidental to the game” (p. 48). He continues: “As the Danish theorist and game-designer Jesper Juul has pointed out, games are eminently themeable: you can play chess with some rocks in the mud, or with pieces that look like the Simpson family rather than kings or queens. It would be the same game” (p. 48).

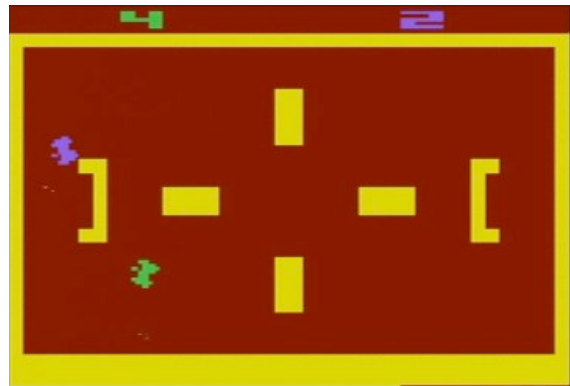


Figure 1. *Combat* (1978, PS2 emulation of Atari 2600 original).



Figure 2. *Outlaw* (1978, PS2 emulation of Atari 2600 original).

were to include more recent examples, would characteristics like theme or history be so easy to cast in a subsidiary role or dismiss altogether? From a methodological standpoint, looking at similar, but more recent, examples is necessary.

*Gun* (2005) and *America's Army: True Soldiers* (2007) resemble the games that Wolf selected for his example. Both involve shooting but are set in different periods and contain much different themes. *Gun* is one of the few western-themed shooter games and presents a gritty revenge story coupled with violent gameplay (in fact, gore is somewhat excessive and is made into a spectacle). It is a narrative-driven, third-person shooter and emphasis was placed on the story, voice acting, weaponry and gameplay. *America's Army: True Soldiers*, on the other hand, is another installment of the U.S. Army's recruitment and PR/propaganda efforts (this time licensed to Ubisoft and Red Storm Entertainment) and features both single-player and multiplayer modes, career-building (with RPG elements), and stresses tactics and teamwork. Because it is touted as a training and recruiting tool, it aims more for realism and provides basic training elements similar to the original PC game. Weapons, squad roles, tactics, rules of engagement and even military protocol and culture are meant to be authentic—even aiming a weapon is very difficult—and immersion is enhanced through a first-person perspective. As it is a recruiting tool, it is partly aimed at a teenage audience and so violence and gore have been significantly toned down.



Figure 3. *America's Army: True Soldiers* (2007, Xbox 360).

At first glance, both Wolf's example of Atari 2600 games and Aarseth and Juul's example of chess would seem to support the ludological tenet that gameplay overrides all other considerations. However, if we consider the nature of the examples themselves—highly abstracted games with simple rule sets—we need to keep in mind that the examples used are very similar to one another but also very different from other types of games, especially videogames created in the last ten or so years. If we limit our analysis to very early console videogames or highly abstract forms like Chess, an important question arises: can we, with confidence, base broad theoretical propositions on such a narrow sample? If we

Even though both could be (and often are) considered as shooters, there are substantial differences in their gameplay, focus, theme and tone. *Gun* is a third-person action-adventure that



Figure 4. *Gun* (2005, Xbox).

has more in common with the *Grand Theft Auto* series while *America's Army: True Soldiers* is a first-person, military-themed shooter. Since it places emphasis on simulation and realism, it shares commonalities with the *Ghost Recon* series or a game like *Close Combat: First to Fight* (made with the cooperation of the U.S. Marines) but is, itself, very different from the majority of first-person shooters. To consider these thematic differences as 'uninteresting ornament' might mean we would miss important details about the design and production of these games and how they are valued by their audiences.

And to dismiss their thematic or semiotic elements entirely would be to gloss over how these elements are intimately tied to the differences in the gameplay between the two titles.<sup>2</sup>

I would like to be clear: I am not arguing that narrative, setting, or representational elements (iconography, if we want to reduce it to that) are more important than gameplay. In fact, I reject their complete separation. Isolating gameplay from anything else is useful from an analytical standpoint—that is, to break down a game to its component parts in order to better understand the whole—but we have to remember that it is artificial to do so. Even from the brief examples above, it is evident that the gameplay and other elements (setting, story, characters, theme, tone, etc.) are tethered to form the larger experience of each game. This is probably more obvious if we consider another example.

*JFK Reloaded* was released in 2004. Structurally, it is a first-person shooter where the player adopts a position in a building, holding a rifle and overlooking a representation of Dealey Plaza in Dallas, Texas in 1963. The game is a simulation of the assassination of John F. Kennedy and the goal is to recreate the shooting as specifically described in the official Warren Commission report. In fact, the subtext of the game seems to be a political one as the game aims to focus attention on the Warren Report and test—through the game's simulation—its veracity and truthfulness. The debate and controversy surrounding the game speaks to its complex meanings and, specifically, to its (inter)textuality. And it is precisely because of the overabundance of its intertextual and textual meanings that the game is differentiated from other first-person shooters. Again, it is the totality of the game—including gameplay, rules, subject matter, setting, etc.—which contributes to the experience of it.

What the example of *JFK Reloaded* also shows is how we need to move beyond purely formal analysis to consider the importance of social and/or historical context when analyzing individual games and, especially, entire genres. It is with the issue of historical context that I would like to further the discussion of Wolf's genre breakdown. Wolf includes an alphabetical list of forty-two different genres (including Abstract, Adaptation, Adventure, Artificial Life, Board Games, Capturing, Card Games, Catching, Chase, Collecting, Combat...) with descriptions of each, a list of examples, and cross-referencing to take into account overlap. The system aims to be comprehensive but it is also historical or period-specific. While he includes some games from the 1990s in his classification system, most of the games provided as examples in each category are early arcade, home-console, or computer games released in the late 1970s through the 1980s. As it is, Wolf's genre breakdown might properly be read as a way of classifying early video games—more specifically, early arcade and computer games and games of the 8- and 16-bit console era—that primarily offered a single type of gameplay and were mostly restricted to 2D graphical technology. In that, Wolf has made an important contribution into the classification of *early* video games and as such we have to recognize the medium's historical nature and acknowledge its historicity, development, and significant evolution.



Figure 5. *JFK Reloaded* (2004, PC).

The above examples—*Outlaw*, *Combat*, *Gun*, *America's Army: True Soldiers*, and *JFK Reloaded*—reveal that the medium of videogames is, at the very least, broad, complex and varied. But more specifically, these examples highlight the problematic nature of arguing for a single, basic essence when discussing the medium as a whole and then applying it to genre theory. While doing so may have some limited application for analysis, this kind of essentialist theorizing tends toward abstraction and broad assumptions (which, as I will argue below, is ill-suited for genre study). What is more, I believe it has contributed to the general misunderstanding and dismissal of genre theory both in terms of how it exists in other fields and how it might be usefully applied in videogame studies.

### The Current State of Videogame Genre Theory

Within videogame studies, the concept of genre has been slowly but gradually evolving. In his overview of the field, James Newman (2004) devotes a few pages to classification or genre. Newman mentions seven broad categories of classification that are commonly used in industry reviews and how similar typologies are deployed—sometimes in problematic ways—in academic studies. Aki Jarvinen devoted a chapter to discussion of genre in his PhD. dissertation

(2008). Much earlier, Chris Crawford, a video game designer, provided a genre-like classification system in his widely referenced *The Art of Computer Game Design* (1984), but as Jarvinen notes elsewhere, Crawford's system has not made its way into industry or academic discussion (2002). Mark J. Wolf has produced an extensive and ambitious classification system but, as outlined previously, it is largely focused on early 2D games. While it is more common to find discussion of single genres in journalistic sources and in the work of fan communities, it is still somewhat rare in academia. It is more common to encounter general theoretical discussions of genre and, as we saw with Newman, equally common are the lamentations about its underdeveloped nature. Still, there have been some important contributions.

Zach Whalen (2003) has produced an interesting essay that looks at Massively Multiplayer games specifically and genre theory more generally. Categorization by platform is, Whalen argues, often ignored by scholarly attempts to discuss genre and raises "important typological questions" such as: "What is the medium of gaming? Is each platform a separate medium? Does the apparatus of a player's interface with the game include the hardware of the console itself?" (Whalen, 2003, para. 12) These questions, Whalen argues, are often overlooked in scholarly discussions of videogame genre:

"... the formalistic canonization of games as quasi-literary objects can only result from the type of understanding which does not depend on a game's commercial success as a marker of quality. Therefore, the consumption of games (the buying of games and accessories) is, unfortunately, a less important question for this discussion. This is unfortunate because the media objects themselves and the journalistic typologies of games create the practical sense of genre that game scholars tend to eschew or take for granted...."

Whalen, para. 13 (2002)

Like other media associated with popular culture, videogames can be consumed in different and quite specific ways. In fact, it should not be surprising that for specific genres, the games themselves might not be the only or primary objects of consumption or interaction. Fighting games and 2D shooters are two genres closely associated with both arcades and home consoles, but due to the nature of each genre the use of arcade joysticks is often preferred for home play. Consequently, a thriving market has evolved for these accessories and, because the genres tend to attract a dedicated and tech-savvy audience, players often build elaborate hardware set-ups for home use, which might include ordering original arcade circuit boards from the manufacturers or building arcade-style cabinets to house a modern PC running emulated software.

Similarly, the space or place of play is another important consideration. In his discussion of the scholarly use of genre in videogame studies, Newman (2004) argues that focusing analytic attention only upon the game itself often does not address other important considerations such as "ludic context" (p. 12). Newman writes: "An underused means of differentiating types of videogames and, more importantly, types of experience, structure and engagement, centres on the location of play" (p. 13). In his discussion, Newman focuses upon coin-op or arcade systems and argues that the social space of game consumption not only affects design considerations but also the experience of players themselves.

Consideration of hardware and ludic context are not only important for genre study but also are central to defining the nature of the medium itself. Another potentially useful—and often discussed—way of conceptually framing genre analysis in videogames is provided by Geoff King and Tanya Krzywinska (2002). King and Krzywinska offer ‘Platform,’ ‘Genre,’ ‘Mode,’ and ‘Milieu’ as broad categories with which genre in videogames can be approached. ‘Platform’ specifically refers to the hardware utilized by a game. They recognize that a single title might be ported to various systems and they also mention that the hardware companies might influence the type of games that are made and published. ‘Genre’ uses the commonly understood categories describing gameplay (Action, Action-Adventure, Strategy, etc.) which can be combined, added to, and further sub-divided. ‘Mode’ is used to describe how the game-world is experienced by the player and would include in-game perspective (first-person, third-person, isometric) as well as options for number of players (single-player, multiplayer) and whether it can be played over a local area network (LAN) or over the internet. ‘Milieu’ is used to describe stylistic conventions and narrative content which, King and Krzywinska say, is similar to the way that genre is “usually employed in film” studies (pp. 26-27).

The strength of King and Krzywinska's system is that it takes into account very different aspects of a videogame that might be potentially useful for analysis and genre study. Implicit in their discussion, however, is the fact that this is a tiered system with ‘genre’ (gameplay) occupying the primary level of categorization. This is due in part because they say that the move from ‘genre’ to ‘mode’ to ‘milieu’ involves a movement from the more general to the more specific. But it is also the result of King and Krzywinska’s desire to not add further tension to the ongoing ludology vs. narrative debate. In explaining the choice of terms for their categories, they state: “The reason for adopting this terminology, however, is to avoid imposing a film-oriented framework upon games, from the outside, rather than working more closely with the dominant discourses surrounding games themselves” (p. 27). At any rate, the need to maintain such a hierarchy is debatable. Whalen, for example, further refines King and Krzywinska’s categories but argues that the mediating effects of hardware and platform would indicate that under certain circumstances, ‘mode’ might be of central importance.<sup>3</sup>

Whalen’s point is made clear when considering ‘serious games’ as this emerging genre of games is defined primarily by subject matter and intent. The category of serious games (sometimes referred to as ‘social impact games’ or ‘persuasive games’) includes games that are used in advertising (advergaming), politics, activism, education, and public policy. While gameplay, format, and platform are important elements of discussion, they are not held as defining elements of the genre and its various sub-categories. Instead, subject matter and the intended use (education or marketing) are the defining characteristics of the genre. In similar fashion, another area that has received some sustained attention is the genre of documentary games or docugames. Through comparison and analysis (sometimes of the exact same titles), both Joost Raessens (2006) and Tracy Fullerton (2005) cautiously propose the documentary tradition as an emerging genre of games. While posing just as many questions as they answer, they nonetheless propose that recent tendencies as seen in games as diverse as *Kuma/War*, *911 Survivor*, and *JFK Reloaded* are indicative of the general documentary tradition. Again, the genre includes a variety of gameplay types showing that gameplay might not always be the defining element of a game or a genre.



In non-academic fora, we can see that the use of genre is sometimes well developed if haphazardly applied. Within mainstream retail stores, genres are often non-existent in favour of categorization by platform. And if we consult the game packaging of individual titles, genre is rarely mentioned. However, the usage of genre within industry journalistic and fan communities is often very well-developed and, at times, quite complex. Among prominent videogame review websites and magazines, there is general uniformity when it comes to genre labels. Action, Adventure, Fighting, First-person Shooters, Flight, Massively Multiplayer, Music/Rhythm, Party, Platformer, Puzzle, Racing/Driving, RPG, Simulation, Sports, and Strategy are commonly encountered categories. As we might expect, the degree of complexity in the application of these terms varies considerably. Moby Games, a website for the videogame history/archiving community, offers a well-organized approach to genre for its users. There is a list of basic or main genres that is used in certain situations and a much longer and more detailed list of genre labels, modifiers and themes (Moby Games, n.d.).

What is important for our immediate purposes is the simple fact that a quite dense lexicon already exists when it comes to thinking about videogame genre. This becomes even more evident when we begin looking at the available writing on specific genres and subgenres contained within history/archiving websites and specialized fan communities that have grown organically around many genres. Sometimes these exist as simple listings of personal favorites within a genre or may form a more concerted effort by a group or larger community to define a genre and its related sub-categories. Much of the writing is limited to personal opinion but it has the potential to be very detailed and exhaustive. As well, these are examples of *genre in action* since they are often sites where audiences and even producers interact with one another as well as the cultural objects themselves (see Gabrielsen, 2006).

It would be a mistake to discount such general usage. Here, I would echo Whalen when he argues that the common or journalistic genre labels need to be incorporated into scholarly studies of videogame genre. This would not mean that every genre must correspond to pre-existing categories or be defined first through common or journalistic usage. Instead, it merely reflects the reality that genres are, in part, social constructions, and that the everyday usage and application of genre labels must be taken into consideration. In addition, tracing the evolution of terminology and concepts can provide an important historical dimension to genre study, especially for genres that enjoy popularity over a long period of time.

William Huber (2003) has also called for a wider and more rigorous approach to videogame genre, specifically in terms of moving beyond a strictly formal or gameplay-centric approach. As he so well demonstrates in his analysis of the Japanese game *Ka* (*Mister Mosquito* in North America), Huber shows how a thematic approach to understanding genre is necessary in fully understanding some videogame titles. Similarly, but more cautiously, Thomas Apperley (2006) has argued that a strictly ludological approach to videogame genre analysis is limited and has to be supplanted with considerations such as narratology and the contemporary logics of remediation (6).

I would add that videogame studies would do well to embrace the theoretical and methodological approaches that have been developed in other fields of study, especially those fields that deal with modern media and cultural expression such as film or television studies. Obviously, certain

aspects of these traditions—especially those that deal with the formal characteristics of their respective media—might have limited applicability to the study of videogame genre without some modification. Others, however, will prove to be exceedingly useful and it would be prudent to take advantage of the failings, mis-starts, breakthroughs and refinements that have already taken place within genre studies in those fields. While a ludological approach is correct in insisting that videogames represent a unique medium with its own inherent possibilities, it is misleading to deny any similarity with other media. Videogames, film, and television do indeed have much in common: they are all audio-visual media with potential for experimental, documentary, and narrative-based forms (including being capable of a high degree of formal and aesthetic refinement); they share similarities in how they can become linked to sub-cultural formations or mainstream popular culture; there are similar (and overlapping) relationships between studios and audiences in each medium; we can see similarities in production models (varying from small creative teams to large industrial productions) as well as similar publishing, distribution and marketing structures. More prosaically, in this world of remediation and corporate synergy there are also important and *real* connections between videogames and other media that we simply cannot ignore.

### **What is Genre and how is it Used in other Fields?**

One of the first and constantly recurring questions to arise when it comes to genre is simply ‘what is it?’ At the very least, it is a method of categorization used to better understand or comprehend a collection of cultural artifacts. However, it quickly becomes clear that genre is used and deployed in a variety of ways by different groups of individuals and that the methods of categorization might vary. When considering popular media like film, genre classification has long been recognized as an important guide that both fans and producers use to guide consumption and gauge popularity (and profitability). Even within academic traditions, genre theory and methodology have gradually evolved from early classification schemes describing poetry, prose and drama to an array of approaches used to understand the rise of modern mass communications and popular culture

It is important to consider that academics are not the only ones using genre. In his discussion of genre, Daniel Chandler (1997) poses the question: ‘whose genre is it anyway?’ and the question of *who* is closely related to the question of *what*. Looking at the medium of video games, we see practical and theoretical applications of genre by an array of different people: reviewers and journalists, publishers and marketers, fans and retail workers, designers and critics, producers and industry analysts. Not only do they use genre categorization in different ways (simply because they are interacting with cultural products for different reasons) but they also interact and influence one another, thereby furthering the definition of any single genre. As such, as much as genre is characterized by aesthetics or formal traits, it is defined by the various people who come into contact with it.

But, is there an object of genre study? That is, in the above example, what is the *it* that people come into contact with? Is there really some thing or group of things out there to be discovered? Or, is genre really just a loosely defined concept more or less agreed upon by individuals at a particular moment in time? More simply, are genres ‘out there’ in the world or are genres just

social constructions in the minds of authors, publishers, designers, marketers, fans and academics? The question is important because how we conceive of genre influences how we go about studying and defining individual genres.

I think it is safe to say that genre is not a thing to be discovered out there in the world.<sup>4</sup> Instead, we have to recognize the fact that genre is a conceptual model or tool. The use of genre (as a concept) is to recognize that the field of human expression exhibits certain patterns, tendencies, and trajectories and that these patterns, tendencies and trajectories may relate to the medium, aesthetics, ideology, economics, current events, history, education and other aspects of human interaction and behaviour. To put it another way, genre—or the act of classification—is not an end in itself, but represents a framework or schematic with which we can better understand an individual title that forms a part of a genre *and* the larger social environment in which that title resides. As Huber (2003) rightly says: “The purpose of looking at genre... is not part of a project of taxonomy, but rather to discuss how the game as a text generates meaning in reception/interaction, to find a lineage in its tropes and so ground it in the broader field of cultural practice from which it emerges” (para. 4).

Genre study—or at least a genre-conscious approach—is critical to game analysis (regardless of any disciplinary, theoretical or methodological starting point) since it is extremely useful to have a shared understanding of the vast output associated with any medium.

This would include a common vocabulary and a shared understanding of the characteristics, aesthetic or ideological values, audience, or the economic influences common to a genre. Such common knowledge is crucial. As the literary critic Northrop Frye (1957) argues, the purpose of genre study is “not so much to classify as to clarify... traditions and affinities, thereby bringing out a large number of... relationships that would not be noticed as long as there were no context established for them” (pp. 247-248). Such clarity would help analysis since it would help to contextualize the fundamental characteristics of a particular game, would aid in making historical comparisons, and help us to understand the motivations behind the design decisions of developers and the reception of fans.



Figure 6. *Space Invaders* (1978, arcade).

Beyond the analysis of individual titles, genre study is also helpful in mapping the evolution of the medium itself. Given the intimate relationship between hardware development and software design, patterns relating to technological change can at times be easier to place within a social, economic and aesthetic context. This is especially true since specific technical developments might only affect certain genres (often because such developments are embraced or rejected by the fan communities surrounding a particular genre). More broadly, the contours of the

medium's history can perhaps be more reliably detected when compared to the growth, stagnation, innovations and trends of various generic categories.

Despite the ongoing evolution of genre study, we can still take comfort in the fact that genre studies within other fields have been tremendously productive. As such, I would like to briefly explore some of the interesting questions and major developments within genre theory that I think are especially useful for consideration in videogame studies.



Figure 7. *Raiden III* (2005, PS2).

characters. The term 'rail shooter' describes a gameplay mechanic—more closely aligned with technological developments of the time—where the player's ship has some freedom of movement but is essentially guided through sometimes fully three-dimensional worlds while seemingly on invisible rails. While the cute-'em-up is distinguished primarily through tone, theme, and graphic design, the rail shooter is distinguished primarily through gameplay mechanics and game design. In contrast to both, the subgenre often called manic shooters, *danmaku* (a Japanese term translated as 'hail of bullets' or 'barrage') or bullet-hell, is a highly visual form that features large numbers of onscreen objects (especially bullets) moving in intricate patterns and trajectories. Manic shooters, with their high degree of difficulty and spectacular gameplay, attract both expert players and audiences to arcades and competitions, turning player performance into an object of fascination and a commodity.<sup>5</sup>

There are some interesting principles here with respect to genre study. As the above examples illustrate, and as Alan Williams (1984) has noted, genre production tends to be messy and complex while genre studies often aims for simplicity and tidiness (p. 122). The lesson is that we should not expect everything to fit neatly into a classification scheme. As well, the terms often have a historical and social dimension that only adds to the confusion. This could be due to evolution of usage or because certain genres and sub-genres may be constituted quite differently

One of the first questions revolves around terminology and nomenclature. Often, there is a bewildering array of terms associated with a genre and its sub-categories which might, at first glance, appear to be inconsistent or haphazardly applied. Typically, this has raised questions about the usefulness of common terms and, in more extreme forms, might lead one to conclude that the categories themselves are less than useful. If we look at the broad genre of the 2D shooter (of which *Space Invaders* is often considered to be the first), we quickly realize that many other terms are closely aligned with it: shoot-'em-up, 'shmups,' STG, 2.5D shooter, fixed shooter, rail shooter, tube shooter, cute-'em-up, bullet hell, *danmaku*, manic shooter, etc. All describe a broad type of game or specific sub-category and some of these terms have been period or geographically specific or tied to specific audiences. Notice too that there are inconsistencies between them. A 'cute-'em-up' describes a cohort of games which typically use bright colour palettes and 'cute'

(or at least place emphasis on very different sets of formal characteristics). As the comparison of cute-‘em-ups and rail shooters indicates, one sub-genre might be dominated by theme and tone while another is characterized by a specific gameplay mechanic. And they will, of course, overlap as hybridization is common (*Rainbow Cotton* is both a cute-‘em-up and a rail shooter).

The historical nature of genres is crucial to keep in mind, especially with cultural products that are associated with mass or popular culture and tied to specific technologies. To use the 2D shooter genre once again, we can see that it was one of the first recognized genres; that it had its ‘heyday’ in the late 1980s and throughout the 1990s; that it was inextricably bound to the refinement of 2D graphics technology; that it was linked to specific hardware and software companies (mostly Japanese); and even that it was a product of the then overwhelmingly male-orientated industry. That is, the 2D shooter genre is historically bound and closely linked with certain economic, technological, aesthetic, and cultural processes. While a handful of shooters are commercially released (or re-released) today and there is still very active interest in the genre (mostly from small but dedicated fan communities), we might consider it as a historical or superseded genre.



Figure 8. *Rainbow Cotton* (1999, Dreamcast).

The trajectory of the 2D shooter genre reveals another important principle: since genres are historically situated, they should be understood as cultural processes. Genres evolve, morph and transform, sometimes go dormant and may even enjoy renewed interest from audiences. They are affected by economic successes (similar to the ‘cycles’ often seen in Hollywood production), are affected by economic or technological change, and are closely aligned with the public mood or even current events. Because a genre can sometimes undergo extensive development and evolution and because it exists alongside other genres, we might see considerable overlap (hence, the ‘messiness’ that Williams speaks of). Ralph Cohen (1986), acknowledging the messiness or “multiplicity” of genre definition, says: “Genres are open categories. Each member alters the genre by adding, contradicting, or changing constituents, especially those of members most closely related to it” (p. 204).

Steven Neale (2000) furthers the point of genre-as-process by discussing the relation between a genre’s characteristics and individual works:

“... the repertoire of generic conventions available at any one point in time is always *in play* rather than simply being *re-played*, even in the most repetitive of films, genres, and cycles.... [Consequently], any generic repertoire always exceeds, and thus can never be exhausted by, any single film”

Neale, p. 219 (2000)

While it is possible to paint a detailed and convincing description of a particular genre, we should not think of that description as a concrete list of characteristics that every individual work must possess. Neale's argument that the repertoire of a genre's features and tendencies can never be fully contained in a single work also brings up some interesting questions as to how we approach a genre and the individual works that help form that genre. Do we put more emphasis on the similarities or the differences? Do we favour popularity or innovation or should we look more closely at works that are considered derivative or... 'generic'? If a genre's suite or repertoire of characteristics always supersedes an individual work, then can we confidently state that a single title or collection of titles is prototypical or typical or absolutely representative of that genre?

What is important to consider are the assumptions we might hold about a genre. Even after genre theory was somewhat well-established within film studies, Alan Williams (1984) argued that film scholars needed to come to terms with the many assumptions that restricted or artificially limited the scope of their genre scholarship:

“The more promising possibility, for the moment at least, is to return to film history and try to produce individual genre studies with real historical integrity. This would mean (1) starting with a genre's 'pre-history,' its roots in other media; (2) studying all films, regardless of perceived quality; and (3) going beyond film content to study advertising, the star system, studio policy, and so on in relation to the production of films.... We need a corpus of basic studies that don't limit themselves to generalizing from a list of agreed-upon masterpieces. And, crucially, we need to get out of the United States... [as a] cross-cultural approach to the topic might help loosen up the current critical logjam”

Williams, p. 124 (1984)

Writing more recently, Neale (2000) identifies the need for film studies to move beyond the “selectivity and unevenness” of a film genre criticism that focuses almost exclusively on “mainstream, commercial films in general and Hollywood films in particular” (pp. 52, 9).

Thankfully, the culture surrounding videogames tends to be international in scope but these warnings are still important to keep in mind, especially for an industry where the market is so dominated by large-scale commercial interests. More important perhaps is the necessity to resist the tendency to form a strict picture of a genre based upon the analysis of only a handful of titles. If we are correct in our view of genre as historical process, it makes no sense to describe a genre solely on the basis of a few of its earliest, most popular or best-selling titles.<sup>6</sup>

The most important reason for resisting such methodological blind spots is because it misses a central aspect of genre: that a genre is not contained within a single text. Reinforcing Neale's point, Jason Mittell (2001) argues that we need to avoid what he calls the 'textualist assumption' of early genre theory where a genre was defined *only* as a textual attribute. Speaking from the perspective of television studies, he argues:

“Genres are not found within one isolated text. *Wheel of Fortune* is not a genre in and of itself but a member of the generic category ‘game show.’ Genres emerge only from the intertextual relations between multiple texts, resulting in a common category. But how do these texts interrelate to form a genre? Texts cannot interact on their own; they come together only through cultural practices such as production and reception....Thus, if genre is dependent on *intertextuality*, it cannot be an *inherently textual* component”

Mittell, p. 6 (2001)

Mittell is not repudiating formal or aesthetic analysis but arguing that we have to supplement textuality with its cultural, economic, even political contexts in order to arrive at a comprehensive genre analysis. This would involve turning our heads in many directions at once: to audience(s), political and legal environments, industrial and marketing practice, etc. (Kapsis, 1991).

For example, the question of audience (or audiences) is important, even for a formal or aesthetic analysis. A puzzling aspect of the survival/horror genre is that many early games feature what could easily be called ‘clunky’ controls. In most other genres, such as racing/driving or platformers, responsive and ‘tight’ controls are considered critical but in games from the *Fatal Frame*, *Resident Evil* or *Silent Hill* series, the player often struggles with the slow or fumbling aspects of their avatar. In fact, what is normally considered as poor design or implementation by non-fans, is here an important part of the player experience. From the perspective of genre, it is important to consider audiences and their particular value systems as this often relates specifically to how formal characteristics are judged and this might be very different when compared to audiences who favour other genres.

Finally, a common refrain from many writers considering genre theory and research—and one implicit in the points made above—is the necessity of empirical investigation (Cohen, 1986; Neale, 2000; Mittell, 2001; Williams, 1984). Cohen even goes so far as saying that genre classification is itself empirical in nature. But the larger point made by many authors is that genre study has to be based on rather exhaustive, empirical research. Not only is this to combat the temptation to base genre analysis on the common traits of a few popular titles but also to counter the hazards of sweeping generalizations sometimes associated with genre discussion. What is more, given the importance of intertextual relations, genre analysis needs to be empirically grounded in extra-textual materials such as press coverage, fan activity, marketing materials, production and distribution details, etc.

Something that becomes evident after some consideration of the topic is that, fundamentally, genre study is a collaborative and long-term project. In order for a detailed understanding of videogame genres to emerge, it must be built and continually refined. If genre is a process, so is its study.

## Genre Study and its Application for Videogames

If we look at the accumulated materials associated with genre study in literary, television, and especially film studies, we can categorize them according to their dominant focus: 1) formal and aesthetic considerations, 2) industrial and discursive context, and 3) social meaning and cultural practice.<sup>7</sup> Formal and aesthetic considerations have the longest history of use. Formal characteristics (especially distinguishing features and recurring conventions) have included story patterns and narrative structure, setting, theme, tone, characterization, lighting and mood, iconography, visual imagery and symbolism, design and art direction. By far, the best-known approach is the use of iconography within film studies in the 1960s and early 1970s (Neale, 2000, pp. 13-16; Cook & Bernink, 1999, pp. 138-140). This approach was often construed as a purely visual one, and its most influential proponents (Edward Buscombe, Colin McArthur) proposed a detailed analysis of the recurring imagery, icons, clothing, sets, settings, etc. With respect to westerns, Buscombe (1995) writes:

“... there are the various tools of the trade, principally weapons, and of these, principally guns. They are usually specifically identified.... Such care in the choice of weapons is not mere pedantry nor dictated purely by considerations of historical accuracy, for an incredible variety of arms were in use. The weapons employed in the films are there for largely stylistic reasons; consider, for example, the significant difference in the style of movement required to cock a Winchester and a Lee-Enfield 3030 “

Buscombe, p. 14 (1995)

We can see that the use of guns goes beyond their visual presence to include gesture (in the act of carrying the weapon or, as Buscombe rightly points out, reloading it), the associated sounds, etc. Barry Keith Grant notes that such iconographic meanings offer specific satisfactions to viewers (especially for those fans of the genre that are attuned to or versed in such meanings) and are integral to the overall aesthetic experience of a genre film (1995a, 1995b). For Thomas Sobchack (1995), iconography would become a form of ‘shorthand’ for classical Hollywood. By employing well-known visual codes, excessive verbal or pictorial exposition could be reduced).

The shortcomings of an approach primarily focused upon visual imagery and iconography were soon recognized. Iconography worked well for westerns and gangster films but less so for other genres where non-visual conventions dominated (comedies or melodramas). As well, interest in other theoretical traditions such as semiotics and structural linguistics would push analysis to consider different visual conventions (lighting, editing, camera movement), or non-visual elements like patterns in narrative structure and characterization. As Grant (1995b) notes, while we can look at the early genre criticism in film studies as highly formalistic and perhaps dated, it contained within it the seeds for later analysis ( p. xvi).

As we have seen, a formal or aesthetic approach has already emerged within videogame studies and will continue to be refined as theoretical and methodological discussions surrounding game analysis and aesthetics evolve. For now, we would include within a formal/aesthetic approach to videogame genre criticism such elements as an analysis of conventions relating to gameplay



mechanics and rules, art and level design, character design and forms of characterization, story patterns and narrative structure, kinaesthetic qualities of the gameplay, the use of hardware and peripherals, etc.

The second category would include approaches to genre that take into consideration the industrial and discursive context of cultural production, especially when considering popular culture. Such an approach would range from consideration of the immediate economic context surrounding a genre to questions of audience, interpretation and ideology. The studio production system associated with Hollywood was recognized as a generator of generic formulas in the constant pursuit of audiences and profits. Giving audiences ‘what they want’ meant that there were very close relationships between producers and consumers which figured in the rationalization of production and, for a time, created an assembly-line approach to Hollywood production. The desire to build upon previous successes (therefore minimizing financial risk) often led to standardization while the need for product differentiation amongst the studios guaranteed some variation and experimentation (Cook & Bernink, 1999, pp. 141-142). More broadly, there is a need to recognize—especially with pop cultural forms associated with mass media—that the industrial and economic context can favour certain genres (and audiences) while ignoring others. Robert Kapsis (1991) has argued that a ‘production of culture’ approach is important for understanding the emergence, perpetuations, and cyclicity of specific genres. Such a political-economic approach to the mass media reveals “how the complex interorganizational network of production companies, distributors, mass media gatekeepers, and retailers influence the production and dissemination of a wide range of cultural commodities” (p. 70). In addition to these interorganizational relationships, Kapsis includes other ‘extra-artistic’ factors such as “the market, pressure groups and censorship, statute law and government regulations, and new technologies” (p. 70). Similarly, Nicholas Abercrombie (1996) has pointed out that maximizing efficiency in television production (such as retaining production teams and recycling sets), coupled with serialization that tends to attract loyal fans, helps perpetuate genres within the industry (p. 43). Steve Neale (2000) has also emphasized the importance of the industrial context, including the promotional and modern marketing activities surrounding cultural products. Citing John Ellis’ concept of the ‘narrative image’ (the ‘idea’ or ‘image’ that is created for a cultural product through publicity efforts) and what Lukow and Ricci call the ‘inter-textual relay’ (which include other elements such as trailers, credit sequences and titles), Neale argues that much of the activity surrounding an individual film helps set up a generic framework or discursive space that may guide viewer expectations and interpretation (p. 39-40).

The idea that an individual cultural product can be framed discursively, leads to the broader question of genre and ideology. Situated within larger cultural, political and economic contexts—and the fact that various audiences and demographics tend to coalesce around specific genres—it is not surprising that an individual genre becomes associated with or might tend to reflect more or less specific world-views, ideologies, and social expectations. Always itself politically charged, the question of ideology and genre has been criticized (at least its most excessive examples) when the simplistic notion of equating an entire genre with a single ideology is advanced (Cohen, 1986, p. 204). Instead, while we may locate certain ideological tendencies (especially through outside economic and political influence), the process of interpretation is complex and a single genre might attract a heterogeneous audience. As Jean-Loup Bourget (1995) argues, certain highly developed genres often include specific titles that

work on irony or are primarily parodies which means that isolating a single ideology (or ideologically-driven interpretation) for an entire genre is very difficult .

For videogame genre studies, it is crucial to keep in mind that the industrial, organizational and institutional context surrounding cultural production will have important effects on a genre and, through marketing and economic activity, will create a discursive or ideological frame around that genre. Again, the context will differ from one genre to another. For example, the institutions involved and the financing available will be very different for sports genres than real-time strategy games. The political climate surrounding genres that habitually feature graphic violence will exist in a very different political and regulatory climate than, say, party or music/rhythm games. But it is important to consider the industrial and economic context, especially for an industry that is dominated by relatively few major companies (Dyer-Witford & Sharman, 2005). For example, certain developers, publishers, and hardware manufacturers might play important roles in the establishment and development of a certain genre, as Capcom, Midway, Namco, SNK, Sega, and Tecmo did for the Fighting genre. Similarly, we might see how institutional relationships or the need for product differentiation might even affect design and aesthetics. Licensing and sponsorships associated with certain genres might affect levels of violence or language content. What is more, platform manufacturers often maintain a certain brand image that might favour certain genres (and audiences) over others.

The third approach recognizes that genres are surrounded by social meanings and are situated in cultural practice. Therefore, consideration of audiences, demographics, social ritual, fan participation, collective values and, again, ideological formation is important as we can see specific genres as vehicles for both cultural expression and social interaction. Within film studies, this is often referred to as the 'ritual approach' to genre (Neale, 2000, pp. 220-226). Similarly, Jason Mittell (2001) argues that television genre study is especially well-suited to a cultural approach since television is often highly integrated in people's lives (and homes) but, more broadly, he argues that genre study which is firmly situated within cultural analysis is especially productive.

A cultural approach is exceedingly important for genre analysis within videogame studies. This is due to the interactive nature of the medium itself and the fact that we are dealing with a medium and an industry that developed in the computer and information era. Modding, homebrew, walkthrough and FAQ creation, clan formation, wiki projects, virtual trading, emulation and archiving communities all point toward the highly social aspects of the medium.

Finally, a few caveats are in order. These three broad categories listed above should be considered loose (and artificial) groupings themselves because we can see how elements of one category might be intimately tied to elements in another.<sup>8</sup> The subject of ideology, for instance, is applicable to both the industrial and discursive context and the social meanings and cultural practice surrounding a genre. Indeed, for a full understanding of a genre to be formed, we would need to contrast the economic and political contexts (the outside as it were) to the intricate circulation of meanings and values between producers, text and audience. The categories provided, then, are meant mostly for illustrative purposes and how they are mobilized through research will, of course, vary from one project to the next.

The other caveat is the sheer scope of what I have outlined here. Obviously, it might not be possible in a small-scale study to include each and every area of genre analysis as outlined but this merely emphasizes the earlier point that genre study is both cumulative and collaborative in nature. It is important to keep in mind that a specific approach might be more suitable for certain genres (for instance, it would be expected that a socio-cultural approach might dominate MMORPG studies) and therefore might become the central focus for a small- or even a large-scale study. That being said, it is still important to be cognizant of the multifaceted nature of genre analysis and heed the advice of previous theorists who argue that genre study should be “multi-dimensional” (Neale, 2000, p. 25) and strive for “methodological eclecticism” (Mittell, 2001, p.4).

It should be clear that genre studies and genre theory are much more robust and varied than is often assumed. And as I have attempted to argue in this essay, it is critical for those studying genre within videogame studies to embrace the openness and versatility of genre analysis as it has evolved in other fields. There is indeed much that videogame studies can gain from those theoretical and methodological principles which have been developed within film and television studies. Perhaps equally important to remember is that in dealing with a new, interactive medium, there is much that videogame studies will be able to offer in the continued evolution and understanding of genre theory. In that regard, we need to keep an open mind when it comes to understanding the aesthetics, economic, social and cultural significance of this new medium, especially as it continues to expand and evolve.

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<sup>1</sup> It is important to indicate that Wolf also asserts that they may become more useful as videogames evolve technologically (p. 115).

<sup>2</sup> While a narrow ludological approach still lingers, it is interesting to note that Jesper Juul has since modified his earlier argument and now includes thematic and stylistic elements (what he calls the “fictional” elements of a game) as essential parts of analysis (see Juul; 12-15, 188-196).

<sup>3</sup> Whalen also looks at the genre of Massively Multiplayer Online games and argues that since it is dependent on particular technologies for its existence, ‘mode’ can—for that particular genre—be seen as equally important as gameplay.

<sup>4</sup> To do so would be to mistake our own mental model for the object of study or to be guided by the assumption that formal properties reflect larger, unseen universal principles. Early modern discussions of genre looked to Aristotle and Classical Antiquity (Cohen, 1986) but forgot that Classical taxonomies were produced with the assumption that there was a divine or cosmic structure underlying the entire visible or physical world. This approach tended to produce a neat taxonomy or container into which everything was supposed to fit. In the last half century, such ‘biological’ models have been rightly criticized (Chandler, 1997).

<sup>5</sup> While posting recordings of gameplay footage to forums and websites is common today, it was already an established tradition to record the gameplay of manic shooter experts and sell the footage in special VHS or DVD compilations (today, these regularly retail for Cdn \$80-100).

<sup>6</sup> The tendency to consider *Halo: Combat Evolved* or *Grand Theft Auto III* as each forming their own genre immediately comes to mind.

<sup>7</sup> For good, general overviews of genre theory and its application, see Chandler (1997). For a good introduction to genre as it applies to film studies, see, Neale (2000, pp. 9-47, 207-230), and Cook & Bernink (1999, pp. 137-231).

<sup>8</sup> As an example, Steve Neale provides a more economical breakdown of genre theory by providing two basic categories: 1) aesthetic components and characteristics of a genre and, 2) the social and cultural aspects of a genre. Neale includes questions of discourse, economic influence, and industrial practice within the second category. See the chapter “Genre Theory” in *Genre and Hollywood*, pp. 207-230.