Exploring the Role of Activity in Genre

Nicole McMahon
QLD University of Technology
2 George St, Brisbane, QLD, 4000
+617 3138 2868

n1.mcmahon@qut.edu.au

Peta Wyeth
QLD University of Technology
2 George St, Brisbane, QLD, 4000
+617 3138 2868

wyeth.peta@qut.edu.au

Daniel Johnson
QLD University of Technology
2 George St, Brisbane, QLD, 4000
+617 3138 9263

dm.johnson@qut.edu.au

ABSTRACT
This paper provides an outline of genre as we currently know it, and examines the changes occurring as games become more complex. Recent research we've undertaken suggests that our perception of which games fall into which genre category is subjective and that genre hybridization continues to blur our understanding of these categories. Consequently, it is becoming increasingly difficult to categorise game play experience based on traditional genre classifications. We examine the use of videogame activities as a useful mechanism for supplementing our understanding of videogame genre. Through considering activity as a means of classifying game experiences we may obtain a much more nuanced understanding of how players engage with games within a particular genre and across genres.

Categories and Subject Descriptors
K.8.0 [**Personal Computing**]: General, Games

General Terms
Human Factors, Theory, Measurement.

Keywords
Videogames, Genre, Activities.

1. INTRODUCTION
Like books and movies, video games are traditionally classified into genres. However, the genres of books and movies differ from games as they are largely based on narrative or setting [5]. We are familiar with the idea that movies classified as westerns are set in the 'wild west' and that fantasy books are based on fantasy events. While videogames can be considered in the same way, generally genre categories are based on ludology, or the mechanics and gameplay activities provided by games [1]. Just as we would imagine the contents of a fantasy novel to be different to those of a romance novel, we expect that the gameplay provided by an adventure game to be different from a role-playing game (RPG). However, today we are seeing an increase in the number of games that defy these traditional categories. This research will look at how activities, which we propose are the fundamental building blocks of genre, can be used to supplement genre studies. Through considering activity as a means of exploring game experiences we can obtain a much better understanding of how

players engage in games and the role that genre may or may not have in influencing player preferences. This explorative research is in its early stages and is intended as a preliminary examination of the relationship between activity and genre. It will act as a stepping point for further, more detailed future research.

2. Genre
Genre has long been used as a way of appealing to a particular audience [2] and genres have been traditionally used to define a composition in terms of general characteristics such as style, content or form [5]. Videogame genre typically categorises games in terms of gameplay interaction. A number of genres appear repeatedly throughout game design literature. These game genres include strategy, sports, puzzle, action, adventure and RPGs – and are often described as the traditional genres [1,2,3,9]. Table 1 outlines the traditional genres, including a brief description and example videogames.

Table 1. Traditional game genres [1,2,3,9]**.**

Genre	Description	Example Videogames
Strategy	Requires players to use tactics and make decisions.	Age of Empires, StarCraft
Sports	Simulates real-world sports.	FIFA, Ultimate Fighting
Puzzle	Players are required to solve problems.	Brain Trainer
Action	Includes fighting, first-person and third-person shooter sub-genres.	Halo, Quake
Adventure	The player is given a series of challenges (i.e. player versus environment).	Uncharted
Role-playing Games (RPGs)	The player takes on a persona, which is then built upon throughout the game.	Fable, Zelda

Within this traditional context, the relationship between style of gameplay and genre allows players to readily recognise a game's genre and allow them to make an assessment of a game based on previous experiences of games in that genre [6]. For example, a player who has enjoyed RPG games is likely to play other RPG games in order to experience the character development opportunities available. There is an expectation that games from the same genre will provide the same kinds of experiences to the player.

Genre, however, is an increasingly difficult means of describing videogames as they become more complex and "hybrid" genres

(e.g., action-role-playing, strategy-first-person-shooter) become more common. Hybridization occurs when one game includes gameplay from a number of different genres [2]. For example, Fallout 3 [4] may be considered a first-person shooter and a third-person shooter as it can be played both ways; it may also be considered a RPG due to its character building qualities; and an adventure game as the player may explore and is challenged by the environment. According to Adams, genre hybridization is becoming increasingly prevalent to appeal to a larger audience [2]. Fallout 3 has the potential to appeal to those who play shooters (first-person and third-person), RPGs and adventure games, by using elements from each of these genres.

Current research suggests that the lines between major genres are blurred. Player perception and experience of genre has changed, resulting in confusion in categorising games. Research conducted by our group (e.g., [8] has consistently found high levels of disagreement among participants regarding the genre of specific games. Examples include whether Bioshock is a first-person shooter or an action-adventure game; whether Borderlands is a first-person shooter, action-adventure, or role-playing game; and whether Portal 2 is puzzle, action-adventure or first-person shooter game. These disagreements and complexities highlight the value of a more nuanced approach to classifying videogames.

3. Activities

Considering and defining videogames in terms of videogame activities is a relatively new idea. Fabricatore describes activities as things players do in game to achieve a goal and gameplay as the act of doing these activities [7]. Adams refers to activities as challenges, and provides a categorisation and broad description of a wide range of activities available in games [2]. Example categories identified are 1) physical coordination, which includes speed and reaction time, and learning combination moves, and 2) conflict, which includes survival, and defending vulnerable units. Adams suggests these activities are the building blocks which make up genre and provides a mapping of the activities commonly present in traditional genres [2]. Physical coordination and conflict activities, for example, often sit at the core of the action genre.

Given more recent hybridization of game genres, the current research aimed to explore which activities are identified by players as being core to their experience of recently released videogames. For example, an action-adventure game may include speed- and reaction-time based activities such as shooting (native to action games), as well as exploration-based activities (native to adventure games). Players who may primarily enjoy RPGs may also enjoy the RPG elements that are nested in a hybrid genre. They enjoy this hybrid game because of its RPG-like activities, so while they may be playing an action game they are still enjoying the RPG elements. Figure 1 illustrates the relationship between activities and game genres.

4. Activity Preferences in Gameplay

In order to investigate players' preferred videogame activities and to explore how activity relates to genre, interviews were conducted with 10 participants (6 of whom were male). Participants ranged in age from 20 to 38 with an average age of 25.9 years.

Participants were asked to talk about their favourite videogame experience and describe the activities they performed in this specific experience. After describing this experience in their own

words participants were asked to select up to seven activities that related to their experience from a group of 30 cards based on Adams' activities [2] (Table 2 includes examples). Each participant's choice of activities was then assessed in light of Adam's link between activities and genre [1], and the genre of the game determined. Of the 10 players interviewed, eight chose a majority of activities from the action genre, but in most cases also chose activities associated with other genres. The remaining two participants primarily chose activities belonging to the RPG category, but both also included activities associated with other genres.
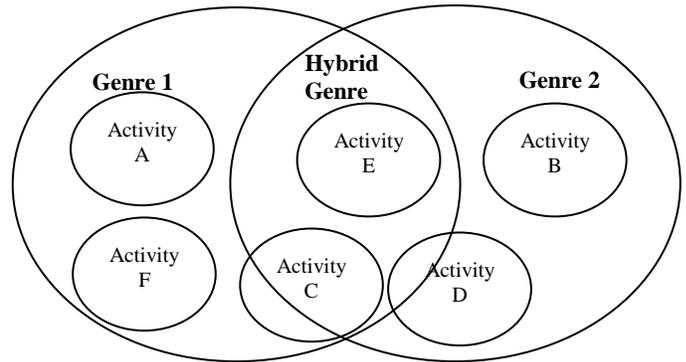

Figure 1. Activities help make up genre.

As a majority of the games described by participants may be considered action or adventure games based on the activities chosen, the remainder of our analysis focuses on these genres. As seen in Table 2, players enjoyed game activities associated with multiple "traditional" genres within one game. For example, while Quake 1 is a heavy shooting based action game, the activities identified by participants included exploration based activities that would be traditionally considered as core to the RPG or action genre. Based on Adam's genres [1], those action-based games which include *strategy, tactics and logistics* activities are unusual, as strategy is not core to action games. This activity is one that action games appear to borrow from other genres.

The activities identified in Zelda the Ocarina of Time are quite broad and varied. Based on the activities chosen by participants this game could be an RPG, an adventure, or a puzzle game. For example, finding hidden passage is an exploration activity that can be found in RPGs, strategy and adventure games [1]. Activities associated with RPG games (e.g., exploration, tactics and logistics, and conceptual activities) were mentioned in relation to Portal 2 as were adventure-based activities. It therefore fits across two genres. Interestingly, speed and reaction time activity was also mentioned in relation to Portal 2.

Two participants selected games from the Halo series and despite being from the same franchise their favourite activities differed. While this could be a function of the Halo series becoming more diverse over time, it may also demonstrate the range of activities available in the series more generally. Clearly, players are not necessarily playing these games for the narrow set of experiences defined within a genre classification.

As the activities identified in Table 2 make up the player's favourite experience it may be assumed that these activities typify enjoyment for these players. For example, it could be assumed that the player who enjoyed finding hidden passages in Quake 1 may enjoy this same activity in other games. In our data we see this activity listed in Quake 1, Zelda and Halo. The hypothesis

that particular players enjoy similar activities across the genres that they play would be interesting to explore in future work.

Table 2. Participants' favourite game experience activities[1].

Game	Activities Selected	Primary Genre based [1]
Quake 1	<u>Finding Hidden Passages</u>; Patterns of Movement and Change; Speed and Reaction Time; <u>Strategy, Tactics and Logistics;</u> Stealth	**Action**, RPG
Uncharted	Reduction of Enemy Forces; Accuracy or Precision; Survival; Defending Vulnerable Items of Units; Accumulating Resources	**Action**
Spiro (YotD)	<u>Accumulating Resources or Points</u>; Learning Combination Moves; Patterns of Movement and Change	**Action, Strategy**
Zelda (OoT)	Strategy, Tactics and Logistics; Remembering Objects of Patterns; Finding Keys; Finding Hidden Passages; Lateral Thinking	**Adventure** RPG Strategy
Halo 4	<u>Strategy, Tactics and Logistics;</u> Reduction of Enemy Forces; Survival; Accuracy and Precision; Defending Vulnerable Units; Speed and Reaction Time	**Action**
Portal 2	Identifying Spatial Relationships; <u>Speed and Reaction Time;</u> Achieving Something Before Someone Else; Lateral Thinking; Mazes and Illogical Spaces	**Adventure** RPG
Lego Batman	Accuracy and Precision; Detecting Hidden Meanings; Strategy, Tactics and Logistics; Lateral Thinking; Achieving Something Before Someone Else	**Adventure**
Halo	<u>Finding Hidden Passages;</u> <u>Remembering Objects or Patterns;</u> Speed and Reaction Time; Learning Combination Moves; Timing and Rhythm; Survival; Stealth	**Action**
Dead Space	Learning Combination Moves; <u>Strategy, Tactics and Logistics;</u> Speed and Reaction Time; Survival; Accuracy and Precision; Stealth	**Action**
Battle Field 3	<u>Construct with a Functional Goal;</u> Survival; Accuracy and Precision; Defending Vulnerable Units	**Action**

Results of the interviews demonstrate that players are enjoying activity within a game of a particular genre not traditionally

associated with that genre. It appears that the usefulness of genre as a means of classifying games and associated player preferences may be limited and that we need to consider a more nuanced approach to the study of player preference. Taking a more fine-grained approach through consideration of specific activity might be a solution.

5. Conclusion

Previously games have been classified into a range of traditional genres. However as videogames become more complex the existing genre classification system is becoming less applicable and useful. This leads to genre hybridization, which makes it increasingly difficult to categorise games into the once clear-cut genres and associated activity. Players who once purely enjoyed RPGs can play a number of different games and experience the game role-playing elements as they would from the original genre. In future we may need to take a closer look at activities, the building blocks of games, to further understanding of player enjoyment and engagement. We may grow to understand genre in a different way, supplementing our current classifications with additional nuanced activity categories.

Within future research, we plan to further understand the way in which players engage in videogame activity across a broad range of genres. We will expand upon the interviews currently being conducted to gather data from an additional 30 participants. This will provide a much wider view of activities in different games and may possibility result in the emergence of useful activity patterns within and across genres.

6. REFERENCES

1. Adams, E. and Dormans, J. *Game Mechanics: Advanced Game Design*. New Riders Game, Berkeley, CA, 2012.

2. Adams, E. *Fundamentals of Game Design*. New Riders, Berkeley, CA, 2010.

3. Bates, B. *Game Design*. Thomson Course Technology PTR, Boston, MA, 2004.

4. Bethesda Game Studios. Fallout 3. 2008.

5. Chandler, D. An introduction to genre theory. *The Media and Communications Studies Site*, (1997).

6. Ermi, L. and Mäyrä, F. Fundamental components of the gameplay experience: Analysing immersion. *Worlds in Play: International Perspectives on …*, (2007).

7. Fabricatore, C. Gameplay and game mechanics design: a key to quality in videogames. *Proceedings of OECD-CERI Expert Meeting on Videogames and Education*, (2007).

8. Johnson, D., Wyeth, P., Sweetser, P., and Gardner, J. Personality, genre and videogame play experience. *Proceedings of the 4th International Conference on Fun and Games - FnG '12*, (2012), 117–120.

9. Oxland, K. *Gameplay and Design*. Addison-Wesley, Harlow, Essex, 2004.

---

[1] The underlining throughout the table denotes the activities, which are unusual based on the game's primary genre. Primary genre is indicated by bold text.