

## How Should Game Genres be Classified?

### **Introduction**

The study of genres is a relatively minor field in game studies. The most widely-accepted genre titles and descriptions have generally been developed by players and journalists, rather than academics. Terms like 'Point-and-Click' or 'Bemani' are quite commonplace in comparative discussions about games, but their colloquial origins mean they are far from ideal in academic debate – their definitions are far from defined! Game studies has yet to formulate a sufficient taxonomy of genres; certainly not one that could dislodge the layman's cornucopia of phrases and buzzwords. In this essay, I will explore the systems by which genres are defined, in games and other media, and propose a system that attempts to define genres in a relevant and meaningful way.

In the context of computer game studies, a game is an interactive work of computer software in which players make choices or face challenges in an attempt to achieve some form of objective. Because this can take an extremely wide variety of forms, discussion about games often focuses on specific genres of game.

In game terms, 'genre' is a shorthand term that describes a particular set of design features that adhere to a common trend. The identification of these genres comes not from directly observing games themselves, but from observations of the way that audiences (players) and authors (designers) relate to them. One typically-referenced game genre is the 'First-Person Shooter', a term that refers to games where the player views the game world as if through the eyes of their character (ie. from a first-person perspective), and shoots other characters with a gun seen at the bottom-centre of the screen (as if it were held by, and pointing away from the player).

The term 'First-Person Shooter' carries a great number of connotations that are not adequately defined by the term itself; it would be conceivable to

put guns into a game like *Dungeon Hack* (1993) to combine a first-person perspective with 'shooting', but this would not generally be considered a true First-Person Shooter. For example, one major gameplay element that is highly characteristic of the genre is that players manually aim and fire weapons at their targets. Common gameplay actions such as hunting targets, making use of cover, and managing health and ammunition levels, have led to the phrase 'First-Person Shooter' being used to describe games as diverse as *Thief* (1998), *Counter-Strike* (1999), *Deus Ex* (2000), and *Serious Sam* (2001).

The specific gameplay tropes that define genres are observed as a result of author and audience reactions to works. In terms of games, this reaction is normally determined by their perception of the typical gameplay experience. *The Elder Scrolls III: Morrowind* (2002) often involves gameplay that resembles a First-Person Shooter (such as when assaulting a monster's lair, armed with a crossbow), but because the *typical* gameplay experience is generally considered to concern character developing your character's attributes and exploring an open fantasy world, it is most often placed within the 'Role-Playing Game' genre.

Game studies concerns itself with genre classification because it offers an insight into the impact and location of games within a broader cultural environment. The defining features of a particular genre are derived from society's collective cultural identification with the games they play; the existence of the First-Person Shooter requires identification with such cultural elements as 'shooting' and 'perspective', for example.

Secondly, genres are a form of attribute-indexing, which society uses to rapidly sort through the overwhelming mass of information it creates. This is used by the individual (who wants to absorb important information quickly), and by the collective (who want to transmit important information quickly). Film studios, for example, have been using simple genre summaries (such as "comedy", "horror" or "drama") as an advertising tool for decades, describing

the typical viewing experience in widely-understood terms, without giving away the details of the story.

Genres are therefore both drawn from, and are influences upon, society's collective cultural identity. Society can only define a genre in terms that it can comprehend, and this definition will itself be added to the collective cultural language and used to define further genres. Game genres should therefore be of interest to game studies academics, as they serve to indicate where games are located with the wider socio-cultural landscape.

### **Game Studies and Genre**

Academics in the field of game studies have repeatedly attempted to define a taxonomy of game genres. One early example can be found in Chris Crawford's *The Art of Computer Game Design* (1982), demonstrating many of the common problems that have recurred in later studies.

Firstly, the boundaries between definitions are often poorly defined, and sometimes seem quite arbitrary – Crawford, for example, differentiates between 'Adventure' games ("[moving] through a complex world, accumulating tools and booty adequate for overcoming each obstacle, until finally the adventurer reaches the treasure or goal") and 'D&D Games' (based on the Dungeons & Dragons tabletop game system, in which players move through a complex world, accumulating tools and booty adequate for overcoming each obstacle, etc). This is partly a terminological problem – ignoring Crawford's own definitions, there are few who would argue that D&D games are not a virtual 'adventure' – but even taking authorial definitions into account, the differences between proposed genres can sometimes appear negligible.

Secondly, the genres defined can only relate to the body of games known to the author at the time of writing. This is particularly obvious in Crawford's work, in which there are only vague hints as to how modern games such as *World of Warcraft* (2004), *Guitar Hero* (2005) and *Knytt* (2006)

should be classified. Crawford himself acknowledges this with the inclusion of a catch-all 'Miscellaneous' genre, but this does not address the root of the problem!

Thirdly, there is an apparent desire to create a 'complete' set of genre definitions. This too is implied by Crawford's 'Miscellaneous' genre – recognising that his list is by no means exhaustive, he has added this 'undefined' category simply to include the games that don't fit into the 'defined' alternatives.

We cannot reasonably condemn Crawford for failing to predict the evolution of gameplay systems for decades to come, but it is notable that these same problems still occur in modern academic writing. In *The Medium of the Video Game* (2001), Mark JP Wolf attempts to create a taxonomy of game genres based specifically on gameplay – a major element of audience experience that is unique to games. Yet, despite his freedom to define genre forms that are simply not present in other forms of media, Wolf encounters similar problems to those Crawford faced 19 years previously.

Wolf's definitions are generally much more developed than Crawford's. For example, the difference between an 'Adventure' and a 'Role-Playing Game' is explained in terms of stats-based representation, which is relatively easy to understand - compare the SNES games *Flashback* and *Shadowrun* (both 1993); broadly similar games<sup>1</sup>, but clearly identifiable as an Adventure and a Role-Playing Game within Wolf's definitions. There are still, however, some grey areas. How do we define a game like *The Legend of Zelda: A Link to the Past* (1991)? With heart pieces, sword upgrades and new armours and shields improving the player's health, attack power and defence rating, as well as the myriad of other item-based attribute changes, it could certainly be argued that *Zelda* operates on a stats-based system, even if those stats are not presented to the player as a table of numbers.

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<sup>1</sup> A man wakes up in an unusual place, with no memory of how he got there, and must explore a futuristic sci-fi game-world in an attempt to uncover his past. After talking to former associates, solving item-based puzzles and battling hostile enemies, he learns that he had discovered a shady group of powerful conspirators, which led to his initial situation. The game ends after he assaults their headquarters and kills them all. Or so he thinks!

This would not be an issue, had Wolf simply placed *Zelda* in its appropriate category. Yet strangely, the examples cited at the end of each category are often surprisingly antiquated – of the 12 games cited in the ‘Shoot ‘em Up’ genre, the most recent example is *Doom* (1993), which was eight years old at the time of publication. Does this reflect a bias in Wolf’s personal experience? If the genres he defines are based largely on an observation of games from the 1980’s, their relevance to the current state of gaming development is questionable. This seems unlikely; some genres – such as ‘Rhythm & Dance’ – draw from a thoroughly modern range of titles, and the smattering of references to *Soul Edge* (1995), *Mario Kart 64* (1996) and *Unreal Tournament* (1999) in other categories suggests that Wolf is at least *aware* of modern games, even if he tends not to refer to them.

Finally, a wealth of questions arise surrounding Wolf’s categorisation system. Should ‘Collecting’, ‘Catching’ and ‘Capturing’ be divided as strictly as ‘Strategy’ and ‘Rhythm’? Does the extreme overlap between some genres – such as ‘Adaptation’ and ‘Card Games’, ‘Tabletop Games’, ‘Sports’, and many others – not suggest that they are far too indistinct? And do categories such as ‘Demo’ really qualify as a *gameplay* archetype? All of these issues could be said to arise from Wolf’s desire to create an exhaustive taxonomy – made plainly clear from his inclusion of non-game categories such as ‘Utility’.

In summary, Wolf’s analysis of game genres delves deeply into the nature of gameplay – the differences between ‘Collecting’ and ‘Capturing’ are slight, but they certainly exist. At the same time, however, he overextends himself to include vague categories such as ‘Demo’ and ‘Education’, which simply do not describe gameplay. Yet it seems reasonable to observe that game demos share a notably different stylistic form to their retail counterparts – brief samples of gameplay that suggest notable *absences* of experience that players will find within the full retail game.

## Genre Studies and Games

How can the inconsistencies in Wolf's gameplay-defined taxonomy be resolved? The broader field of genre studies may provide an answer. In Robert Allen's *Channels of Discourse, Reassembled* (1992), Jane Feuer notes that there are typically three different approaches to genre classification: aesthetic, ritualistic, and ideological.

The aesthetic approach is to view genre as a system of artistic conventions, against which an author can assert their individualism. For example, *Dungeon Keeper* (1997) turns the established 'Dungeons & Dragons'-inspired Role-Playing Game genre on its head, by putting the player in charge of managing a dungeon full of fantasy monsters and co-ordinating its defence against invading heroes.

The ritualistic approach is to view genre as a system by which authors and audiences negotiate a collective interpretation of their work. Establishing a genre creates a contextual framework within which the audience appraise an associated work. In this regard, *Space Giraffe* (2007) could be said to demonstrate an inadequately developed genre – critics and audiences focused on its *similarities* to *Tempest* (1980) within the broad Shoot 'em Up genre, because there was no adequately-established 'Tube Shooter' genre framework available with which to appraise their specific *differences*.

The ideological approach is to view genre as a system of socioeconomic control, in which authors assert the dominant ideology of capitalist society. The *Dragon Quest* (1986 onwards) and *Final Fantasy* series (1987 onwards) have played a major role in establishing a game genre in which progression is a reward for the completion of repetitive tasks such as slaying monsters; it has also established a commercial model whereby a long series of broadly similar games can be sold to the same group of consumers without complaint.

A combination of these three perspectives can be used to assess Wolf's genre definitions. The 'Demo' genre, for example, can be defined by particular gameplay tropes insofar as they relate to its ideological position as a marketing device; the specific adaptation genres, such as 'Card Games', could be seen as an attempt to situate such games within the broader ritualistic framework of their real world counterparts. Wolf has made his gameplay observations from multiple theoretical perspectives, creating the definition inconsistencies described earlier.

### **Studying Game Genres**

Framing Wolf's definitions within different analytical approaches afford a new perspective on the issue of game genres. Instead of demanding a single, consistent approach to defining genres, it could be more accurate to describe games as a bundle of genres from different perspectives. *Torus Trooper* (2004) could be described aesthetically and ritualistically as a 'Shoot 'em Up' (assuming the absence of an adequately-established 'Tube Shooter' genre, as discussed earlier), and ideologically as an 'Indie Game' (carrying its own situational implications – a non-commercial game does not need to seek mass appeal, for instance).

Indeed, once game classification has been established as defining a *bundle* of relevant genres, there is a compelling argument that these bundles should contain a greater number of more specific genres. *Halo* (2001), for instance, could be given a string of genre tags across a range of theoretical approaches, such as 'Tactical Combat', 'First-Person Perspective', 'Shoot 'em Up', 'War', 'Sci-Fi', 'Mass-Market Commerciality', etc.

This technique could also address some of the other, more general issues with genre classification. The dichotomy that plagues other taxonomies – making definitions specific enough to be meaningful, but broad enough to be relevant – would be softened by the greater flexibility of this system. Games like *Flashback* and *Shadowrun* could be grouped together in some respects and differentiated in others, within a single, consistent model. This

greater flexibility would, hopefully, do away with catch-all genres like 'Abstract' or 'Miscellaneous', by breaking their contents down into constituent genres.

Would it also address the issue of organic genre definitions? To some extent, this system seems to allow new genre classifications to be added without upsetting the classification of previous games – although Chris Crawford doesn't mention rhythm games in his early taxonomy, a new genre could be added at a later date without having to ring-fence an artificially broad set of gameplay requirements to justify it.

However, it remains true that the formation of genres is a social activity, and – as we have seen with *Space Giraffe* – a gameplay trope must be identified across a sufficient number of games before it can be understood as a distinct genre. In this respect, the genre classification of games would likely become an even thornier issue, as they would have to be defined from a *range* of perspectives, based on *current* definitions, at any given time.

Furthermore, it creates a new uncertainty of where to stop subdividing gameplay. If Wolf's 'Collecting' and 'Capturing' genres are viably different, what about the difference between 'Collecting' games where all tokens are visible on screen, and those where they must be discovered? Does this describe a sibling 'Foraging' genre, or a separate 'Exploration' genre that could be combined with 'Collecting'?

## **Conclusion**

Reassessing existing game genre taxonomies using advanced genre study techniques can resolve many of the inconsistencies in their implementation. That the more advanced models of specialist genre theorists should prove more robust than those used by game theorists should hardly come as a surprise, but the fact that these advanced models do not streamline the initial genre-definition process is notable.

That said, there is no real reason to think that a definitive model of game genre classification would ever become feasible, or even necessary. Genre definition is an organic process that evolves from the cultural and economic interplay between authors and their audience – while the ‘First-Person Shooter’ is currently enjoying widespread popularity, it could quite feasibly divide into two separate genres called ‘Single-Player Shooter’ and ‘Deathmatch’, if given enough time. It is therefore difficult to predict the long-term evolution of genres, as they are so greatly affected by artistic creativity and broader social trends.

The two biggest issues facing game genre studies at present would appear to be disagreement over terminology, and – more importantly – disagreement over the nature of gameplay. Whereas terminology can generally be agreed upon through academic debate and the popular adoption of particularly well thought-out notations, the definition of gameplay will prove more of a challenge due to the organic nature of genres. To put it another way: defining gameplay in itself sounds quite feasible, but defining gameplay *with respect to genre* would be a Sisyphean task under continual review. The process of collaborative negotiation between artists and audiences creates an unstable, unpredictable evolution of genres that academics would perpetually chase.

In conclusion, there will most likely never be a definitive taxonomy of game genres, but there could quite possibly be a definitive *system* by which to *create* a taxonomy of game genres. Creating this system would require much clearer collective definitions of gameplay elements, but this is not beyond the realms of possibility. By assessing the current trends in game experiences, and identifying the key gameplay tropes they represent, a reliable ‘snapshot’ of genres could be made for a given point in time.

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