

# Genre Awareness and Nostalgia: Textual Aspects of Role-Playing in *Black Geyser: Couriers of Darkness*

Norbert Krek

University of Debrecen  
Debrecen, Hungary  
norbert.krek@gmail.com

## Keywords

nostalgia, isometric role-playing games, genre, textuality, *Black Geyser: Couriers of Darkness*, Infinity Engine

## INTRODUCTION

The video game ecology of the last decade has witnessed a revival of isometric role-playing games (RPGs) such as *Pillars of Eternity* (Obsidian Entertainment 2015) or *Pathfinder: Kingmaker* (Owlcat Games 2018). This paper argues that one of the key aspects that plays a crucial role in the formulation of the subgenre's identity, what distinguishes isometric RPGs from other forms of computer role-playing is their heavy reliance on textuality. As part of a larger project, the research identified three nostalgia-infused components: the isometric perspective and the combat system alongside its predominantly textual nature as the subgenre's mechanical, visual and worldbuilding conventions, all three of them closely tied to each other. The paper further argues that these three affective elements imply that the subgenre has strong ties to table-top role-playing games functioning as their remediation and thus earning its function within the gaming community.

## GENRE AWARENESS AND NOSTALGIA

Investigating the origins of crime novels, Yves Reuter (2017) states that a genre can be regarded as such by certain structural elements recognized by a community. Reuter refers to these dual structural and social dimensions of genre codification by the term "genre awareness", a process during which certain structural elements are recognized and institutionalized as a generic frame (Reuter 2017; Kálai and Keszeg 2021). In accordance with Reuter, recent scholarship on game genre studies (Voorhees 2019; Schniz 2020; Cășvean 2015; Rauscher 2018) has also emphasized the importance of social dimensions of genre as its decline, reappearance or formulation is closely tied to communities of players and developers or the lack of them. Building upon the work of Lauren Berlant (2011), Gerard Voorhees (2019) states that "genre is a stylized, formalized response to recurrent situations", therefore changes of the generic frame are indicative of crises.

Nostalgia, a strong affective attachment that is often linked to contemporary discourses of crisis (Niemeyer 2014; 2021), is a key factor in revitalizing the formula of isometric RPGs in the form of imitating the design of early 2000s Infinity Engine-games. With the availability of crowdfunding as an alternative, it was possible for gaming communities to support developers' projects for niche markets (Gilbert 2017) such as Project Eternity (later realized as *Pillars of Eternity* (Obsidian Entertainment 2015)), one of the cornerstones in the history of the subgenre. Schniz (2020) claims that game engines are in strong symbiosis with video game genre traditions, and this observation

Proceedings of DiGRA 2023

© 2023 Authors & Digital Games Research Association DiGRA. Personal and educational classroom use of this paper is allowed, commercial use requires specific permission from the author.

can also be applied to isometric RPGs, as the formulation of its genre awareness is strongly related to the nostalgic imitation of the interface and gameplay features of the Infinity Engine (Felczak 2020).

Genre awareness also has a social dimension the investigation of which is part of a larger project. The paratextual elements that frame the isometric role-playing genre, the player community who sustains it and the developer side that produces these games also play a vital role in the study of the codification and formulation of this subgenre especially in the context of nostalgia. Even though the larger project deals with these social dimensions and questions, the present paper focuses only on the structural elements of genre awareness.

## **METHODOLOGY AND FINDINGS**

As a consequence of mimicking the design of Infinity Engine-games, textuality constitutes the basis of the games' design that belong to this subgenre. Relying on the above assumptions, the paper traces the structural elements of genre awareness, the affective nodes infused with nostalgia that is connected to the subgenre's textual nature. Using the close analysis (Fernández-Vara 2015) of *Black Geysers: Couriers of Darkness* (GrapeOcean Technologies, 2021) as a case study, the paper argues that two main aspects, in strong association with the textuality-influenced game design, can be distinguished by which isometric RPGs differ from other computer role-playing genres at a structural level. Stemming from the imitation of Infinity Engine traditions, the fundamental design of isometric RPGs is predominantly textual in nature that manifests in the way the player gets to know the narrative and explore the game world and lore as it is essentially done through reading vast amount of texts. The heavy reliance on textuality poses a challenge to the player in the form of interpretative difficulty (using Jagoda's (2018) term), as the dialogue options showed in the text box offer no clear indication regarding the possible moral outcome of situations, and when making a decision, the player has to choose options suitable for convincing non-player characters (NPCs).

Furthermore, isometric RPGs tend to implement a party-based combat system with turn-based or pausable real-time variations. The foundations of this tradition originate from different editions of *Dungeons & Dragons* and their modifications (Schules, Peterson, and Picard 2018; Barton and Stacks 2019). This form of combat requires a more tactical approach to fighting enemies in the game world than mainstream RPGs with audio-visual focus. It is also demonstrated in the fact that the kind of damage dealt and taken or resisted can also be retraced in a text box which emphasizes its slow-paced rather than action-oriented essence. This slower, tactical combat and the isometric perspective that provides a more comprehensive view of the battlefield have the implication of a strategic attitude of playing.

## **CONCLUSION**

With the application of Yves Reuter's concept genre awareness to game genre studies, the research aimed to provide a dynamic framework for studying the process of video game genre formulation. Using *Black Geysers: Couriers of Darkness* as a case study, this investigation analyzed the structural aspects of genre awareness in the formulation of the isometric role-playing game subgenre. The paper argues that the three identified elements that are closely tied to the nostalgic imitation of early 2000s Infinity Engine games, are what distinguish the subgenre from other forms of digital role-playing.

## **BIBLIOGRAPHY**

- Barton, Matt and Shane Stacks. 2019. *Dungeons & Desktops: The History of Computer Role-Playing Games*. New York: CRC Press.
- Berlant, Lauren. 2011. *Cruel Optimism*. Durham and London: Duke University Press.

- Cășvean, Tulia-Maria. 2015. 'An Introduction to Videogame Genre Theory. Understanding Videogame Genre Framework'. *Athens Journal of Mass Media and Communications* 2 (1): 57–68. <https://doi.org/10.30958/ajmmc.2.1.5>.
- Felczak, Mateusz. 2020. 'Dungeon Pirates of the Postcolonial Seas. Domination, Necropolitics, Subsumption and Critical Play In'. *Game Studies* 20 (4).
- Fernández-Vara, Clara. 2015. *Introduction to Game Analysis*. New York: Routledge.
- Gilbert, Andrew Simon. 2017. 'Crowdfunding Nostalgia: Kickstarter and the Revival of Classic PC Game Genres'. *The Computer Games Journal* 6 (1–2): 17–32. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s40869-017-0031-x>.
- GrapeOcean Technologies. 2021. *Black Geyser: Couriers of Darkness*. V Publishing.
- Jagoda, Patrick. 2018. 'On Difficulty in Video Games: Mechanics, Interpretation, Affect'. *Critical Inquiry* 45 (1): 199–233. <https://doi.org/10.1086/699585>.
- Kálai, Sándor, and Anna Keszeg. 2021. 'Is There Such a Thing as a Hungarian Nordic Noir? Cultural Homogenization and Glocal Agency'. *Academic Quarter* 2021 (22): 37–59. <https://doi.org/10.5278/ojs.academicquarter.vi22.6600>.
- Niemeyer, Katharina. 2014. 'Introduction: Media and Nostalgia'. In *Media and Nostalgia: Yearning for the Past, Present and Future.*, edited by Katharina Niemeyer, 1–26. New York: Palgrave MacMillan.
- . 2021. 'Media Studies and Nostalgia: Media Philosophy and Nostalgizing in Times of Crisis'. In *Intimations of Nostalgia*, edited by Michael Hviid Jacobsen, 151–70. Bristol University Press. <https://doi.org/10.51952/9781529214789.ch007>.
- Obsidian Entertainment. 2015. *Pillars of Eternity*. Paradox Interactive.
- Owlcat Games. 2017. *Pathfinder: Kingmaker*. Deep Silver.
- Rauscher, Andreas. 2018. 'Genre'. In *Game Studies*, edited by Benjamin Beil, Thomas Hensel, and Andreas Rauscher, 343–62. Wiesbaden: Springer Fachmedien Wiesbaden. <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-658-13498-3>.
- Reuter, Yves. 2017. *Le Roman Policier*. Malakoff: Armand Colin.
- Schniz, Felix. 2020. *Genre Und Videospiele*. Genrediskurse. Wiesbaden: Springer Fachmedien Wiesbaden. <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-658-27244-9>.
- Schules, Douglas, Jon Peterson, and Martin Picard. 2018. 'Single-Player Computer Role-Playing Games'. In *Role-Playing Game Studies: Transmedia Foundations*, edited by José P Zagal and Sebastian Deterding. New York: Routledge.
- Voorhees, Gerald. 2019. 'Genre Troubles in Game Studies: Ludology, Agonism, and Social Action'. *Kinephanos*, no. Special Issue The Rise(s) and Fall(s) of Video Game Genres: 16–39.