

Defining Genre in Video Game Historiography: Structural, Discursive, and Sociocultural Definitions

Stanisław Krawczyk

University of Warsaw
krawczykstanislaw@gmail.com

Keywords

cultural sociology, genre theory, video game genres, video game history

INTRODUCTION

Two components may be recognized in the definitions of video game genres. The concrete component describes the traits of a particular genre – e.g., MMO – and the abstract one identifies the concept of genre itself. In the paper I will distinguish three types of definitions with regard to the abstract component, and I will argue that one of them is especially helpful in the historical study of video games. I will also outline the research implications of the proposed understanding of genre.

The first type of genre definitions in video game studies is the structural one, which emphasizes the inherent organization – or structure – of games (possibly also that of players' actions or experiences). This type can be found at all stages of the field's development, both in minor works and in significant contributions (some examples of the latter are Wolf, 2002, Apperley, 2006, and Clarke, Lee, Clark, 2017). Structural definitions tie up well with formal and procedural approaches to game analysis, and they can provide original insights when researchers or critics offer new ways to group various games under a certain label. But a serious problem for this position is that "one man's genre can be another's sub-genre, simple flavor or salad dressing, and presumably another's media" (Arsenault, 2009). Structural definitions are not well suited to the study of such differences, and when we employ them in video game historiography, we risk downplaying the multitudinous meanings people assign to games. Moreover, when we focus on genre structures, we risk discounting the role of genre discourses and other contextual factors.

The second definitional type, the discursive one, is hardly seen in game studies. Its main point is expressed concisely in the following example from science fiction studies: "[genre] is not a set of texts, but rather a way of using texts and of drawing relationships among them" (Rieder, 2017, p. 21). This approach might be useful in any analyses of game-related discourses. Not only does it direct our attention to how people actually play games and communicate about them but it also highlights the importance of the underlying context: the time, the place, the players' class, ethnicity and gender, and so forth. However, discursive definitions do not treat games as constituent parts of a genre, and are thus removed from the widespread use of the term (both popular and academic). This renders them rather impractical.

Extended Abstract Presented at DiGRA 2018

© 2018 Authors & Digital Games Research Association DiGRA. Personal and educational classroom use of this paper is allowed, commercial use requires specific permission from the author.

The third type of definitions may be seen as a compromise between the former two. I call it sociocultural, as it aims to take account of both the cultural and the social, without undue focus on the former (as in structural definitions) or on the latter (as in discursive definitions). The particular version of this approach I suggest here is indebted to the cultural sociology of Wendy Griswold (1986, 1987), whose methodological and empirical work offers a useful way to study complex cultural objects – in our case, game genres – in the context of social meanings, discursive classifications, institutional arrangements, other relevant cultural genres, etc.

I propose to define genre as a set of games classified together by a social group or groups. Depending on the specific case, the classifying process may include the labelling of game boxes, the choice of wording for promotional descriptions on the Internet, the vision presented by game developers in media interviews, the genre names used in Wikipedia entries, or the tags assigned by Steam users. The process itself, its objects, its actors, its contexts, and its results are all open to a sociocultural study.

The central implication of this position is that genres are fluid. A game can become part of a genre it did not represent before (if there is a group that starts recognizing it as such), and a game can stop belonging to a genre it did represent (if it is no longer classified this way). Furthermore, the same game may be part of a given genre – or several genres – to some people and not to others. Applying this approach in video game historiography may open the way for more such studies as Carl Therrien’s “Etymology of the First-Person Shooter Genre” (2015). Sociocultural definitions can prove helpful in surmounting the limits of structural ones, providing a tighter connection between terminology and research interests and opening a path for new ideas.

Let us consider one possible way to carry out a sociocultural analysis. We begin by analyzing the use of genre labels at a certain historical moment (as documented in printed magazines, on message boards, etc.). Then we look back to investigate the history of these and similar labels, and we only stop once we can no longer see a discursive continuity (we follow the empirical history of the discourse, not today’s assumptions about the first game in a particular genre). Insofar as is feasible, we also track the relevant discourses in different social groups, media, or even geographical locations. All the while we play the games in question or otherwise become informed about them, and we examine the connections between games and discourses. Finally, we include various contextual influences that contributed to the shape of the genre. As a result, we may learn that certain genres were defined in a much more complicated manner than we initially realized (e.g., the traits now considered to be central features of the genre may have been insignificant to early reviewers, or the initial genre definitions may have implied very different intertextual associations than the ones we have now).

The main limitation of the sociocultural approach is related to the ideal of comprehensiveness. With numerous elements in mind, it is all too easy to become lost in the data, and it may be necessary to sacrifice depth for breadth. However, practical decisions can be made to prioritize certain issues and treat others in a cursory manner, and other types of studies can be consulted (or, indeed, conducted) before an attempt at a sociocultural analysis. The proposed approach thus remains a viable way to explore the multifaceted history of video games.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Apperley, T. (2006) "Genre and Game Studies: Toward a Critical Approach to Video Game Genres," in *Simulation & Gaming* vol. 37, no. 1, pp. 6-23.
- Arsenault, D. (2009) "Video Game Genre, Evolution and Innovation," in *Eludamos*, vol. 3, no. 2.
- Clarke, R. I., Lee, J. H., and Clark, N. (2017) "Why Video Game Genres Fail: A Classificatory Analysis," in *Games and Culture*, vol. 12, no. 5, pp. 445-465.
- Griswold, W. *Renaissance Revivals. City Comedy and Revenge Tragedy in the London Theatre, 1576-1980*. The University of Chicago Press, Chicago and London, 1986.
- Griswold, W. (1987) "A Methodological Framework for the Sociology of Culture," in *Sociological Methodology* vol.17, no. 1, pp. 1-35.
- Lee, J. H., Karlova, N., Clarke, R. I., Thornton, K., and Perti, A. (2014) "Facet Analysis of Video Game Genres," in In M. Kindling and E. Greifeneder (eds.), *iConference 2014 Proceedings*, pp. 125-139.
- Rieder, J. *Science Fiction and the Mass Cultural Genre System*. Wesleyan University Press, Middletown, Connecticut, 2017.
- Therrien, C. (2015) "Inspecting Video Game Historiography Through Critical Lens: Etymology of the First-Person Shooter Genre," in *Game Studies*, vol. 15, no. 2.
- Wolf, M. J. P. (2002). "Genre and the Video Game," in M. J. P. Wolf (ed.), *The Medium of the Video Game*, University of Texas Press.