Mechanic/Aesthetic Videogame Genres: Adventure and Adventure

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ABSTRACT
The paper positions videogame genre theory within the larger context of genre studies. This will be done by applying Rick Altman’s semantic/syntactic genre theory to videogames in the manner of Aki Järvinen’s earlier contribution. The primary difference to Järvinen’s model will be the emphasized aesthetic perspective—here represented by Altman—which will be the second defining concept next to game mechanics in understanding videogame genres through simplified dual categories. In this way, the paper establishes a combined mechanic/aesthetic approach unique to videogame genre classification. The recurring example will be the adventure game genre, which can be considered the videogame genre closest to Altman’s medium, film.

Categories and Subject Descriptors
K.2 [History of Computing] Software, theory

General Terms
Theory

Keywords
Videogames, film, genre, adventure

1. INTRODUCTION
Mostly thanks to the industries of literature, film and music, genre became a significant topic in the popular culture during the 20th century. Subsequently, when the videogame industry saw daylight in the late 1970’s, it was clear that its future evolution would likewise be connected to genres. [1]

While genre transformations have truly played a remarkable role in the development of the whole videogame industry, the nature of this phenomenon hasn’t been thoroughly examined. [2] At the same time when videogame scholars were busy exploring their medium in the 1980’s, their colleagues made significant progress in genre studies. By the time videogames finally caught wider interest in the academic circles, genre theory had become a highly developed subject of study.

In a sense game studies are in a privileged position. Since videogames follow the traditions of older popular culture in many ways, the field is able to employ advanced theories without the trouble of inventing them. However, the advantage proves useful only as long as the applicable aspects are successfully separated from the ones that require adjustment or can’t be applied at all. Consequently, an examination of videogame genres should begin with a scrutiny of their relationship to pre-existing popular culture genres.

The most successful survey of this relationship can be found in Aki Järvinen’s wide-ranging doctoral thesis, in which he positions videogame genres within the context of games in general. Relying on Rick Altman’s semantic/syntactic approach to film, Järvinen [2] distinguishes his genres on the basis of mechanic (system behaviour) and thematic traits of games. Eventually, he breaks up the division into smaller genre nominators: game components, game environments, game rules, game information, game mechanics, game system behavior, game theme, game interface, game context, game rhetoric or style, and the player itself.

While Järvinen’s study once more confirms the complexity of game categorization, its mechanic/thematic basis also implies of some order within the subject. This paper aims at developing Järvinen’s general basis into a dual approach to videogame genres uniquely. Instead of connecting the approach to games in general, videogames are seen as an aesthetic extension of previous (genre-related) art forms. As an independent aesthetic medium, videogames will be divided in genres according to their mechanic and aesthetic elements. Being aware that this leaves out some aspects of the continuously expanding concept of videogames1, the paper stands primarily as an attempt to provide a simplified view that is balanced between the concept’s two core elements.

2. TRADITIONAL GENRE THEORY
Genre studies have primarily concentrated on dividing and naming different types of text3. [3] Despite some relations, especially between narrative forms of expression, it is apparent

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1 Mobile games, online games, multiplayer games and pervasive games—to mention a few current trends—serve as examples that keep the concept of videogame in constant state of change. Mechanic/aesthetic approach works best as an analysis of genre construction in the context of classic videogame culture.

2 E.g., Espen Aarseth [4] defines text as an “object with the primary function to relay verbal information.”
that different media construct their own specific genres. This concerns videogames as well.

But while the taxonomy of videogames requires a somewhat novel approach, other aspects of earlier genre studies might be directly applicable. For instance, the socio-cultural background behind genre evolution seems as relevant to videogames as to literature, film and music. As long as the commercial element remains the driving force, they are all parts of the same popular culture:

The genre may be considered as a practical device for helping any mass medium to produce consistently and efficiently and to relate its production to the expectations of its customers. Since it is also a practical device enabling individual media users to plan their choices, it can be considered as a mechanism for ordering the relations between the two main parties to mass communication. [5]

If the relationship between the customer and the product is acknowledged as the wellspring of genre evolution, there is no doubt that the constantly advancing technology will keep shaping the formula—online games and social gaming representing the recent outcome of the development. Technology affects game mechanics in the same way.

For the above reason, the approach to videogame genres might be better connected with aesthetics. Even though technology shapes the methods of artistic expression too, aesthetic structures do appear historically more stable. As William Huber [6] points out, one of these stable structures can be found in universal themes that "can constitute a history that may last over generations." Before applying these aesthetic structures to videogames, their tradition requires a short review.

2.1 Semantic/Syntactic Categorization

Everyone’s familiar with the western. Horses, guns, Indians, the good and the bad and the ultimate duel represent some elements of the film genre, which needs no further introduction. Musicals, science fictions, documentaries and film noirs can also be recognized by their elements, yet obviously different ones from those of the western. As Robert Stam [7] adequately puts it:

While some genres are based on story content (the war film), others are borrowed from literature (comedy, melodrama) or from other media (the musical). Some are performer-based (the Astaire-Rogers films) or budget-based (blockbusters), while others are based on artistic status (the art film), racial identity (Black cinema), locate (the Western) or sexual orientation (Queer cinema).”

Notwithstanding Stam’s straightforward examples, genres function on many levels. While location can be considered a central defining element of the western, it is not defined by location alone; it’s a multidimensional combination of different levels such as themes (the good and the bad, morality), objects (horses, guns) and subject matters (the Civil War, Indians).

It is pointless trying to list all the possible levels on which genres may function; yet some theories have done well in categorizing them. One of these theories is Rick Altman’s [8] renowned semantic/syntactic model, which separates two aesthetic genre construction traditions:

(i) The semantic tradition, which stresses the genre’s building blocks, and
(ii) The syntactic tradition, which stresses the structures those blocks are arranged into.

Whereas the building blocks represent the easily perceivable levels (objects, subject matters), their structures relate on levels that comprise those blocks (themes, relationships). In the following approach they are considered one aesthetic method of categorization, which will be juxtaposed with the interactive side of videogames. There have been a few contributions of this combination before; however, the following one is closest related to Järvinen’s previously mentioned analysis. [4]

3. MECHANIC/AESTHETIC APPROACH

Since Altman’s theory relies heavily on elements of traditional narration, it can’t be applied to videogames as such. Whereas certain types of videogames do involve traditional storytelling elements, others do not. [13][14] Hence, not all videogames can be broken down into Altman’s semantic building blocks and their syntactic constructions. Videogames require a more relevant method of categorization.

This method is easily found by listing often-used videogame genres. Strategy, role-playing, simulation and action are all based on their gameplay challenges instead of semantic or syntactic levels. In contrast to aesthetic traditions, videogame genres are first and foremost defined by the actions, behaviors and control mechanisms afforded to the player within the game context, that is, game mechanics. [5]

But while mechanics dominate the taxonomy of videogame genres, aesthetics mustn’t be disconnected from these divisions. As the term videogame implies, all videogames include at least some aesthetic elements, which can function as secondary defining features. Accordingly, I will establish mechanic/aesthetic approach to videogame genre construction that recognizes mechanic elements as well as aesthetic ones. To demonstrate the approach in practice, I will examine a videogame genre that has evolved through the entire history of videogames: the adventure game genre.

3.1 Adventure Game Mechanics

Adventures is an exceptional videogame genre because of its name, which doesn’t refer to the genre’s mechanics. This has confused scholars and critics especially in recent years, when the genre’s (proportional) popularity has faded from its early years. All the same, adventure genre is based on mechanics just like other videogame genres.

Clara Fernández-Vara [18] has made respectable work on

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[6] Andrew Plotkin [17] explains the relation between mechanic and aesthetic by comparing the skills of players to those of readers: “Reading science fiction or fantasy is a skill – – Interpreting what a book offers you, and understanding its unspoken framework, has always been a sort of game. Communities of readers evolve, subdivide, and affect the creation of new books—just as they do for games.”


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3 Even though themes derive from the traditions of art, it is possible to question their aesthetic nature. For instance, the themes of “horror” and “eroticism,” which function as instruments of emotional expression, appear often without notable aesthetic interest.
defining the genre and defending its position next to more popular genres of today. Her definition is comprehensive, yet it can be shortened as follows: “[A]dventure games are associated with stories, since it allows players to progress through a narrative event structure. – – Challenges in adventure games appear in the form of puzzles, i.e. challenges where there is no active agent against which the player is competing.” [19]

Since videogame genres are primarily defined by their mechanic gameplay challenges, it is first and foremost the puzzles that separate adventures from other games. But while puzzles form the core of adventure games, they are not exclusive to adventures alone. For instance, several role-playing and action games include puzzles as well. What makes adventure games distinct from them is the relationship between puzzles and other gameplay. While puzzles dominate the gameplay of adventure games, other games have them merely as secondary challenges.

Yet there are videogames such as Tetris that can’t be described as adventures even though they have puzzles as their dominating gameplay challenges. The mechanics of adventure games require a more specific description. Relying on Fernández-Vara’s [18] more detailed summary:

Adventure games are story-driven videogames, which encourage exploration and puzzle solving and always have at least one player character. The basic interaction of adventure games is based on object manipulation and spatial navigation. Their challenges usually appear in the form of concatenated puzzles, which are integrated in the fictional world.

As puzzles still dominate the definition, four more distinctive features are given: story, player character, object manipulation and exploration. Whereas all adventures are driven by a story through a character or multiple characters, object manipulation and exploration extend the concept of puzzles by integrating them in the game’s fictional world. Together these features shape the mechanic basis of the genre. Although some of the features may be found in other genres as well, only when all of them are present do they make the game an adventure game.

3.2 Adventure Game Aesthetics

As a starting point, it is enough to associate a game with one of the mechanic genres. A Mind Forever Voyaging (Infocom, 1985), Gabriel Knight: Sins of the Fathers (Sierra, 1993) and Amerzone (Microïds, 1999) can all be described as adventure games without any confusion. However, their aesthetics differ greatly, for which they should be specified with a term that recognizes those aesthetic differences. The already established genres of film and literature may be used for this purpose. A Mind Forever Voyaging can be described as science fiction, Gabriel Knight as mystery, and Amerzone as adventure. As a result, the genres “sci-fi-adventure,” “mystery-adventure” and “adventure-adventure” [sic] provide more specific descriptions.

But the classic genres of film and literature can’t always be used as in their original context. In terms of Altman’s theory, it is generally pointless to define videogame genres by already established syntactic definitions. While the film western can be defined by the dialectic relationships of its semantic elements, there is no use defining videogame western in the same way. Although some videogames like Red Dead Redemption (Rockstar, 2010) fit well in to the category of westerns, it is usually because of their semantics. Undoubtedly some syntactic levels—such as moral themes and dramatic tensions—are found in games as well; they have not, however, merged to establish many noteworthy genres so far.

While story-driven videogames have the potential to deal with the same syntactic levels as film and literature, the gameplay makes constructing those levels a problematic issue. Videogames are dominated by the gameplay element, which engages the player to overcome challenges. Despite the fact that these challenges could be used to deepen the syntactic levels, they typically end up as constraints. Since videogames have (so far) been developed mainly as light entertainment, constructing complex syntactic levels has understandably remained as a minor objective. [9]

To conclude, aesthetics may be used to divide mechanic videogame genres, but in a limited sense. Videogames rarely develop syntactic levels; hence the aesthetic specifications are primarily based on semantics. This concerns especially the already established genres of film and literature, which should be defined according to the semantic tradition when employed to videogames.

3.3 Sub-mechanic Genres

Few genres are stable. [2][6] While the already established aesthetic genres of film and literature will hardly go through radical changes, the mechanic genres are likely to alter repeatedly. [10] This does not mean that action or role-playing mechanics would cease to exist, but that they will come have new forms.

While Fernández-Vara’s[18] definition of adventure game (mechanics) covers all adventures from the late 1970’s till now, she also splits the genre into “text adventures” and “graphic adventures,” where the different types are the result of the historical evolution of the interface. As the case shows, these kind of sub-mechanic divisions might express extremely significant differences between games of the same genre. Consequently, it may be reasonable to classify videogames with as many as three descriptive terms. [11]

Recalling the previous examples, A Mind Forever Voyaging would be classified as a “science fiction text adventure.” But though Gabriel Knight and Amerzone are both graphic adventures, there is no point in naming them as such. Since the vast majority of adventures are built on graphical interfaces, it would be equivalent to describing a movie as a “color film mystery” or a “color film adventure.” [12]


9 Emily Short points out that at least some independent games employ gameplay to deepen their syntactic levels. They do, for instance, develop themes of futility and loss by presenting the player with a goal that cannot be attained and use this to make a statement about the nature of the world. Videogame developer Quantic Dream provides fine commercial examples (Fahrenheit, 2005; Heavy Rain, 2010) of employing gameplay for syntactic purposes. See also DigiFX Interactive’s Harvester (1996). There is no question about the increasing artistic ambition in videogame development.

10 Although most aesthetic videogame genres follow the trends of film and literature, there are exceptions. The pirate theme makes an interesting example, which has thrived in the videogame industry for more than two decades now. Is the recent success of pirate films due to pirate videogames?


12 Classic adventure films seem to have disappeared in the 1990’s. This is probably due to the recent fantasy film boom.
On the other hand, the last two examples represent the extremes of adventure sub-mechanics. Where the first one is simulated from the classic third-person view, the latter works through a first-person mode. The split corresponds to a significant difference in the genre, for which identifying Gabriel Knight as a “third-person mystery-adventure” and Amerzone as a “first-person adventure-adventure” might well be considered practical.

While the player perspective may be used to subdivide more than a few types of game mechanics—for instance, “first-person-shooters” have become a standard term to represent a specific type of action games—there are several other sub-mechanics with the same classificatory potential. The split between “real-time strategy” and “turn-based strategy” serves as an often-referred case, which relies on describing the system behavior behind the particular mechanics of the strategy genre. Although not all mechanics require subdivisions, they can clarify the largest genre constructions.

4. CONCLUSIONS
This paper has been an attempt to simplify the relation between previous genre theories and recent videogame studies. By combining mechanic genres (of videogames) with aesthetic genres (of film and literature) an exclusive approach to categorizing videogames was proposed. The approach was named mechanic/aesthetic, as it divides videogames by their mechanics and aesthetics. Since the evolution of gaming has already resulted in vast changes in integrated gameplay mechanics, it was also suggested to let sub-mechanics divide the largest genres.

Though mechanic genres will certainly remain an evolving subject of study—thanks to the technology-driven industry—one shouldn’t overlook the aesthetic genres either. While this paper has taken its aesthetic examples from the traditions of film and literature, the recent arrival of “music games” already makes it possible to categorize videogames also by the aesthetic genres of music; for instance, Guitar Hero (Harmonix, 2005) as a “rock music game.” This only confirms that time does not necessarily distance the industry from other popular culture.

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6. REFERENCES

13 The “significant difference” refers to the altered mechanics (movement, point-and-click interface etc.) rather than to the actual perspective, which might be considered more likely an aesthetic difference. See Fernández-Vara [19].