Introduction:

The Rise(s) and Fall(s) of Video Game Genres

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Since video games have come to acquire the status of major cultural objects, their structuration and categorization become an important challenge for their studies. The tenth art thus follows its predecessors in the constitution of strong analytical canvases allowing for the mapping of a vast production. It was notably the case of literature, from which we can mention *The Fantastic: A Structural Approach to a Literary Genre* (Todorov 1970), *Kinds of Literature: An Introduction to the Theory of Genres and Modes* (Fowle, 1982), *Théorie des genres* (Genette & *al*. 1986) or *Qu'est-ce qu'un genre littéraire ?* (Schaeffer 1989). The analysis of genres is also well developed in film studies with major works such as *Theories of Film* (Tudor 1979), *Film/Genre* (Altman 1999), *Genre and Hollywood* (Neale 2000) or *Cinema Genre* (Moine [2002] 2008).

In light of this important research tradition, it is clear that as a young discipline, video game studies still need to address this subject to a greater extent. Indeed, few books tackle this issue upfront, although one may think of *Computer Games: Text, Narrative and Play* (Carr et al. 2006), *Dungeons and Desktops: The History of Computer Role-Playing Games* (Barton 2008), *Horror Video Games: Essays on the Fusion of Fear and Play* (Perron 2009) or *Guns, Grenades, and Grunts: First-Person Shooter Games* (Voorhees, Call, and Whitlock 2012). Otherwise, the literature on the subject is scattered in a few academic articles, chapters of collective works and

theses (Wolf 2001, Apperley 2006, Järvinen 2008, Arsenault 2009, Gregersen, 2014). The scarcity of academic contributions regarding video game genre signals the need for further investigations from a formalist and historical point of view, precisely because generic labels such as "platform games," "first-person shooter games," "adventure games," "action games," or "real-time strategy games" play such a central role in shaping the horizon of expectations as well as the interactions, communications and ludo-creative activities of players, developers and journalists alike. Part of the answer to this lack of research is not only linked to the multiplication and vagueness of the notion of genre itself (for example, Mark J.P. Wolf's typology alone accounts for forty genres), bit also bound to the fact that scholars first had to define the object of their study, a venture that took the form of an opposition between the narrative and ludic parts of the medium. Although those aspects tend to be reconciled, such a polemic dissociation, combined with multiple disciplines mobilized in video game studies, led to a proliferation of short texts (papers, book chapters or thesis sections) offering diverging classifications. While it is a consequence of the gap between the classical notion of genre and the studied object, this proliferation seems to go against the communicative and classifying function of the generic approach by casting more shadows than light on video games.

However, such an observation obscures somehow the shifting and discursive nature of genre which led Dominic Arsenault to define it, following Tudor, as the "temporary crystallization of a common cultural consensus" (2011, p. 334). It is undeniably because a given genre's characteristics fall under a consensus – as opposed to a specific authority or a rigid structuralism – that a myriad of generic forms and tags constantly appears, disappears and reappears. For example, one might think of the *first-person shooter*, first known as the *maze game* or *3D maze game*, then as *first-person action*, *first-person shoot-'em-up*, and *DOOM-like*, before it splintered into the *first-person tactical shooter*, *team-based first-person shooter*, *MMOFPS*, and other more specific names. The case of *jumping games* also comes to mind, which were initially labeled as *action-adventure games*, *platformers*, or as *Metroidvanias*. Yet, while some video game genres benefit from a strong consensus, others raise more protests and suffer from a lack of recognition. It is precisely the case for *walking simulators*, *serious games*, *art games*, *hidden object games*, *incremental games*, or erotic games. This transformative and discursive dynamic is at the heart of the processes of innovation, reiteration and rupture which constantly enliven and redefine the outlines of genres.

From this perspective, the multiplication of contradictory approaches becomes less a symptom of conceptual inoperability than of the great vitality of a field of study that is gradually structured through confrontation and dialogue. Just as videogame genres first appeared in the form of borrowed tags (tabletop RPG, tabletop *wargame*, *Maze Game* and *Shooting Gallery*) or by mirroring the titles of iconic productions (*Myst-like, DOOM clone, Diablo clone*) before being stabilized through institutionalized labels (*Role-playing game, Real-Time Strategy, First-person Shooter*), it is possible to produce increasingly precise and functional models by diversifying our disciplinary ways of dealing with the notion, studying specific cases, and leading critical analysis of generic categories themselves. It is in an attempt to foster such conceptual refinements and expand the historical and theoretical exploration videoludic genres that the 2017 edition of the Game History Annual Symposium took place.

This symposium has wished to address this protean object through three major issues raised by the emergence and evolution of genres. The first, of a fundamentally historical nature, concerns the study of the formal and experiential specificities of different classifications of games repositioned in their context of formation and transformation. It is a question of determining the technological, practical, and playful conditions that drive generic labels and their evolution.

In order to develop this basis, the second issue concerns the documentation and analysis of the discourses of the various communities commenting on and constituting generic categories. Finding traces of the perspectives of players, journalists, designers, advertisers and academics on this matter allows us to revisit our historically situated perception and to make a necessary and fruitful conceptual shift.

Finally, the third issue is at the intersection of the first two and concerns the evolution of genre through the phenomena of appropriation, circulation and diversion. The generic history of video games is indeed strewn with transformations and hybridization from the creators' and the players' community. Documenting these phenomena therefore opens up many ways of thinking on how isolated practices can crystallize into genres which can be identified by a wide audience.

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Based on papers given at the Symposium, the five texts in this issue offer an eclectic range of approaches to these three issues and reflect the major topics mentioned above. Gerald Voorhees'

article thus acknowledges the difficulties faced by video game studies in terms of generic categorization. He finds the roots of such a theoretical impasse in the debate between ludologists and narratologists which, according to Gonzalo Frasca (2003), "never took place" but must occur. Voorhees calls for an agonistic (and not antagonistic) dialectic that serves as a crucible for the emergence of rigorous definitions of genres, depending on the dialogical or discursive nature of their construction. With this in mind, what the author calls "genre trouble" appears less as an intellectual dead end than as an extremely fertile field of exchange and discussion; an approach that the following articles confirm by exploring various cases of genre formation through the confrontation of different angles of thinking.

The study conducted by Miikka Junnila, Markku Reunanen and Tero Heikkinen looks at Western-themed video games and analyzes the transposition of this cinematographic genre into video games to question the categorization of these specific types of productions. Through the quantitative and qualitative analysis of a large corpus, the disparity of game forms associated with the Western raises, on the one hand, the question of the intersection between the thematic and ludic aspects of this genre as well as, on the other hand, the link between the interactional possibilities offered to the player and the type of fictional universe that is represented.

Simon Dor's contribution addresses the issues related to the historicization of gameplay observed during his analysis of real-time strategy games (RTS). The study of journalistic discourses of the 1980s leads him to question the uncontested continuity that a teleological approach to the genre's history poses with wargames. Based on this critical epistemology, the author exposes some genealogical filiations linking the RTS to other genres such as arcade games, sports games and multiplayer games. This new viewpoint opposes an essentialist conception of the generic phenomenon with a succession of historically located references that invite the theorist to a permanent recontextualization of these categories.

Gabrielle Trépanier-Jobin's article examines parodies of casual games to question both literary theories of the parodic genre and the status of the casual games category. The incremental game *Cow Clicker* (Bogost, 2010) is taken as an exemplary case study of an important misalignment between the authorial intents coded into the game and its reception. Through an examination of *Cow Clicker*'s paratext, creator's and players' discourses, and by making insightful comparisons with other incremental games (*FarmVille, A.V.G.M.* and *Progress War*), the author interrogates

the labile and uncertain character of the procedural rhetoric embedded in casual game parodies. Therefore, the interpretation and the appropriation of video games by the players' communities are considered as determining phenomena regarding the effectiveness of procedural rhetoric alongside the understanding of the critical message of a given videoludic parody.

Finally, Maxime Deslongchamps-Gagnon's study of walking simulators reflects a very contemporary generic birth. *Dear Esther* (The Chinese Room, 2012), a clear prototypical work similar to what *DOOM* (id Software, 1993) has been for the FPS, is taken as a starting point. The author addresses the formal and discursive deployment of the walking simulator and invites us to redefine the common perception of what video games are all about. He retraces the controversial emergence of this genre (and its initially pejorative generic label) by investigating its polarized discourses as produced by four game communities: the players, the marketing entities, the developers, and the specialized press. Such research indicates the fertility of an approach focused on the gap a genre can create in a well-formed and consensual horizon of expectations. It also revealed the fruitfulness of reflecting on genre troubles from an agonistic lens to better understand the tensions that shape the appropriation and the semantic evolution of various generic appellations.

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From the need to decentralize the approach of videoludic genres from a strictly ludological line or essentialism (Voorhees and Junnila & Reunanen), to the call for an archaeology of generic labels and their semantic developments (Deslongchamps-Gagnon and Dor), to the analysis of epistemological gaps that cross different reception contexts (Trépanier-Jobin) as well as the contradictory discourses that constitute the history of video game genres (Deslongchamps-Gagnon and Dor), the five texts collected in this issue not only expose the diversity of generic studies, but also point toward common challenges that researchers are actually facing. The lines of thought proposed here offer several keys to understand the disorder through which video game genres emerge, crystallize and transform. They contribute, we hope, to the clarification of several "genre troubles" – as formulated by Voorhees – that make this field of inquiries an extremely rich area of research.

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