Genre Troubles in Game Studies:

Ludology, Agonism, and Social Action

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Abstract: This paper outlines an impasse in game studies that others have called "genre trouble," which can be traced to the scholarly discourses that engaged the concept of game genre and reproduced aspects of the ludology and narratology debate. Two lines of argumentation and inquiry about game genres can be discerned, a dominant ludological line and a less prominent but more productive agonistic orientation. The potential benefits of the agonistic approach to enrich and enliven studies of game genre are articulated to both the discourse community of game studies and the inherently political contexts in which the field is situated. In this context, genre trouble is not an obstacle to game genre analysis but its method.

Keywords: Genre, Game Studies, Ludology, Agonism, Social action

Résumé en français à la fin de l'article

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This paper outlines an impasse in game studies that others have called "Genre Trouble," (Aarseth 2004; Arsenault 2009) and argues for shifting our stance, as a field, to rethink this trouble as an opportunity to bring renewed attention and enthusiasm for the analytical concept of "genre". As a critical tool, genre theory and analysis can help produce knowledge about the cultural and communicative dimensions of digital games that studies of individual games and those that treat games as a totality cannot. In this context, I am starting from and extending Bernard Perron's (2009b) observation that there is discernable dearth of scholarship on game genre (p.4). In addition to offering a retrospective explanation for this gap, I hope to pick up threads that link genre studies to contemporary shifts in game studies.

I argue that our field's genre gap is a product of a different sort of genre trouble than what Aarseth described. Though the contemporary consensus is largely that the ludology and narratology debate was banal and is no longer worth talking about -- if it even happened in the first place -- it is my position that this debate produced implications that persist to this day. Indeed, the concept of genre in game studies has been, until very recently, a reflection of the ludology and narratology debate and a testament to the structuring power of this discourse within our community. In what follows, I begin with a rhetorical analysis of how this conversation played out in terms of research on game genres, and how it has helped constitute this genre trouble. I draw two lines that, I argue, delineate how our field conceives of and takes up genre, and how it might do so going forward. The first is the "ludological line" and in addition to being the typical story that we tell ourselves in literature reviews about game genres, it is also a significant piece of the architecture of the Genre Trouble. I then formulate a counter-narrative with an alternative trajectory for our field, a competing history of genre characterized by pluralism and discursivity and loosely organized around notions of interaction and gameplay, which I call the "agonistic line." If the figure for the ludological line is a line in the sand, the figure for the agonistic line is the one we draw between different points in order to create connection and form.

Of course, both of these lines are fabrications: rhetorical constructs produced in the midst of specific historical contingencies. But it is my contention that the contemporary situation -- in the institutions of game studies and more importantly in the social, political, and economic contexts that even the more privileged among us can no longer pretend only exist outside of the "magic circle" of our community -- necessitates we pivot to an agonistic line on genre. I

conclude by advocating for an agonistic orientation in the discourse of our field and in critical-cultural studies of game genre by arguing that genre is a crucial tool that games scholars can use to intervene in the cultural struggles that define the historical present.

Genre Trouble

As a discursive formation, genre trouble refers to the struggle, carried out in scholarly conference presentations and proceedings, journals, and books, to conceptualize and practice game genre studies. The consequence of our genre trouble is our general inability, as a field, to harness genre as a tool that contributes effectively to our larger critical and conceptual apparatuses. Though my first impulse is to frame this as a matter of our inability to agree upon the criteria for distinguishing different genres of digital games, much less the actual contours of particular genres. However, such an assessment would be disingenuous. In fact, game genre exists in a state of simultaneous crisis and stasis precisely because of the criteria we have collectively accepted. Here, in addition to the substance of the argumentation we must look to how communicative forms and norms in game studies manage conflicts about and across disciplinary lines.

The "dispersion" and general "lack" of work on games and genre, noted by the organizers of the 2017 Game History Symposium – both a manifestation and consequence of the Genre Trouble in game studies – can be traced to the ludology and narratology debate. With Nelson, McGill & McCloskey (1987), I maintain that interrogating the rhetorics of inquiry of a field can challenge the aura of neutrality reified by the languages of academic inquiry and "reveal underlying issues and better ways to consider them responsibly" (p.4). It has long been considered *passé* to revisit the "debate that never took place" (Frasca 2003a), but as I have claimed elsewhere (Voorhees 2013), its lasting impact was to "define and thereby control the nature of the field". In this instance, the ludological narrative regarding genre enjoys pre-eminence, and colours every work on the topic. As I will argue, a significant component of the Genre Trouble is the simple but immutable insistence that game studies practice the formalist analysis of a game's "structure and elements -- particularly its rules" (Frasca 2003b, 222). It is crystallized in Thomas Apperley's (2006) canonical essay "Genre and Game Studies" but neither originates nor ends there.

Following Jan Simons (2007), I maintain that the study of game genres is one site where the ludology and narratology debate "blissfully ignored" the substance of the issues at stake. Though certainly well intended, Gonzalo Frasca's (2003a) insistence that "ludologists love stories too" and his opening vignette about using narrative concepts into his own work (without any specific sense of how) has come to epitomize the empty, feel-good quietism that drains any value from discussions of the topic. And despite Frasca's insistence about "ludology's intentions of peacefully coexisting with narratology," fifteen years later the flagship game studies conference is organized around the theme, "The Game is the Message," and the call for submissions to the track on "meaning-making" unabashedly asserts: "The connection between a game and its content is often interchangeable -- a game is clearly recognizable even if the surface fiction is changed" (DiGRA 2017). In the same way that having a friend who is a member of a marginalized community does not absolve one from benefiting from that community's marginalization, admitting that one "likes stories" without making space for narrative-oriented scholarship, much less while actively campaigning to take that space, is a rhetorical effort to depoliticize what others (e.g. Aarseth 2004) have freely admitted is a concerted project to build infrastructure, institutional legitimacy, and access to resources for games researchers. More than a dozen years and a handful of conciliatory gestures later, it is understandable that we forget that academic discourses participate in what Antonio Gramsci calls the "war of position" between competing ideological formations (1971, p. 238-9).

It is in this spirit that I amplify Matthew William Kappell (2016), arguing that "the 'debate that never happened'… is a debate that needs to happen. In ignoring the debate we are putting the utility of game studies at risk – perhaps not amongst ourselves but certainly in the context of the larger academy and culture in general" (6). It is in this spirit and with the hope that game studies will be able to speak to concerns outside of the phantasmic circle of our field that I interrogate how it constructs genre.

The Ludological Line

The origin of the ludological line, or the narrative about genre that is told from the ludological perspective, is Aarseth's (2004) essay "Genre Trouble." Contemporaries often point to this article to highlight Aarseth's dubious claim that the character of "Lara Croft" is a non-essential element of the Tomb Raider series. But I want to draw our attention, instead, to the particular

use of "genre" as both an analytical framework and rhetorical device in this piece. Aarseth uses genre to distinguish modes of cultural expression -- stories, simulations, and games -- as well as to describe formations of cultural expression including adventure, strategy, and role-playing games. Aarseth's decision to use genre to describe both of these categories creates an equivalency between them, one that is exploited in his argument that the underlying structures that distinguish adventure, strategy, and role-playing games are properties of their approaches to simulation. The resigned acceptance of this has had three lasting implications.

First, this equivocation helped provide discursive legitimacy to calls for a new discipline. Others have discussed how the ludology and narratology debate was and still is instrumental to the development of game studies as a discursive community connected by shared practices (Murray 2005; Kappell 2016). It is certainly not a novel or even uncommon tactic, in this light. In fact, if we take communication studies as an example, we can discern how this same discursive move was employed in the early days of the field. In the 1910's a growing number of scholars concerned with teaching public speaking began to leave Composition departments. Their first move was to split from the National Council of Teachers of English (formerly the National Organization of English Teachers and organize as the National Communication Association (formerly the National Association of Academic Teachers of Public Speaking). Herbert Whilchen's penned the manifesto for the emerging field of Speech Communication -- the distinct style of rhetorical theory and criticism that emergence in the first half of the Twentieth Century in the US -- citing a worrying lack of attention to the peculiarities of oral, rhetorical practice. In other words, the medium of oral speaking, an entire mode of cultural expression, was being neglected to focus on writing. This scenario repeated itself in the 1950's when a group of scholars grew concerned about the field's focus of oral discourse and rhetorical approaches, which they claimed came at the expense of other modes of communication, particularly electronic media. These folks eventually formed the International Communication Association (formerly the National Society for the Study of Communication) (Weaver 1977). Aarseth's move to turn the discourse of genre into an argument for the legitimacy of a new discipline follows this well-established tactic.

This does not mean that it was not also a distraction, a deflection, and unproductive for those interested in charting the relations between formations of text and the contexts of their production and circulation; indeed, this is the second consequence the equivocation. Aarseth's

tale of genre trouble helped pivot the conversation from genre as formations of text to genre as justification for ludology. That is, by insisting on talking about genre as a nebulous "form of expression" Aarseth makes it more difficult for us to take up the questions of genre as a set of conventions or expectations negotiated between a discourse and its audience (Burke 1965[1953]), or "stylistic and substantive responses to situational demands" (Campbell and Jamieson 1978, p.19), much less as an "aesthetic structure of affective expectation [...that is] repeated, detailed, and stretched while retaining its intelligibility, its capacity to remain readable or audible across the field of all its variations" (Berlant 2008, 4). Even if this was not the intention of the essay, this move was nevertheless intentional.

At this point, scholars working explicitly in game studies in spaces where Aarseth also worked had begun the project, though not in any systemic way, of parsing out how the repetition of clusters of formal elements constitute distinct game genres. Diane Carr (2003) had written her famous piece on genre as the production of an affective state, and Geoff King and Tanya Kryzwinska (2002) had already talked about genre in terms of gameplay, as the actions that a player must perform to succeed in a game. Indeed, Aarseth, Smedstad, and Sunnanā (2003) had, the previous year, proposed a taxonomy to bring coherence and systemicity to prior efforts to theorize genre. We will never *post factum* be able to quantify the extent of the effectiveness of this rhetorical strategy, but I will claim with absolute certainty that genre would be more robust and more diverse area of inquiry in game studies if Aarseth, and others working under what Andreas Gregerson (2014) calls a "strict ludological position," had not refused to engage the question of how to utilize and study genre in games from the very start (p. 161).

The third lasting impact of the Aarseth's version of genre trouble is the deployment of a transhistorical narrative in which, retroactively, "the past is presented as an extension of the present" (Charland 1987, 140). In doing so, it reifies the foundations of a strict ludological position by inscribing ludology into a narrative about genre in game studies. For example, Frans Mayra's (2008) *Introduction to Game Studies*, presents genre as a problematic, echoing the ludology and narratology debate. He juxtaposes the Western and the Detective Story, which he terms "established conventions in the narrative arts" and brings forward, against this, Mark J.P. Wolf's claims that game genres should be "based on the nature of interactivity rather than iconography" (2001). Of course, Wolf makes no mention of ludology, nor does he cite any of the Northern European researchers who operated under the moniker – rather, he puts his work in

conversation with North American film and television scholars, the very folks who represent the narrative arts and the academic establishment the ludologists railed against. Nevertheless, Mayra's brief discussion of genre manages to frame the question in terms of ludology and narratology and also fold Wolf into the conversation after the fact.

This transhistorical façade is also exemplified in what is perhaps the most iconic essay, and certainly the most cited, on games and genre. In "Genre and Game Studies: Toward a Critical Approach to Game Genres", Apperley (2006) argued for understanding game genres as formations of "the various types of 'non-trivial' efforts involved in the ergodic 'traverse' of video games" (7). He draws a line from his theorizations, one that retrospectively includes Wolf's taxonomy, King and Kryzwinska's categorizations, and even Aarseth's *Cybertext*. Apperley does this by calling for an understanding of genre that builds from Wolf's taxonomy, but on the condition that Wolf's cipher, "interactivity," is replaced with the ludological shibboleth of "ergodicity." Apperley's theorization of genre seemingly remedied two irreconcilable positions, bringing explicitly representational elements into conversation with ludology by piously centering the ergodic. And it is presently the most vital touchstone in most literature reviews of the subject that I have come across (and written myself) -- sometimes the starting point, often the end point, and in many more cases the only point on the matter. Despite some recent scholarship that seeks to expand the scope of our thinking about genre (e.g. Gregerson 2014), game studies that take on genre are in a sort of stasis that is simultaneously a state of crisis.

Like the game versus player debate that followed, the ludology and narratology polemic's most substantive and lasting consequence was to create a story that makes a claim about the proper conduct of digital games research, and that thereby partakes in the shaping of other conversations in the field without directly participating in them. Michel Foucault (2000) calls this governmentality, the conduct of conduct, "a set of actions upon other actions" (341). By constructing a narrative about genre in game studies that wears a transhistorical façade, the debate helped constitute and entrench a knowledge about the proper conduct, or method, of the practice of game studies scholarship. It succeeded, in part, because of its ability to make a smooth line out of the rough contours of history, to even incorporate scholarship that was written and published before the term ludology was widely known.

But, it is important to remember that this principle of respecting the character of interaction in games is not a unique contribution from ludology. In fact, the centering of engagement, participation, and interaction emerged from and is still grounded in the discourses and corresponding expectations generated by the complex of player communities and cultures, professional and organizational norms of game development, and the crowded market for popular culture in which games circulate. There is a keen irony that this formulation is a serendipitous parallel with the ludological insistence that ergodicity define the study of games, especially to the extent that is was put forward by film and media scholars, literature scholars, and semiologists -- including Mark J.P. Wolf, Christopher Douglas, and David Myers -- practitioners of the very fields constructed as threats to game studies. But it is no coincidence either. Indeed, it would have been imperative for ludology to incorporate and thereby domesticate this cognate set of concepts.

The Agonistic Line

I want to turn to consider an alternative history of genre in game studies, one that traces what I am calling the agonistic narrative. At the heart of this line of inquiry is a conception of game genres that is premised upon the characteristic of "gameplay," which I have defined as "the agonistic struggle [between a culturally located subject and the technological apparatus of the game] – playful but consequential – out of which meaningful human action emerges" (Voorhees 2013, 16). This draws upon and extends Foucault's rethinking of the struggle between structure and agency -- in its various concrete instantiations – as an *agonistic* "mutual incitement and struggle…a permanent provocation (2000, p. 342). To discuss this alternative line of thinking about genre as agonistic means centering contestation and conflict without enmity; it rejects zero-sum games. Rather, it privileges the interplay of pluralities, of perspectives and stakes, in the work of doing genre theory and analysis in game studies.

How do we locate this line? We fabricate it, as one does, articulating various threads to one another. And our starting point is the much maligned concept of "interaction," which ludology claims to rehabilitate but in fact displaces with an emphasis on the game and how it structures play. Though he does not offer a formal definition of interaction, Wolf's chapter on genre in *The Medium of the Video Game* is clear in its insistence that "player participation" should be the "central determinant" of any game classification (2001, p.114). Importantly, while he argues

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that interaction is and should be a primary consideration, Wolf advocates for genre categories that also account for how goals and objectives motivate play. To wit, the very notion of interactivity, which Apperley took from Wolf and domesticated through the construct of ergodicity, is constituted by an excess that cannot be contained in this figuration. Gameplay is the interaction between player and game in a network of variously competing, coordinating, and compelling desires and stimuli and their polyvocal intercourse. Gameplay is not and can never be a system operation, the sum total of possible or even probable means of ergodic traversal enabled within the parameters of a determinant cybertext.

Did anyone, even the ludologists, ever really think otherwise? Game designer Chris Crawford's (1984) binary system of genre classification, which he outlined in *Art of Computer Game Design*, divides the whole of digital games into the genres of "skill and action (emphasizing perceptual and motor skill)" or "strategy (emphasizing cognitive effort)." Crawford ultimately centers "interactiveness [as] a measure of gaminess" but also accounts for how graphics, sound, and input devices can further distinguish or disrupt genre expectations in his outlines of various subgenres (10). David Myers takes a similar position in his 1990 article, "Computer Game Genres," in which he proposes that we classify games by the "types of interaction [they elicit] between player and machine" (p. 295). In both of these instances, interactivity is centered in ways that manage to not erase the players, or the various non-essential and "interchangeable" elements that index the distinguishing features within families of resemblance.

A similar approach to genre shows up again and again. In the introduction to the *Screen/Play* anthology, Geoff King and Tanya Krzywinska (2002) advocate for the use of genres defined in dialog with "gaming communities", but based on styles of interaction. In "Genre and Affect," Diane Carr (2003) distinguishes genres based on the affect produced through different forms of gameplay -- as it enabled and induced by the interplay of the mechanics and thematics. Interactivity features prominently in Zach Whalen's 2004 polemic, "Critique of Generic Formulas," though it becomes nearly unrecognizable when rethought as the social relations facilitated and foreclosed by the technologies that form the basis for three new genres: massive, mobile, and Real. In the same year Apperley's famous article was published, Andrew Burn and Diane Carr argue that "style of gameplay on offer is of fundamental significance" in genre analysis but also insist that "games are hybrid forms, and thus invite compound classifications" (2006, p. 16). The concept arises again in Dominic Arsenault's (2009) essay "Genre Evolution"

when he asks the important question of "what comes after and around gameplay?" Of course, the answer is complex: games genres are perceived, received, and reconceived in the shifting but often overlapping contexts of technology, subjective experience, industry norms, and player communities, all of which are implicated in the interaction. David Clearwater's (2011) "What Defines a Game Genre?" provides further justification for Burns and Carr's decision to defer to game cultures in constructing genres premised on forms of interaction, outlining the intertextuality inherent to genres.

Even the most recent and sophisticated efforts to revisit and retheorize game genres have taken their lead from a notion of interactivity. In "Genre and Embodied Interaction," Andreas Gregerson (2011) further rehabilitates the concept by also considering the material interfaces of play. He forwards "interaction modes" as "generic structures of action" to supplement the criteria of interaction and representation in the established frameworks on game genres. Gregerson refines this formulation, arguing that "video game genres systematically structure embodied interaction modes of players by way of their generic material interfaces and their required embodied actions" (2014, p. 169). In this conceptualization, the available interactions, thematic and representational discourses, and material interfaces are each coordinates that can be used to triangulate game genre categories defined by an empirically derived notion of gameplay as the rhythms and patterns enacted in and by play, *contra* the ludological understanding of gameplay as (all) the potential -- rather than those that are actually employed -- means of traversal embedded in a game.

The common thread running across the surface of this constellation of scholarship -- uniting this rich history and exciting contemporary scene of genre in game studies -- is the concept of interaction. But if interaction is centered it is nevertheless the site of intense *agon*. Of course, interactivity explicitly identifies a process of reciprocity and feedback; the meeting of subject and object and the dialogic exchange across the interface. But interactivity, as a concept, has also been put into conversation with ergodicity, representation, affect, narrative, technology, materiality, as well as a host of other theoretical priorities.

We see this in three sustained bodies of inquiry on the topics of first-person shooter (hereafter FPS), survival-horror (c.f. Kirkland 2009; Perron 2009a; Perron 2012; Kryzwinska 2015; Perron 2018), and digital role-playing games (c.f. Williams, Hendricks and Winkler 2006;

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Taylor 2006; Voorhees, Call and Whitlock 2012), among others. Here, genre is employed as a means of bringing into relief gameplay, formations of textual and play practices, by highlighting the repetition of the interplay of interaction mechanics, narrative and thematic representations, technological and material dimensions, and their constant construction, reconfiguration, and permutation in the various communities that claim a stake in them.

An exemplary case can be observed in relation to FPS scholarship, where folks located in geographically distant research centres and conceptually diverse sets of disciplinary commitments have engaged in a decade-plus (and still ongoing) conversation about the structures, aesthetics, and functions of FPS games. Looking across essays on the subject in Geoff King and Tanya Kryzwinska's *Screenplay* (2002), Nina Hunteman and Matthew Payne's *Joystick Soldiers* (2010) and Gerald Voorhees, Josh Call, and Katie Whitlock's *Guns, Grenades, and Grunts* (2012) anthologies, for instance, we can discern that they variously center the actions, thematics, and contexts that constitute gameplay or suspend these facets in polylogic tensions. Though these studies all acknowledge that genre should account for interaction, it is certainly not *a priori* the most vital element of any inquiry. So while ludic forms are central to Dan Pinchbeck's (2013) construction of the origins of the FPS, Mark J.P. Wolf (2012) leans more heavily on perspective and aesthetics in his account of the birth of the genre, though both can ultimately been seen utilizing the language and insights of multiple perspectives -- especially when contrasted to Alexander Galloway's account of the FPS as filmic remediation (2006). The nexus of interaction and aesthetics is complicated in fascinating ways in Dominic Arsenault (2009) and Carl Therrien's (2015) work on the FPS genre. In Arsenault's intervention, this is supplemented with a consideration of how technologies, or platforms, contribute to the shape of the genre, and a gesture to the importance of the experience of gameplay. Therrien's contribution does this and then some, examining how the genre was produced in multiple intersecting discursive contexts – academic, journalistic, and enthusiast – and bringing the historical scene in which the FPS does cultural work into focus. Of course, games studies have said much more about the FPS than I could state here, and much of it without explicitly making use of the term genre.

Nevertheless, what we can discern from this and other constructive conversations is that contestations around notions of interactivity have been agonistic, working through the interplay of pluralities. The works that I have attempted to tie together in this section think through

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interactivity as it is, in different circumstances, modified by story, representation, technology, material apparatus, and/or attitude. As a corpus, however loosely stitched together, they put interaction on the table alongside these and other vital dimensions, and insist that the most salient quality is not inherent to the objects but to the subjects who collectively assign meaning to them. Classifications are made and assigned, sometimes, based on the prioritization of one contextually relevant aspect, or by valuing equally the interactive, representational, and technological, or by valuing them differently but consistently across the board. This is the kind of genre analysis and criticism that has yielded the most insight, and it does so because it puts multiple disciplinary rhetorics and multiple stakeholders in conversation. Embracing the encounter between different disciplines and ways of knowing, this approach to genre requires that critical practice entails looking through and using different criteria for organizing genres.

Beyond enabling increasingly sophisticated discussions organized under the rubrics of genre, by performing interdisciplinary inquiry, an agonistic orientation centers the discursivity inherent to genre analysis and demonstrates how meaningful engagement with diversity produces knowledge. In the latter, we can identify the operation of agonistic pluralism in genre discourses in the field of game studies and in the former, we can identify how game genre analysis can uncover and even generate agonistic pluralism in public culture.

Agonistic pluralism in game studies

The contestation and recombination of the varied theoretical, methodological, institutional and political commitments characteristic of genre analysis proceeds from a logic that can productively animate the field of game studies. Most of these conflicts have been engaged agonistically, as non-zero-sum confrontations. In fact, of those discussed here, only Aarseth conceives of game studies and the Genre Trouble as explicitly zero-sum. It is significant that Aarseth, who advocates for the demise of scholarly engagement that refuses to oblige his presumptions, and Frasca, who advocates for tolerance for other "teenage narrativists" (2003a) walk a different line, one that they insist does not intersect and cannot be made parallel with this methodologically pluralist, agonistic line of inquiry.

This distinction in orientation, or attitude, is vital, as it animates the difference between agonism and antagonism. Chantal Mouffe, preeminent philosopher of the political, explains:

While antagonism is a we/they relation, in which the two sides are enemies who do not share any common ground, agonism is a we/they relation where the conflicting parties, although acknowledging that there is no rational solution to their problem, nevertheless recognize the legitimacy of their opponents. They are 'adversaries' not enemies. This means that while in conflict, they see themselves as belonging to the same political association, as sharing a common symbolic space within which the conflict takes place (2005, p. 20).

It is not difficult to understand how the ludological position on genre operates according to the logics of enmity and antagonism. The refusal to engage in even the possibility that understandings of game genres could be bettered by using theoretical/critical tools derived from other fields of study constitutes a refusal to acknowledge the legitimacy of scholarship that does this. Indeed, the ludological line is defined by the ultimate aim of expelling other approaches and methods from the "common symbolic space" of game studies; a narrativist game scholar is a game scholar that should not exist (Aarseth 2004) or whose existence must be tolerated despite their inability to contribute meaningful knowledge (Frasca 2003a). Paradigms that do not *a priori* centre ludology are the trouble with genre, according to this narrative. This much is codified when Apperley marks (and performs) a "shift from representational to ergodic understanding of genre in video games" (2006, p.9).

It would be willfully naïve to treat this scholarly discourse as a part of a value-free, non-partisan search for truth rather than acknowledge how the forms, tropes, and processes of academic argument are tied to the distribution of material and symbolic resources. As Nelson, McGill & McCloskey argue, considering a field's "rhetoric of inquiry" can challenge the aura of neutrality reified by the languages of academic inquiry and "reveal underlying issues and better ways to consider them responsibly" (1987, p.4). In discussing the ludological line on game genre, I have drawn attention to how claims about the nature of a medium are mobilized in the rhetorics engaged in the construction of new disciplinary formations. Furthermore, I have identified the preponderance of the transhistorical narrative about the ludological line, the notion that game studies was always and already moving toward genres distinguished by ergodicity, as a powerful and lasting effect of this rhetoric. By insisting that ludology be the *a priori* criteria for drawing the boundaries of what can legitimately be called game studies, this discourse participates in governing the conduct of the field.

Game genre was one site where this struggle took place and it could be again, if we are willing to recognize that it was, in fact, contested. The greatest danger, in this instance, is the sort of unproductive tolerance that Frasca helped constitute by imagining away the confrontation between ludology and narratology. It is a civil construction of the exchange but also one that erases its function and meaning. As Kappell argues, there is nothing substantive to show of it. This is because tolerance is among the weaker forms of affect governing the non-antagonistic relationship between social actors in a given scene. And, significantly, tolerance for diversity is not pluralism. Tolerance does not enable a mutual engagement with diversity and difference but rather, by definition, signals a commitment to not engage.

What is required is not tolerance but agonism: the contestation of perspectives, the methodological impieties such meeting will produce, and a sustained debate over what game studies is and should be. This means recognizing that agonistic confrontation is vital to the health of a field of study, but not that difference and incommensurability should be celebrated as such. Bonnie Honig makes this clear in arguing that the point of an agonistic politics is "not to celebrate a world without points of stabilisation" but "to affirm the reality of perpetual contest, even within an ordered setting, and to identify the affirmative dimension of contestation (1993, p. 15). Where Honig is pointing to agonism and difference as inherent to human sociality, Mouffe argues that it is a precondition to community. Her theory of the political is premised on the idea that "far from representing a danger for democracy" agonism "is in reality the very condition of its existence" (2005, p.150).

As a community, game studies has imagined away the ludology and narratology debate, such that the actual clash of ideas and critical competencies it produced are not easily discoverable. But looking closely, we have seen how the debate is inscribed in the discourse of the Genre Troubles, how it developed ludological concepts at the expense of other modes of analysis and established clear protocols for doing work that counts as game studies. I have created an alternative account of how game studies can and does do genre analysis right, one that explicitly and directly contests the established genealogy and telos of game genre analysis. It is essential that we do the same with other sites and topoi in game studies, not for the sake of digging up or inventing conflicts, but so that we can better discern how these conflicts have in fact shaped our community, values, and practices.

Agonistic pluralism in game/public cultures

But it is not enough to initiate and sustain agonistics in game studies when games and game genres are doing this work by engaging public culture. This is because games are thoroughly communicative. Games use visual, procedural, textual, and narrative representations to communicate claims about subjects and the worlds that we inhabit, though players tend to only perceive them as arguments when they explicitly take on contentious topics. In this light, "as sites where culture and identity are contested, politics are debated, and knowledge is produced and disseminated digital games are ripe for intervention by critical scholars of communication investigating the intersections of discourse, power and social action" (Voorhees 2012a, p.6). While there is no shortage of scholarship examining the specific interventions that individual games perform or enable, we have not been doing the sort of work with larger formal, analytical categories and relations described by genre.

Game genres can be more roundly understood when approached as communicative action, as discursive interventions in everyday life. Carolyn Miller (1984) championed this conception of genre in her pivotal essay "Genre as Social Action." Stating from the premise that all communication is a response to a situation, Miller argues that distinct genres of communication -- mediated and otherwise -- can be approached as conventional responses to recurring situations. This communicative dimension of genre was introduced to game studies by Carr and Burns (2006) in *Computer Games: Text, Narrative, and Play*. Here, they take their lead from Russian literary theorist Mikhail Bakhtin, and maintain that genres are a form of "social action" because they are "conventional uses of language by social groups" (p. 14). Carr and Burns applied this to help explain how the RPG genre has developed in response to its uptake in different geographical and cultural milieus.

Writing about the *Final Fantasy* series, I was inspired by Carr and Burns' study of RPGs, but like Miller draws insight from Kenneth Burke's theorizing of form (Voorhees 2009b). The study traces the rough contours of the RPG genre through several (re)configurations of the form, up to the year 2006. By connecting these formal changes and the patterns of representation mapped onto them to the historical contexts and social spaces in which these games were produced and ultimately played, the paper identified four historically situated genre formations within the assemblage called "Japanese RPGs," and demonstrated how each

communicates advocacy for a different construction of multiculturalism. Here, the different forms of the JRPG each constitute a distinct response to a common, shared cultural situation. A similar analysis of the *Mass Effect* series explains that the RPG genre operates as commentary about the management of social difference. That paper employs Michel Foucault's theory of governmentality in place of Burke's theory of aesthetics, which I also turn to in an essay on the cultural-politics of several distinct formations of the FPS genre (Voorhees 2012b). By relating the themes common to FPS games from three distinct periods to the material and cultural militarization of North American society, the paper shows that public acceptance of FPS games grew along with the forms of the genre that intelligibly communicate endorsements of militarism.

Games communicate -- making context-specific arguments, telling stories, representing physical and psychic realities, and more -- in response to historical situations; game genres do the same. But to do the work of locating how game genres participate in the circulation and contestation that is public culture requires more of the critic. It requires that a scholar play games outside of their wheelhouse in order to discover and create novel linkages. And it requires that we to pay attention to the representations, mechanics, and technologies of games and to embodied, social, and affective practices of play in order to discern patterns in any one, or across any number of these dimensions.

This is because genre truly is a crossroads. As Carolyn Miller explains, doing genre analysis means studying intersections; investigating the meeting of form and substance; examining how human motives conjoin with material and social contexts; understanding the mutually constitutive relationship between reflecting and shaping society; considering symbolic and material dimensions; discerning how individuals engage collective fantasies; and scrutinizing the relation between structures and agency (2014, p. 69). And while it is challenging, among these tasks, you will find many points of connection to ongoing work in the field.

Genre Trouble, Revisited

I have endeavored to show that the Genre Trouble in game studies worth revisiting is a rhetorical problem more than a conceptual one. Examining the rhetoric of inquiry in this Genre Trouble, the debate contesting different conceptions of game genre, suggests two distinct

discourses. The ludological line on the study of game genres enjoys pre-eminence in our literature reviews and metanarratives. Nevertheless, we can observe the continued development of increasingly sophisticated scholarship on the aesthetic and cultural dimensions of a handful of specific genre formations, e.g. the FPS, survival-horror, and role-playing game genres. In my analysis, this scholarship is distinguished by its pluralistic agonism, its predisposition to encourage the interdisciplinary encounter between a plurality of theoretical lenses and engagement with multi-faceted, messy, and contingent constructions of game genre.

An agonistic orientation to game genre, furthermore, enables two components of critical practice. The first is self-reflexive and a matter of turning the concept onto the discourse practices of game studies. As a reflection of the ludology and narratology debate, the Genre Trouble draws attention to two distinct logics -- antagonistic and agonistic -- for managing the differences inherent to an interdiscipline. It also suggests that the latter is a precondition to the open exchange of ideas and argument, which the former seeks to foreclose. The second facet of critical practice is sociological, a matter of making clear how game genres are engaging in social action. Genre is a stylized, formalized response to recurrent situations, and genre responds by acting to communicate advocacy for specific actions, attitudes, and orientations.

An agonistic orientation is also essential to transforming our collective experience of genre trouble into a vital aspect of method. This is because genre trouble is not an obstacle to game genre analysis but its method. Here, I am not only arguing *contra* Aarseth's tale of genre trouble to advocate we impiously utilize multi-disciplinary frameworks, but also drawing on Judith Butlers' (1993) advocacy for gender trouble, the disruption of naturalized gender formations. And this is critical if we aim to not only map the dynamics and implications of preeminent genre formations but also to chart their deterritorialization and the occurrence of new patterns and clusters of affect, mechanics, and performance. That is, aside from genre evolution (Arsenault 2009), there is the matter of genre emergence and dissolution which demands genre trouble as a method.

Feminist cultural studies scholar Lauren Berlant writes: "The waning of genre frames different kinds of potential openings within and beyond the impasse of adjustment that constant crisis creates" (2011, p. 6-7). From this we can gather three lessons. First, the decline and dissolution of genre formations is an index of the changing affective state of gaming culture *qua* public

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culture. Second, a lack of generic unities is indicative of a cultural *aporia*, an impasse or crisis of collective imagination to formulate a coherent response to the historical moment. And third, the unintelligibility of the moment is an opportunity that invites new forms of response, new genres, and new orientations to the future.

This is Genre Trouble as method. The pluralistic agonism generated by competing perspectives and critical commitments is exactly the productive, impious, messy sort of genre trouble that is required to not simply identify novel patterns of form and activity that constitute distinct formations of games, but to participate in the recognition, formalization, sedimentation, and unsettling of game genres. In short, genre is a conceptual tool for studying historically contingent formations of text and practice, and Genre Trouble a critical practice for assembling and inventing forms of sociality to survive the present.

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Résumé : Cet article trace les grandes lignes d'une impasse dans les études du jeu que certains ont appelée « troubles du genre », et qui peut être attribuée aux discours universitaires ayant interrogé le concept de genre vidéoludique tout en reproduisant certains aspects du débat entre ludologie et narratologie. On peut distinguer deux axes d'argumentation et de recherche sur le genre dans le jeu vidéo : un axe ludologique dominant et une orientation agonistique, moins proéminente mais plus productive. Les avantages potentiels de l'approche agonistique pour enrichir et animer les études du genre vidéoludique sont rattachés à la communauté discursive des études du jeu ainsi qu'aux contextes intrinsèquement politiques dans lesquels le domaine se situe. Dans ce contexte, le trouble du genre n'est pas un obstacle à l'analyse générique, mais bien sa méthode.

Mots-clés : genre, études du jeu, ludologie, agonisme, action sociale