# Game/Genre: A Critique of Generic Formulas in Video Games in the Context of "The Real"

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Genre is a contentious topic in any medium. Genre fiction or "genred" fiction carries with it a mark of marginality. A typical remark from a *New York Times Book Review* demonstrates this pattern: "science fiction will never be Literature with a capital ''L,'' and this is because it inevitably proceeds from premise rather than character" (Birkerts). Similarly, fiction titles of specific genres such as Western and Science Fiction bear conspicuous labels that distinguish works like *Dune* from the unmarked, real fiction, saying in effect, "Warning—this is not really Literature." While there is some degree of generic criticism (that is, criticism that asserts one genre's superiority to all other genres based on nothing more than its distinguishing criticism) in game *journalism* and reception, there have only been a few attempts to deal with the issue of genre in game *studies*. It is my goal to reach an understanding of the conflicting generic sensibilities established by video game journalism on the one hand and game studies scholarship on the other.

A common rhetorical phenomenon in writing about video games is to begin with a broad statement invoking the volume of games produced or the surpassing quality of the most recent generation of games to "wow" skeptics into considering the possibility that games mean something more than play. As this essay has a more meta-critical approach, it seems appropriate instead to pay appropriate respect to the growing amount of critical literature on gaming and avoid the apologetics that many earlier scholars have felt obligated to undergo.

Games have indeed come a long way, and so has game scholarship. The recent publication of *The Video Game Theory Reader* (edited by Mark J.P. Wolf and Bernard Perron) indicates both that reading is an appropriate task for learning about games and that a critical mass of viewpoints exists to justify an anthology of wildly different and, sometimes, antithetical scholarship on video games

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as cultural artifacts. The *Theory Reader* begins with a brief history of video game theory and sets itself up alongside the journal *Game Studies* (http://www.gamestudies.org) as, essentially, a toe-hold in the "theoretical landscape" for "serious academic writing on the video game" (Wolf, "Introduction"). The editors acknowledge in the course of this history that much of the writing on games has been aimed at either the production or consumption of video games, but in separating the contents of their collection as "serious academic writing" the editors have (justifiably, perhaps) sidestepped issues of game typology being worked out "in the trenches" of online game journalism.

The result has been a conflicting sense of generic categories for games which suggests that gamers (the audience for game journalism) produce and respond to different categories for games than do scholars. I propose to examine this problem by focusing on the way each conversation accommodates the emergence of new categories by drawing on a similar problem in the medium of television, the emergence of reality TV. I will argue that the emergence of any new genre essentially changes the medium itself in its relation to other media and in academic thinking about its nature. In much the same way that "RealiTV" changed the very language of TV (by privileging the cinéma vérité approach to shooting video, for example), I propose that Massively Multiplayer games present a new way of generic thinking about gaming from both the consumption and scholarly perspective. I am not suggesting, however, an analogy whereby *Cops* is to TV what *Everquest* is to Gaming. Instead, game typology is in a phase of (re)defining its categories and the example of Reality TV will provide a suggestion for understanding the way that game genres may emerge.

## Genre

For my discussion of genre, it is important to clarify the term as definitional slippage is one of the key problems I hope to address. In general, Rick Altman's syntactic/semantic approach to genre is useful for an understanding of the history of generic thinking and for its evaluation of the emergence of new genres, but a preliminary definition and examples of approaches to game genre will hopefully eliminate some of these difficulties for the purposes of this essay at least. The taxonomic vocabulary is itself not without controversy in gaming discussions (not to mention the actual nomenclature of types of games that I will discuss later), but an understanding of what separates one game genre from another is essential at this point.

In their introduction to *Screenplay: cinema/videogame/interface*, editors Geoff King and Tanya Krzywinska make what is, to my knowledge, the first attempt to define games with a system of three modifiers: Genre, Mode, and Milieu. A game's genre is its "broad category or type" and does not describe the same distinctions as do film genres. Rather, a game's genre refers to the way the game is played or what one must do in order to accomplish the goals of the

game. "Mode" is the way a game's content is presented to the player and includes the interface, and "milieu" is King and Krzywinska's term to describe a game's narrative content in much the same way that film genres are distinguished. This three-tiered system is, I believe, the most appropriate typology for games because it suggests that the qualities of gaming lie in the experience of play, not in the content of the narrative or in the mise-en-scéne.

This typology also accounts for the categories typically set forth by the game journalism community, but academic writing seems to be more confused on the terminology in its attempts to make the terms themselves the focus of study. In an essentially modernist critical approach, several authors have attempted to codify game genres into a definitive system, but all three of the systems I will discuss have failed to merge into common or scholarly practice—with the possible exception of Espen Aarseth's. This is because they each fail in some way to incorporate an appropriate consideration of how generic terms are used and how such usage affects the medium itself and the consumption of new games. Game journalism, specifically websites devoted to disseminating information and advertising about new games to consumers[1], utilizes a fairly uniform classification that reveals a consideration of game properties that appears to go as far (or further) than scholarly typologies with little apparent contact between the two fields. What follows is a brief survey of a few major game-sites with regard to their classifications of games.

### Genre Consciousness on the Web

The typical layout of a gaming website reveals its intended audience and intended use and suggests the role genre plays in the selection and production of games. These websites' layouts follow the ubiquitous "upside-down-L" format common to commercial sites and includes navigational bars across the top and indexical material organized in hierarchical (usually unordered) lists on the left side. *GameSpot*, *IGN*, and *GameSpy* also all use a similar technique of highlighting recent or upcoming releases and advertising their respective reviews or previews of a given game. A row of screen captures or title splashes of new games occupies the viewer's vision just below the top navigational bar and site logo, and often this row moves automatically or changes upon reloading the page. A slightly different non-commercial site, *Home of the Underdogs* (*HOTU*) lacks this banner of screenshots, but relies on the same indexical format. I mention the layout of these sites first because the location of the generic information as well as its function in directing user access of the sites reveals the importance of generic categories to game consumption. At the very least, the inclusion of this kind of information at all indicates that genre functions "on the surface" of day-to-day game reception. Many of my own purchasing or renting decisions are based on such internal monologues as "I haven't played an Extreme Sports game in a while" or "I really don't have time for another RTS [Real-Time-Strategy]."

*GameSpot*'s list seems to be the most balanced, and occupies a prominent place in the upper left margin of the page. According to *GameSpot*, therefore, all the video games that they deal with fall under one of the following categories: "Action, Adventure, Driving, Puzzle, RPG (role playing game), Simulation, Sports and Strategy" (http://www.gamespot.com). This list invites browsing under one's preferred genre for new games and information about favorite games. *Adrenaline Vault* departs only slightly from this listing substituting "Driving" with the more specific "Racing" and adding the "Arcade" genre, but one must first access a category of information about games like "Reviews" to then have the option of browsing by genre. *GameSpy*'s list is shorter and not explicitly marked as genre:—"Action, RPG, Sports, Strategy" (http://www.gamespy.com) —but the role of identifying games by these markings accounts for the fact that some gamers prefer games that are played in a familiar way. *IGN*'s list is more confused, including platforms, reviews, and genre under one listing sloppily labeled "Games," and *Home of the Underdogs* privileges genres in the top (horizontal) position of their "upside-down-L"[2] and adds "Applications, Education, Interactive Fiction, Special, and War?" categories to *GameSpot*'s list (http://www.the-underdogs.org).

These sites organize their content into familiar categories not as a prescriptive designation of uniformity but as responses to consumers' understandings of games. Worth noting in these ad hoc typologies is the absence of the two genres I used in earlier examples as well as Extreme-Sports, MMORPG, RTS, and the notorious Survival Horror[3]. These are constantly referenced as genres, yet they do not appear in the organization lists of these websites because, significantly, their definitions include additions of "Mode" (Massively Multiplayer Online) or "Milieu" (Extreme, Horror) properties to the games they describe. These categories operate as independent of their parent genres in the sense that Survival Horror attracts a particular audience that has no acknowledged allegiance to the Action-Adventure uber-genre that also includes text-based adventures (*Adventure*, *Zork*, *A Mind Forever Voyaging*) and platform games (*Super Mario Brothers*). So it appears that the three-fold hierarchy does not necessarily operate in as derivative a fashion as King and Krzywinska suggest. Instead, it appears that "genre," "mode," and "milieu" describe different game qualities in more or less equal proportion and that these three properties combine to form a practical sub-genre.

At any rate, the websites devoted to covering game-related news enact a categorization scheme that seems to privilege "genre" as the initial form of categorizing games, though such restrictions seem to break down upon exploration. The distinction between Action and Adventure is particularly slippery as the terms are frequently combined into "Action/Adventure" and when they are separated, games may appear under both categories. *The Grand Theft Auto* franchise, for example, makes prominent appearances under both Action and Adventure on *GameSpot*, and the games' unique style of play actually raise some interesting questions about the

emergence of new genres for talking about games. "Action" games typically rely on simulated violence or highly kinesthetic game play (or both) and generally lack narrative depth; these games are often facetiously labeled "twitch" games because a player's primary involvement is reflex-like reactions to the rapid appearance of targets and obstacles on the screen. Adventure games, on the other hand, typically rely on a story to involve the player and successful game play requires understanding and advancing the story line. Many games, such as *Grand Theft Auto III* are both visually and kinesthetically involving and provide a good story, so the terms become interchangeable or combined. A hybridization of the two genres does not seem to exist as such though Survival Horror games frequently occupy the middle ground. Survival Horror games with their specific, predictable content (advancing zombies, monsters breaking through windows, a creepy atmosphere, limited ammunition and save points) rely too much on an identifiable milieu to count as a specific genre unto themselves under the Genre/Mode/Milieu classification.

The use of these generic labels by game journalism[4] indicates that categories marking the type of game play are important to game consumers. The relative importance of these genres may, however, be called into question with the visual positioning of the generic categorizations on the sites mentioned above. All of these sites also offer a categorization by platform—PC, PlayStation 2, GameCube, Xbox, N-Gage, GBA—that overrides the genre categories. The importance of platform ownership as it relates to game availability and preference of genre has received comparatively little academic attention, but platform ownership and preference clearly relates to a player's genre appreciation. First Person Shooter (FPS) is often considered a genre (sub-genre of Action but with a modal [first-person] modifier) that only works well on the PC. A PC player sits closer to the screen and directs the cursor or crosshairs with his or her mouse in a close parallel to a standard Graphic User Interface (GUI). Therefore, a preference for PC games likely indicates that a player prefers FPS games. The importance of platform to genre preference indicates the importance of mode, and raises complex typological questions: What is the medium of gaming? Is each platform a separate medium? Does the apparati of a player's interface with the game include the hardware of the console itself? What effect do different control pads have on a player's immersion in the game?

I do not at this time intend to make an attempt at answering these questions, but my point is that these complex critical questions arise from the common-sense presentation of game information in journalistic websites. The implied organization of games into this preferred category system indicates that a different set of identifiable qualities, game platforms, inform players decisions about game purchases and playing time, and, therefore, seems to offer a competing practical typology that is altogether different from the games' genre question. However, the question of platform as it relates to game consumption addresses a concern that is inde-

pendent of the media theorists' questions about what games are and how games are played. Media theories treat games as cultural artifacts and the formalistic canonization of games as quasi-literary objects can only result from the type of understanding that does not depend on a game's commercial success as a marker of quality. Therefore, the consumption of games (the buying of games and accessories) is, unfortunately, a less important question for this discussion. This is unfortunate because the media objects themselves and the journalistic typologies of games create the practical sense of genre that game scholars tend to eschew or take for granted. The formation of new genre awareness can only happen in the reception of games and is therefore highly dependant on the consumption of games and platforms. Though I will argue later that certain new platform technologies will require new understandings of genre categories, it is unlikely that my prescriptions will lead to anything unless the often messy dialectic of corporate production and user comments that fill gaming websites arrives at a similar conclusion by practice.

### Types of/and Typologies, and Taxonomies

Most authors and scholars who have written about gaming include in their analysis some understanding of "genre" either explicitly or by implication. There is certainly no consensus viewpoint on generic questions, but there is a surprising slippage in terminology leading, as mentioned earlier, to rhetorical gestures like King and Krzywinska's typology, but others' systems seem to arrive at similar conclusions with different terminology. This problem of terminology even extends to the term "genre" as some authors refer to games as a genre of, presumably, New Media or, perhaps, culture itself. Espen Aarseth's seminal introduction of the journal *Game Studies* begins with this glib usage; "as we know, there have been computer games as long as there have been computers: *SpaceWar*, arguably the first modern game, turns forty this year, and commercially the genre has existed for three decades [my underline, italics in original]" (Aarseth "Year One"). In the same issue, however, reviewer Aki Jarvinen questions the claim that *Halo* signifies the end of the First Person Shooter genre. Implicit is a questioning of the identity of genres as useful categories in that *Halo*'s improvement is apparently that it borrows well from other "genres" such as Third-Person Driver. Again, these particular categories are perhaps best thought of as defined by mode rather than genre, but the implied critique of any categories suggests unanswered questions about the meaning of categories and how games respond to received notions of genre.

Addressing the genre problem head-on is another strategy and at least two authors have arrived at what would seem to be exhaustive systems of genre stratification. Mark J.P. Wolf's is perhaps the most specifically inclusive of received genres—i.e., genre terms in common use in game journalism—but the complicated sub-genres and overlaps draws into sharper focus the typological inconsisten-

cies in *GameSpot*'s categories, for example, in that each list item is not parallel with the others except that they all describe games. In other words, the vocabulary itself is convoluted as "Action," a designation that describes a game by what one does in the game environment to accomplish its goals: one "acts," albeit violently and with a gun. By contrast, the RPG category describes the format of the game itself.

Similarly, though Wolf establishes a careful focus on interactivity as his tool (enacting the same strategy as King and Krzywinska would later use), his cumbersome list of over forty genres highlights by exaggeration the typical problems of typology created ad hoc in the process of journalistic coverage of the game industry. This focus on interactivity logically excludes genre-labels inherited from film like Science Fiction and Horror, but apparently extends to include interaction with the hardware itself. In other words, Wolf's isolation is too specific and yet too inclusive of disparate descriptors. That "Demo" clearly describes a type of game (a miniaturized version of potentially any game) clearly answers a different question about a game than do categorizations like Driving and Escape. To be fair, I am not criticizing Wolf's conclusions as such but pointing to the fact that his system, like many other taxonomies of game types, cannot succeed exhaustively even with careful specifications and modifiers. In fact, it may be better not to try. In other words, I do not mean to suggest that there is a flaw in Wolf's thinking but rather that such formalizing techniques are, perhaps, inadequate to the field of games.

Epitomizing the formalist move is Diane Carr's comparison of *Silent Hill* and *Planescape Torment* in a recent issue of *Game Studies* (V. 3, n. 1). Her analysis is rooted (pun intended) in Janet Murray's identification of digital narrative as either of two essential labyrinth types—"maze" and "rhizome"—but observes specific game structures and patterns in the maze/rhizome distinction (Murray 132). Carr does not argue for an analogous relationship by demonstration such that *Silent Hill* = maze // *Planescape Torment* = rhizome, but the use of a received model to describe games indicates a formal tendency that is common to game writing when it addresses genre. Carr's essay does, however, make a useful point of isolating "affect" as a genre distinction: "[these] games seek to generate different affect, and they effectively exploit alternate models to achieve that end." In other words, Carr separates the fantasy/horror content of each game, which is superficially similar, with the stance of that material in its affect in regard to players. Thus, though the focus is now on the dialectic of user response, the tendency to describe a game by what it is and does is the same as Wolf's approach.

Chris Crawford, one of the earliest writers to address the aesthetics of game design offers a more deterministic outlook on types of games describing a color wheel model of sorts where all games are a combination of one of three "basic thinking elements": "hand-eye coordination, puzzle solving, and resource management" (Crawford 159). These three elements, like Diane Carr's distinc-

tions, focus on the interactive content of games and arrive at three distinct algorithms for user performance. Crawford recognizes this schema as limiting the development of games in that new games can only be more creative combinations or technologically flashier versions of older game types. Suggesting that new games should re-examine ways of thinking, Crawford raises the controversial specter of emotion in games[5] as well as verbal thought, but already there are games that potentially meet these descriptions. At any rate, these three categories—hand-eye coordination, puzzle, and resource management—are not game genres as such but formal categories or qualities in the "language" of games. As such, two of these qualities (puzzle and resource management) frequently appear as generic labels and the systematization of these qualities mimics a generic taxonomy. Therefore Crawford's terminology enacts the same formalistic/deterministic tendency in other game scholarship where games are regarded as a static corpus of texts open to "literary" analyses.

Such meta-generic slippage—as well as the apparent malleability of the term "genre" itself—raises important meta-generic questions that have yet to be addressed systematically. Questions like "Who does the work of game genre?" "Who is genre for?" and "What's at stake in talking about game genres?" suggest that such an exhaustive system need not exist and in fact may not be appropriate. The tendency toward generic systematization in game studies seems to reflect an imitation of the literary sense of genres in the interest of "canonizing" games themselves and the result is an inappropriately formalistic model of scholarship that attempts to isolate the games as a-historical, a-political, a-commercial, "literary" objects. *Game Studies*' own mission statement includes the declarative "Our mission—To explore the rich cultural genre of games" (Aarseth, "Mission Statement"), which not only includes the familiar ambiguity of "genre" but also smacks of an appeal to "literary" quality. The use of the term "genre" with its critical weight and odd French pronunciation (Frye 13) specifically invokes literary categories when words like "phenomenon," "category," or "medium" could have sufficed. To be fair, I am not criticizing Aarseth's usage of this term, but I am instead clarifying how scholars typically think about genre.

So in this case, a key concern in identifying genre from the critical standpoint is the canonization of the games themselves and the implied vindication of the critical task. However, journalistic generic terms themselves are routinely adopted by scholars without much qualification when writing about particular games as in Steven Poole's clever "biological" history of games as descendants of the primordial Shoot-Em-Up *SpaceWar* or the nascent Sports game *Pong*. It appears, therefore, that generic terms carry the most weight and perform their most appropriate task of channeling commercial behavior in the form of game journalism. When scholars enter the meta-generic debate, they are usually armed with a formalist system that at best cracks as soon as a new or exceptional game appears to threaten its rigorous system either as a multi-

genred game or as a game with no discernible genre. Therefore, game scholarship's meta-generic tendency toward formalism avoids the dynamic nature of game production and reception and is consequently most vulnerable at moments of emergence where anomalous games grow in popularity.

The phenomenon of MMORPG's is a prevalent example of a new form of gaming that is defying conventional generic placement and is finding its own status as a genre. Massively Multi-player Online Role Playing Games bear the longest and most awkward title of any genre, but the presence of such a category on the generic landscape has the potential to disrupt current generic theory regarding games. To explore how this shift might occur I will consider a similar (and—as I hope to demonstrate—related) phenomenon in the advent of Reality TV and the subsequent disruptions in notions of television genres and television itself.

## RealiTV

In common and scholarly contexts, "Reality TV" has become accepted as a term to describe a genre of television. This genre includes variations, sub-types, and overlaps with other genres, but the essential characteristics are easily identified: "normal" people taped actually doing things, a cinéma vérité look or feel, and an implied voyeuristic mode of viewing. Other characteristics, while less universal, seem prevalent across more than one form such as a pattern of humiliation, confrontation, disclosure, dramatic irony and the twinge of transgressive viewing one expresses when one "apologizes" for being a regular viewer of, for example, *Joe Millionaire*, but none of these need be invoked merely to recognize Reality TV as a form.

A brief survey of television programming and books about television demonstrates that genre is a conscious part of the consumption, production, and criticism of television just as it is in video games. Television events like FOX's "Laugh out Loud Sunday" or even cable channels dedicated ostensibly to a single genre (e.g. Comedy Central, the Romance channel, or A&E Biography) include a genre label in their presentation as an attraction to consumers who are also aware of their genre preferences. And browsing a library's catalog of books on television (in the vicinity of PN 1992) reveals books on Drama, Tragedy, Sit-Com, and other generic labels familiar to television audiences.

Most histories of the Reality TV genre begin with the 1973 PBS series *American Family* and track the genre through its various high-water marks of success including the popularity achieved by such shows as *Cops*, *America's Funniest Home Videos*, *The Real World*, and *Survivor*. And an etymology of the term "reality television" itself suggests something of the status of the form as a "genre." "Reality-based television" is a more accurate term than the oxymoronic Reality TV, and the truncation of the name reveals more than a popular familiarity with the form. The merging of reality and television presents a number of philosophical questions and

problems stemming from the pretension of "real representation" as James Friedman points out in his introduction to *Reality Squared: Televisual Discourse on the Real*:

> These theoretical discussions have occupied scholars as well as some artists and have occasionally penetrated popular public discourse where, since the 1980s, the television industry and its critics have identified, labeled, and begun promoting a reemergence of 'reality-based' television." (Friedman 1)

Thus placing Reality TV in a theoretical framework from the beginning, Friedman (wisely) avoids typological "genre" controversies such as might occupy TV critics and reviewers[6]. But the treatment of the phenomenon itself implies a genre recognition, as evidenced by the frequent use of "Reality TV." The removal of the word "based," therefore, reveals more than a convenience of speech and suggests that accepted notions of televisual representation as documentation have become confused with narrative. "Reality TV" and the mischievous neologism RealiTV submerge philosophical problems within the material they represent. These broad questions might threaten the underpinnings of television itself, but blurring lines between modes of representation also affect the presentation of television fiction.

John Caldwell's essay in the Friedman anthology discusses the phenomenon of Docu-Real television fiction, which adopts the appearance of documentary-inspired Reality TV in order to create a particular plot mood. This overlap can be startling to viewers who assume that video documentary footage is "evidence" of "what happened" as in such cases as the Rodney King incident and Tianman Square, but docu-real fiction is accepted because of its overtly fictive stance. Conversely, the absurd premises that seem to draw primetime network audiences to "reality" seem even farther removed from plausibility, yet they are accepted and receive journalistic attention as real events. Reality TV programming commonly bills its content as not simply "must see TV" but as defining cultural events. Large scale programs like the recently concluded *Average Joe* build melodramatic suspense into the moment of a young woman's decision to wed with the combined insistency of a media event and a series finale. Though the show will almost certainly vanish in the banality of the ensuing televisual repetition, one feels as though "something important has happened and I was there."

Television events are not unique to Reality TV, nor did reality-based programming necessarily push other genres toward the same type of melodramatic spectacle-based viewership, but fictitious staging of such events as temporally "now" despite the obvious benefit of post-production amounts to a new perspective on television's capacity for presenting truth. It may be that audiences cheerfully suspend temporal disbelief, or their disbelief may not be compelling enough, but the sense that television no longer must be

"present" while waving the banner of reality in the form of cinematographic choices and mise-en-scene shifts the mode of spectatorship to a more ironic or removed tone.

Similarly, the genre of games under the lugubrious generic title MMORPG seem to have a similar effect on the way games are marketed. The increasing availability of "always-on" internet connections and higher bandwidth access have made practical the idea of games with persistent real-time worlds existing as a large scale role-playing game. Games like *Everquest*, *Asheron's Call*, and *Shadowbane* build on the Dungeons and Dragons model of role-playing game already quite successful as a stand-alone genre with popular franchises like *Final Fantasy* and *Forgotten Realms*. First-Person Shooters were the first to go "on-line" with something like large-scale warfare, but role playing games took full advantage of persistent internet servers and sustainable virtual communities to create fully immersive fictive worlds. Recent press about deviancy in the *Sims Online*[7] indicates the depth of the communities that develop and the sense of self-regulation that often develops, building off of a virtual social awareness informed by message-board politics and weblogs.

The effect of this genre on the medium of video games is not yet as obvious as the effect of Reality TV on television, but the extra-textual awareness of the genre itself has raised new public questions about gaming including journalistic awareness pieces about the addictive dangers of games like *EverQuest* a.k.a. "EverCrack" and "NeverRest[8]." Furthermore, other genres have also built significant online communities surrounding internet game play. Action/Adventure games with head-to-head competitive modes create "clans" or groups of players perhaps from different parts of the world who participate team-like in internal tournaments and battles with other clans. This type of community exists primarily in the First-Person Shooter genre, but the idea imitates an innovation of the MMORPG genre.

In response to the significance of these communities, FPS games now come pre-packaged with web development kits for clans who want their own website and instructions for creating their own game servers. This online consciousness is fundamentally linked to the MMORPG's "persistent world" feature and indicates a shift in video game playing space from private to public as the technology of gaming becomes fused with the technology of communication.

The emergence of this genre, therefore, is unique in that it was not a hybridization of earlier genres nor was it, as Chris Crawford advises, employing a new way of thinking about thinking. The MMORPG is in fact a discrete genre, but it is a genre dependent upon a particular technology for its existence. In that sense, I suggest that the technology of gaming must be given a more thorough consideration in generic thought. From the consumer journalism point of view (e.g. *GameSpot*) the platform categorization is an indication of this line of thought, but a combination of generic categories (derived in motive if not form from literary genres) and technological modes indicates the possibility of new descriptors for

games. I propose, therefore, three terms for describing games: Massive, Mobile, and Real with the full knowledge that I now appear to be initiating the formalistic move I earlier identified in others' writing. My aim in suggesting these three game descriptors is not to add to or replace earlier genre typologies, and I have no pretension that *Adrenaline Vault* will be adopting my categories for organizing access to their information about games. Rather I intend to demonstrate that plausible alternatives to existing models of game genre and genre itself may not appropriately categorize games into a coherent system. The addition of these categories as genre would, naturally, complicate the notion genre and are offered as a meta-generic critique. Also, it must be noted that these terms, especially Mobile, are in common usage, though they are not used generically or as categorical descriptors.

## New Directions

MMORPG's bear the longest of the genre names because they consist of a modal modifier (Massively Multi-player Online) to an existing genre category, RPG. Shortening this category to "Massive," therefore, broadens it to include FPS and combat-based games like *Jedi Knight*, as well as Real Time Strategy games like *Warcraft III*. Identifying this category as a discrete unit also bifurcates the catalog of games and game players by the technology of gaming; in other words, the "work" of this category is to stratify gaming into access and isolation because the primary sensibilities of the gaming experience are fundamentally shifted as play becomes public and failure has more (social) consequences than simple frustration and repetition. The resulting split in games could be generically exhaustive in that potentially any game genre may have its online version, and the online manifestation of some of the more narrative-driven genres like survival horror could create a mediated situation similar in some ways to Reality TV's sense of "missing the action." Presently, MMORPG's regularly release plot updates, but visions for both *The Matrix* and *Resident Evil*'s Massive incarnations call for players actively advancing the general plot creating a feeling of "missing out on the action" for the uninitiated or those interrupted by real life.

One key feature of the Massive type besides its technology is the privileging of a compelling, persistent story-world. The preference of this world to real-life ('r/l' in gamer shorthand) is a function of its quality as a game such that more immersive games are better representatives of the Massive category. In this sense, failure in the game amounts to virtual, "public" humiliation and hazing[9] and enacts a familiar motif of reality-based television. At any rate, this meta-generic category offers a deeper description of a game's qualities than may be immediately obvious, and the resulting difference in game interaction seems to beg for a generic incorporation of the Massive descriptor. At least it's easier to say than "MMORPG."

Mobile games again receive a designation based on the technology of their existence. Gameboys and other hand-held gaming devices have been popular as long as my personal history as a

gamer, but the availability of games outside of the apparatus of the television or PC monitor demands further attention. The fact that video games can be indulged anywhere again moves the act of playing (potentially) from a private space into the public, but the exposure is reversed. A player's body is in public while his or her game play is private whereas a Massive game obscures the body and exposes constructed game play identities to public view.

Again, virtually any existing genre can be appropriated into the Mobile category simply because of the technology, but the fact that games constructed for smaller display screens and shorter periods of game play (popular titles like *Wario Ware Inc: Mega Microgame$* for the Game Boy Advance are built on hundreds of "micro-games" that take a few seconds to complete) offer changes in the dynamic of play that act in all ways like generic modifiers.

What I am calling "Real" video gaming is certainly the most obscure of these categories, but it merges the public/private contrast of Mobile and Massive gaming. Real gaming is, like its nominal association with Reality TV suggests, a hybridization of styles that question received concepts of media's representative status. These are games which, again relying on current or developing technology, require players to physically relocate themselves as an act of playing the game. This is not to be confused with kinesthetically engaging preoccupations such as *Dance Dance Revolution* but includes experimental location-specific titles like *Human Pacman* and *Can you see me now*.

According to the website for *Mixed-Reality*, the University of Singapore research team developing *Human Pacman*, their game is "pioneering a new form of gaming that anchors on physicality, mobility, social interaction, and ubiquitous computing." Players wear backpacks that power head-mounted display units that completely obscure their vision. A camera on the front of the unit feeds the player local visual information overlaid with the game's content which is, as the name suggests, spherical pellets which disappear as the player walks through them. Furthermore, other players appear as "ghosts" and can "eat" Pacmen by tagging them. The entire game can also be viewed from a central control point as a three-dimensional game of *Pac-Man*.

The *Can you see me now* experiment was less hardware-oriented, but still mixed players' "real-world" experience with a video game interface. These experiments do not currently seem capable of producing the sweeping mass appeal of MMORPG's, but their inclusion on this list is necessary in their inversion of the form of game-play as a response to technology.

## Conclusion

In any analysis, the concept of generic typology is a slippery slope of contradictions and inexact or imbalanced types. My goal in this essay has been to critique the motives that lead to generic sensibilities in consumers of games and generic categorization among game scholars. While some of the authors mentioned offer

suspect analyses, my goal has not been to criticize their conclusions or arguments as such but to demonstrate that formalizing tendencies in game scholarship at large tend to isolate games as a-historical formal objects. This type of scholarship is not appropriate for a dynamic and technology-dependent medium, and I propose three new hardware-specific modifiers for types of games: Massive, Mobile, and Real. This meta-generic technique, it is hoped, will challenge ways of thinking about types of games as absolute, formal, or deterministic, and the emergence of new genres like MMORPG will change the manner of generic assumptions much like the advent of Reality TV terminology subsequently altered understandings of television.

## Notes

[1]I have chosen to deal exclusively with online gaming journalism not only for ease of access but for the "breaking news" quality of the sites, and their incorporation of user-provided commentary. The resulting mix of corporate and user perspectives is more like a dialectical genre mapping and is, therefore, the ad hoc generic ideal I oppose to scholarly investigation.

[2]One reason for *HOTU*'s divergence from *GameSpot* is undoubtedly *HOTU*'s mission as an archiver of "abandonware" and older games. Thus the games are already privileged as artifacts and the generic identification has more to do with affiliation than access.

[3]Other exceptions may relate to cultural preferences as in the Rhythm genre popular in Japan as well as the infamous dating (hentai) simulation games.

[4]For example, a past feature in *GameSpot*'s "Adventure" category is a review for *Fatal Frame II* which opens with "It can be difficult for a survival horror game to make its mark on a genre already full of bloodthirsty zombies and narrow-beam flashlights." (http://www.gamespot.com/ps2/adventure/fatalframe2/review.html)

[5]cf. past discussion on the "Water Cooler Games" weblog. (http://www.watercoolergames.org/archives/cat_emotion_in_games.shtml)

[6]This type of debate links television forms in some way to the onus of genre(d) fiction as being obsolete or marginalized in its attempt to "merely" entertain or fill a mold.

[7]A recent *Salon.com* article—http://www.salon.com/tech/feature/2003/12/12/sims_online_newspaper/index_np.html.

[8]cf. a *Fox News* article about gamers' "Double Lives." (http://www.foxnews.com/story/0,2933,59959,00.html)

[9]cf. an interview with a notorious *Sims Online* scammer and brothel madam "Evangeline" in *The Alphaville Herald*. (http://www.alphavilleherald.com/archives/000049.html)

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