Video Game Genres

Lars Konzack
University of Copenhagen, Denmark

INTRODUCTION

In video game magazines, video game web-sites, game reviews and among publishers, video game genres are used to quickly describe what type of game it is. Even though these genre descriptions are useful for the gaming community, they often lack academic verity. Studying video game genres as a discipline has only been done to some extent. First of all the video game genres are historical genres and should be treated like that, meaning they are not formally categorized, rather a video game genre is phenomenon that can be described as well as possible. That is not to say, that no formal approach is unwelcome or discouraged, however, one should not expect that such an approach may fully describe the field of video game genres. Especially because new genres may emerge and with every new video game, video game genres slowly or radically transform – in the sense that most video games tend to have small changes but once in a while some video games comes along and changes or even redefines the genre.

The purpose is to outline video game genres and the field of studying video game genres.

BACKGROUND

Since the first computer games in the 1940s and the later commercial video games in the 1970s and onward (Donovan, 2010), video games have developed into video game genres. In an early study of video games, Gillian Skirrow defined three video game genres: arcade games based on hand-eye-coordination, management/strategy games based on intellectual skills, and adventure games based on narratives (Skirrow, 1986). Later, David Myers defined six video game genres: arcade, adventure, simulation, role-playing, war games, and strategy games (Myers, 1990). And Mark J. P. Wolf defined no less than forty video game genres, some of

which not everybody will fully accept as video game genres like for instance artificial life, collecting, demo, diagnostic, and utility (Wolf, 2001).

To understand these video game genres, one has to distinguish between literary/cinematic historical genres versus game genres. Literary or cinematic historical genres consist of e.g. horror, crime fiction, science fiction, fantasy, romance, social realism, cyberpunk, steampunk and so forth. Each of these literary/cinematic genres may be used in order to describe the content genre of the video game. The literary/cinematic genres will not be pursued any further since these genres are dealt with in literature and cinema and not necessarily used in all kind of video game. Some video games, like Tetris, are abstract games with minimal or no literary or cinematic content, and consequently are poorly described within the literary/cinematic framework. Furthermore, even though some video games may be described as one literary/cinematic genre, they may in a game perspective vary from role-playing or adventure to strategy or even arcade action. Hence a science fiction video game could be developed for almost any kind of video game genre.

The first video game was a strategy game named Nim for the Nimrod computer, created back in 1951. In 1958, Tennis for Two an action sports game was created by William Higinbotham. Sometimes Spacewar! from 1961 has been named the first video game, and even though it isn't, it is in fact the first action shooter. These games were later copied in the early 1970s for the arcades. The computer game Colossal Cave Adventure from 1976 introduced the adventure and role-playing game genre (Donovan, 2010).

MAIN FOCUS

As for video game genres, they have been compared to the classification of games made by Roger Caillois, defining four kinds of game types: agôn (competition),

alea (chance), ilinx (vertigo), and mimicry (simulation), thereby putting them into a class of game genres rather than literary/cinematic genres (Mortensen, 2009). While it is obvious that a lot of video games are based on competition and simulation, and computer gambling fits into the notion of games of chance, traditional video games rarely become a game of vertigo, moreover the game typology does not account for the differences between video game genres because e.g. shooters, strategy games, fighting games, and sport games all have competition in common, however they certainly differ in approach to the competitive element of the game.

To actually define video game genres as more than a game typology, it is important and necessary to take into account the historical development of video games and the video game industry as an economic discourse for selling and advertising video games. The historical development is closely related to two factors: an often simple remediation of traditional games like chess, sports, and gambling, and innovative remediation of cultural products originating from what is known as geek culture (King & Borland, 2003). Geek culture is a common label for the cultures surrounding science fiction and fantasy fandom, comic book fandom, and role-playing game fandom. That is not to say that the video game industry have not been innovative at all in producing whole new concepts but it is important to stress that these two factors have had and still have a considerable influence on the video game industry.

As regards to video games we should avoid using the term simulation as a genre because it is ambiguous as to what it means. A simulator may be seen as simulation, so may strategy war games, and even role-playing games, but each time used with a slightly different notion of what it means to simulate. Likewise, Roger Caillois used the term simulation as the game type mimicry, which again is another way to conceptualize simulation. More importantly, the fact that each of these games can be said to simulate something even though they are considered to be of different genres make the term simulation less useful as a way to distinguish between video game genres.

Strategy Games

The first kinds of video games were simple strategy games, and in many cases remediation of chess in which the computer functioned as the opponent, using artificial intelligence (Donovan, 2010). But to really understand the strategy game genre, one has to understand the history of war games that came before. Philip von Hilgers shows how German Kriegspiel (war game) came to play an important role for the German military commando, spread to other nations and had an enormous impact on the U. S. military during World War II (Hilgers, 2012).

In 1954 Charles S. Roberts established the first commercial board war-gaming company called The Avalon Game Company, only to be changed to Avalon Hill in 1958 (Roberts, 1983). Today, the brand name is owned by Hasbro. Over the years Avalon Hill launched many ingenious war games mostly based on historical battles but fictional combat scenarios as well, e.g. the science fiction board game Starship Troopers, based on the novel of the same name by Robert A. Heinlein, was launched in 1976, and the science fiction board game Dune likewise based on the novel by the same name by Frank Herbert came out in 1979. In 1981, Avalon Hill published the board game Civilization. There is controversy as to whether Sid Meier was directly inspired the Avalon Hill game when he created the video game Civilization in 1991, but even if he was inspired by other strategic board games, it shows the close relation between the development of paper board games and the computerized strategy games and how paper board games worked as inspiration for computerized strategy games (Edwards, 2007).

The first strategic video game was a Risk-like game called Invasion released in 1972 for the Magnavox Odyssey (McCourt, 2009), and in 1980 Strategic Simulations, Inc. (SSI) launched Computer Bismarck as the first historical computer war game. Civilization by Sid Meier is an example of a so-called 4X strategy game in which players are meant to explore, expand, exploit, and exterminate. Early strategy games were always turn-based, but with improved technology it became possible to design real-time strategy games (RTS) in which players didn't have to wait for their turn to come up but could handle decisions simultaneously, making the game livelier (Egenfeldt-Nielsen, Smith, & Tosca, 2013). Legionnaire developed by Chris Crawford, published by Avalon Hill in 1982, is one of the earliest examples of real-time strategy games. But it was Dune II (1992) by Westworld and Warcraft: Orcs & Humans (1994) by Blizzard that attained the renown of the RTS genre.

A sub-genre of strategy games are the god games in which the player controls an overall setting and takes the role of a divine or in some other way larger-than-life being. Populous (1989) by Peter Molyneux

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