Chapter 2

Rethinking Genre in Computer Games:
How Narrative Psychology Connects Game and Story

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ABSTRACT

"Rethinking Genre in Computer Games" is an attempt to find a new way of categorising game genre. Instead of dividing gameplay and game story as two separate entities, and regarding them by different genre standards, what if there were a way of distinguishing shared psychological qualities of a game's narrative and gameplay components? If the gameplay and the game narrative can be seen to conform to the same psychological underpinnings (as in the same cognitive–emotional responses), then such a common denominator may open up this particular area of game studies to a new perspective on game genre. By analysing two games as case studies, the intention is to provide a widely applicable theoretical model for game analysis, with suggestions provided on possible future directions. The proposed model should challenge preexisting ideas on genre organisation and emphasise the value of employing psychology to better understand computer games.

INTRODUCTION

When it comes to computer game genre classifications, we are still forced to navigate a terminology jungle, having to simultaneously consider the game platform, the narrative, the game world milieu and, last but not least, the mode of gameplay. With multiple terms in each of these subcategories the norm, the plethora of descriptive words makes the

taxonomy all but impenetrable. And yet a clear taxonomy system is important in order to make further progress in game studies, as well as enabling the new denizens of the gaming workforce—the "non-techie" screenwriters—access to the theoretical underpinnings of writing for games.

By way of making sense of the genre profusion and rendering it wieldy, it is prudent to first address one of the sources of this current genre state—the gameplay–story schism. While this debate has already begun losing steam in recent years with

the opposing camps more willing to bridge the theoretical gap, it nonetheless epitomises the fundamental split in the conception of a computer game. Is a game primarily about gameplay or story? Regardless of how one answers this question, it is beyond doubt that our understanding of game genre hinges on this problematic issue, which is why the most salient aspects of the gameplay–story debate will be discussed here, although without delving into an unnecessarily detailed charting of all the different views.

The aim of this chapter is to put forward a theory for genre classification that unites gameplay and story by applying narrative psychology and cognitive behavioural psychology to the gaming experience. The crucial question explored here concerns the psychological appeal and motivation in gaming—if the psychological impact of the narrative mirrors the psychological impact of the ludic aspect, then this could be a potential new model for a more integrated gaming genre system. Following on from the school of thought that stories have long served our psychological needs, narrative psychology allows us to probe the potentially psychotherapeutic role of gaming narratives. Concomitant with this exploration, cognitive behavioural psychology provides revealing insights vis-à-vis the gameplay, or rather the gamer's behavioural patterns. By bringing these two strains of psychology together in the analysis of games, we may be able to marry the narrative and gameplay aspects more cohesively as well as finding a new way of classifying game genre.

In addressing this question, I will refer to Bruno Bettelheim and Clarissa Pinkola Estés' analyses of myths, folk tales, and fairy tales as guidelines to dealing with stages of psychological development. I will also delve into the writings of narrative psychologists Paul Ricœur and Jerome Bruner. George Kelly's cognitive behavioural model of fixed-role therapy will complete the psychological theoretical framework of this chapter.

To support the proposed ideas, two games will be used as case studies to demonstrate the validity of the new theoretical model: *Bully* (Rockstar, 2006) and *American McGee's Alice* (Rogue Entertainment, 2000). Apart from the fact that both games feature strong narratives, there are two reasons for selecting these particular games. Firstly, both share a similar narrative and gameplay type: within the wider coming-of-age narrative context, the games foster a gameplay attitude that I have termed as "rebel." By exploring and comparing the story and gameplay through the psychological theories mentioned above, I endeavour to see whether the rebel category holds up as an actual genre tag. Choosing two rather than one game of a specific type is intended to show whether the methods and terms can be applied more widely. Additionally, *American McGee's Alice* provides a female point of view, thus presenting an interesting variation. The second reason relates to *Bully* rather than *Alice* and has to do with the media furore the game sparked because of its controversial subject matter of bullying. While the case study will neither defend nor denigrate the game based on its treatment of bullying or violence, the topic of bullying, especially when presented in a relatively realistic environment (as opposed to a more fictionally removed fantasy landscape) offers intriguing and rich material for psychological study. It has to be also noted that while these games do not qualify as serious games, what emerges as a potential developmental and psychological tool from the analysis of these games places them within the nonentertainment clause of serious gaming.

Following the analytical appraisals of the two games, I will conclude by suggesting ways of applying the new genre theoretical model to other game categories, with a view of ushering in a more creative way of thinking about game classification. The emotional–cognitive ideas explored in the chapter will challenge the assumptions that certain dramatic forms are not suited to gaming (i.e., tragedy).

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