

The Rhetoric of Serious Game Genres: Issues for Analysis and Design

Lee Sherlock

A number of frameworks based on the idea of serious game *genres* or *categories* have been developed to understand the range of purposes and actions that serious games engage with. For instance, Bergeron (2006) presents a set of “primary categories” associated with serious games that includes “games with an agenda; news games; political games; realistic games; and core competency games” (p. 26). While such frameworks attempt to describe the relationship between particular games and their “real-world” purposes, I argue that these genre definitions obscure both the co-construction and negotiation of meaning through the process of play and the “procedural rhetoric” (Bogost, 2007) involved in digital gameplay. For Bogost, procedural rhetoric is “the art of persuasion through rule-based representations and interactions rather than the spoken word, writing, images, or moving pictures” (p. ix).

In many serious game genre frameworks, an interpretation of the game designers’ intentionality becomes the point of emphasis, rather than a set of meanings or values generated through interactive gameplay. In other words, the treatment of serious game genres across various contexts, including in scholarly or industry-oriented work and in popular online collaborative writing environments such as Wikipedia, often reduces serious game genres to prescriptive labels of purpose, which essentialize a domain or activity that the game participates in. As a result, intended or predicted purposes do become established with genre labels, but they tend to foreground the designers’ situating of the game rather than emergent ideas of social action based on gameplay. The lack of attention to procedural rhetorics and forms of interaction in relation to genre has also been commented on by Apperley (2006), who frames the problem in the context of video game genres more broadly. As Apperley argues, “the primary problem with

conventional video games genres is that rather than being a general description of the style of ergodic interaction that takes place within the game, it is instead loose aesthetic clusters based around video games' aesthetic linkages to prior media forms" (p. 7). Although Apperley's critique takes as its motivation an overreliance on notions of aesthetics and remediation, which is not necessarily my central focus, I argue in a similar line that serious game genre frameworks have essentialized notions of genre in ways that do not adequately account for the "ergodic interaction" and procedural rhetorics that players engage with when they play a serious game.

In response to this problem, I interrogate the status of serious game genres, evaluate the criteria used in constructing those genres, and consider the various "possibility spaces" (Sawyer & Smith, 2008) that players, designers, educators, and other groups might employ to articulate how serious games are experienced across a variety of purposes, disciplines, and contexts. The primary work informing this analysis is drawn from rhetorical genre studies, including work on genre and play theory (Christensen, Cootey, & Moeller, 2007) and genre ecologies (Spinuzzi & Zachry, 2000; Spinuzzi, 2003). Based on these foundations, I present a mode of serious game genre analysis that moves across levels of scope: first, I draw upon the work of Bogost (2007) in articulating the procedural rhetorics of gameplay, which helps identify the typified forms of interaction making up the kinds of persuasion and learning that players engage with in the process of gameplay. Spinuzzi (2003) reviews three levels of scope that have emerged across rhetorical genre studies: macroscopic (associated with activity), mesoscopic (associated with action), and microscopic (associated with operation) (p. 45). A productive way of unpacking the latter two levels of scope is to examine the ergodic interaction and procedural rhetorics of gameplay.

To fully address the macroscopic level of scope, though, I advocate a second analytical step: moving beyond in-game interactions to situate the game within a larger genre ecology. The framing of a broader genre ecology for a single game is, necessarily, a rhetorically contingent exercise. However, some possible genres and relationships this might involve include: a consideration of the game in relation to the rhetorical construction of the website(s) it is officially or unofficially hosted on, a reading of the game as situated within a history of related media production (e.g., understanding Molleindustria's *The McDonald's Video Game* as existing within an ecology of documentary film and nonfiction writing on the subjects of fast food corporate economics and environmental practices), an examination of FAQs or walkthroughs related to the game, blogging done by designers, players, or institutions in response to the game, and so on. This practice of constructing a genre ecology becomes especially critical if we are to meaningfully account for and represent games such as *Darfur is Dying*, which utilizes game mechanics to link the player with genres *outside* the game as a form of social action, thus explicitly connecting the levels of mesoscopic action and macroscopic activity.

As part of this genre analysis, new connections between rhetorical genre studies and serious game design and play issues emerge. One implication is that we can develop new models for understanding how gameplay extends outside the game itself to include other digital texts, forms of learning, and modes of social action. Returning to the example of *Darfur is Dying*, the player is linked to several rhetorical exigencies for “taking action” in response to the Darfur crisis as a regular gameplay mechanic. Thus, persuasion in the game is tied to concrete avenues of social engagement and encourages a genre ecology that moves the player into a larger network of interactions beyond the game artifact. To label *Darfur is Dying* a “political” game or an

“activism” game along with any number of games with similar thematic or representational content, then, elides the procedural and rhetorical processes of persuasion that constitute player participation and “real-world” social engagement.

As this example illustrates, interrogating serious game genres with a critical lens has implications not just for the marketing and presentation of serious games in popular discourse, but also for the critical analysis of serious games. This presentation will also consider the game design implications that can be drawn out of genre-based critique. For instance, in Spinuzzi and Zachry’s (2000) discussion of genre ecologies, the authors present the heuristic tools of “genre ecology diagrams” and “organic engineering” (p. 176). Originally developed in the context of computer documentation, these tools could also be productively applied to serious game design processes such as prototyping, playtesting, and user interface design. Interrogating serious game genres at these different levels of scope holds the potential to identify how game-based procedural rhetorics not only involve interactions with social values but also engage dialectically with the social values embedded in discourse surrounding the game. Thus, the genre analysis proposed here might align productively with projects such as Values at Play, a research, design, and teaching collective that sets out to “assist and encourage designers in creating games that further the understanding and appreciation of such values as equality, diversity, creativity, and many more” (“Values at Play”). In drawing out these implications, the underlying argument is that the construction of serious game genres needs to be examined not only as a set of critical or analytical terms, but as a particular orientation or mode of thinking that is necessarily linked to particular design affordances and constraints.

References

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