

Defining game genres: The perspective of cultural sociology

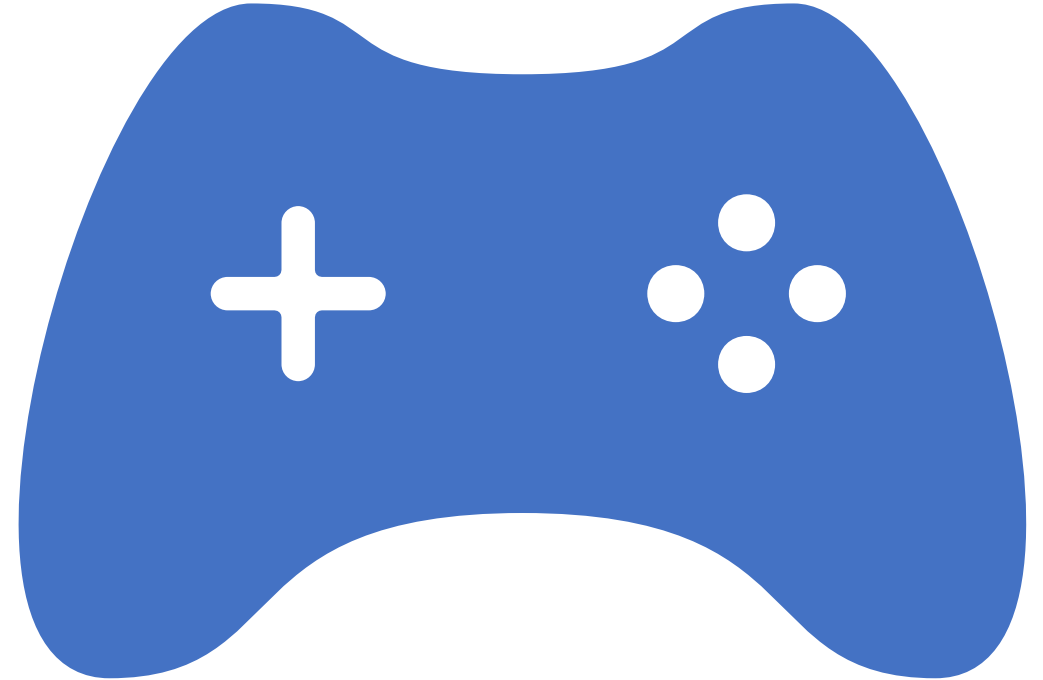
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Focusing on the abstract

Definition of a genre	Definition of genre
What is MMO? What is cRPG? What is RTS?	What is genre itself?
Concrete component of genre definitions	Abstract component of genre definitions

The abstract component is often hidden
in definitions of particular genres.



Structural definitions of genre

By far the most frequent in game studies, e.g.:

- Wolf, *Genre and the Video Game*, 2002.
- Apperley, *Genre and Game Studies...*, 2006.
- Clarke, Lee, Clark, *Why Video Game Genres Fail...*, 2017.
- Vargas-Iglesias, *Making Sense of Genre...*, 2018.
- Simonson, *The Need for Recategorized Video Game Labels...*, 2023.

Based on how the researcher sees games (= artifacts).

They describe genres as structures.

Structures of what?

1. Games or game elements.
2. Players' actions.
3. Players' experiences.

Structural definitions in research

Pros and cons

- They are the most **intuitive** and have been studied the most.
 - They tie up well with **formal and procedural** analyses.
 - They can result in **highly original insights**.
-
- They depend on the researcher's **subjectivity**.
 - They **downplay the social** meanings of games, the role of genre discourses, the history of these discourses, etc.



Discursive definitions of genre

Not easy to find in game studies.

You might also call them constructionist.

Based on a study of how other people see games.

“[Genre] is not a set of texts, but rather a way of using texts and of drawing relationships among them” (John Rieder, *Science Fiction and the Mass Cultural Genre System*, 2017, p. 21).

Example:

John Rieder's analysis of the
reception of Mary Wollstonecraft
Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1818)



Photo (cropped) of Boris Karloff
in *Bride of Frankenstein* (1935),
source: [Wikimedia Commons](#), public domain

Discursive definitions in research

Pros and cons

- They are useful in (wait for it) **discourse analysis**.
 - They help us focus on **how people see games**.
 - They highlight **the context** (time; place; players' class, ethnicity, and gender; etc.)
-
- They are **counterintuitive**. If genre is only a discursive phenomenon, then **games do not belong** to game genres. Which is... strange?
 - **Moving away from games** themselves may feel like leaving something important behind.

Another way
Cultural Sociology





Florian Znaniecki

The humanistic coefficient

Photo by Stolski, source: [National Digital Archive](#) & [Wikimedia Commons](#),
public domain, first published in 1931 in *Ilustrowany Kurier Codzienny*

cultural phenomena, as the scientific humanist takes them, are essentially “somebody’s” phenomena. They are objects as given to the experience of individuals

We use the term “humanistic coefficient” to indicate the fundamental character of cultural phenomena described above, the essential feature that, when taken as objects of theoretic reflection, they are already data given to somebody in the course of his experience, or activities performed by some conscious subject as viewed by himself or by others.

Without the humanistic coefficient the myth would not exist at all; the painting would be a chaos of colored spots upon a piece of canvas; the word, a meaningless sound; the legal scheme, a collection of sounds or black spots upon paper; the instrument, a mere piece of iron; the social organization, a complexity of incoherent movements of living organisms.



Towards a sociocultural approach to genre

Every genre is “somebody’s” phenomenon.



Wendy Griswold

The cultural object



A cultural object may be defined as shared significance embodied in form (Griswold 1986). In other words, it is a socially meaningful expression that is audible, visible, or tangible or that can be articulated. A cultural object, moreover, tells a story, and that story may be sung, told, set in stone, enacted, or painted on the body. Examples range widely.

A religious doctrine, a YouTube video, a belief that women are more sensitive than men, a Shakespearean sonnet, a hairstyle such as Rastafarian dreadlocks or the Manchu queue, a habit of saying “God bless you” when somebody sneezes, or a quilt made by hand or by robots—any and all of these can be cultural objects. Each tells a story. Notice that the status of the cultural object results from an analytic decision that we make as observers; it is not built into the object itself.



Towards a sociocultural approach to genre

Every genre is “somebody’s” phenomenon.

Every genre is shared significance embodied in form.

In every study, we construct “genre” as an object of analysis.



Pierre Bourdieu

The struggles
over classification

Painted portrait of Pierre Bourdieu (cropped), source: Thierry Ehrmann's [Flickr.com](https://www.flickr.com/photos/thierry_ehrmann/) profile, CC BY 2.0, taken on November 13, 2013

The social sciences deal with pre-named, pre-classified realities which bear proper nouns and common nouns, titles, signs and acronyms. At the risk of unwittingly assuming responsibility for the acts of constitution of whose logic and necessity they are unaware, the social sciences must take as their object of study the social operations of *naming* and the rites of institution through which they are accomplished.

dominant discourse is performed. This discourse is a structured and structuring medium tending to impose an apprehension of the established order as natural (orthodoxy) through the disguised (and thus misrecognized) imposition of systems of classification and of mental structures that are objectively adjusted to social structures.



Towards a sociocultural approach to genre

Every genre is “somebody’s” phenomenon.

Every genre is shared significance embodied in form.

In every study, we construct “genre” as an object of analysis.

We should study the social operations of naming through which genre names are imposed as natural.



Sociocultural definitions of genre

Sociocultural definitions of genre

- Absent in game studies (to my knowledge).
- They take the middle ground:
 - Between structural and discursive definitions.
 - Between games and game discourses.
 - Between the cultural and the social.

Sociocultural definitions of genre

One possible definition:

Genre is a set of games classified together by a social group (or groups).

Where do you look for acts of classification?

1. Labelling of game boxes.
2. Choice of words for promotional descriptions on the Internet.
3. Vision presented by game developers in media interviews.
4. Genre names used in Wikipedia entries.
5. Tags assigned by Steam users.
6. ...

Sociocultural definitions of genre

- Every genre is **somebody's genre**.
As social classifications change, so do genres.
- A game can **become part of a genre** it did not represent before.
- A game can **stop belonging to a genre** it did represent.
- Also, the same game may be part of a given genre – or several genres – **to some people and not to others**.
- If genre is a set of games grouped together, then there is **no first game** in any genre.
(If anything, there is just **the first act of classification**.)

Sociocultural definitions in research

Pros and cons

- They are **comprehensive**, including both games themselves and the ways games are marketed or discussed.
 - They can help us conceptualize genres differently in **some future studies**.
-
- When you want to be so comprehensive, it is easy to become **lost in the data** or to make the analysis **superficial**.
 - So you may need to **be very selective** or have a lot of **previous studies** at hand.
 - **What social group(s)** do you want to include?

One way
to conduct
a sociocultural
study

- 1. Pick a contemporary genre label**
(e.g., adventure games).
- 2. Examine the current uses of this label**
(in printed magazines, on message boards, etc.).
- 3. Study the past uses** of this and similar labels.
- 4. Move back with the genre discourses**
until you can no longer see a discursive continuity.
- Insofar as possible, track the discourses
in different groups, media, and geographical locations.
- 6. Play the games or get to know them in other ways.**
How are your perceptions of the games similar to the perceptions you study? How are they different? Why?
- 7. Find out about the context** of games and discourses
(political and economic pressures, similar themes in various media, and so on).

Carl Therrien

Carl Therrien is professor in games & film studies at Université de Montréal. He co-directs research in the context of the LUDOV group (www.ludov.ca). He is the author of the platform studies book *The Media Snatcher* (MIT Press, 2019). He co-founded the History of games international conference series. His PhD thesis explored the notion of immersion across different media, more specifically cinema and video games. He recently completed the first phase of an ongoing research project on the history of video games, and has

Inspecting Video Game Historiography Through Critical Lens: Etymology of the First-Person Shooter Genre

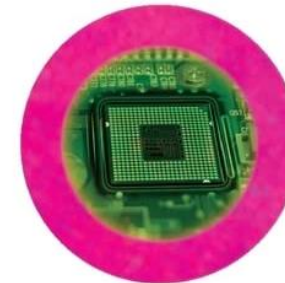
by Carl Therrien

Abstract

Documenting, understanding and transcoding the history of games into narrative form is a daunting task. Confronted with such an enormous quantity of traces, historians are naturally inclined to rely on testimonies and subjective accounts for some aspects of their narrative. As Paul Ricoeur pointed out, voluntary witnesses must be confronted with involuntary witnesses -- all the other traces -- in order to properly document, explain and format history into a proper narrative. In this paper, the first-person shooter genre and its integration in journalistic and academic accounts are inspected through a rigorous etymological study. The genre has been associated with a major cultural shift that corresponds with the release of popular titles from id Software at the beginning of the 1990s. Through an in-depth inspection of the available documents, this paper highlights the problematic cultural biases that permeate historical accounts, and demonstrates that engaging the complexity of the medium's history can lead to strikingly different stories.

The Routledge Concise History of

SCIENCE FICTION



Mark Bould and Sherryl Vint

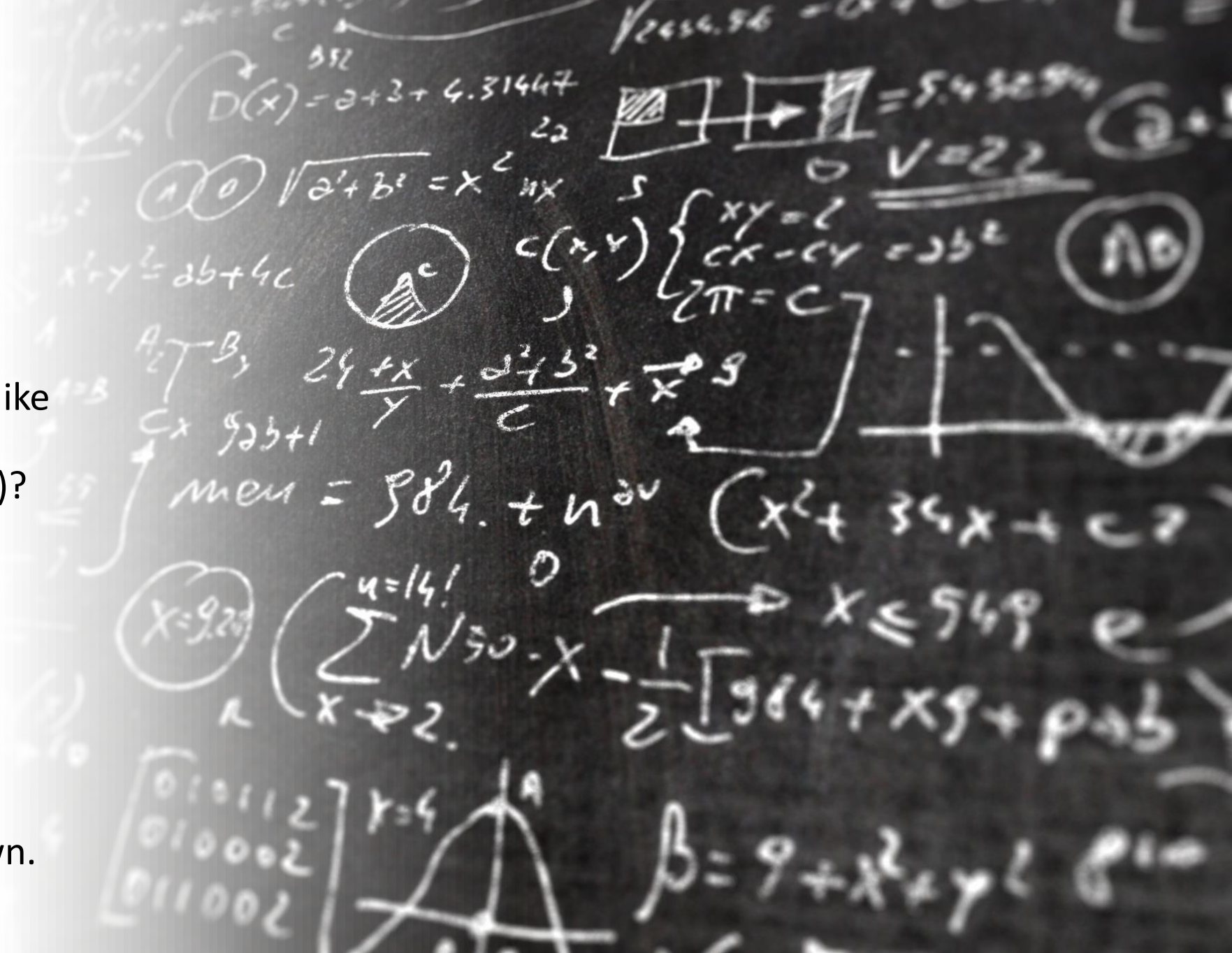


Final thoughts



What I still need to do

- Have I missed any reviews like Clearwater's *What Defines Video Game Genre...* (2011)?
- Refer explicitly to genre theory, literary studies, film studies, etc.
- Locate more examples of game-oriented studies.
- Possibly conduct a small historical analysis of my own.



Definitional approach	How frequent?	Whose point of view?	Genres are made of...
Structural	Very frequent	Researcher's	...games (and maybe players' actions or experiences)
Discursive	Hardly used	Other people's (reconstructed)	...discourses
Sociocultural	Absent	Researcher's and other people's	...games and discourses

Definitional Approach

Advantages

Limitations

Structural

(Genre is a structure of games, elements, actions, experiences...)

1. The most intuitive and studied
2. Useful in formal and procedural analyses
3. Can result in highly original genre insights

1. Can be very subjective.
2. Can downplay the social context of games (e.g., genre discourses)

Discursive

(Genre is the way we talk about games)

1. Useful in discourse analysis
2. Focuses on how people see games
3. Highlights the context (time, place, class, gender, etc.)

1. Counterintuitive
2. Leaves games behind

Sociocultural

(Genre is a set of games classified together by a social group or groups)

1. Comprehensive: includes games and contexts
2. Can provide new conceptualizations for some future studies

1. Risks getting lost in the data or making the analysis superficial
2. You may need to be very selective or have many previous studies
3. What group(s) to include?