On Genre and the Ludic Device

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I've been wondering for some time now what a platform does for a videogame that's different from what, say, parataxis, does for verse. I don't mean this in the sense of a direct analogue; one refers to a kind of virtual architecture with an implied ludic, "mechanical" component and the other is a kind of grammatical structure referring to short, staggered lines of text. They have, at best, a metaphoric relationship to each other. But in a functional sense, they're describing similar kinds of properties: specific formal traits which are, more often than not, deliberately applied to the work in order to evoke specific feelings, sensibilities or ideas. They are, in other words, devices.

We don't usually call these formal traits "devices" when we're referring to games, unless they happen to be thematic or aesthetic and can therefore be semi-consciously drawn from another artistic discourse: cinematographic techniques, for example, may qualify, or even the aforementioned "metaphor." Instead, we may refer to these things as "tropes" or "conventions", or at their most coldly academic, "mechanics." But there's something unsatisfying in all of these terms. In the former case, "trope" or "convention" suggests a kind of overuse, a certain degree of creative laziness. In the latter, the problem is ambiguity.

On the other hand, the word “platformer” is meant to imply a whole genre of games. That is to say, virtual objects in which movement across platforms are a necessary part of navigating the space. Ostensibly, it’s supposed to have the same kind of meaning for videogames that “romance” has for novels and “jazz” has for music.

Genres can be named after a number of things—movements, philosophies, epochs—but generally they’re categories which embody a collection of specific conventions in order to address a set of preoccupations. Often, they’re confounded with “style”, but the two are distinct—two writers of the same genre, like science fiction for instance, may approach speculation about the future with vastly different styles, expressing massively different (even diametrically oppositional) insights. Genres are like philosophical models in that they give us the tools to set about tackling a certain discussion, but that doesn’t mean a singular, “correct” conclusion must follow.

It is true that these discursive models get very muddled very quickly. Take music or literature, for instance: genre labels are at once so atomized that they’re scarcely meaningful or helpful, and it’s very tempting to want to throw out the practice of genre labeling altogether. Furthermore, pieces of media from specific genres break or deviate from expected conventions all the time, or blend them to the point of arguably creating something new entirely. These hybrids are common across art forms, so why am I worried about how we use them in games?

One of the big issues for games is that we lack a vocabulary with clear and serviceable meanings at the outset. Specifically, I think our problem comes from a tendency to base genres around surface ludic and/or aesthetic characteristics, and treat those characteristics as if they are *definitive* of whole genres and their histories rather than *indicative* of distinct tools and techniques—for our purposes, “devices”—which may span different genres and which may be selected by a game-maker for a whole host of reasons. In other words, we’re basing our idea of “genre” in games—outside of popular pulp genres from film and literature—on “mechanics”, a concept which is loosely defined at the best of times.

Probably the easiest go-to for a functional definition of “mechanics” is the oft-referenced and revered paper by Robin Hunicke, Marc LeBlanc and Robert Zubeck, *MDA: A Formal Approach to Game Design and Game Research*. The paper describes “mechanics” like this:

> “Mechanics are the various actions, behaviors and control mechanisms afforded to the player within a game context. Together with the game’s content (levels, assets and so on) the mechanics support overall gameplay dynamics.”

“Dynamics” refer to the relationship that emerges from the player acting on the mechanics and vice versa: for instance, tactics and strategies players develop out of the various tools a game may offer them. “Aesthetics”—and I find this one rather confusing, especially as it contrasts with “content”—is meant to refer to emotional response.

I don’t think it would be wise to allot significant space to disentangling some of the

assumptions in the paper, where it works and does not, and all the myriad ways it gets treated like part of an official canon in game design discourse. But I would like to point out, first of all, that "aesthetic" here is being used in the stead of what would otherwise be called "sensibility" or "affect", and that appears to only be the case for the sake of legitimizing the use of "content" to refer to things like "assets"—which is often used doubly as marketing material. I bring this up because while I think MDA is basically workable and can be helpful as a mental model for how information in a game is crafted and received, some of its definitions complicate its standing as a high watermark for clarity in design language. Further, while the model and order of "MDA" can help simplify a chain of events, it also implies a hierarchy where these divisions of formal properties are listed in order of importance. The "mechanics" are the foundation of a game, "supporting overall gameplay dynamics", and therefore the most essential link in the chain. It may not have been the intent of the piece, but it's easy to see how it may reinforce the kind of formalist thinking which pretends that there is a true, ideal essence of the form, or that a game's qualities may be easily compartmentalized according to utility.

What we can hold onto, however, is that "mechanics" refer to "actions, behaviors and control mechanisms" which the game system hands over to the player in order for them to navigate it. Josh Trevett, in his review of *MirrorMoon EP* and *English Country Tune* for Arcade Review, Issue 5, more thoroughly articulates a concept of "mechanics":

> "[…] Mechanics are those things which give a player's actions ludic context. They're the moving parts of each world, some of which are under the player's control. They signal and modify the player's position relative to the goal. In *MirrorMoon* and in most puzzle games, the player must correctly make use of the mechanics in order to "solve" the puzzle. If they don't use the mechanics, they're guessing. Going by this definition of the word, mechanics are what puzzles are made out of."

If mechanics are those things which "give player's actions ludic context"—for instance, the act of platforming to reach various stages of a game, or solving a puzzle in order to unlock a story element, or even just a limitation on walk speed to signify injury—we may therefore be able to understand "mechanics" another way, as **ludic devices**. If that's the case, then maybe we can accept ludic devices as being no more inherently important than rhetorical devices, narrative devices, poetic devices, and so on. If this is so, then any given game may be comprised of numerous different devices acting in concert to influence an experience, and it may be the case that ludic, aural, visual and narrative devices are fundamentally unified to promote specific ideas or affects. If this is true, then it follows that genre-labeling based around individual mechanics is an arbitrary and inconsistent limitation, and a recipe for the kind of vague genre-label soup many contemporary games find themselves submerged in.

On the other hand, this habit of devices-as-genres can create a situation where, exactly to avoid that kind of obliteration of meaning, we can become so protective of a genre definition that our thinking devolves into a kind of puritanism. The genre label becomes

so fixed to one particular formal, usually ludic, posture that any deviation is interpreted as unorthodox and therefore invalid.

Take, for instance, the roguelike, a genre which is not just based around a device, but around an individual game—*Rogue*. The term has often revealed a certain prescriptivism in its proponents: whenever a new game is released in the same formal tradition as *Rogue*, it's scrutinized as to whether or not it meets the criteria to truly be called a "roguelike", to the point of splitting hairs. In her piece, *Never Say Roguelike,* Tanya Short writes,

> "Stop to think – how do we describe those games where you jump around on platforms, often die from falling on pits, and sometimes you kill enemies by jumping on them? It's not a "Mario-like". It's a "platformer."
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> Why?
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> The short answer: Platformer is more accurate, easier to understand/remember for people who have perhaps never played a Mario game, and doesn't imply a thematic genre.
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> Imagine an alternate universe in which all "jumper games" felt obligated to include plumbers and mushrooms as thematic elements. Loosening the label up into "Mario-likelike" or "Mario-lite" might make it less limiting, but actually more vague and potentially confusing."

Short, although speaking to her audience in terms of games and their terminology as essentially products and their features, raises the argument that naming genres after legacy games actually creates a situation that's more misleading and confusing about what those games do than if we based our lexicon on some distinctive qualities shared by all these games together. She notes that, since we can only describe these games by referring to other "-like" games, the discussion quickly becomes recursive, abstruse, and even more ambiguous. While this method of naming explicitly retains a history, it's done in a way that's so non-descriptive and navel-gazing as to be actively alienating to anyone who isn't part of the club.

Short offers some alternative terms which we can use to qualify "roguelike" games which are more precise, like "mystery" and "improvisation." What's worth noting, however, is that she provides six different alternative terms, all of them different, and all of them implying different overall devices or sets of devices. Mystery, for a start, has a long enough history in narrative media, and so a narrative arc structure, and devices like foreshadowing, suspense and irony are formal mainstays of the genre. What we're left with isn't a single new definition, but an array of adjectival terms from which to draw.

So what do we do with a term like "platforming"? Where "roguelike" is clearly too vague, "platformer", which is centered on a single ludic device, can be so atomically specific that it stops adequately describing all games which contain platforms over which the player jumps.

One thing we can do is accept subgenre labeling, which can remain ludic or bring in labels from elsewhere. We already do this with aforementioned genres like “adventure”, “horror” and “sci-fi”, but we could be including less action-oriented terms like “romance” or “melodrama” in our vocabulary. *Dragon Age*, for instance, is at once an RPG, fantasy epic and romance game, arguably among other things. But of course subgenre labeling —as we’ve seen in music, in games and elsewhere—can become as vague and insular as other approaches.

Genres are at once general and specific, so finding a balance that makes any amount of sense is an exercise in exhaustion. But if clarity is the goal, I think descriptiveness is the key. It runs counter to the predominant logic of organizing works of art by type, (which is convenient for sale and consumption purposes but perhaps not always the greatest for critical purposes), but it might be in our interest when we talk about games to worry less about how they fit into one genre or another and more about how the mechanisms inside them are communicating things.

This isn’t to say we never discuss how a game, or other work of art, may be engaging with a genre’s history and traditions. We would be remiss as critics to ignore that. In fact, a kind of genre labeling for games which is less dependent on commercial or utilitarian expectation and more aware of history or aesthetic philosophy may be a useful way to approach the issue. But I also think we can engage with a game much more effectively by thinking less in terms of, say “platformer” or “first-person shooter” or “sandbox game” as hard categories, and more in terms of things like “platform”, “jumping”, “camera”, “shooting” and “sandbox exploration” as ludic devices which can be put to use the way “metaphor” or “characterization” can. These are things which are deliberately put in our games to push us toward thoughts and feelings, and I think we do games and ourselves a disservice thinking of them as little more than lazy conventions—tropes which are only present because, according to the label, they have to be, and anything else would be false advertising.