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## Different levels of game genre. A Review.

The problem of genre is probably as ancient as literature itself; anyone who takes up this topic not only has to face the tradition of genre studies but also has to justify the validity of applying narrative fiction concepts to game studies. Therefore, Maria B. Garda's book *Interaktywne fantasy. Gatunek w grach cyfrowych (Interactive fantasy. Genre in digital games)*<sup>1</sup> was a daring endeavour from its inception. Yet, after reading through the first chapter one abandons initial doubts regarding Garda's thesis.

Genre been thoroughly examined not only in many academic disciplines dealing with different media, but also in popular discourse. Labels such as fantasy, gothic, thriller, or romance are used by researchers and connoisseurs of different media, and by novice amateurs, children, and unsavoury fans that are just learning to recognize and understand the vast landscape of different cultural artefacts. Marketing copywriters use genre tags to set expectations for their consumer base; media producers employ genre effects, using them as a recognizable means of communication. Garda argues that game culture in many ways replicates the Hollywood film complex, in which "genres are by definition not just scientifically derived or theoretically constructed categories but are always industrially certified and publicly shared".<sup>2</sup> Yet the fact that these collections of conventions and effects are constantly used and transformed makes it almost impossible to create an ultimate definition of any genre. Furthermore, living in a world where different types of text converge, exchange, and leave their native platform—a postmedia landscape<sup>3</sup>—the quest for the academic definition of genre is so much more difficult. Therefore the author of the reviewed book writes, "That is why the goal of my work is not to define the concept of [game - M.P.] genre, but rather to examine the role of genre distribution of digital games in relation to similar

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<sup>1</sup> Maria Garda, *Interaktywne Fantasy. Gatunek w grach cyfrowych*, (Łódź: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Łódzkiego) (2016).

<sup>2</sup> Rick Altman, *Film/genre*, (London: British Film Institute) (2000), p. 16.

<sup>3</sup> Piotr Celiński, *Postmedia. Cyfrowy kod i bazy danych*, (Lublin: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Marii Curie-Skłodowskiej) (2013).

divisions in film and literature”<sup>4</sup>. Inspired by the concept of genre layers<sup>5</sup>, *Interactive Fantasy* introduces the original concept of merger models and analyzes an example of a well-established one: hardcore fantasy RPG.

## Genre layers

Genre layers assign games to specific genres on different levels. In *Interactive Fantasy*... three such layers are presented: thematic, ludic, and functional. “*Thematic genres* relate to categories of semantic systems and are defined primarily on the basis of the representation”<sup>6</sup>. These genres are easily identified throughout any medium that uses any kind of narrative or figurative imagery. Fantasy, horror or western are examples of thematic genres; they are transmedial and mostly originate from creations preceding videogames, thus frequently the tools for their analysis are derived from literature and film studies. The second layer is the *ludic genres* that are defined by the rules, mechanics, and conventions of gameplay. A point-of-view perspective paired with a three-dimensional environment and shooting-based gameplay will result in an FPS (first-person shooter) game, for example, the *Doom* series (id Software, 1993–2016), while continuous time plus a commander’s perspective and a gameplay based on economy and military conflict will be an RTS (real-time strategy game) such as the *StarCraft* series (Blizzard Entertainment, 1998–2017). The Ludic genre is also transmedial, as there are card games (*Gwent* (CD Projekt RED, in public beta from 2017) and poker), roleplaying games (*Warhammer Fantasy Roleplay* (Games Workshop, 1986–2009) and *The Witcher* (CD Projekt Red, 2007–2015)) and wargames (*Panzer General* (Strategic Simulations, Inc., 1994) and *Warhammer 40,000* (Games Workshop, 1987–present)) created for different media; but at the same time there are platformers (*Super Mario Bros* (Nintendo, 1985)), tile matching (*Candy Crush Saga* (King, 2012)) or dexterity games (*Twister* (Milton Bradley Company, 1966)) that could not have been transferred to any other platform than the original one. The third layer presented by Garda is the *functional genres* defined by the context of reception and the modes of participation. The author introduces two independent divisions of games within functional genres. The first relates to the declared goal of the product; whether it is an entertainment game or whether it has another purpose besides fun; the latter is the case of serious games, which can be further divided into educational games, advertisement games or persuasive games. The second division is based on the designed cognitive effort that the game requires from the player, resulting in either

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<sup>4</sup> Maria Garda, p. 22.

<sup>5</sup> Gerald Voorhees, Josh Call, Katie Whitlock, *Dungeons, Dragons, and Digital Denizens: The Digital Role-Playing Game* (New York: Continuum) (2012).

<sup>6</sup> Maria Garda, p. 25.

hardcore or casual games, as defined by Paweł Grabarczyk<sup>7</sup>. This is probably the most interesting and the least recognized genre layer, because although much is written in academia about serious games, there is little reflection on casual or hardcore games as genres.

## Genre effects

Within each of the described genre layers, the games are divided by a different set of distinguishable features: narrative, gameplay, and social context. Yet, even within the categories the differentiators for each genre label are not of the same nature. FPSs are defined by environment whereas RTSs (real-time strategies) are defined by usage of time. Therefore, as Garda states, the role of the genre is less that of classification, but rather that of interpretation. To analyse this situation, she uses *genre effects* borrowed from Dominic Arsenault:

Playing a game is experiencing a constant flux of (genre, series or intertextual) markers, that depending on the individual spectator and his competences, can produce the genres effects that precise their expectations and prepare their favourable disposition for the upcoming semiotic sequence.<sup>8</sup>

A genre marker can be one of many differentiators for a single genre, like progression of character statistics in role-playing games, but a marker can also be used in several games of different genres, such as the multiple endings marker. Under this tag on the *Steam* platform there are listed such different games as triple AAA role-playing game *The Witcher 2: Assassins of the Kings* (CD Projekt Red, 2014), indie narrative adventure game *The Stanley Parable* (Galactic Cafe, 2013), or a visual novel *Cinders* (MoaCube, 2012). Genres arise, mix, and evolve so the gaming community and industry use not only names such as cRPG or FPS, but also tags, which Garda refers to as *genre labels*, which can either signify a whole genre, e.g. FPS, or also relate to just one genre marker, e.g. multiple ending.

## Merger models

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<sup>7</sup> Paweł Grabarczyk, "O opozycji hardcore/casual", *Homo Ludens: Czasopismo Ludologiczne Polskiego Towarzystwa Badania Gier*. 1(7) (2015), pp. 89-109.

<sup>8</sup> Dominic Arsenault, *Des typologies mécaniques à l'expérience esthétique: fonctions et mutations du genre dans le jeu vidéo* (doctoral thesis) (2011), pp. 287-288.

[https://www.academia.edu/2999430/Des\\_typologies\\_m%C3%A9caniques\\_%C3%A0\\_l'exp%C3%A9rience\\_esth%C3%A9tique\\_fonctions\\_et\\_mutations\\_du\\_genre\\_dans\\_le\\_jeu\\_vid%C3%A9o](https://www.academia.edu/2999430/Des_typologies_m%C3%A9caniques_%C3%A0_l'exp%C3%A9rience_esth%C3%A9tique_fonctions_et_mutations_du_genre_dans_le_jeu_vid%C3%A9o) date accessed 11 November 2017.

Upon those theoretical foundations, Maria Garda presents her original idea: genre merger models<sup>9</sup>. She argues that specific genres from different layers attract each other and have been historically proven to be popular clusters. For example, the ludic genre of HOPA (hidden object puzzle adventure) is frequently combined with the detective story theme and a casual mode of engagement, resulting in a recognizable historically embedded trend. Merger models describe a specific convention popular at a given time, “those relations change historically, as today many genres that were in the past associated with a hardcore mode of engagement open up to more casual practices”<sup>10</sup>. We could ask about the popularity of the WWII hardcore FPS model of the early 2000s, and how this model has changed now in a time of a possible revival of the model with the premiere of *Call of Duty: WWII* (Sledgehammer Games, 2017). Garda emphasizes that the list of layers is not complete and can be expanded with labels beyond what the gaming community considers genres. Two interesting additions would be the hardware and nationality layers. A collection of specific local merger models that are highly popular in a particular country could shed light on the national style of game development, while analysis of merger models related to a specific console would tell the story and reveal the strategy of the owner company.

Merger models ought not to be limited to genres; while this framework can serve to interpret a specific genre and its evolution, in my opinion it is more of a tool for writing histories of games. What it should provide us with is an insightful multidimensional map of interconnected trends in game development and its transformations over time. As presented in *Interactive Fantasy*, the merger model concept can be used to holistically and thoroughly describe a group of games, such as hardcore fantasy RPG, or to analyse chosen aspects of single or multiple games, as Garda does in the last chapters of the book.

## The Exemplar Model

### Fantasy

The fantasy genre as it is applied in video games is most indebted to J.R.R. Tolkien, his successors, and followers. Yet Garda does not limit herself to this genre core and presents a brief history that led to the creation of Middle-earth. She describes the inspirations of early fantasy writers (mythopoeic narratives, romantic nostalgia for the pre-industrial world and the English Fairyland) as the roots that set the genre’s standards for the following decades. Following the arguments from Tomasz

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<sup>9</sup> Maria Garda, “‘Limits of Genre, Limits of Fantasy’: Rethinking Computer Role-Playing Games”, in *Cultural Perspectives of Video Games: From Designer to Player*, ed. Adam L. Brackin and Natacha Guyot (Oxford: Inter Disciplinary Press, 2012).

<sup>10</sup> Maria Garda, (2016), p. 27.

Z. Majkowski's monograph of the 20<sup>th</sup> century fantasy "In the Shadow of the White Tree", Garda adapts her definition of fantasy based on three main characteristics:

- *its 'otherness', geographical and chronological distinctiveness from the areas identified with the common reality (...)*
- *presence of fantastical elements motivated by magic,*
- *conventional ancientness or 'medievalism'*<sup>11</sup>

Tolkien is also indirectly responsible for the popularity of magic and elves in 21<sup>st</sup> century popular culture, firstly by inspiring the nascence of tabletop role-playing games in the '70s and later with the film adaptation of *Lord of the Rings* (2001–2003, Peter Jackson). Not satisfied to just follow the history of fantasy popularity, Garda goes on to summarize the academic research dedicated to this genre. While it is not the main point of interest in the book, it is deep and thorough and can be an interesting read not only to uninitiated scholars.

## Hardcore

The chapter devoted to hardcore games, or more precisely games that demand high cognitive engagement, is mostly focused on gamers' culture and players' typologies; it is the chapter that concentrates on the social context of games instead of the artefact itself. Following various researchers, Garda presents a history of the rise and fall of the *gamer*. Looking for the birth of the gamers she summons Graeme Kirkpatrick, who places it in the middle of the '80s and points to British gaming magazines as the source of this identity<sup>12</sup>. The author of *Interactive Fantasy* rightly adjusts this statement to a Polish context, in which gaming culture experienced a similar boom in the '90s. On the other hand, she sees the beginning of the fall of the *gamer* in the *Casual Revolution*—the transformation of the video game industry in the early 2000, when developers opened their products to wider audiences who would not call themselves gamers, as described in Jesper Juul's *A Casual Revolution: Reinventing Video Games*<sup>13</sup>. Garda follows the different definitions and characteristics of the engaged user and describes how the RPG genre relates to them. While for years role-playing was considered to be the definition of hardcore games, in her opinion it is more interesting to see the latest

<sup>11</sup> Tomasz Z. Majkowski, *W cieniu białego drzewa: powieść fantasy w XX wieku*, (Kraków: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Jagiellońskiego) (2013), p. 331.

<sup>12</sup> Graeme Kirkpatrick, "Constitutive Tensions of Gaming's Field: UK Gaming Magazines and the Formation of Gaming Culture 1981-1995." *Game Studies* 12.1 (2012). <http://gamestudies.org/1201/articles/kirkpatrick> date accessed 11 November 2017.

<sup>13</sup> Jesper Juul, *A Casual Revolution: Reinventing Video Games and Their Players*, (Cambridge: The MIT Press) (2010).

changes in that matter. As more and more developers adopt casual strategies for their work, we see titles that have the characteristics of role-playing, but are also more open to casual players, like *Games of Thrones: Ascent* (Disruptor Beam, 2013), which is analysed in a later chapter.

## RPG

Role-playing games are one of the most popular and vital genres in games culture and even in trying to grasp the topic broadly, Garda has a lot to cover. Yet she does so in a brief but detailed and engaging form which covers the archaeology of computer role-playing games, presenting the details of the creation of *Adventure* (Will Crowther, 1975), the ancestor of all RPGs. Later Garda discusses the periodization of the genre as defined in *Dungeons and Desktops* by Matt Barton<sup>14</sup>. However, the most important part of this chapter is the reflection on the foundation elements of role-playing and especially how they changed over time. Nonetheless, the two defining traits of role-playing are just as relevant now as they were in 1998, when the book Garda quotes was published. These essential RPG genre effects are the character development system (aggregation of points) and the player's diverse interaction with the game world (role-playing)<sup>15</sup>. The analysis of these elements gives insight into the genre's roots and also its relationship with its tabletop counterpart.

The last part of *Interactive Fantasy* shows how the theoretical model conceived by Maria Garda can be used in analysis. Especially valuable is the ludic analysis of the *roguelike* genre, in which the author delves into the history of this convention, describes the revolutionary effect of *Diablo* (Blizzard North, 1996), and the recent popularity of *neo-roguelike*. This part not only presents an insightful research of a forgotten breed of games but is also a great example of a middle-range game analysis.

I am convinced that *Interactive Fantasy. Genre in digital games* will be an essential book in Polish game studies curricula. It is a great handbook for games genre theory, presenting all the necessary concepts for aspiring students. The different theories and wide range of topics related to fantasy role-playing games will make it also engaging reading for fans or avid gamers, as the academic nature of the publication does not make it inaccessible or overly complex. On the other hand, in *Interactive Fantasy* Maria Garda presents an original and inspiring theoretical framework that could be useful for seasoned game researchers. The genre merger model is an

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<sup>14</sup> Matt Barton, *Dungeons and Desktops: The History of Computer Role-Playing Games*, (Wellesley: A K Peters) (2008).

<sup>15</sup> Aleksy Uchański, Piotr Gawrysiak, Piotr Mańkowski, *Biblia Komputerowego Gracza*, (Warszawa: Iskry) (1998), pp. 231.

insightful concept that is open to further developments and, despite its name, should be developed and adopted to game aspects beyond just genres.

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