# On Genre Theory and Popular Arts

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## Lecture

Understanding S.T.A.L.K.E.R. or the hermeneutics of popular digital art

## Abstract

Computer Games have long been viewed as a preparatory hell for juvenile deliquents before they blossom into rampage killers. But this view has changed not the least because nowadays most people under 30 have actively played games. Nevertheless there still seems to be a deep gap between computer games and art. My talk will try to close the gap by using concepts developed in the studies of popular culture to describe the new and already famous game S.T.A.L.K.E.R. in relation to the paradigms of the ego-shooter genre. In contrast to the Cultural Studies approach and their focus on the reception process, this talk will focus on the game and view it as a work of modern popular art and try to contribute to a hermeneutics of this kind of art.

Popular culture is all about repeating a working formula, but it can only repeat it successfully by adding variation. So while all works of high art in the last 200 years promise to be solitaires, to be unique and individual, all works of popular culture promise to be familiar but interesting at the same time. The recipient usually has some clear idea what kind of emotional experience he or she can expect and wants. Actually the usage of cultural objects, of books, films, songs for a kind of self medication, for a way to stimulate or suppress certain emotions and thoughts seems to me to be not researched enough yet. From internet sites with sex stories which developed a system of codes to signal in advance what kind of sexual fantasy the reader can expect to the genre system of modern popular literature which allows readers to choose the familiar made interesting, all this can be seen as going to a drugstore and choosing your psychotropic yourself. But in the following I don't want to discuss games as popular arts from the side of the recipient but want to concentrate on the work. Nevertheless genre seems to me to be the fundamental category to understand a work in popular culture. Usually these works advertise the

genre they belong to already in the paratexts, and this information is important to establish a horizon of expectations or – if you prefer a newer metaphor – the relations in this cultural field. Genre is a concept which is notoriously difficult to define.[1] For my line of argument those approaches seem most appropriate which see genre as a pragmatic concept which is used to structure communication. In this view it belongs to the work of cultural criticism to analyse cultural objects and their paratexts to determine the historical system of genres used at a certain time and at a certain place. Then a genre concept like 'detective novel' is nothing stable but in the year 1920 it has other features than in the year 2000. But feature lists alone are probably not enough to describe a genre, because people are not organising their memories of complex objects using lists alone. If we, as cultural critics, want to understand genres we have to mould genre concepts following the new insights in how people use concepts. At the moment one of the most fruitful approaches in cognitive sciences to concept modelling is still the prototype concept.[2]

For the following discussion I am only interested in two aspects of this theory: the idea that there are prototypes for a genre, which play the role of a standard model or a best example, and the idea that the list of properties distinguishing a genre from another is not a clearly defined set of equally important features but a roughly ranked list. I will use these aspects to describe the work and its relation to the genre. A work can then be described as a having properties and each of these properties can be related to the genre as it is defined by the genre history up to this moment. Not all properties are equal but some are more prominent for a genre like the system of resources and activity types in a strategy game, some are common to all genres in a media but important nevertheless like the quality of graphics in computer games or the quality of writing in all literary texts.

This sounds more formalist as it really is. It is a common scenario for a first person shooter that the player has to save the world from a menace, very often from outer space. This scenario has been used by the very first ego shooters like the *Doom* (id 1993). There have been some interesting variations, some of them just got rid of the "save the world" story line altogether, like *Max Payne* (2001, Remedy),[3] which tells the story of a revenge in the style of a film noir (actually a comic version of a film noir) or *No one lives forever* (Monolith 2000), which is a very funny tongue in cheek spy story set in the 1960ies. Others have taken up the scenario but transformed the cliché framing story into an intense and gripping story line by adding interesting side characters and a detailed story line, like *Half-Life* (Valve 1998). Each of these variations can be described under two relations: one is the relation to other scenarios used in first person shooters (and other computer games) and the other is the relation to our common cultural knowledge about fictional and non fictional worlds. Each property has to be seen in both relations, in the long row of genre specific variations of this property and in the relation of them to the common world including other media.

## Notes

1. See the excellent discussion in Rüdigre Zymner: Gattungstheorie. Probleme und Positionen der Literaturwissenschaft. Paderborn: mentis 2003.

2. This is a very rough simplification. The theory of concepts is battling field where philosophers and psychologists meet – often at the same side against other philosophers and psychologists. A very well argued overview of this discussion including a discussion of crtitical arguments against prototype theory can be found in Eric Margolis / Stephen Laurence: Concepts and Cognitive Science. In: E.M./S.L. (ed.): Concepts. Core Readings. Cambridge, Mass., London: MIT Press 1999, p. 3-83. The volume also contains Eleanor Rosch famous text and some newer texts on prototype theory.

3. Actually Max Payne is really a 3rd person shooter.