How to Define a Genre: A Lacanian-marxist Case Study of the *NES* Platform Game
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Defining a genre in literature is not an easy task; throughout history there have been many debates about what makes tragedy tragic, or when a work of art is baroque and when it's rococo and so forth. In videogames, albeit their specificities, the problem is similar. In this article we will try to define the NES platform game and through this process, hopefully, shed some light on the question of how to define videogame genres. We also maintain that such a process can have very practical benefits since it allows us to think "outside the box", that is, to consider new possibilities of game design beyond fixed genre settings. We will purposely analyze some very canonical games of a popular genre (the platform game) in a now classic platform (the 8-bit Nintendo Entertainment System), in order to show that, to some extent, what we consider an unquestionable genre has actually a very interesting dialectical contradiction at its core. This contradiction can be relevant if we want to think about the role of game developing inside the culture industry, something which definitely *does not* arise spontaneously from the masses (Adorno 2001); that is to say: the genres we are used to playing in videogames are not something "natural". In other words, to naturalize something which is socially constructed or to believe that something historical is eternal is a process of reification; this article's purpose, then, could be said to be that of questioning reification in videogames when it comes to game genres.

Ways of defining a genre can be roughly divided into two approaches: the deductive and the inductive. Translating the problem into our case study, we could put it this way: do we play all the NES platform games and then try to develop a definition from them or do we first elaborate a definition and try to apply them to all the empirical cases? It is, of course, a very *grosso modo* way of summing things up, but it is a good way of introducing the methodological problem since in this paper we will try to approach this from a admittedly dialectical way of reasoning.

The properly dialectical way of defining a genre is to select extreme cases from that genre and then analyze them as constitutive of it. There is nothing exotic about this methodological maneuver, it is basically a way of forming a *concept.* "The general is the idea. The empirical, on the other hand, can be all the more profoundly understood the more clearly it is seen as an extreme. The concept has its root in the extreme." (Benjamin 2003, p.35).

With this paper we will define the NES platform game as a genre. The extremes taken for analysis will be two games familiar to players around the world: *Super Mario Bros. 3* and *Mega Man 2.* We will show how these two games are "polar opposites" and form a dialectic that runs through the whole genre.

We would like to not only approach the problem dialectically, but also in a materialist way. Therefore we will draw many ideas from a Lacanian and Marxist theoretical framework: these are not references which are usually used in relation to videogame studies, but since we are dealing with such canonical games, we believe concepts from these traditions can shed a very different light on the problem of defining videogame genres. We will begin with a key concept in Lacan's contribution to a materialist theory of the subject: the Borromean knot.

Preliminary Concepts

It seems to be quite common for videogame scholars to mention the "ludologists *vs.* narratologists" debate. Seen from a distance, it concerns a polemic about videogame concepts unfolding on the philosophical front of this new field of studies. We certainly have no intention in trying to put an end to this debate – every field of knowledge has its founding myths, polemics and dialectics which develop slowly – but nevertheless there might be some contributions from the psychoanalytic perspective. The Symbolic and the Imaginary (not to mention the Real) are different registers, but they do not exclude each other in the *Erfahrung* (the experience) of the individual. Likewise the narrative and the *ludus* intermingle in the player experience. We will come back to that later on.

Well, what exactly are these registers? Let's begin with the Imaginary.

When a six month old baby sees himself in the mirror, he is not yet "fully human" in the sense of being the "speaking animal", but he can already identify (*not* recognize) himself. It is actually quite a sensation for the baby, since he gesticulates and is obviously content and curious. Joyful, the little one will suffer a double (mis)recognition (something Lacan, and Michel Pêcheux after him, call *méconnaissance*): first of all, there will be the alienation of the ego (the Imaginary is the realm of the ego) and, on top of that, there will be a concealment of this very alienation. So the child sees himself in the mirror and he will identify himself as more of a totality than he actually is; he will see himself as "more complete".

Of course it doesn't have to be a real mirror, it can just as well be another child for instance or some other object. But what about becoming the "speaking animal"? Now that's when it comes to the Other, the big Other with the capitalized "O". When two humans are speaking, they do not understand each other "linearly". We are not talking about circumlocutions or roundabout manners. It means that a simple sentence such as "Mario is an Italian plumber" is not understood by the listener *as it is being said,* but only *afterwards* in a *retrograde* way*.* The big Other is this "battery of signifiers" (in Lacan's expression), guaranteeing the consistency of language. The symbolic Other is very different from the imaginary lower case other. It is the first that guarantees some degree of truth to human subjectivity.

> Through speech, I recognize the Other (…) as the very locus of truth (and of *my* truth), since it is actually necessary for me to call on him to witness the truth of my speech, even if I do this to lie to him and fool him. (…) the game of truth presupposes a law, a rule of the game (...) (Borch-Jacobsen 1991, p.117)

Although laws and rules are different in many dangerous ways, Borch-Jacobsen rightly attributes to the Other the capacity of *witnessing* the speech's truth, even when "truth" is not the main concern. We can now draw a demarcation line that goes: in the Imaginary there is identification, in the Symbolic there is recognition. When the child enters the mirror stage (it corresponds roughly to Freud's anal phase), he will set in motion a process that Lacan identifies with Hegel's master-slave dialectic.

Simply put, the master-slave dialectic is described in the *Phenomenology of the Spirit,* and it concerns the need to surpass mastery since the slave (who exists for the other) and the master (who exists for himself) would be two sides of the same consciousness. Such dialectic concerns a struggle between the master and the slave – each one is the other's worst enemy – but the death of the one will be the death of the other. In here we find aggressiveness and narcissism. It would go beyond the scope of this article to discuss this at length, but we must point out the aspect of *recognition* involved when the subject enters the Symbolic. In a classic passage, Hegel writes that: "Self-Consciousness exists in-and-for-itself while (and because) it exists in-and-for-itself for-another; that is, it exists only as something recognized." (Hegel, 1994, p.50)

The myth of Narcissus is relevant here, since the Greek legend tells us that the beautiful youth fell in love with his mirror-like image seen on the lake; the image became master to a point where aggressiveness (in the form of his suicide) led to his *real* death. The Real, the third order in the Lacanian topology of the subject, is that which cannot be symbolized. It is before and beyond words – it is the place of trauma. It is also the order that threatens to return to the subject shattering his symbolic screen and flooding him with deadly *jouissance,* the paradoxical pleasure that leads to death.

In a certain sense, *jouissance* could be understood as the object of a real desire, but that's a bit of polite speculation. What really matters is that our desires are actually symbolic that we desire in relation to the Other's desire: "man's desire is the desire of the Other" (Lacan, 2001, p.292). We can never be quite sure of what the Other wants from us, so it is common for one to be left to stagger and stutter. The Other's conundrum is an *(en)jeu-des-mots,* i.e., a game and a bet with words. We bet our way through desire with words, sometimes in a more or less dangerous way.

Imaginary as the ego may be, it is the socio-symbolic Other that is the *locus* of the unconscious. That means that the unconscious is "outside" and it is also structured like a language. Through the influence of structuralists such as Claude Lévi-Strauss in anthropology and Roman Jakobson and Ferdinand de Saussure in linguistics, Lacan developed the idea of a Symbolic order which is the register of language, the place where the subject is caught up in the web of signifiers, and consequently that the unconscious can be understood in linguistic terms.

We have briefly mentioned the Borromean knot, a topological figure that represents in Lacanian epistemology the subject in its three orders: the Imaginary, the Symbolic and the Real. We should now turn to a bit of Lacanian semiotics since we'll find the metaphoric and metonymic relations described and formalized in such a way that will come in handy when analyzing our platform games.

Lacanian Semiotics: Metaphor and Metonymy

According to the classic definition of Ferdinand de Saussure, the father of modern linguistics, the sign is the composing element of language and it has two sides, like two sides of a sheet of paper: the signifier and the signified. The signifier would be the phonic component, and the signified would be the ideational element. This signifier/signified relation, according to Saussure, is arbitrary.

By his turn, Lacan "turns Saussure upside down" (not unlike Marx with Hegel). The signifier has now priority since it produces the signified.

Signifiers have a differential value, and no value "in-itself", so language does not concern positive values. Contrary to Saussure, Lacan makes of *signifiers* the "building blocks" of language. Thus signifiers – which are not reduced only to words – are fundamentally *articulated*. Such units "are subjected to the double condition of being reducible to ultimate differential elements and combining them according to the laws of a closed order." (Lacan 2001, p.116).

As for the signified, according to Lacan it is an effect of the play of signifiers. "In other words, the signified is not given, but produced." (Evans 1996, p.189) Again, the Marxist distinction between the producing basis of society and the produced super-structure is not very far from the discussion here. We will now turn to two axes of analysis: the metaphor and the metonymy since these will be key concepts for our analysis.

The Lacanian definition of *metaphor* is based on Jakobson's distinction of metaphor as corresponding to the paradigmatic connection (relations *in absentia*) and metonymy to the syntagmatic connection (relations *in praesentia*).

At the beginning of these preliminary concepts we mentioned briefly the "ludology vs narratology" debate. We would like to turn now to a materialist dialectic definition of narrative of our own which will be useful in the course of our analysis.

Narrative

I want to connect our concept of narrative for the purposes of this paper to an essay by German philosopher Walter Benjamin entitled *The Storyteller* (written in 1936).

The storyteller is a figure that is now disappearing, states the text, since it is related to an artisanal work time. Modern industrial work and consequent reification, the impoverishment of experience through the abundance of fragmented ideological information and the calamitous effects of contemporary war contributed to the disappearance of the figure of the storyteller that Benjamin links in his essay to the Russian author Nikolai Leskov. Always in haste, modern man has not the languor (*Langeweile*) necessary to enjoy/engender narratives bearing the wisdom of an experience that could be transmitted.

> (…) characteristically, it is not only a man's knowledge or wisdom, but above all his real life – and this is the stuff that stories are made of – which first assumes transmissible form at the moment of his death. (…) suddenly in his expressions and looks the unforgettable emerges, and imparts to everything that concerned

him that authority which even the poorest wretch in the act of dying possesses for the living around him. This authority lies at the very origin of the story. (Benjamin 2003, p.151)

We will thus define the concept of narrative in the following way: it is *a symbolic predication of the Real*. We will expand on this in the following.

A mere imaginary predication of the Real would be, of course, ideology. But narratives speak *qua* the Other. Ideologies always work through a process of identification where alienation is concealed (suffice to remember the *méconnaissance* phenomenon). If we turn to Althusser's productive discussion of ideology in his best-known essay *Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses* (written in 1969) we will find such a structure with two characteristics. First, alienation will be kept out of sight, and secondly identification will turn the individual into a subject (the author plays with the double meaning of the word) for the ideology – Althusser condenses both these processes in the fertile concept of *interpellation.* According to the French theorist in a classic *locus*:

> We observe that the structure of all ideology, interpellating individuals as subjects in the name of a Unique and Absolute Subject, is *speculary*, i.e. a mirror-structure, and *doubly* speculary: this mirror duplication is constitutive of ideology, and ensures it's functioning. Which means that all ideology is *centred*, that the Absolute Subject occupies the unique place of the Centre, and interpellates around it the infinity of individuals into subjects in a double mirror-connection such that it *subjects* the subjects to the Subject, while giving them in the Subject in which each subject can contemplate its own image (present and future) the *guarantee* that this really concerns them and Him [...] (Althusser 1995, pp.134-135)

So we can make an operational definition of ideology as being an *imaginary predication of the Real.* But what about the narrative as symbolization? There is something every narrative must be if it is to ascend to the Symbolic – every narrative is an act. An act is not an activity, it is a way a free individual objectifies the big Other. With that we do not mean reification where there is only a symbolic *justification* of the Real, we mean an event where the Other is brought into being. Of course there is no reason why a narrative cannot also justify, as in reification, the Real, and there are plenty of such narratives all around us.

Concerning the identity of the act and the Other, philosopher Slavoj Žižek writes that "an authentic act momentarily suspends the big Other, but it is simultaneously *the 'vanishing mediator' which grounds, brings into existence, the big Other.*" (Žižek 2007, p.144). Narration is always such an act.

Narratives can be analyzed in terms of metonymy and metaphor.

We are now ready to turn to two NES platform games which we believe to be the polar opposites of each other in the dialectic of the genre. We will apply the concepts mentioned here and, from the angle of narrative as we defined, relate both *Super Mario Bros. 3 (SMB3)* and *Mega Man 2 (MM2)* to each other as extreme *translations* of the concept of the NES platform game.

How to Press "Start"

The first thing to do is not to ask about the "output" or the "ideological" – we have seen that our definition of narrative does not merely concern "representation" as if that could be external to the socio-symbolic field.

Rather, the practical, physical, corporeal and tangible are to be the first locus of attention. In the vast majority of cases concerning videogames this means pushing buttons on a control.

This is a table summing up the differences between the buttons in SMB3 and MM2 – for our purposes we will only consider A, B and Start.

Button	Super Mario Bros. 3	Megaman 2
A	Jump; fly; swim	Jump
B	Run; carry; throw fireballs; throw hammers; use a tail whip	Shoots arm cannon, metal blades, quick boomerang…
START	Pause	Pause; go into change weapon screen

Table 1: Button Description

We will say that these buttons belong to the realm of the *signifiers* in these games. We can ascribe the visual and sound elements of these videogames to the field of the *signified,* which are *produced* by the signifiers.

In SMB3 both the A and the B buttons are metaphorical.

In MM2 the two metaphorical buttons are B and Start. The Start button is also metaphorical in a particular way: after each boss is defeated, the Start button acquires the new meaning of the capacity to select more weapons.

Concerning only the three buttons – A, B and Start – in each game we can draw the following table:

Button	SMB3	MM2
A	Metaphorical	Metonymical
B	Metaphorical	Metaphorical
Start	Metonymical	Metaphorical

Table 2: Button Level: Metonymy and Metaphor

In SMB3 the "Start" button is only used when the player wants to "turn away" from the game (curiously enough, Mario and the enemies disappear from the screen as if the player's own reflection disappeared…). In MM2 the player steps back from the action and can change his tactics; the time itself of reflecting *about* the game must be taken into account. So in SMB3 the player reflects *out of* the game and in MM2 the player reflects *inside* the game.

SMB3 is primarily imaginary and works through identification, and MM2 is primarily symbolic and works through recognition.

Super Mario Bros. 3 brings to the player a fantasy world where princess Toadstool has been kidnapped by the evil dragon Bowser. The player must assume the role of Mario to restore order in the eight kingdoms of the game. In each kingdom the ruler has been transformed into an animal by Bowser's children and so Mario must recover the magic wand from each world's "boss" and turn the king back into his old form until the final duel with Bowser.

Mega Man 2, on the other hand, is set in the year 200X (the game was released in Japan in 1988) when an army of robots, led by eight robot masters are created by the evil Dr. Wily. The player assumes the role of Mega Man, a robot created by Dr. Light. Mega Man must crush each robot master, incorporating their weapons to his arsenal, and defeat Dr. Wily.

Mario's progression through the eight kingdoms is metonymic, even if he can choose certain routes or "skip" certain kingdoms (using the magic flute for instance). Mega Man's relation to the robot masters' stages is clearly metaphoric. Each one of them has a weakness (Wood Man's leaf shield is powerful against Air Man for instance) and so choosing the order to play the levels is a crucial part of the strategy.

Another reason for MM2's robot masters' stages being metaphoric is that each boss confers Mega Man their characteristic weapon. If there were anthropophagic cannibals that ate their enemies believing they would absorb their powers, here we can speak of something of a "robophagy". But what really matters is that the weapon is the *condensation* of the robot master's stage. In SMB3's kingdoms, on the other hand, the bosses allow Mario to return the kings to their former self through a *fetish*.

After restoring the order in the kingdom, Mario receives a letter from the princess, where he reads her *displacement* (a magic item in the place of the princess).

In the "big picture", SMB3 is the narrative of an object (the princess) that is taken away and is retrieved. Freud describes his 18 months old grandson Ernst playing with a reel that had a piece of string, tossing it to where it could not be seen and pulling it back, meanwhile exclaiming "Fort!" (Gone) and "Da!" (There), a typical case of repetition in childhood not strange to the structure of SMB3.

Meanwhile MM2 is a recognition narrative. In MM2 the intro states that: "Dr. Light created Mega Man to stop the *evil desires* of Dr. Wily" (emphasis added). Mega Man confronts Dr. Wily – nothing has been lost, but there is the threat of destruction. So Mega Man is in relation to two asymmetric desires: Dr. Wily's, which are evil and must be thwarted, and Dr. Light's, a father figure incorporated into the fabric of the game since he develops special weapons for Mega Man.

The fact that MM2 is a recognition narrative is particularly clear in the game's end: Dr. Wily's holographic projection (the last vestige of the Imaginary) is defeated and Dr. Wily begs for mercy – Mega Man spares him. In the end of SMB3 on the other hand the princess jokes about the princess being yet "in another castle", as if the Imaginary turned back on the player to threaten with an endless flight from the *hic et nunc* in a labyrinth of mirrors.

We can again relate these three levels to metaphor and metonym by drawing a table:

Level	SMB3	MM2
Kingdom/Robot Master	Metonymic	Metaphorical
Magic Item/Weapon	Metonymic	Metaphorical
Ending	Metaphorical	Metonymic

Table 3: Game Levels: Metonymy and Metaphor

As we can see, on a first glance SMB3 and MM2 seem very similar: one set in the mythical time, the other in a sci-fi future, but both a story of good versus evil. Their controls (*Table 1*) also seem to share many characteristics. However, deepening the analysis, we find that their control buttons have different narrative functions (*Table 2*) and that the super-structural game levels (*Table 3*) are actually opposite to each other.

On the "Game Level", the realm of the signifieds, we have seen that SMB3 and MM2 are dialectical opposites and on the realm of the signifier, on the "Button Level", there are some things that are different and others that remain the same. This will allow us

to define the NES platform genre: *they are games where there is at least one metaphorical non-jump button.*

Conclusion

We read with great interest Dominic Arsenault's article on *Video Game Genre, Evolution and Innovation* in the *Eludamos: Journal for Computer Game Culture* (2009). The author questions the concept of genre that is taken for granted in most researches in the field of videogame studies and analyzes, within his own theoretical framework, the first person shooter. In a key passage in his conclusion, Arsenault relates mechanics, design, play-experience and history in the following way:

> "From the production side of the business, then, video game genre can be understood as *the codified usage of particular mechanics and game design patterns to express a range of intended play-experiences*. In this respect, charting the history of a video game genre requires one to go beyond the 'laundry list' of mechanics (…) and investigate the history of the general play-experience of which the particular mechanics are only one possible materialization. (…)" (Arsenault 2009, p.171)

We have also tackled the NES platform genre through the way signifiers *produce* signifieds. Although videogame scholars may be fond of the "game mechanics *vs.* game dynamics" opposition, we believe it to be lacking a true dialectical dimension, being no more than a dichotomy.

When Arsenault proposes the diachronic investigation of "play-experience" of which the "mechanics" would be "one possible materialization", there is from our perspective an inversion of the real process. It is "mechanics" that allows for "one possible materialization" of "play-experience" but this "mechanics" is always-already decided by the industry, "from above". With the exception of social disposition (capitalism, the videogame industry existing inside a society divided into classes) the videogame industry and what it believes should or should not be designed have as its aim the maximum profit ("business"). But nothing – absolutely nothing – in the creative possibilities of videogame itself prevents game producers from making a "James Joyce's *Finnegan's Wake*" or a "Heidegger's *Being and Time*" as a NES 8-bit platform game. The fact is that videogame industry – its specificities from, say, the music industry and the film industry have to be more studied from a sociological point of view – has little interest in anything but that which appeals to the biggest possible masses. The result is that videogame apparatuses exhibit a huge gap from the technological capacities to what they are used to deliver.

To study the world in terms of its dialectical contradictions does not mean to study that which is given, but to try to understand also its possibilities. Arsenault's study of video game genres is certainly very useful for further research, but in the sense that it limits itself to studying "reality" without its possibilities, it remains historicist and not truly historical. To study the French Revolution for instance is not to list all its events, but to question what lied *in potentia* in each act. In a sense, to use a videogame image, Arsenault is adopting a *Super Mario Bros. 3* way of looking at things, and we're proposing more of a *Mega Man 2*-like reading of videogames in general.

Recently there have been some interesting games made with an "artistic" aim. It would go beyond the scope of this article to investigate these "indie games", but perhaps we can quote names such as Ian Bogost and Jason Rohrer since they already signal a trend in videogame making, if not in the videogame industry. Perhaps they are a part of a growing movement that will pose an alternative to the videogame industry monopolistic practices; however, one should not forget that it is impossible, from our Lacanian-Marxist perspective, to change videogame practices, to "reform" them without changing the world where they exist.

A game such as *Killzone 2* is supposed to have had a budget of 45 million US dollars, and it consists basically of people shooting people. It is not that there is *necessarily* any problem with the representation of shooting people, it is just that when one thinks about the colossal effort put into it and the aesthetic output, one begins to wonder if a twenty-first century creative technology such as videogame is not being managed with a nineteenth century factory mentality.

The videogame is a cultural item that belongs, from its very birth, to the cultural industry. In this context it is this author's opinion that game designers should pay critical attention to the "ludologists *vs.* narratologists" and "game design *vs.* game mechanics" dichotomies because of the political tones they can acquire.

To study an object scientifically does not mean taking a neutral stance on it. Videogame studies can and should provide elements that go beyond the scope of the immediate and furnish videogame designers with the critical tools to think and practice their art.

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