

Establishing New Genres in Digital Games: The Auto Battler Case Study

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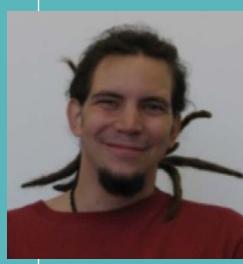
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ABSTRACT:

The paper discusses the criteria about how one can establish if a group is a new genre. It distinguishes between two main lines of thinking about genre in general – content and discourse. Both lines have two things to discuss. For content it is similarities and differences in mechanics, and for discourse it is commercial and social purpose of the use of new categories. The case studies then show how this can be applied to the rising auto battler class. There are 7 core mechanics in games that are similar, but every game differs in small details from others. The discourse in the social and commercial sphere has appeared over a short time period, and the adoption of the new genre by the gaming community was therefore fast. The bottom line of the text is that using rigid categories for discussions about digital games cannot focus only on rigid criteria, but also on context.

KEY WORDS:

auto battler, core mechanics, digital games, game typologies, genres studies, modding.

Introduction

The question of art genre has bugged media¹ (but also 'pre-media') researchers for centuries, but real systematic study started in the 1960's, when genre studies appeared.² And even though the discussion has been vivid since then, digital games and new media bring many new perspectives to the topic. We are witnesses to quick rises and falls of new forms of texts, and the ways of their classifications after the information revolution are arguably much more varied.

One of the first discussions about new genres in the digital era started in 1999 by asking the question if internet advertisement is a new kind of genre. The researchers reflected on media forms and content transformation effects of the new digital era: "How are we to approach the study of these unstable generic forms in constant rapid evolution?".³ The question they asked is valid for other types of new media. There is no clear answer to this. As D. Arsenault points out, "no amount of critical thinking can get us (...) to a grand unified and stable genre categorisations".⁴ As the classifications serve different purposes for different situations, it seems obvious that there will never be one unified theory, and history of genre discussion in the oldest media shows us that every approach in this regard will become problematic sooner or later. Therefore, in this paper, we do not try to build universal genre definition, or give some simple universal tool based on a strict method. We argue that to name some new group or class⁵ of games and genres, we should consider more

1 Remark by the authors: In this text, we use media and art analogically, as we are not talking about performative arts (even though many ideas may apply).

2 Remark by the authors: The genre studies often go beyond media and art genre discussions, but in this paper, we will not dive deeply into ontological discussions.

3 FORTANET, I., PALMER, J. C., POSTEGULIO, S.: The Emergence of a New Genre: Advertising on the Internet (netvertising). In *Hermes, Journal of Linguistics*, 1999, Vol. 23, No. 1, p. 95. [online]. [2020-04-21]. Available at: <<https://tidsskrift.dk/her/article/view/25551/22464>>.

4 ARSENAULT, D.: Video Game Genre, Evolution and Innovation. In *Journal for Computer Game Culture*, 2009, Vol. 3, No. 2, p 159. [online]. [2020-04-04]. Available at: <<https://www.eludamos.org/index.php/eludamos/article/view/vol3no2-3>>.

5 Remark by the authors: We also use terms group and class analogically, even though in more ontological or linguistic oriented work, the distinction between things sharing a relationship (group) and things sharing the same attributes (class) may play some role.

perspectives. We propose four key features based on two main approaches, to figure out whether the new group is a genre. These features must be discussed in every instance of a new genre arising, and they should work more as a guide. In later chapters we exemplify this on the 'genre' of auto battlers. We selected this example, for several reasons. First, it is as this is one of the most actual classes of game that we can see growing in the last two years, and secondly, it is one of the examples of participatory culture, that is in many ways unique for the medium of digital games.

Content and Discourse

The idea of classification of content in media forms can be traced to Aristotle's *Poetics*, and his attempts to classify 'poetry' by differences in three categories. He lines three main types of classification, based on matter, subjects and method.⁶ This kind of objectivistic approach was prevalent for most of history, but more recent discussions focus also on the author and reader aspects. On the other hand, there are still some reasons to keep this objectivistic approach in mind, as the need for digital classifications of content rises. J. F. Hoorn for example argues for counting different words in literary works, to determine what genre they belong to.⁷ These suggestions are quite formalistic in nature – arguably necessary for objective classification, but they basically reject the idea of social and other contexts of the classification of art/media forms. As J. Derrida and A. Ronell point out, genres are subjective. He concludes that "every text participates in one or several genres, there is no genreless text".⁸ This means that texts belong to some genre from the moment they emerge. This means that texts are not only a simple part of the genre, they ARE the genre. Therefore, individual texts themselves are participating in the emergence of genres. In Derridian tradition, R. Cohen argues that "classifications are empirical, not logical".⁹ But how can we then truly say, that some text is part of this or that genre? To put it simply, the text and the genre are inseparable, there can't be one without another. But if it is so, the obvious chicken/egg paradox rises; where does the new genre come from?

Even though there is no clear and acknowledged distinction by the different authors, we can clearly see the two basic lines of arguments. One focuses on the content of the medium, and the other on the discourse surrounding the medium. We will examine this distinction in more detail in the later chapters. Maybe digital games can help with figuring out some interesting content and discourse processes behind the emergence of new genres. Thanks to the dynamic nature of this relatively new media, it is possible to witness 'births' and 'deaths' of new classes (the biology analogy serves as a metaphor, as death or extinction of a genre is not really possible, because genres can intermix, and even the 'extinct' ones can be brought back to life).¹⁰ One such example is *auto battler*. Appearing for the first time in early 2019, one year later, there are already tens of games being referred to as auto battler. It is not for the first time in digital games history that we can see a new

⁶ ARISTOTLE: *Poetics*. Cambridge : Harvard University Press, 1995, p. 15.

⁷ HOORN, J. F.: How is a Genre Created? Five Combinatory Hypotheses. In *Comparative Literature and Culture*, 2000, Vol. 2, No. 2, p. 4. [online]. [2020-04-21]. Available at: <<https://docs.lib.psu.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1070&context=clcwweb>>.

⁸ DERRIDA, J., RONELL, A.: The Law of Genre. In *Critical Inquiry*, 1980, Vol. 7, No. 4, p. 55.

⁹ COHEN, R.: History and Genre. In *New Literary History*, 1986, Vol. 17, No. 2, p. 210.

¹⁰ JAUSS, H. R.: *Toward an Aesthetic of Reception*. Minneapolis : University of Minnesota Press, 1982, p. 49.; ALTMAN, R.: *Film/Genre*. London : British Film Institute, 1999, p. 70.; ARSENAULT, D.: Video Game Genre, Evolution and Innovation. In *Journal for Computer Game Culture*, 2009, Vol. 3, No. 2, p. 149. [online]. [2020-04-04]. Available at: <<https://www.eludamos.org/index.php/eludamos/article/view/vol3no2-3>>.

minor genre rising (i.e., Souls-like, MOBA), but it probably never appeared as quickly as the case study shows. To understand if this class is really a new genre, we first need to examine what exactly game genres are, and what is their role in digital games.

Genres and Digital Games

Since the early history of games classification, the focus has been on how the game is played¹¹ as the game mechanics are arguably the most important semiotic code in the games. And just like we do not categorize genres in literature by the size of the letters, the fonts, or other 'details', we also do not categorize the genres in games by 'details' like narrative setting, or graphics. This does not mean actors do not use these criteria, only that the mechanics are usually considered the main differentiator (in the famous paper MDA framework this is problematized by a focus on the aesthetics of games, but even though the paper is one of the basic sources for game studies, these categories are not used on a daily basis).¹² In a study of the multi-dimensional typology of games E. Aarseth mentions: "Games are the most culturally rich and varied genre of expression that ever existed. (...) Unlike literature, film, music, painting and architecture, the systematic study of game genres have been mostly neglected over the centuries. Perhaps the reason is that games are so diverse that it is very hard to see what they all have in common".¹³ Now this older text is still valid in many ways. Game genre discussions cause various issues and we do not have a lack of authors trying to create game categorizations. E. Aarseth, S. M. Smedstad and L. Sunnanå created typology, which uses dimensions and their values by comparative analysis, which as they propose, can be used to classify any game, two similar games may be compared and their differences identified and described in detail. The fifteen dimensions are grouped under five headings: Space, Time, Player-structure, Control, and Rules, which are based on content.¹⁴ These classifications may work for academic purposes, but due to their complexity it might be hard to understand for the non-academic public. It doesn't have any use for someone who may want to filter games by their needs or wants – e.g., if player want to play some stealth FPS game it doesn't mean he or she wants to decide whether upgrades are or are not conditional, or if environment is or is not being destroyed after using a weapon.

M. J. P. Wolf derived 42 categories (and he calls them genre) of games based on gameplay and interactivity, but excluded other elements such as mood or theme.¹⁵ These categories are also based on content and had problems with classifying one game into various genres (i.e., *Pac-Man*¹⁶ can be in at least 4 categories – collecting, maze, chasing and capturing), or multiple games that should be divided into more genres only in one together (like in genre RPG, where we can bundle MMORPGS such as *World of Warcraft*¹⁷,

¹¹ CAILLOIS, R.: *Man, Play, and Games*. Chicago : University of Illinois Press, 2001, p. 11-14.; APPERLEY, T. H.: *Genre and game studies: Toward a critical approach to video game genres*. In *Simulation & Gaming*, 2006, Vol. 37, No. 1, p. 11.; BUČKOVÁ, Z.: *Typology of Game Principles in Digital Games: A Case Study of Mafia III*. In *Acta Ludologica*, 2019, Vol. 2, No. 1, p. 48-49.

¹² HUNICKE, R., LEBLANC, M., ZUBEK, R.: *MDA: A Formal Approach to Game Design and Game Research*. [online]. [2020-04-21]. Available at: <https://www.researchgate.net/publication/228884866_MDA_A_Formal_Approach_to_Game_Design_and_Game_Research>.

¹³ AARSETH, E., SMEDSTAD, S. M., SUNNANÅ, L.: *A Multidimensional Typology of Games*. In RAESSENS, J., COPIER, M., GOLDSTIN, J., MÄYRÄ, F. (eds.): *DIGRA '03 – Proceedings of the 2003 DIGRA International Conference: Level Up*. Utrecht : Digital Games Research Association, 2003, p. 48.

¹⁴ Ibidem, p. 49-53.

¹⁵ WOLF, M. J. P.: *The medium of the video game*. Texas : University of Texas Press, 2002, p. 116-134.

¹⁶ NAMCO: *Pac-Man*. [digital game]. Tokyo : Namco, 1980.

¹⁷ BLIZZARD ENTERTAINMENT: *World of Warcraft*. [digital game]. Irvine : Blizzard Entertainment, 2004.

JRPG such as *Pokémon Blue*¹⁸ and *Red*¹⁹, and action RPG such as *The Witcher*²⁰). G. King and T. Krzywinska in 2002 made 4-tiered hierarchy-based interactivity rather than narrative: platform referred to the gaming hardware; genre referred to “broad categories such as ‘action-adventure’, ‘driving’, or ‘strategy’; mode referred to players’ experiences of the gameworld; and milieu referred to ‘location and atmospheric or stylistic conventions’.²¹ One of the more recent ideas of game classification comes from Ha Lee and her team. They suggest a so-called *facet analysis*. Twelve facets, such as purpose, temporal aspect or setting serve as different criteria for finding similarities and differences in games. Two facets are important from our perspective: gameplay, and style. In their understanding, gameplay is one of 10 basic genres (i.e., Action, Fighting, RPG or Strategy) and style describes more specific genres (i.e. Platformer, Shump, Run and gun, etc.).²² This classification is based on a strong theory and methods, but unfortunately, the complexity of the system makes it hard for more practical use. If we want to look at the topic from a practical point of view, one of the places to look shall be the online game distribution platforms, as they all have at least some sort of classification that is focused on the users. These platforms also use diverse game categories by genres or styles.

On the Steam store, users can browse games in twelve genre categories.²³ These categories deviate only in details from other major stores such as Epic Store or GOG. But the Steam store offers one crucial feature for our discussion – tags. Tags not only can include previous genres, so users can simply merge two genres into one filter, but also add tags not mentioned in genre filtration.²⁴ The crucial difference to other classifications, the tags on Steam store also lets users tag games. The process is not purely in the hands of the users, but: “Tags can be applied to a game by the developer, by players with non-limited accounts, and by Steam moderators. This allows players to help mark-up games with terms, themes, and genres that are relevant and help describe the game”.²⁵ This is a perfect example of discursive classification. We can clearly see the important role in participatory culture, and the lively ‘discussion’ between involved actors. In this chapter, we show how most of the genre classifications are based on the content of the games. But with rising user participation (and considering the subjectivist approaches mentioned in previous chapters), the question of genre needs to be discussed from the perspective of discourse.

Modding and New Genres

It is with no surprise that the idea of the evolution of the media genre arose, with acknowledgement of evolution in biology. D. Arsenault even indicates that ‘survival of the

- 18 GAME FREAK: *Pokémon Blue*. [digital game]. Kyoto : Nintendo, 1996.
- 19 GAME FREAK: *Pokémon Red*. [digital game]. Kyoto : Nintendo, 1996.
- 20 CD PROJEKT RED: *The Witcher*. [digital game]. New York : Atari, 2007.
- 21 CLEARWATER, D. A.: What Defines Video Game Genre? Thinking about Genre Study after the Great Divide. In *Loading...*, 2011, Vol. 5, No. 1, p. 29. [online]. [2020-04-04]. Available at: <<http://journals.sfu.ca/loading/index.php/loading/article/view/67/105>>.
- 22 LEE, H. J. et al.: Facet Analysis of Video Game Genres. In KINDLING, M., GREIFENEDER, E. (eds.): *iConference 2014 Proceedings*. Illinois : iSchools, 2014, p. 127. [online]. [2020-03-27]. Available at: <https://www.ideals.illinois.edu/bitstream/handle/2147/47323/057_ready.pdf?sequence=2&isAllowed=y>.
- 23 Store. [online]. [2020-04-13]. Available at: <<https://store.steampowered.com/>>.
- 24 Popular brands. [online]. [2020-04-13]. Available at: <https://store.steampowered.com/tag/browse/#global_492>.
- 25 Steam tags. [online] [2020-04-04]. Available at: <<https://partner.steamgames.com/doc/store/tags>>.

fittest literature’ was a major paradigm.²⁶ Unfortunately, the idea of survival of the fittest is not the best understanding of evolutionary biology. This concept is very misleading, as survival is only a small part of the evolution process, and fitness of species is not that relevant in evolution. Evolution is about adapting to a changing environment.²⁷ In this regard, the concept of genre evolution is still relevant, and as will be shown in this chapter, it may be even more relevant in digital games. E. Aarseth argues that the computer software environment, and especially digital games, is a new form of text.²⁸ He calls this new form of text *cybertext*, and he aligns two key functions, which differentiate it from linear texts and hypertexts. First (*configurative*) is the necessity for the continuous and persistent interpretation of ongoing events on the screen, and configuring of actions accordingly. But he also recognizes that games are not only played. Due to their digital essence, most of the games can be changed in some way. He calls this function of *cybertext textonic*, as at this level, the *texton* of the game is modified.²⁹

The most notable example of a new genre arising from a mod are multiplayer online battle arenas (MOBAs). The first instance of this genre was a mod for *StarCraft*³⁰ called *Aeon of Strife*, but much more popular was the mod *Defence of the Ancients* for *Warcraft III: Reign of Chaos*³¹ from 2003. In 2009, Riot Games released *League of Legends*³², which in many ways reshaped the digital games market. With the rise of popularity of League of Legends, the new genre was quickly recognized by the community and the market. Journalist Christian Nutt in an interview with developers Gabe Newell and Erik Johnson said that the word MOBA was first used by Riot Games, and Gabe Newell did not know the meaning of the acronym. That was in 2001, when Valve was already developing *Dota*³³.³⁴ There can be little doubt that without the kind of participatory culture special to digital games, the evolution of genres would have gone in a very different direction. This participatory culture also has many real-life consequences. Modders can become programmers or designers for a living, some even find work in the very company that released the game he or she was modding.³⁵ They can become celebrities, sometimes even better known than the original game creators. One such example can be Dean Hall, author of a popular mod for the game *ARMA 2*³⁶ called *DayZ*. This strongly intensifies the role of the consumer in participatory culture and it brings an interesting shift in the author – consumer relationship, as the line becomes much more blurred. Now the consumer does not only modify one text, he or she can in a sense create a whole new class in the form of genre. For discussions about genres in digital games the modding culture generally means that we can track down not only ‘adoptive parents’ (the inspirations) but also ‘biological parents’

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- 26 ARSENAULT, D.: Video Game Genre, Evolution and Innovation. In *Journal for Computer Game Culture*, 2009, Vol. 3, No. 2, p. 159. [online]. [2020-04-04]. Available at: <<https://www.eludamos.org/index.php/eludamos/article/view/vol3no2-3>>.
 - 27 COLBY, Ch.: *Introduction to Evolutionary Biology*. [online]. [2020-03-20]. Available at: <<http://www.talkorigins.org/faqs/faq-intro-to-biology.html>>.
 - 28 Remark by the authors: The basic level of text is linear and can be seen in most media, and the reader does not give much input into it. Second level is hypertext, where the reader can explore the text when he or she has an option. But in most games, there are so many options to do, that the concept of hypertext cannot explain the digital games and similar environments.
 - 29 AARSETH, E.: *Cybertext: Perspectives on Ergodic Literature*. Baltimore : The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997, p. 67.
 - 30 BLIZZARD ENTERTAINMENT: *StarCraft*. [digital game]. Irvine : Blizzard Entertainment, 1998.
 - 31 BLIZZARD ENTERTAINMENT: *Warcraft III: Reign of Chaos*. [digital game]. Irvine : Blizzard Entertainment, 2003.
 - 32 RIOT GAMES: *League of Legends*. [digital game]. Los Angeles : Riot Games, 2009.
 - 33 VALVE: *Dota 2*. [digital game]. Bellevue : Valve, 2013.
 - 34 NUTT, Ch.: *The Valve Way: Gabe Newell and Erik Johnson Speak*. [online]. [2020-01-15]. Available at: <https://www.gamasutra.com/view/feature/6471/the_valve_way_gabe_newell_and_.php?page=3>.
 - 35 For more information, see: SOTAMAA, O.: When the Game Is Not Enough: Motivations and Practices Among Computer Game Modding Culture. In *Games and Culture*, 2010, Vol. 5, No. 3, p. 239-255.
 - 36 BOHEMIA INTERACTIVE: *ARMA 2*. [digital game]. Prague : Bohemia Interactive, 2009.

(the original game) of new genres arising from mods. This is an argument against dismissing the idea of the biological evolution metaphor in genre evolution, as the relationship between the genres is much closer. But we need to understand evolution as a series of intricate relationships between species and their single representatives, and as a force of adaptation to the environment (where the environment is the digital games market), rather than a simplistic idea of survival of the fittest.

New Genre Key Features

As we discussed in the previous chapter, genre classification in digital games is mostly based on content (primarily on game mechanics). This approach follows a more objectivistic line, which has origins in the aristotelian/platonistic idea of genres as basically fixed sets which can be examined per se. There is no doubt about the importance of these criteria, but we argue that it is merely a prerequisite to becoming a new genre. As pointed out by Derrida, Bakhtin and their successors – the genre is mostly a discourse or a social construct, and there are many purely practical reasons behind their definitions or uses. In this chapter, we will discuss four key features based on these two lines of argument. In a content-based view the key features are: Category of genre merges/clusters games with similar traits, but some traits must differ. And for a discursive view the features are: Category of genre serves social purpose and it serves for commercial use.

Content in Games

It is clear that to call some group a genre, it must have some traits in common. But what traits should they be? As we showed in the previous chapter, one of the most recognized differentiating traits are game mechanics. We still have to keep in mind that “the traits that are shared do not necessarily share the same function”.³⁷ Therefore, to talk about a new genre, one must understand how the selected media type uses these traits, and how their use evolves over time. Even though it is a somewhat fluid concept and we cannot draw a strict line between core and minor mechanics, they can be analysed and discussed, and defined. L. Konzack³⁸ calls this gameplay and suggests we should focus on these attributes:

- Positions – this one is more closely related to players and society;
- Resources – the means by which the players are able to influence the game;
- Space – the space of the game, and also the space of the real world;
- Time – the time limit set for the game duration;
- Goal (sub-goals) – what is needed to win the game. Sub-goals are what are needed to partially reach the main goal;
- Obstacles – the challenge of the game comes from obstacles;
- Knowledge – open knowledge (i.e. rules), hidden knowledge (i.e. strategy of others), and random knowledge (i.e. rolling dice);
- Rewards/penalties – i.e., points, money, time, space or resources that may be won or lost during the game.

³⁷ COHEN, R.: History and Genre. In *New Literary History*, 1986, Vol. 17, No. 2, p. 207.

³⁸ KONZACK, L.: Computer Game Criticism: A Method for Computer Game Analysis. In MÄYRÄ, F. (ed.): *Proceedings of Computer Games and Digital Cultures Conference*. Tampere : Tampere University Press, 2002, p. 93-94.

M. Consalvo and N. Duton went deeper in their approach, and they created an inspirational set of questions to be asked about the game during qualitative research. They are based around four basic categories: Object inventory, Interface study, Interaction map, and Gameplay log.³⁹ These categories are not very useful in formal analysis though, as they do not cover topics like *metagame*⁴⁰ or time, which can strongly influence the way the game is played. On the other hand, overly formalistic approaches such as tools for classifications based on similar traits, by multidimensional typology of games,⁴¹ which is in many ways too formalistic, and seems too rigid for clustering or merging the genres, as more and more games are combinations of those types – for example many experimental games such as *Superhot*⁴² breaks the temporal dimension. The second key feature arises from the acknowledgment of the fact that “No text which is denominated ‘novel’, for example, has traits that will identify all texts within the class”.⁴³ But with digital games, where we create genres based on game mechanics, the situation gets a little bit tricky. The thing is, it is not so hard to basically copy all the game mechanics (or even simply copy the code), and add different visual and sound effects. This is usually done with simpler games. In popular language these are called clones, even though they are not absolutely similar.⁴⁴ The very word used exemplifies how the prime language considered in digital games is the game mechanics. That is also one of the reasons why we do not have genres such as Flappy-Bird-like, or Monument-Valley-like genre, even though there were many of them.

To stay with the evolutionary biology metaphor, the genre resembles more living organisms, which evolve over time, change, and adapt to the consumers expectations. And once in a while a new genre/species arises from these tweaks, but the evolution does not stop. New games in the new genre almost always change some minor mechanics. Sometimes they do not change the gameplay so much, but sometimes they can willingly embrace different aesthetics. One such example may be the difference between levelling systems in League of Legends and *Heroes of the Storm*⁴⁵. In League of Legends, heroes level up individually, which emphasizes more competitive play in the team. Meanwhile in *Heroes of the Storm* the whole team levels up together, which emphasizes more cooperative play. To conclude this chapter, we argue that when discussing if some category can be a new genre, we should examine the similarities and differences in the key representatives of said genre. The examples of methodological approaches from above serve mostly as inspiration, as their role is more useful in qualitative research focused on single games or competitions, not on identifying new classes. To determine if the class is or is not a new genre, first we need to discuss core game mechanics in general. The question we must ask is, whether we can create basic categories, in which we can draw down the key differences and similarities in game mechanics. These categories will differ from group to group, and it would be counterproductive to name all possible categories, as the nature of studying human creativity dictates, these categories are never going to be totally rigid and hence they must be created in context.

³⁹ CONSALVO, M., DUTTON, N.: Game analysis: Developing a methodological toolkit for the qualitative study of games. In *Game Studies*, 2006, Vol. 6, No. 1. [online]. [2020-03-20]. Available at: <http://gamestudies.org/0601/articles/consalvo_dutton#app1>.

⁴⁰ Remark by the authors: In example meta in MOBAs is arguably one of the strong reasons for their popularity.

⁴¹ AARSETH, E., SMEDSTAD, S. M., SUNNANÅ, L.: A Multidimensional Typology of Games. In RAESSENS, J., COPIER, M., GOLDSTIN, J., MÄYRÄ, F. (eds.): *DIGRA '03 – Proceedings of the 2003 DIGRA International Conference: Level Up*. Utrecht : Digital Games Research Association, 2003, p. 49-53.

⁴² SUPERHOT TEAM: *Superhot*. [digital game]. Lodz : Superhot Team, 2016.

⁴³ COHEN, R.: History and Genre. In *New Literary History*, 1986, Vol. 17, No. 2, p. 205.

⁴⁴ ARSENAULT, D.: Video Game Genre, Evolution and Innovation. In *Journal for Computer Game Culture*, 2009, Vol. 3, No. 2, p. 164. [online]. [2020-04-04]. Available at: <<https://www.eludamos.org/index.php/eludamos/article/view/vol3no2-3>>.

⁴⁵ BLIZZARD ENTERTAINMENT: *Heroes of the Storm*. [digital game]. Irvine : Blizzard Entertainment, 2015.

Discourse in the Culture

There are two somewhat opposing ideas about the role of genre in discourse. As A. J. Devitt points out: "a better understanding of genre may help us understand better how writers know when and what to revise".⁴⁶ M. M. Bakhtin also argues that "every significant genre is a complex system of means and methods for the conscious control and finalization of reality. (...) Human consciousness possesses a series of inner genres for seeing and conceptualizing reality. (...) The artist must learn to see reality with the eyes of the genre".⁴⁷ On the other hand, game journalist E. Johnson points out that "naming your genre, especially a young one, is just a tool to kind of help explain to customers what kind of game you have".⁴⁸ Both the author and the consumer live in the social world, and probably also in the discourse of the given media and culture they live in and so on. One game refers to another, and the genre rises from the 'discussion' between producers and consumers. R. Cohen argues that reasons for different groups of people (i.e., critics, authors, readers...) having interest in classification of media content differ.⁴⁹ He argues that we need to acknowledge the existence of genres in media, because "genres provide expectations for interpretations, and, a variant of this, genres provide conventions for interpretation".⁵⁰

We can see the same logic in digital games, where the genre also serves as a tool for consumers to know which other games the title of his or her interest refers to. This requires some knowledge on the side of the consumer, as "The only chance the player has to do this is by knowing the genre and thereby knowing what to expect".⁵¹ So there is no doubt that calling some new group of texts a new genre is the function of orientation on the consumer. But since the newly forming genres contain only a small amount of titles, they will not usually have separate categories of their own in shops, but they may i.e. have their own tag in online distribution platforms, so players can find similar games in the same category. These tags can help us conclude if we can talk about a new genre, as it shows what people consider a new genre.⁵² But as mentioned earlier, Devitt points out that we have to think in a product perspective when talking about genre.⁵³ Using the category of genre is crucial for marketing analysis. It defines how and on whom to focus the campaign. It also gives a common language to investors and creators. Imagine pitching a new RPG game, with the necessity of describing all the basic rules of the RPG genre. But how to pitch something, that has such different game mechanics that any genre criteria does not fit? Probably hardly with difficulty.

That might be one of the reasons why we recently see so many new genres in games arising from the indie or modding community. But creating only one mod is not sufficient to create a new genre, as "the prototypical work is a qualification ad hoc but not a priori"⁵⁴

46 DEVITT, A. J.: Generalizing about Genre: New Conceptions of an Old Concept. In *College Composition and Communication*, 1993, Vol. 44, No. 4, p. 582.

47 BAKHTIN, M.: *Speech Genres and Other Late Essays*. Austin : University of Texas, 1986, p. 133-134.

48 NUTT, Ch.: *The Valve Way: Gabe Newell and Erik Johnson Speak*. [online]. [2020-01-15]. Available at: <https://www.gamasutra.com/view/feature/6471/the_valve_way_gabe_newell_and_.php?page=3>.

49 COHEN, R.: History and Genre. In *New Literary History*, 1986, Vol. 17, No. 2, p. 205.

50 Ibidem, p. 210.

51 KONZACK, L.: Computer Game Criticism: A Method for Computer Game Analysis. In MÄYRÄ, F. (ed.): *Proceedings of Computer Games and Digital Cultures Conference*. Tampere : Tampere University Press, 2002, p. 97.

52 Remark by the authors: Considering of course, that the tags can be selected and added by users, as is the case in Steam.

53 DEVITT, A. J.: Generalizing about Genre: New Conceptions of an Old Concept. In *College Composition and Communication*, 1993, Vol. 44, No. 4, p. 574.

54 HOORN, J. F.: How is a Genre Created? Five Combinatory Hypotheses. In *Comparative Literature and Culture*, 2000, Vol. 2, No. 2, p. 3. [online]. [2020-04-21]. Available at: <<https://docs.lib.psu.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1070&context=clcweb>>.

without the involvement of larger companies, which can invest in game production value and marketing is not likely. We can see this in the rise of searches for the word MOBAs⁵⁵ one year after releasing League of Legends and *Heroes of Newerth*⁵⁶, two more advanced MOBAs, than the founding mods for StarCraft (Aeon of Strife) and Warcraft III: Reign of Chaos (Defence of the Ancients). Therefore, if we consider genres as "social contract between writer and particular public"⁵⁷ and that most digital games are commercial products or services, we argue that the other two important conditions for new genres in digital games are the social and commercial purpose of said genre.

Content: How Are Auto Battlers Played?

As we mentioned before, we are witnessing quick rises and falls of new forms of media. From what we could see auto battlers rose quickly from nearly nothing. They began as one custom game mode made for Dota 2 and for now we can define 5 auto battler games that have publicity and millions of players.⁵⁸ Auto battler merges genres such as strategy, chess, tower defence and elements of MOBA games (for *Dota Underlords* – Dota 2, for *Teamfight Tactics* – League of Legends). As we have seen before with MOBA games like League of Legends or Dota 2, which both came from custom games, auto battlers follow the same line. We set out to list the *core mechanics*, the common elements of these games, to point them out, to show there are common mechanics, but that these games aren't clones of one another:

1. Games offer a chessboard or a modified chessboard where players deploy their champions that fight with other player's champions or neutral monsters.
2. Champions do mostly have one main ability that is used after the mana of that champion is at maximum. Mana is gained after auto attacking an enemy or receiving damage from enemy champions. Players can buy champions that are of two or three classes, which can be combined to receive bonuses. Champions can be levelled up by buying three of the same champion.
3. Players may acquire items that may be used in battle for various purposes.
4. Every player has an avatar with hit points. Each avatar's main use is to deploy champions and cannot be used while duelling (they don't participate in battle) except in *Dota Underlords* where an avatar can fight and also has its own abilities and HP. After an avatar receives the amount of damage that brings it to zero hit points, the avatar dies and the player cannot participate in duels anymore. The game continues for other players until one avatar (or player) remains. This player is the winner of the game.
5. The game has rounds, during which players duel with each other. The winner of the round gives damage to the loser. The amount of damage is dependent on the number of rounds that were played and champions that haven't died on the winner's side.
6. All these games use some kind of currency, like gold pieces, that can be used for buying new champions or experience points which raise the level of the player. The player with the higher level has more champions that can be placed on the chessboard.

55 MOBA. [online]. [2020-03-15]. Available at: <<https://trends.google.com/trends/explore?date=all&q=MOBA>>.

56 S2 GAMES, FROSTBURN STUDIOS: *Heroes of Newerth*. [digital game]. Singapore : Frostburn Studios, 2010.

57 COHEN, R.: History and Genre. In *New Literary History*, 1986, Vol. 17, No. 2, p. 208.

58 GOSLIN, A.: *Which auto battler should you play: Teamfight Tactics, Underlords, or Dota 2 Auto Chess*. [online]. [2020-04-14]. Available at: <<https://www.polygon.com/2019/6/27/18759592/auto-battler-teamfight-tactics-underlords-dota-2-auto-chess-differences>>.

7. Auto battlers may be played in various modes such as Normal or Ranked.

Some minor deviations from this basic concept may (and probably will) appear in future. It is possible that this list of core game mechanics will need to be updated, but at this time, these core mechanics are what all auto battlers have in common. That's also the reason why we have decided to use these mechanics in our short case studies for the most popular auto battlers we could find.⁵⁹ S. Malliet suggests an approach of qualitative content analysis of games based on topics of interests or elements to discuss, from which 5 are related to gameplay: Complexity of controls, Game goals, Character and object structure, Balance between user input and pre-programmed rules, and Spatial properties of the game world.⁶⁰ This categorization led us to adapt 7 categories to compare the differences between individual games referred to as auto battlers. The categories are: *Board*, *Items*, *Time*, *Winning/losing conditions*, *Start*, *Characters* and *Meta*.

Dota Auto Chess (Drodo Studio)

Auto chess game mod for Dota 2 has a QR code in the loading screen which takes the player to the google app store or apple store.

Table 1: Dota Auto Chess analysis

Board	Dota Auto Chess made by Drodo Studio as a custom game mod for Dota 2 uses the same chessboard as traditional Chess. Players use only 4 x 8 rows of tiles from 8x8 available on the chessboard. The other half of the chessboard is used by various monsters or enemy players in symmetric multiplayer mode.
Items	The game starts with a shopping phase in which the player buys champions from the shop. In the first three rounds they have to fight creeps (small units which may drop items that can be used for players units making them stronger). Each player may drop 26 various items Overtime, 18 items can be used to make 25 different items by making the right combination. ⁶¹ Drop rate increases as the game progresses and players fight stronger creeps.
Time	In the game, there are 12 waves of different monsters. Within waves of creeps players duel each other with their champion deck on the chessboard. After losing a duel, players lose some percentage of hitpoints. The last player remaining in the game is the winner.
Start	A player starts the game with 1 gold which may be used for buying his first champion. Every following round the player gets passive income. Gold can be used for buying new champions or increasing a player's experience level that indicates how many champions he or she can have on the chessboard.
Characters	Champions used in this game mode are the same as in Dota 2, their looks, abilities and names are the same. Champions that are being used on players' chessboards have two of X classes. Players can make their champions stronger by combining champions in the same class. Players can make champions stronger also by buying the same units that he or she already has. Three same champions merge and create a champion which is level 2 with higher damage and durability. Players can also make level 3 champions by merging two same level 2 champions.

59 Remark by the authors: All mechanics and all Auto battler studies – as of October 2019.

60 MALIET, S.: Adapting the Principles of Ludology to the Method of Video Game Content Analysis. In *Game Studies*, 2007, Vol. 7, No. 1. [online]. [2020-04-26]. Available at: <<http://gamestudies.org/0701/articles/malliet>>.

61 *Items*. [online]. [2020-01-12] Available at: <<https://dotaautochess.gamepedia.com/Items>>.

Meta	This game mod may be played as 'normal' game when nothing happens after losing or winning, as in ranked games, by gaining 6 different ranks inspired by chess figures such as pawn, knight, bishop, castle, king and queen. Under these ranks players can achieve sub-ranks that are numbered from 1 to 10. Once the player hits the highest sub-rank, the player is moved to the next highest rank.
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Source: own processing

Auto Chess (Dragonest Game)

Table 2: Auto Chess analysis

Board	Uses the same chessboard as traditional Chess uses. Players use only 4 x 8 rows of tiles from 8x8 available on the chessboard. Other half of the chessboard is used by various monsters or enemy players in symmetric multiplayer mode. This is the same as for Dota Auto Chess.
Items	This auto battler game shares most of the mechanics as the previous game. Items can be used for champions, which gives them abilities.
Time	This variation of auto battler puts 8 players together into a match which is 2 less than in Dota Auto Chess or Dota Underlords or Teamfight tactics. Waves of monsters and battling phases remain the same.
Winning/Losing Conditions	Game mechanics aren't changed and works exactly the same as their previous mod for Dota 2. Last man standing is the winner. Player who loses all hit points dies and cannot participate in the match.
Start	Player starts the game with 1 gold which may be used for buying his first champion. Every following round the player gets passive income. Gold can be used for buying new champions or increasing a player's experience level that indicates how many champions he or she can have on the chess board. This is also the same as before in Dota Auto Chess mode.
Characters	Champions used in this variation of this new game class are inspired by the champions in Dota 2. They share the same design and also abilities, their looks are a little different but players who recognize Dota 2 champions can easily name them. The mechanics of merging and levelling up remains the same as for Dota Auto Chess.
Meta	This game may be played in four different styles. In the Classic Mode 8 chess players fight on their own using heroes randomly drawn from the shared card pool to create their own formation. Then the chess pieces will fight automatically. Defend the offense from opponents and survive to the end. In Duo Mode two players share their health and fight against other 3 opposing teams. Fantasy mode is rotated weekly. It changes the game rules. ⁶² In the Quick Mode player doesn't have to purchase experience points, there is no gold interest. Creeps are omitted, so they aren't there to give items. As long as you survive to Round 15, you will have 7 rare pre-combined items. The way the items drop on the board is similar to the Creep rounds in Classic Mode. The winner can choose one of the three options, while the loser can only get one random item. ⁶³

Source: own processing

62 *Introduction of Auto Chess*. [online]. [2020-04-12]. Available at: <<https://ac.dragonnest.com/en/game/introduction>>.

63 *Development Log: Quick Mode*. [online]. [2020-04-12]. Available at: <<https://ac.dragonnest.com/en/news/detail/e5b6992e4b9>>.

Dota Underlords (Valve)

Table 3: Dota Underlords analysis

Board	Dota Underlords uses a traditional 8x8 chessboard, the concept of the game and the mechanics are the same as with auto chess custom game for Dota 2.
Items	Items may drop from monsters as in the other types of this auto battler game. They can be combined and added to the players' champions giving them more power.
Time	8 players duelling each other until the last one remains. Game has the same mechanics as other auto battlers, so planning and battling phases remain the same.
Winning/Losing Conditions	Game mechanics aren't changed and work exactly the same as their previous mod for Dota 2. Last man standing is the winner. Player who loses all hit points dies and cannot participate in the match.
Start	At the start of the game the player has 1 gold which should be used to buy the first champion which will battle monsters.
Characters	In other auto battler games players have one character which doesn't fight alongside his champions, but Dota Underlords made one huge change in mechanics giving players an option to choose his or her own 'underlord' before the match which fights alongside the champions 'crew'. Underlords have their own talents that bring different playstyles into the game. This game also uses champions from Dota 2 and the levelling up and shopping phases remain the same.
Meta	In Dota Underlords players may play normal games and also ranked games with various rankings such as: upstart, grifter, outlaw, enforcer, smuggler, lieutenant, boss, big boss, lord of white spire. Each rank badge below Lord of White Spire is further divided into five tiers, indicated by colours and roman numerals. Green I, Blue II, Red III, Pink IV, Gold V. ⁶⁴

Source: own processing

Teamfight Tactics (Riot Games)

This game shares the League of Legends client where players may choose which game mode or map, they want to play. Teamfight Tactics is one of the possibilities.

Table 4: Teamfight Tactics analysis

Board	The board of Teamfight Tactics doesn't resemble chess, as the game uses hexagons instead of squares. It has 6 rows with 7 tiles each, and the player uses only half of them – 3 rows with 7 tiles each. Unlike in Auto Chess, Teamfight tactics don't start with the shopping phase.
Items	Items may drop from monsters that players fight. Items can be found also on champions that are around the carousel.
Time	10 players duelling each other until the last one remains. The game has the same mechanics as other auto battlers, so planning and battling phases remain the same. (mobile version of this game has 8 duelling players, but the game is in early access so it may change before launching the app)

64 Ranked. [online]. [2020-04-06] Available at: <<https://dotaunderlords.gamepedia.com/Ranked>>.

Winning/Losing Conditions	Last man standing is the winner. Player who loses all hit points dies and cannot participate in the match.
Start	Players start around a carousel that contains champions with items on them. After a few seconds players can pick one of them and if the player won't pick, he or she gets one at random. Players are then teleported to their own chess boards and the game starts with the first wave of minions. In this round the player may drop items, gold or champions. After this round, shops appear and players may buy another champion. In every preparing phase players can buy, sell, merge or move champions around the board. As in Auto Chess champions that players buy are level 1 and they're levelled by the same mechanics.
Characters	This auto battler game uses champions from League of Legends. Mechanics about merging and levelling up champions remains the same.
Meta	This game mod may be also played as a ranked game, with gaining 6 different ranks inspired by ranks used in League of Legends, containing iron, bronze, silver, gold, platinum, diamond, master, grandmaster and the challenger tier. Under these ranks players can achieve sub-ranks that are numbered from 1 to 4 (only ranks from iron to diamond). Once the player hits the highest sub-rank, the player is moved to the next highest rank.

Source: own processing

Chess Rush (Tencent)

Chess Rush by chinese game giant Tencent uses the same mechanics as other auto chess/auto battler games including chessboard, shopping phase, items used for players champions, game flow or other rules. Graphic design of the games is more colourful as it's common in games made for the chinese market.

Table 5: Chess Rush analysis

Board	Uses the same chessboard as traditional Chess uses. Players use only 4x8 rows of tiles from 8x8 available on the chessboard. Other half of the chessboard is used by various monsters or enemy players in symmetric multiplayer mode. Which is the same as for mostly all other auto battler games.
Items	This auto battler game shares most of the mechanics as the previous games. Items can be used for champions, which gives them abilities.
Time	This variation of auto battler puts 8 players together into a match which is 2 less than in Dota Auto Chess or Dota Underlords or Teamfight Tactics. Waves of monsters and battling phases remain the same.
Conditions	Game mechanics aren't changed and work exactly the same as other auto battler games. Last man standing is the winner. Player who loses all hit points dies and cannot participate in the match anymore.
Start	Player starts the game with 1 gold which may be used for buying his first champion. Every following round player gets passive income. Gold can be used for buying new champions or increasing a player's experience level that indicates how many champions he or she can have on the chess board. This is also the same as before in Dota Auto Chess mode.
Characters	Champions used in this game are quite similar as some League of Legends and Dota 2 champions, but their names are different. The mechanics of merging and levelling up remains the same as for Dota Auto Chess.

There are two modes in Chess Rush. Turbo Mode that reduces 40-minute play time into a mere 10 minutes. It achieves this by reducing your health and increasing the mana you gain each round. The result is a much faster-paced experience that doesn't actually compromise the gameplay. It's the exact same experience, just faster. So all of the strategies players developed so far will still work.⁶⁵ Co-op mode will take four teams of two and allow them to battle it out on the board for supremacy. To make things even more interesting Tencent is launching another update for Co-op mode on August 15th that will bump those two-person teams to four, making for a more intense match as it'll be 4v4 instead of 2v2.⁶⁶

Source: own processing

Other Smaller Auto Battlers

Currently, we can see various 'auto chess-like' games on the google app store and app store for iPhones. At this time thousands of players are playing auto battler games every day. All the games share the same or mostly the same mechanics of the auto battler. We can find some auto battler games in the Google Play Store such as Magic chess bang with more than one million downloads by kaka games, Tactical monsters rumble arena with more than one million downloads, Arena of evolution with more than 500 000 downloads, Heroes Auto Chess⁶⁷ with 100,000 downloads, or games such as Auto Chess War⁶⁸ or Heroes of Chess⁶⁹.

Discourse: Rise of Auto Battlers

Since the usage of the Steam platform, we focused primarily on the reports from this platform for games like Dota Underlords and an original custom game Dota Auto Chess. This game can be played through Dota 2 Arcade (Custom games.). The most popular games can be filtered in the arcade browse menu. We can see 10 of the most popular custom or arcade games for this week. The number of 'playing now' is variable that is changing quickly so we decided to identify the numbers of subscribers to individual custom games sorted by the most popular. The most popular game of the week is custom game called *Custom Hero Chaos* (summoner online) with 1,021,579 subscriptions, the second most popular is Dota Auto Chess with 9,736,327 (these numbers are not correct??) subscriptions, other games in the filtered view have around one million subscribers, but the game called Overthrow 2.0 is the only one that has more than 3 million subscribers. If we filter games as TOP rated (all time) then Dota Auto Chess is at the moment in the first

⁶⁵ *Chess Rush Review – Turbo Mode Makes All the Difference*. [online]. [2020-04-12]. Available at: <<https://www.droidgamers.com/2019/07/06/chess-rush-review-turbo-mode-makes-all-the-difference/>>.

⁶⁶ *Co-op Mode Is Now Live in Chess Rush. Additional Mode Coming*. [online]. [2020-04-12]. Available at: <<https://www.androidheadlines.com/2019/08/co-op-mode-is-now-live-in-chess-rush-additional-mode-coming.html>>.

⁶⁷ *Heroes Auto Chess – Free RPG Chess Game*. [online]. [2020-04-12]. Available at: <https://play.google.com/store/apps/details?id=com.onetongames.hac&hl=en_US>.

⁶⁸ *Auto chess War*. [online]. [2020-04-12]. Available at: <https://play.google.com/store/apps/details?id=com.phoenix.autochess&hl=en_US>.

⁶⁹ *Heroes of Chess (Early Access)*. [online]. [2020-04-12]. Available at: <https://play.google.com/store/apps/details?id=com.stegobubbles.heroesofchess&hl=en_US>.

80 games of 4,000. We found in over 80 games only 2 games that had more than 4 million subscribers which was *Touhou Avatar Dream Battle* and *Skillshot Wars*, and only one game that had more subscribers than Dota Auto Chess which was *Overthrow* with more than 10 million subscribers. *Overthrow* is a game mod created by Dota 2 Official in 2015. These numbers show that Dota Auto Chess is one of the most successful game mods created for Dota 2 games.⁷⁰

Dota Underlords was released in June 2019 for Steam and also mobile devices with Android and iOS made by Valve. On Steam Spy we found that 10 million users own this title. On Steam players may use tags alongside developers and moderators as we mentioned before. Dota Underlords was 344 times tagged as an auto battler alongside tags such as free-to-play, strategy, casual or tactical.⁷¹ On the Android store we can find this game in strategy, tactics, offline, single player and stylised categories, but if we look at the 'about' we can find in the description that Dota Underlords is a 'strategy battler' or also an 'auto battler'.⁷² Teamfight Tactics made by Riot Games do not have much official public data for their games since Teamfight Tactics is running under the Riot games client. Various pages indicate that Teamfight Tactics has 33 million of players monthly.⁷³ Teamfight Tactics can be also found on Google Play Store and on App Store, but currently it's still in the beta version. The name of the game contains 'strategy game' but in the description of the game the developers call it also an auto battler.⁷⁴ For other auto battlers downloadable via App Store or Google Play Store there exist only numbers of downloads which are more than 5 million.

The popularity of auto battler games can be seen also on various sites which are used for community tournaments such as 5v5 or 1v1 mod for League of Legends, Dota 2 or other famous games. Since the rise of popularity of auto battlers there exist tournaments for these games, even though these games were still in beta versions at the end of 2019. On the site Battlefy we can find tens of Teamfight Tactics tournaments⁷⁵ or also for Dota Underlords on ESL Play.⁷⁶ These community events are sponsored mostly from private sponsors, but for Auto Chess Mobile they made an immense tournament based in China with a prize pool worth 1 million dollars. We could also track some events that made an impact on the growth of auto battler games. The first big impact made was the release date of Dota Auto Chess on January 4th 2019⁷⁷ when searches started to increase in google trends. The next thing happened a week later on January 11th when subreddit Auto Chess was created on the Reddit site,⁷⁸ where a lot of gamers can comment, ask or give advice. On January 14th, we tracked an article talking about auto chess popularity around players on Kotaku.⁷⁹ On February 10th a subreddit of the Auto Chess Mobile game was created.⁸⁰ Following this trend on May 8th, 2019 a subreddit about Teamfight Tactics⁸¹ was created

⁷⁰ Remark by the authors: All these informations shown, such as subscribers, names of the custom (or arcade) games can be find in Dota 2 game under the Arcade subpage in menu.

⁷¹ *Dota Underlords*. [online]. [2020-04-02]. Available at: <<https://steamspy.com/app/1046930>>.

⁷² *Dota Underlords – Google Play*. [online]. [2020-04-02]. Available at: <<https://play.google.com/store/apps/details?id=com.valvesoftware.underlords&hl=sk>>.

⁷³ *Teamfight Tactics has 33 million players a month*. [online]. [2020-04-03]. Available at: <<https://www.pcgamesn.com/teamfight-tactics/player-count>>.

⁷⁴ *Teamfight Tactics: League of Legends Strategy Game*. [online]. [2020-04-03]. Available at: <<https://play.google.com/store/apps/details?id=com.riotgames.league.teamfighttactics&hl=sk>>.

⁷⁵ *Showing tournaments for teamfight tactics*. [online]. [2020-04-03]. Available at: <<https://battlefy.com/search/tournaments/game/teamfight-tactics/>>.

⁷⁶ *Dota Underlords global*. [online]. [2020-04-03]. Available at: <<https://play.eslgaming.com/dotaunderlords/global>>.

⁷⁷ TACK, D.: *What Is Dota Auto Chess and Why Is Everyone Playing It?*. [online]. [2020-04-04]. Available at: <<https://www.gameinformer.com/2019/01/14/what-is-dota-auto-chess-and-why-is-everyone-playing-it>>.

⁷⁸ *AutoChess*. [online]. [2020-04-04]. Available at: <<https://www.reddit.com/r/AutoChess/>>.

⁷⁹ GRAYSON, N.: *Dota 2 Custom Mode Is Either One of Steam's Top Games Or A Glitch*. [online]. [2020-04-04]. Available at: <<https://kotaku.com/dota-2-custom-mode-is-either-one-of-steams-top-games-or-1831749731>>.

⁸⁰ *AutoChess Mobile*. [online]. [2020-04-05]. Available at: <<https://www.reddit.com/r/AutoChessMobile/>>.

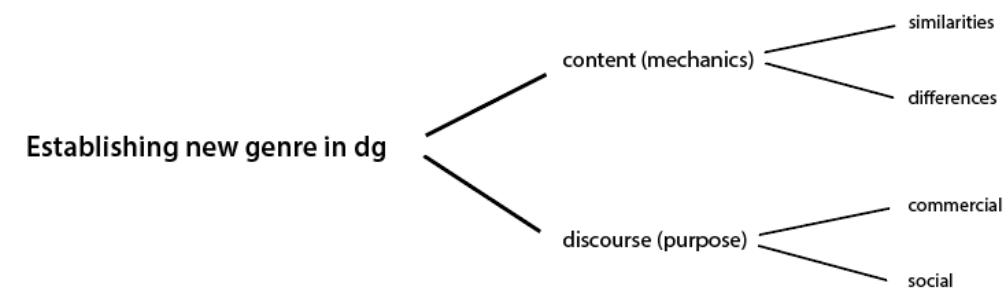
⁸¹ *Teamfight Tactics*. [online]. [2020-04-05]. Available at: <<https://www.reddit.com/r/TeamfightTactics/>>.

also and on May 10th, 2019 a subreddit about Dota Underlords.⁸² Dota Underlords was released on June 20th.⁸³ On the 25th of June a Kotaku article named auto chess as a new game genre. May 26th was the date when Teamfight Tactics was released.⁸⁴ A WCCFTECH article about Tencent releasing the auto battler game Chess Rush was made public on July 3rd.⁸⁵ On July 10th, a separate article was created on Wikipedia about auto battlers.⁸⁶ An article about auto battlers on rock paper shotgun was published on August 1st, 2019,⁸⁷ and on August 22nd was added to Wikipedia auto battler as a strategy game videogame subgenre.⁸⁸ Right now, if we google search Teamfight Tactics, Auto Chess or Dota Underlords google offers us a quick overview and we can see that all these games have their genre as auto battler. For now Tencents Chess Rush doesn't have any genre assigned to it.

Auto battlers are free to play games which may also be the reason why they became so popular, although all these games offer some kind of purchases such as microtransactions or battle passes for seasons. These passes and transactions for changes of looks of avatars or chess boards or even some effects so far do not allow anyone to 'pay to win'.

Conclusion

To discuss whether some new class of media is a genre, we had to dive into genre theory, and the reasons why we use genres in the first place. We concluded that discussions about genre have two distinctive approaches – one oriented more on the content of the medium and the other more on the social discourse surrounding the medium. This distinction is not strict though, and we used it more as a guide to create four key features of the new genre in digital games. The first two are content based, and they focus on the similarities and differences in the mechanics of the games. The second two are based on discourse, which can serve a social, or a commercial purpose. These two purposes work in harmony with each other, and by reviewing the games mechanics and tracking the most popular and trendsetting pages, we can prove or disprove if there a new genre is imminent.



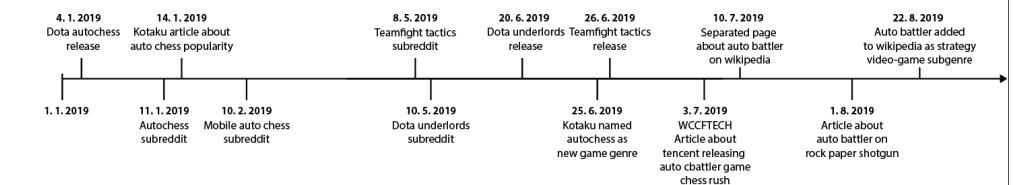
Picture 1: Conditions of new genres in digital games.

Source: own processing

- 82 *Dota Underlords on Reddit*. [online]. [2020-04-05]. Available at: <<https://www.reddit.com/r/underlords/>>.
- 83 *Dota Underlords*. [online]. [2020-04-05]. Available at: <https://store.steampowered.com/app/1046930/Dota_Underlords/>.
- 84 GRAYSON, N.: *A Guide to Auto Chess, 2019's Most Popular New Game Genre*. [online]. [2020-04-05]. Available at: <<https://kotaku.com/a-guide-to-auto-chess-2019-s-most-popular-new-game-gen-1835820155>>.
- 85 GANTI, A.: *Tencent Gets in on the Auto Chess Bandwagon With a Game Called Chess Rush*. [online]. [2020-04-06]. Available at: <<https://wccftech.com/tencent-auto-chess-rush/>>.
- 86 *Auto battler*. [online]. [2020-04-06]. Available at: <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Auto_battler>.
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For our analysis, we selected the class of games called auto battler (at the beginning called auto chess), to show how this can be done. We selected these games, because they are some of the newest digital game classes of recent years, and also because they work as a great example of the role of participatory culture in digital games. We examined several of the most popular games in this category. First, we searched for similarities and we showed that we can find at least 7 core game mechanics that can be considered crucial for a game to be called an auto battler. Then we made small case studies of these games and showed the minor differences in 7 categories based on the core mechanics to show how these games differ in details based on gameplay, and therefore they cannot be considered clones. As we pointed out in previous chapters, the concept of core mechanics and minor ones is somewhat fluid. Therefore, we will not provide any table of conditions, or some other 'simple solution' based on visualisation. If we want to discuss content in relation to game genre, we cannot rely on simplifications; we need to use language, in the form of one paragraph:

The auto battler class shares the same core mechanics for board, items, time, winning/losing conditions, start, characters and meta. All auto battlers we tested have in common phases where players start with some amount of hitpoints, duel each other and then fight until the last player remains. In all auto battlers we can find the same mechanics of 'buying', 'deploying', 'levelling up the champions' or avatar. The minor differences can be found in the avatar for Dota Underlords which fights alongside the champions, Teamfight Tactics, which uses a hexagonal instead of square 'chessboard' and uses a 'carousel' round for players to pick new champions with item on them, or auto battlers for smartphones which have some kind of 'turbo mode' for quicker gameplay. From the discursive perspective, we showed how the first of the games became popular in several weeks. The first subreddit dedicated to Auto Chess appeared just four days after the game release, and most other researched games had subreddits created even before they were released. More importantly, only half a year after releasing the first game (and with only four games/mods out in total) journalists started to call this new type of games a genre, and an article about Auto Chess appeared on Wikipedia. We can also see how tags on Steam started to appear, and now we can find more and more games marked with the label auto chess in the store. With its monetary free-to-play model, most of the games are no doubt a commercial product also. This timeline shows how the discourse surrounding the new class evolved.



Picture 2: Auto Battler appearance timeline

Source: own processing

Based on these notes, we can conclude that auto battlers are a new genre. A genre that proves, in digital games, the role of participatory culture is much more important, as it can not only create new particular contents, but also totally new and unexpected forms or classes, such as genres. The aim of this paper is to widen the discussions about game genres. We argue that there are no 'shortcuts' to truly understand how they function. We have to get rid of rigid criteria or deeply abstract constructs. Genre, just as any other category has a base in objective properties, but the meaning only becomes clear within the culture.

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