

4. How have television and new media (e.g., Internet, video games) affected our understanding of genre? Should we think of genre in terms of media specificity, or should genre categories be unified across all moving-image media? Or both?

Mittell: Genres certainly vary across media, but cross-media influences can be quite significant. Horror games, films, and TV shows have different norms and cultural meanings, but as a specific change emerges in a given medium, it will often ripple across media and even into related genres. More important than medium specificity is historical and contextual specificity – how a genre works in a given time and place is central to our understanding of the field.

Ruston: I think the immediate effect new media has had on genre studies is to re-emphasize formal characteristics and interface methods: genres such as “Spatial Annotation Project,” “First Person Shooter,” “Massively Multi-player Online Game” or “Hyperfiction” tell us more about how the participant/reader/viewer engages with the project than about theme and content as genres such as “Western” or “Science Fiction Adventure” or “Horror” do. In part this is because there are a variety of modes of participant interaction in new media projects, and understanding these interface and design characteristics is a critical element of thoroughly understanding new media. Thus, whereas in film the reception mode (theatrical projection) is quite consistent across all projects leading to categorization first by formal traits, thematic content, or narrative structure, new media projects tend to be categorized first by interaction mode because that is the first zone of unfamiliarity encountered by audiences. Second, the interaction mode is the first layer of meaning construction available for analysis to the critic, and significantly impacts questions such as narrative structure, modes of engagement, etc.

Suggesting that some kind of “unity” of genre categories is a possible goal overlooks both the value of genre as a critical tool and the origin of genres. Genres don’t arise through edict or decree, but rather they are the discursive product of audiences, creators, marketers, distributors, and critics. Thus, it may serve both fans’ and marketers’ purposes to discuss Resident Evil as a transmedia horror genre franchise, but a critic may find the video game genre categories of First Person Shooter and Third Person Shooter important when analyzing the various titles within the Resident Evil game franchise.

Shetley: Both, clearly. Horror remains recognizably horror, whether it appears on TV, film, or in a graphic novel; at the same time, any graphic novel is in some ways more like any other graphic novel than it is like any film. Genre theory needs to take account of both these kinds of relatedness. The proliferation of new media may help us to understand better what is specific to particular media, and what is transportable between them. Without positing that any medium has an essence, one may still note that some forms seem better adapted to certain media than others; the “talking heads” format works well on television, much less so in film. Tracking the transformations of genres through different media will help us understand better the contours of possibility (at least at the present time) within each medium.