

Is it a survival horror, an action horror or a *Metal Gear Solid 3*-related title? The categorization of *Resident Evil 4* from gamers' point of view

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Generic categorization originated in literary disciplines. Aristotle (1922) was the first author to establish a generic theory focused on fictional works in verse (Ford 2002, 4-5). He distinguished four genres of works based on formal properties: epic, tragedy, comedy, and parody. The four categories are considered heterogeneous: a text cannot belong to both tragedy and comedy. This classification has several stated objectives. First, to give specific writing advice for each genre – you don't write an epic the same way you write a parody, since the two do not try to produce the same effects on the audience. Secondly, the classification establishes a hierarchy of value between the categories. Aristotle glorifies tragedies, and even more so epics, while comedy and parody are considered less prestigious. Thirdly, his classification allows works within the same genre to be compared to gauge their respective success (Schaeffer 1989; Genette 1979). Finally, and it is not so much an objective as it is a social and epistemological stance, Aristotle takes generic labels and distinctions commonly used by the population (Griffith 2013, 15-16) and pairs them with scholarly definitions. Thus, he addresses his *Poetics* as a more intellectual way to understand and classify literary works.

Today, these particularities continue to guide most studies using generic categories, regardless of the medium in question. Obviously, recent research centered on genres questions knows these aporias and seeks to distance itself from unrealistic heterogeneous and timeless categorization. However, in literature and cinema, as well as in video games studies, genres are common labels used freely, without thinking too much about their definitions. In fact, genres often serve as the basis for hermeneutic consideration in papers that don't focus on works categorization (for example, to quickly describe a game in a corpus). So, researchers frequently assert

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their own categories as “true” scientific statement without noticing that their uses straighten generic labels.

What is more, it leads to the perception that achieving a perfectly balanced system, in which each genre can fit perfectly alongside the others and naturally embrace each new work, is a scientific goal *per se*. However, even though such classification systems remain useful for heuristic or hermeneutic purposes, they rarely take all existing works into account and often focus on a few well-known samples of a particular genre. Furthermore, they have sometimes broader flaws that allow associations between works and genres never related in the discourses around the media (Arsenault 2011, 93-104).

This brief critique of formal and structuralist systems highlights one last legacy of Aristotle: generic research has often focused only on the categorizations made by researchers, with very little questioning of the actual circulation and uses of categorical labels in everyday life and the discourses of a broader audience. However, for several decades, despite the presence of authorial and editorial discourses (often guided by commercial interests, see Therrien 2015), gaming communities have tended to use their own codes to classify games, first in clubs and through exchanges in specialized magazines, then through online social networks. Such discourse is worthy of study as it reveals categories and links between works that future considerations tend to smooth over or erase. Furthermore, considering the players' discourse leads us to reconsider the concept of genre, which appears to be very vague for most people. In fact, it seems clearer to speak of “categories” in a broader sense, understood as “a collection of at least two videogames that appears in a discourse” (Surinx 2025).

This presentation aims to revisit the categorization of *Resident Evil 4* (Capcom 2005) in online discussions among French-speaking gamers. Indeed, this game is often referred to as a turning point in the series, which shifted from games focused on a horror experience to a more action-oriented gameplay. For researchers, this case is also representative of a transition from the classical survival horror genre to the action-horror genre (see Perron 2018).

Our investigations focused on several discursive formats spread across multiple sites: tests and forums on the specialized JV site, reviews on the Steam sales site, and Wikipedia pages and forums. Our study is grounded in semiotics and rhetoric and uses manual and qualitative methodology. For cases involving interactions between multiple participants, we use tools inspired by co-enunciation, over-enunciation, and under-enunciation as defined by Rabatel (2005; 2012). The corpus is analyzed until saturation – when it no longer reveals any new cases (Derèze 2009). Our goal is to determine the labels used, their nature (thematic, mechanical, related to a period, related to an artistic style...), their function when used (to include or exclude a game, historical, evaluative, recommendation...), and how a label is retained in an interaction.

Our early results show that even if RE4's affiliation to survival horror is debated, the action-horror label appeared lately in players' discourses. Also, we noticed that the term “action” is inconsistently used to refer to a real category (“RE4 is/is not an action game”) or a simple characteristic of the game (“There is more action in RE4”). In fact, right after the game's release, most discussions question RE4's belonging to the rest of the saga. Players rarely compare it to non-related games or series released at the

same time which have comparable features. For example, a few discourses make a connection with *Metal Gear Solid 3: Snake Eater* (Konami 2004) due to the survival dimension of both games. Some categories also focus on the position of the camera and show that players are not familiar with the third-person shooter (TPS) label, which is quite common nowadays to qualify *RE4*. In fact, the distinction between TPS and FPS appears to be more recent, and *RE4* was considered an FPS for a few years, probably because of its similarity with shooter games that allow to aim precisely with a controller. Among non-strictly generic categories, we also found several labels or expressions related to the consoles used. Indeed, certain players value the platform, notably judging that some of them do not offer the “true” *RE4* experience.

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