

Interface Games as Microgenre: Definition and Thematic Investigation

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INTRODUCTION

Digital user interfaces are central to everyday life in contemporary capitalism. Laptops, phones, tablets and television screens all have user interfaces, and they are the main way many of us work, watch, read, socialise and play (Ash 2015, Galloway 2012, Hansen 2012, Jorgensen 2013). It is unsurprising, then, that there has been a recent spate of games that foreground user interfaces as central to everyday life. Remediating user interfaces, often from non-games software (Bolter and Grusin 2000), these games turn fictional computers and phones into playful environments, as players send emails, trawl through files, use software, and hack systems to play. They use what Krampe et al. (2024) refer to as “metareferential interfaces”, or “interfaces about interfaces” (739), to self-reflexively highlight the centrality of user interfaces to digital software and videogames in general. While there are examples in the literature discussing these games individually (e.g. Nicoll 2024, Bakk 2021, Wood 2017), there has been no substantive attempt to outline how remediating interfaces create meaning and play across all these games, often in ways that signal directly towards the situatedness of user interfaces within contemporary capitalism.

In this paper, we offer one of the first attempts to define and theorise these games as an emerging genre—or “microgenre” (Rehak 2007, Stevens and O’Donnell 2020)—we call the “interface game”. As we will show, interface games are a diverse microgenre that refer to a wide variety of themes, and which comment on our relationship to user interfaces. In our research, we have identified more than fifty interface games, with well-known examples including *Her Story* (Sam Barlow 2015), *Telling Lies* (Sam Barlow 2019) *Emily is Away* (Kyle Seeley 2015) and *Hypnospace Outlaw* (Tendershoot 2019). Beyond these examples, there are many that exist on the periphery of the games industry (Keogh 2023), created by solo developers and distributed on the independent games platform itch.io, as it is a significant emerging genre in hobbyist and independent games design.

Discussing both the larger and niche examples, this paper will define interface games as a microgenre. Microgenre refers to “the classification of increasingly niche-marketed worlds in popular music, fiction, television and the internet” (Stevens and O’Donnell 2020, 1) that have proliferated through digital platforms. Examining microgenres allows us to make “micro-connections among cultural artifacts” (Stevens and O’Donnell 2020, 1), creating nuance in discussions about culture by unravelling the smaller, under-examined trends in media production. Via Frow’s (2006) theorisation of “generic cues”—ways of implicating a genre or way of reading that is immanent to the text’s form—we outline the formal features of the microgenre and show how interface games are uniquely suited to consider the socio-political nature of user interfaces (Galloway, 2012). In doing so, we forward the importance of generic analysis in games studies, as well as the usefulness of examining under-examined and hyper-niche game genres.

We use this generic analysis to highlight four thematic preoccupations in the games we identified: surveillance, nostalgia, digital identity and digital horror. The first theme, surveillance, includes games like *Her Story* and *The Operator* (Bureau 81 2024) that force the player to confront the surveillance that occurs through the user interface, as well as the labour that underpins it. The second theme, nostalgia, utilises imaginary software and hardware in games like *Hypnospace Outlaw* and *Moida Mansion* (Lucas Pope 2024) to both nostalgically invoke early computer histories, while challenging conventional historical narratives around perpetual technological progression. The third theme involves the interrogation of digital identities—especially by queer developers—through games like *Secret Little Haven* (Hummingwarp Interactive 2018) and *A Normal Lost Phone* (Accidental Queens 2017), which consider how our social lives and identity-formation are mediated through user interfaces. Finally, the fourth theme of digital horror involves games like *Pony Island* (Daniel Mullins Games 2016) and *Basilisk 2000* (KIRA 2023), and considers the uncanny underpinnings of interfaces, and the darkness lurking beneath the screen.

Each of these preoccupations identify interface games as a microgenre uniquely suited to interrogating the role of interfaces in our daily life. Through their design, interface games are one of the main ludic spaces for considering the impact that user interfaces and platforms have on our identities, experiences and labour, and their increasing embeddedness in our daily lives. Through this analysis, this paper not only charts a crucial new microgenre, but stresses the importance for looking towards microgenres on platforms like itch.io as places of formal experimentation within games.

BIO

Dr Cassandra Barkman is a lecturer in Media & Communications at the University of Melbourne. Her research regards the close textual analysis of videogames, narratology, complex storytelling and pedagogy. She is also a board member for DiGRA Australia and deputy director of University of Melbourne research initiative MAGPIE (Melbourne Academic Games, Play and Interactive Entertainment).

Finn Dawson is a PhD Candidate at the University of Sydney. He writes on world-building and politics in digital games, analysing how game worlds are related to contemporary capitalism. He has spoken and written on automation, world-building and game communities.

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