

MEETINGS AS GENRE SYSTEMS: SOME CONSEQUENCES FOR EMS DESIGN

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The concept of genre had its genesis in literature. In that context, a genre considers a category of literary works that, having the same fundamental purpose, will present a similar structure and will obey to similar conventions. For centuries, this concept served as a practical way to organise and index literary works, as well as a way of entailing rules to literary creation.

This research work draws from the concept of genre already applied to the study of computer-based organizational communication. Others have previously established a connection between genres, organizations and meetings, something that is very reasonable, considering that meetings are regarded by organizations as one important form of communication.

Genres of organisational communication are socially recognised types of communicative actions habitually enacted by members of a community to perform social purposes. Their distinguishing aspect relies on the ability to highlight the particular combination of technical, social and institutional forces entailing organizational work. Clearly, such a definition embraces electronic meetings.

Our goal is to apply the genre concept to the analysis of electronic meetings. Then, we illustrate how genres influenced the design and development of an Electronic Meeting System (EMS). In particular, the approach demanded a re-design of EMS meeting reports, with consequences to the whole EMS architecture.

The original characterization of meetings as a system of genres comprised a combination of: logistics, agenda, the meeting itself, and the meeting report. Another interesting connection between genres and meetings regards meetings as part of the “organizational text,” which covers all kinds of meaning produced by organisations to accomplish work. Integrating these perspectives, we may define meetings as: (1) An organizational communication genre, part of the organizational repertoire of genres and genre system; (2) Instances from a repertoire of meeting genres enacted by the organization to accomplish typical types of meetings; (3) Meeting genre systems expressing some recurrent meeting structures. At the upper level, we may have a generic meeting genre system consisting of logistic-agenda-meeting-report. But this generic meeting genre system may be specialised in several ways, thus creating repertoires of meeting genre systems.

From this genre perspective, we propose some consequences for EMS design:

- Meeting genres reflect recurrent patters of work that could be used to design more situated EMS, rather than generic-purpose ones.
- EMS tend to reflect a functional perspective over meetings, concerned with data acquisition, organization and reduction. On the other hand, genre systems reflect a communication view, both at micro level (the genres that make up a meeting genre system) and macro level (the meeting genre as part of the organizational genre system). This eases the integration of meetings with other organizational processes, in particular through meeting reports.

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- Since the genre view can be applied to one particular component of the meeting genre system – the meeting – this creates an opportunity to identify and categorize more fine-grained patterns. Such repertoires could then be easily incorporated in genre-based EMS, not with the intention to structure work but to convey contextual cues and explaining factors.

In order to apply some of the observations drawn above, we developed an EMS based on the concept of communication genre. Basically, the prototype main purpose is proof of concept, rather than full functionality.

The prototype supports the genre lifecycle, i.e. genre creation, choice and use. The genre creation is a social process that may take a long time. It may start with an appropriation of a genre used by a different community or with a modification of an existing genre. The prototype supports the creation of a repertoire of meeting genre systems by specializing the logistics-agenda-meeting-report genre system. These genres are characterized by their communicational purpose and form.

The choice of a meeting genre depends on the recurrent situation. Typically, the participants in a genre system start by observing some genre being used and identify a recurrent situation, which influences them to select some particular genre. The prototype supports the selection of genres to apply in a particular circumstance, it offers to users a view of the genre system but does not enforce any process or tool aimed at structuring meetings.

The use of a genre consists in the production and distribution of an artefact that is able to materialize the genre. In opposition to literature genres, where there is a clear differentiation between producers (e.g. novel writer) and consumers (novel reader) of artefacts (books), which materialize genres (novel), in the organisational context everybody may be producer and consumer of many different artefacts. Meetings are as well viewed as having a set of artefacts that materialize meeting genres. For instance, there is the agenda on the flip chart, decisions on the whiteboard, participant notes and meeting minutes.

The prototype supports the use of meeting genres by producing and distributing HTML templates and forms. This functionality was implemented using the Web infrastructure (JavaScript, Perl and CGI) and can be accessed through common Web browsers as well as Palm Pilot PDA.

The EMS prototype was experimented in a small accounting firm with the purpose of supporting Annual General Meetings and Extraordinary General Meetings. In this context, we created a repertoire of 27 genres and 2 genre systems (capital increase and accounts approval). This repertoire was obtained by interviewing the firm accountants and also by consulting legislation that rules this kind of firms.

The above genres were uploaded into the prototype database. Then, we designed HTML templates that support the purpose and form of each genre.

Several members of the accounting firm used the system. Although at this moment a formal evaluation of the prototype was not performed yet, we could obtain some useful observations from the users.

It was found that the performance of the server and databases employed by the prototype were modest, making the meeting process slow and affecting the interaction between participants.

The participants liked the agenda artefact, allowing everybody to follow the discussion and avoiding spending much time in accessory subjects. The accountants also considered the meeting reports more clear, since additional information was being delivered in context. The kind of user interface was considered an advantage, because it allowed us to accommodate little changes proposed by the accountants.

Those changes on the user interface were made to ease the acquaintance to the system. Unfortunately, the participants complained about different screen resolutions, which interfered with the level of participation.

The possibility of reviewing the meeting report through the Internet was perceived as a notable advantage. Especially for the accountants, the system allows to scan data from several clients at the same time. Obviously, problems with confidentiality and ethics were raised by the users.

We were also able to propose a comparison of our prototype with a commercial EMS already used by some members of the accounting firm. They found out that the prototype was more adjusted to the specific situation at hand but less flexible. In fact, the production of the repertoire of genres is a process that takes some time and apparently was not completed.

The prototype allowed collecting more structured information about the meeting than habitually and putting it into the reports. In comparison to the traditional EMS, it was noticed that the results were much more integrated, and that there was more significant information about the meeting. For instance, the integration between support documentation (management reports, balance sheets and accounts) and each item discussed in the meeting was more explicit. The system also produced less redundant data, such as jokes and other unproductive and sometimes inappropriate comments.

From this very preliminary evaluation we could obtain a set of system properties that seem to be of most importance to the users: performance, flexibility, perception of fitness to the activity, user interface, ease of understanding the system and distributed access. Future work will consider more communities of users in order to explore these properties in more detail.