

Genre Subversion by Gummy Bears and Explosive Diarrhea

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Litwiller looks to *Amazon.com* to understand the concept of genre subversion. By tracking the Amazon reviews of Haribo's sugar free gummy bears, she discovers something more sinister than bowel movements—she discovers how genres change form.

What the crap is this title doing in a writing journal? I am so glad you asked. In my quest to understand how new genres develop and how they morph from one form to another, I went to *Amazon.com*. A few years back my older sister visited home from college and read aloud a couple reviews of Haribo's sugar free gummy bears listed on Amazon at the dinner table¹. These reviews had little to do with manufacturing information, price points, or product presentation, but everything to do with painful bowel movements and the hysterical story behind them. (Yup, my family is weird; we talk about poop at the dinner table.) Thinking back to this product and its reviews, I want to discover how and why one standard genre, the review, was subverted into another, a hybrid-review. How did the Haribo gummy bears go from this, their very first review back in 2006:

They're delicious, but after I ate a few handfuls, a couple hours later I started to feel really sick. I spent the whole rest of the day suffering painful gastrointestinal distress. I believe this is an occasional side-

¹If you would like to explore all the reviews for the Haribo's sugar free gummy bears, follow this link and enjoy: www.amazon.com/Haribo-Sugar-Free-Gummy-Bears/dp/B0087JELLC/ref=cm_arh_d_dp_opt?ie=UTF8#customerReviews.

effect of the sugar substitute (branded Lycasin(tm)). If you don't have a problem with Lycasin, go right ahead and munch away. If you don't know, I'd try them in small quantities first to make sure they don't cause you any problems. (Meyer)

To this, a short and amusing story:

... I boarded the train and found a seat next to a woman dressed in business attire. She was also going to NYC for a meeting and we struck up small talk about our fields of expertise. I must say she truly was a wonderful acquaintance on the trip and who's to say I eventually wouldn't be able to work myself up to the task of asking her to grab dinner later that night! We continued to talk about everything and anything, really hitting it off. That is until about 25 minutes into our journey when I felt a small rumble roll across my stomach. It was nothing too painful, but definitely felt like the start of what could be considered a very uncomfortable experience. My stomach then continued to rumble and gurgle like a dying whale calling out to its mother. I began to sweat heavily and my new traveling companion asked me if I was feeling okay because I started to turn pale. I tried to play it off best I could and excused myself. (Bill B.)²

The jump between these two Amazon reviews is what I want to explore. But before we can move on, we need to have a couple things straightened out. First, what exactly do I mean when I say subversion? **Subversion**, according to the OED, is “the challenging and undermining of a conventional idea, form, genre, etc.” In this article, subversion is when we approach a text with assumptions about its genre and the conventions it will follow, but instead we find elements that don't belong. We also need to understand what I specifically mean by review. I mean comments on products that are discussed in an online forum, specifically as seen on Amazon. I'm not talking about book or movie reviews. Those have distinct conventions that Amazon reviews don't have, such as giving a summary without a spoiler. We'd be quite annoyed if we read a cliffhanger on how well a product works. As we'll see later, the Amazon reviews for Haribo's sugar free gummy bears (henceforth to be known simply as gummy bears) change shape and are a subversion of the usual review. I'll be using hybrid—a genre with mixed characteristics (OED)—to describe this sub-review. This hybrid-review looks like a short, humorous story, which in some cases is hard to believe or simply not believed.

²To read Bill B.'s whole account go here: www.amazon.com/gp/customer-reviews/R32W7DR55CRCYP/ref=cm_cr_getr_d_rvw_ttl?ie=UTF8&ASIN=B0087ELICA.

The Grand Plan

To start out this experiment I needed a control, so I did some virtual shopping on Amazon. I checked out several non-food items and their reviews to see what was typical. Then I looked around at various edible items (yes, you can order your entire pantry on Amazon). I first needed to understand the **conventions**—the features and elements that make the genre recognizable (*ISUwriting*)—of an Amazon review before I could determine what exactly it was that made this hybrid-review stand out. Once I gathered up my list, I headed for the gummy bear reviews, and I had my most enjoyable research experience ever. I read as many reviews as I could (there are nearly 1,000) and took note of any oddities. Lastly, I had to determine if this new form of review really was a review, so I considered what conventions of a traditional Amazon review were still present.

General Amazon Reviews

To give you an idea of the layout for Amazon reviews and formatting features that will be mentioned later, I've included a screenshot (Figure 1) of reviews for a hedgehog pencil holder.

Customer Reviews

☆☆☆☆☆ 2
5.0 out of 5 stars ▾

5 star	100%	Share your thoughts with other customers
4 star	0%	<input type="button" value="Write a customer review"/>
3 star	0%	
2 star	0%	
1 star	0%	
1 star	0%	

See all verified purchase reviews ▾

Top Customer Reviews

☆☆☆☆☆ **Desk Upgrade**
By Heather Keith on September 30, 2016
Verified Purchase
I totally LOVE this!!! My prior company-supplied pen cup looked like a mini trash can. While useful, it brought no joy upon viewing it. Now, when I turn my chair I get insta-happy seeing my brightly pen quilled lil friend smiling at me.
Comment | Was this review helpful to you? Report abuse

☆☆☆☆☆ **Super cute!**
By Lydia Bizarre on September 7, 2016
Verified Purchase
Absolutely love this! I bought it as a gift for my daughter who loves hedgehogs and almost kept it for myself! It is so cute and a great size.
Comment | Was this review helpful to you? Report abuse



Figure 1: Amazon review format example.

- Amazon's visual formatting
 - Star rating and graph (overall and individual)
 - Review title
 - Date posted
 - Name (or username)
 - Verified purchase label (if applicable)

- “Was this helpful” vote and count
- “Report Abuse” option
- Comment tab

This visual appearance is used for reviews across all Amazon products, from electronics to clothes to food, and the appearance doesn't change throughout the whole hybrid-review transformation. Even though the content is changing, the visual conventions (as listed above) are all still there, making this not a new genre, but just a morph or shift of an existing genre. As I shopped around, I created a list of review qualities including short length (typically three to five lines), sentence-styled prose, evaluative word choice in consideration of performance, straightforward tone, consideration of price and quality, packaging or presentation, and, where applicable, size, fit, weight or quantity of the product. Also, the subject matter was always focused on the product, and any additional information was to further the argument. The most helpful reviews are very specific about what happened. Not every Amazon review has each element, but typically several are present.

Food Specific Amazon Reviews

To understand how the gummy bear reviews fit into the review circle, I needed to know what people were talking about in other edible reviews and what common topics were brought up. I looked up foods such as beef sticks, candy boxes, apples, water, and more. Below are common conventions for Amazon food reviews in addition or adjustment to the ones above.

- Taste
- Texture
- State of food: was it rotten, stale, fresh, bruised or in an opened bag
- Portion size: was it too much or too little (for example, perfect snack size for kids)
- Health: did this item cause illness or food poisoning
- Nutrition of the product: was it correctly and clearly labeled, was any information deficient
- Dietary restrictions: users will comment if it is in accordance with their specific diet plan

Now that we have a good list of what defines an Amazon review, we can move on to the long awaited gummy bear “cleanse.”

Subversion by Gummy Bears

For a genre to form there must be more than one text that belongs to that genre. There must be a patterned occurrence and a history of the genre. Genres go through a period of being **active** and “in-flux” before they reach a solidified or **inscribed** state (*ISUwriting*). Today we see social media platforms adapting and changing; Facebook today doesn’t look like what it did when it first appeared. Even its wordage has changed; before, you wrote on someone’s “wall,” but now you write on their “timeline.” Facebook is an active genre, whereas the resume, for example, is an inscribed genre. The resume’s conventions haven’t changed in years, while Facebook is always in a process of updating. The typical Amazon review is an inscribed genre, but the hybrid-review we see on the gummy bear page is active and developing. A genre-history also implies that there is more than one example of said type of text. Now, if there were only one hysterical review for the gummy bears, we could write it off as an anomaly. Thank goodness for our own enjoyment that it’s one of many reviews that skirt the requirements for the usual review.

To tackle the ordeal of the gummy bear I read the reviews from first to last. My goal in this was to see where exactly the change took place; where did the explanation turn elaborate? This occurrence happened about one year from the first review. On April 16, 2007, Andrew Schaefer reviewed the gummies as follows:

I bought 10lbs of these bears while I was doing the “Atkins thing” . . . and I found the same gastric issues that others experienced. However, we like to keep them around the office for newbies to experience. They’re so tasty that people will sit at your desk and snarf down a whole bowl full. We’d warn them not to eat too many, but they’d just nod and keep munching. The next day they’re a believer in moderation. Apparently we’re all masochists as we ate all 10lbs in a month regardless of side-effects. (Schaefer)

Here we find the bend in rules or conventions starting to happen. There is a practical joke element, which implies humor. Schaefer tells us the effect of an upset stomach, but does not say much else about the product. I can understand by the practical joke that Schaefer enjoyed his purchase, but he doesn’t add to the conversation of the product. He doesn’t give new insight into the bears, just an unintended use for them—office initiation.

A few months after Schaefer’s review we have one by Allyson N. Wright. Wright uses literary techniques such as an introductory sentence and foreshadowing in her first sentence, “getting stabbed in the stomach probably would have been more pleasant than what happened to me a couple hours after eating a handful of these.” Traditional Amazon reviews are too short to

make use of an introductory sentence and are to the point, which nixes the need for foreshadowing. She also ends with sarcasm and writes, “basically, if you want to induce flu-like effects and spend at least 6 hours in excruciating pain, eat these with reckless abandon.” By including literary techniques, she enhances the text, making it more colorful. Wright could have simply ended her review with, “I don’t know why anyone would eat these,” but instead her sarcasm boosts her message.

Though these two reviews aren’t a prime example of the hybrid-review, they do show the introduction of elements that are then used in future gummy bear reviews. The humor elements and the literary elements are both heavily used in the new review. These reviews provide inspiration, a small stepping stone for the hybrid, to help create a platform where the hybrid-review will be accepted and widely received. I should note that while all the morphing reviews are being posted, so are the traditional reviews. These include positive reviews as to the flavor and texture of the item, with no mention of any gastric affects, as well as negative reviews for the very effects stated in other comical reviews. You should know that these are present and continue the whole life of the gummy bear reviews, but I don’t want to make you read that boring crap, so we’ll focus on just the hybrid-reviews.

Of all the gummy bear reviews, my absolute favorite encapsulates nearly all the conventions of this hybrid-review. Gregory Craff³ wrote his review, “The rocket fuel has low specific impulse,” in 2013. He also includes foreshadowing by writing, “After my first enjoyment, I experienced something less enjoyable.” However, his most impressive literary effect is his use of metaphor. He writes, “the gummi bears, hereafter referred to as The Fuel,” which he uses to frame and illustrate the rest of the story. This metaphor adds to the humor; the master bath is no longer the master bath, but is now “the Launch Facility,” with the toilet as the “Launch Pad.” All of this description (even down to the brand of toilet) is stated well before we get to any relevant gummy bear information. Craff is fully invested in his metaphor and elaborates on “unneded” details. “Thrust built rapidly to the 100% rating of the nozzle. The exhaust thundered against the parabolic shape of the Launch Pad and reverberated back upwards, buffeting the structure of Space Ship Me.” I put “unneded” in quotes because this information is frivolous for the traditional Amazon review, but furthers Craff’s tale immensely as a hybrid-review. Other metaphorical phrases include “nuclear Armageddon” and “atomic bomb” (The Informer, Amazon Customer).

One other interesting inclusion in the subverted reviews is pop-culture references. Though this is not found in every hybrid-review, it is more common

³To enjoy Craff’s entire review go here: www.amazon.com/gp/customer-reviews/RDG7A7YL703CG/ref=cm_cr_getr_d_rvw_ttl?ie=UTF8&ASIN=B00087ELLC.

here than in traditional Amazon reviews. Craff refers to the Saturn V launch as well as Star Trek: ““The engines cannae take any moor, Cap’n!’ (I have no idea why my arse has a Scottish accent.)” C. Cooper’s review also includes pop-culture references (“Scenes from the movie 2012 could have been filmed inside my gut”) and likens the bloating to the NBA finals and “the blueberry girl from Willy Wonka.”

One last unusual aspect of Craff’s review is that it was remediated into a video clip of a dramatic reading⁴. **Remediation** is when content crosses genre boundaries. The content or message is still the same, but the form it’s presented in is different. In the dramatic reading, we still have Craff’s gastrointestinal adventure, but the mode it’s distributed in is a short video clip instead of static words on a screen. It also becomes an auditory experience because it’s being read in a Russian accent. As the adventure is remediated into this genre, it becomes even sillier as the accent accentuates the circumstances. Now, remediation sounds a lot like subversion, so how are they different? In remediation, the content, or story, goes from one form to another, whereas in subversion the content changes, but the genre does not. Thus, we have the hybrid-review, which is changing the content conventions but not the Amazon review genre itself.

We also see the gummy bear review change the content conventions of the Amazon review by messing with the star-system. Given all the stories of sickness and ill health, this product should be a one or two-star product. But because people are rating the adventures by writing skill, edge-of-the-seat attention, and humor, the review (not the product) deserves a five-star rating. The rating becomes confused and unreliable. Amazon realizes that there are some inconsistencies in the rating system and so tries to balance those with an algorithm. When you hover over the “3.9 out of 5 stars⁵” of the review you get this disclaimer pop up, which Amazon puts on all their products:

Amazon calculates a product’s star ratings using a machine learned model instead of a raw data average. The machine learned model takes into account factors including: the age of a review, helpfulness votes by customers and whether the reviews are from verified purchases.

However, this calculator takes a beating considering that it tracks which reviews people found helpful. When 56,624 people find a review helpful because it went viral, it distorts the real rating. Any kind of “gastric issues”

⁴Brian West uploaded the video, entitled “Rocket Fuel,” to *Vimeo* in 2013. Here is a link if you would like to view it: vimeo.com/73300452.

⁵The gummy bears were reviewed for 3.9 stars as of October 8, 2016. Though this item is “currently unavailable” and has been since I started my research in September, it is still being reviewed months afterwards.

would bring the stars down, but other customers thoroughly enjoyed the joke or humor aspect of the gummies. Though the reviews describe the incident, it seems that it's really the story that is rated. The star-system is misused, like using a chair as a stepping stool. Customers found a side benefit for the gummies, but didn't focus on the intended benefit of the gummies (which is to taste good and be a fun snack).

Concluding the Case of Diarrhea

Even though our hybrid gummy bear reviews sounded so different from traditional Amazon reviews, we can still put them in the same genre of Amazon review because the basic elements are still there. Both traditional and hybrid Amazon reviews carry the same look, and the visual format and elements are all present. Relaying the information through sentences is still used, but the hybrid-review is prose with more elaboration and color. Humor is a part of traditional reviews, but it takes a back seat and is seldom utilized there, while the hybrid-review must have humor in order to not be a flop. The hybrid-reviewers know the rules of Amazon reviews and therefore know how to break them successfully.

As you journey into the big world of genres, explore what is right in front of you. Don't take any genre for granted, but consider its history. Appreciate when the genre is kept intact and when the rules are bent effectively. And always be on the lookout for Haribo's sugar free gummy bears.

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Gabrielle Litwiller's claim to fame is sadly not her own viral gummy bear review, but she has cycled across the USA. If she is not biking or snuggled in a blanket with a book, she is either experimenting the perfect cup of espresso with her husband, Josh, or throwing a paper towel roll around the house with her dog, Molly.