The case of missing cases. On piratexts — paratexts created by pirates for pirates.

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of the talk is to explore a forgotten genre of paratexts (that I call "piratexts") created in communities where users only had access to pirated game versions

Keywords

Paratext, piracy, game history, Eastern Europe

The notion of a "paratext" has been introduced by Gérard Genette (1997) as a part of a broader classification of different types of trans-textual relations. Since then, it has been widely used by literary and media scholars in ways that ended up being far removed from the original notion. As Jan Švelch (2018) pointed out, the most important revision of the notion related to game studies was due to Mia Consalvo and Jonathan Gray (Consalvo, 2017; Gray, 2010). These authors broadened the term's usage to encompass any accompanying works — official and unofficial. Even though I agree with Švelch that expanding the meaning of paratexts may be unfortunate from the methodological point of view, I believe that using this broader notion may still be very beneficial for selected purposes. Thus, in my talk, I understand gaming paratext as any work (textual or graphical) that accompanies the digital artifact (the game).

In the era of the dominance of digital distribution, paratexts lost some of their importance. Still, we should remember that they were a crucial part of the experience in 8- and 16-bit video games. One of the reasons for this was the limited memory of the machines and their storage mediums, which forced the creators to offload the story and illustrations to the accompanying materials, such as the box art and manuals. In some cases, the manuals were so crucial for the overall experience that the games could hardly be played without them (flight simulators are a good example of this). The importance of these elements can be seen in their inclusion in many re-releases of retro games, such as the ones sold on the GOG platform or in compilations where they are often added as scans of original materials.

In contrast to this "intended usage scenario", players who experienced pirated games were often utterly oblivious to paratexts such as boxes or manuals. As observed by Jaroslav Švelch (Švelch, 2018), this led to some games being less popular in Eastern Europe than in the West because it was hard to understand the overall game objective. In countries where piracy was the only way of obtaining games, the users could only experience the digital artifact and had to understand them in isolation. This was amplified by the fact these users had no access to Western magazines (not to mention the Internet, which was unavailable at the time). This lack of official paratexts forced gaming communities to develop unique materials that I suggest calling "piratexts".

The experience of playing games in isolation from the original authorial intent has been likened to Umberto Eco's aberrant reading (Švelch, 2018, Eco, 1972), and it can also be compared to transgressive play (Aarseth, 2014). Still, since, in the case of pirates, ignoring some of the creators' intentions was not a conscious decision of players but the result of the socio-economical situation, I suggest it should be treated as a unique phenomenon.

In my talk, I focus on Polish piratexts created for the games released for 8- and 16-bit platforms because the country had a well-established game magazines market and cracker scene. I propose to distinguish between the three strategies used by pirates. The first example consists of typed-in manuals and unofficial starting screens added by pirates for game releases (typically for Commodore 64). This category represents a borderline scenario as the additions were coupled with the digital artifact (but still as separate executables). The second category is the artwork used to illustrate game reviews in local magazines. Some of this artwork (that functioned as the missing game box) was inspired by the original boxes, but in many cases, it was an original creation inspired by the game content.

The third, arguably the most interesting category, can be seen in a unique journalistic form that I suggest calling "para-reviews". I use this term to refer to reviews published in the Polish press in the late 1980s and early 1990s. In contrast to standard reviews published in the Western media, para-reviews functioned as "missing manuals". Typical para-reviews did not contain any evaluation of the game and consisted only of two parts: the game's narrative and a listing of the controls. The reason for it was that the writers knew quite well their readers were going to get the game free of charge (or very cheaply). What is fascinating is that the narrative was often made up by the writers and did not reflect the original story from the manual. This was because the writers were also very often oblivious to the original paratexts. In my talk, I show several examples of such para-reviews. One comes from *Action Biker* (Mastertronic 1985), a racing game released for major 8-bit platforms in 1985. The original manual contains practically no backstory. The Polish para-review published in 1987 (Mazur & Piotrowski 1987) presents a complex narrative that fleshes out the main character and frames the experience in a completely different context of a psychological trauma of the main protagonist.

I claim that the historical study of games should take phenomena such as piratexts into account as they represent a forgotten aspect of gaming that shaped the experience of many players around the globe. If the manual narrative and the box art were essential aspects of the game for Western players, can we still say that Eastern and Western users experienced "the same game"?

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