Remakes, Remasters, and Paratextual Revisits

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INTRODUCTION

The gaming industry has always been "relentlessly forward-marching" as Newman put it (2012, 52). Returning to cherished game titles nonetheless allows for a celebration, and commodification, of nostalgia (cf. Whalen & Taylor 2008). The gaming industry, then, relies on a "balancing act that simultaneously invokes the revolution of innovation and reassuring familiarly of continuity of form and function" (Newman 2012, 52). Remakes and remasters are prime examples of this. This paper engages with such games by employing the concept of paratextuality, originally coined by Genette to understand and analyze textual material which surrounds a main text to influence or steer its perception and consumption (1997b, 1). Paratextuality has become a key perspective to understand the gaming experience and gaming histories (cf. Beil et al. 2021; Seiwald & Vollans 2023). I question in what ways we can consider remakes and remasters as paratextual in relation to their original games; how this perspective allows us to reflect on the industry's dealing with past and present, and what it means for our understanding of the player experience of such games.

As Grabarczyk and Aarseth point out in their formal classification of game versions, the notion of *remake* stands for a new game featuring a similar (though updated) presentation and mechanics as the original but running on new code. A *remaster* however retains parts of the original code and mechanics but sports a new/updated presentation (2019, 13). Recent examples of remakes are *System Shock* (2023; based on the 1994 game) or *Dead Space* (2023; 2008), examples of revisits are *Metroid Prime: Remastered* (2023; 2002) or the upcoming *Braid: Anniversary Edition* (forthcoming; 2008). The difference is not always fully clear however, and industry terminology used is often part of marketing narratives (Grabarczyk and Aarseth 2019, 13). Commodifying the old as new through specific labelling is not unique to games. As media scholars Heinze and Krämer point out in relation to film, "the label 'remake' in advertising […] creates an implicit contract between producers and consumers that establishes the possibility to engage with more than one text simultaneously" (2015, 8). It can lead to discovering the original alongside the new version with a focus on differences, triggered by what they call the "paratextual marking" of a film as a remake (ibid.). Going beyond formal classification, this paper takes remakes and revisits as one group of texts offering such paratextual functionality (Genette 1997b,

12) between two texts – which here happens through play. As such, it adds to the idea that paratexts themselves can be playful in form and nature (cf. Glas 2021; Seiwald 2021).

We should, of course, be wary of expanding the meaning of paratextuality too far when applying it to games (cf. Švelch 2020). From the perspective of transtextuality, ie. the relationship between a text and other texts, remakes/remasters could just be considered part of what Genette calls hypertextuality, ie. how new texts relate to older texts. Rather than providing commentary (a form of metatextuality - another Genettian concept), this relationship is defined by transformation or, as Genette calls it, transposition (1997a, 28). I am not arguing against considering game remakes/remasters as hypertextual in a Genettian sense.[1] Rather, I argue that their *function* within the game industry relies as much, and sometimes more, on paratextuality.

Remasters/remakes themselves are usually surrounded by - and through audio commentaries can even contain - their own making-of material. The focus often is on differences between versions, combining praise of the old while signalling change in the new version. Such ancillary textual material usually paints a highly positive picture of texts and their creation, as such playing a key role in assigning value to cultural productions (cf. Gray 2010). The remasters/remakes themselves also have a paratextual relation with the original game however through a functional quality Švelch describes as "corrective". The term does not necessarily imply there is a problem with the original which needs fixing but that "general updating follows the same logic as it establishes hierarchy between obsolete and up-to-date variations of a text" (2017, 75). Švelch refers to patches and updates here. From the perspective of the industry's forward-looking practices, I argue that we can consider remakes/remasters *as a whole* as 'up-to-date' versions of the original. Due to obsolescence and/or lack of access to the original, they sometimes even become the *only* way the play the game. Even if not the case, remakes/remasters "correct" the old with a new experience which is usually framed as the best way to play the game.

The paratextual qualities of remakes/remasters can also be tied to a recent discussion on *revisiting* as a conceptual alternative to replaying games (cf. Glas & Mukherjee 2023). Through remakes/remasters, players allow for comparison and scrutiny of design decisions past and present as they revisit and navigate their histories of playing games. Even when encountering a game without having played the original, they knowingly revisit a gameworld, assigning value to the original in the process.

The paper will discuss example games like those mentioned above using paratextual analysis as the primary method. Showing the topic's complexity, a specific case is Crowbar Collective's *Black Mesa* (2020), a remake of the classic *Half-Life* (1998). A fan project years in the making, it was eventually endorsed by the original game's developer Valve, which allowed a commercial release on their platform Steam. Here, authorial complexity is added to the mix, with a fan production accepted by the "official" authority making it an allographic paratext (Genette 1997b, 9-10; cf. Webber 2023). Its well-documented development provides insight into the complex interplay between the hypertextual and, especially, paratextual dimensions. *Half-Life*'s often derided Xen levels, for instance, were entirely redone and expanded for *Black Mesa*, allowing players to engage with the shortcomings of the original in new ways.[2] While not studying game development directly but rather through the lens of paratextuality, these analyses contribute to the growing field of game production studies (cf.

Sotamaa & Švelch 2021). Approaching games like *Black Mesa* as paratextual revisits brings into view the role remakes/revisits play in our understanding of the past and present of gaming, and how the industry actively shapes it.

ENDNOTES

[1] Within film studies remakes are also usually associated with hypertextuality from a Genettian transtextual perspective, cf. (Horton and McDougal 1998).

[2] The making of the new Xen levels for *Black Mesa* received its own behind-the-scenes material in the form of the 'Xen Museum' update in 2021, see:
https://steamcommunity.com/sharedfiles/filedetails/?id=2463740880&searchtext=xen

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