

“Test Trophy Please Ignore”: Achievements as Paratexts in Palimpsestic Readings of Remasters and Remakes

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INTRODUCTION

Some of the most successful video games of the past few years were remakes or remasters of older games.¹ We argue that these new versions of games, in the process of being reworked or reconstructed, can be conceived as “palimpsests” (Genette 1997a),² as “having been reused or altered while still retaining traces of [their] earlier form” (Oxford English Dictionary, 2024). Since the release of the Xbox 360 in November 2005, which marked the beginning of the widespread adoption of achievements³ across platforms⁴ (Jakobsson 2016), this process of remaking or remastering a game also includes its trophy list. There are usually two scenarios: either a game’s prior release(s) already had trophies—thus comparing trophy lists can highlight added, updated or removed achievements—or they did not—which implies an entirely new set of achievements. Trophies therefore attest to the palimpsestic relationship between a game and its previous version(s). In this context, achievements are observed through iterations of the same game.

While their effect on game sales and replayability as well as their reception and their role in gamification have been widely studied (Hamari & Eranti 2011; Jakobsson 2016), their interpretative function has yet to be theorised. For this purpose, we argue that trophies can be conceptualized as “paratexts” (Genette 1997b); under Genette’s framework, an achievement can convey authorial commentary on the video game it is attached to. Ultimately, we argue that various forms and degrees of authorial commentary on the palimpsestic nature of the later iterations of games arise through their achievements.

ACHIEVEMENTS AS PARATEXT

According to Jan Švelch (2020), paratextuality can be “relevant to scholarship interested in game production” (Švelch 2020) specifically because the “authorial intention” of the paratext is “always the conveyor of a commentary that is authorial or more or less legitimated by the author” (Genette 1997b, 2). Because they are

situated outside of the game (Hamari & Eranti 2011, 4), we argue that trophies are paratextual devices, “thresholds” (Genette 1997b, 2) of games that convey authorial commentary. According to Dorothee Birke and Birte Christ, paratexts, and thus achievements, have three main functions: interpretive, commercial and navigational (2013, 67-68). Framing trophies as paratexts hence reveals that while their commercial function has been studied, their interpretive and navigational roles are yet to be examined. What’s more, studies of remakes and remasters as paratexts (Glas 2024) do not appear to include achievements in their paratextual readings.

Juho Hamari and Veikko Eranti (2011, 5-12) dissect trophies into individual components: (1) a signifier—composed of a name, a visual and a description—which is what players see when they unlock the achievement, (2) a completion logic—composed of a trigger as well as optional pre-requirements, conditional requirements and a multiplier—which determines when the achievement is unlocked and (3) rewards, which can vary from in-game bonuses to points in the achievement system. Since trophies are made visible near the edge of the screen upon completion, their signifier comments on the events that just took place, similarly to a footnote. They are, however, searchable at any time on the platform (PlayStation and Xbox consoles or Steam) or online, like a back cover, an index or endnotes. When considering achievements as paratexts, all three components of their signifier as well as the completion logic can become vectors of authorial commentary.⁵

“IT CAN’T BE FOR NOTHING”

Through the comparison of achievement lists between two versions of the same games, we demonstrate that trophies, as paratexts, reveal traces of the remaking or remastering process and thus shed light on the palimpsestic nature of the games they are attached to. To illustrate the complexity of the relationship between the original game and its remakes or remasters, we begin with a few examples such as *Silent Hill 2* (Team Silent 2001) and *Shadow of the Colossus* (Team Ico 2005), which were initially released on PS2 and received a trophy list for their PS3 “HD” remasters.⁶ Both were later remade or remastered,⁷ which offers a second point of comparison. As another example, *The Stanley Parable: Ultra Deluxe* (Crows Crows Crows 2022) provides an updated achievement list from *The Stanley Parable* (Galactic Cafe 2013) which further pushes their metadiscursive commentary on the the relationship between video game players and “real life”.

This presentation’s main focus is *The Last of Us* (Naughty Dog). The PS3 (2013) and PS4 (2014) versions of the game included trophies linked to difficulty—to obtain the platinum trophy,⁸ you notably needed to complete the game in both “Survivor” and “Survivor +” difficulty levels—that the PS5 version (2022) removed. This means that the platinum trophy in this latest version can be earned in a single playthrough on easy mode, provided players are thorough while exploring. An important part of the challenge has disappeared, which echoes Carl Therrien’s observation of a progressive facilitation of video game completion (2014, 566-567). The three versions of *The Last of Us* suggest a commentary on the balance between skills and discourse in the game. This shift from a focus on difficulty to simply engaging with the game indicates that, over the nine years between the original and the remake, the narrative aspect is now the priority over skill-based challenges.⁹

All in all, trophies as paratexts have implications for both narrative and game design, as well as metadiscourse, including aspects like humor, tribute, critical commentary, game experience and aesthetic. In the case of remakes and remasters, achievements provide valuable paratextual commentary on their palimpsestic nature by shedding light on design changes, making references to the original game or encouraging new ways of playing the game.

ENDNOTES

¹ The difference between a remake and a remaster is not necessarily trivial (see Glas 2024). While they can be used interchangeably, we propose to use “remaster” to mean an “up-to-date” version of the same game (i.e. mainly a graphical enhancement, but very little changes in terms of story and gameplay) and “remake” to mean a newer version which mostly follows the original but can offer original narrative or gameplay elements.

² Under Genette’s notion of transtextuality, remakes and remasters would be said to be in a hypertextual relationship, with the original as the hypotext and the remake or remaster as hypertext.

³ This paper uses the terms “achievement” and “trophy” interchangeably.

⁴ The Electronic Entertainment Design and Research published a study in October 2007 which “concluded that, in general, [XBox 360] game titles that have a higher volume of Accomplishments correlate with both a higher Metacritic Metascore and higher gross sales in the United States.” Other companies followed Microsoft’s example; Valve introduced its achievement system on Steam in November 2007 and Sony launched its trophies on the PlayStation 3 in July 2008. Moreover, it is now mandatory for game development studios to include achievements when they release a game on Microsoft’s and Sony’s platforms (Hamari & Eranti 2011, 4).

⁵ The reward component is intentionally left out of the interpretive and navigational functions of trophies as paratexts as it varies between platforms—some do not even give any reward beside the achievement itself. Moreover, a PlayStation trophy being bronze or silver, for instance, conveys little to no information to the player other than the expected rarity/difficulty associated with it.

⁶ *Silent Hill HD Collection* (Hijinx Studios 2012) and *The Ico & Shadow of the Colossus Collection* (Bluepoint Games & Japan Studio 2011).

⁷ *Silent Hill 2* (Bloober Team 2024) on PS5 and PC and *Shadow of the Colossus* (Bluepoint Games 2018) on PS4.

⁸ The platinum trophy requires players to obtain all other trophies in the game.

⁹ This echoes Glas (2024, 2) who offers a perspective on the “paratextual qualities of remakes/remasters [that] can also be tied to a recent discussion on *revisiting* as a conceptual alternative to replaying games.”

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