

Hidden Paratextuality: Concealing the Factual Aspects of Video Games

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Paratextuality (Genette, 1997) is an important part of video game culture. Trailers, screenshots, patch notes, manuals, credits and many other phenomena establish paratextual relationships between video game texts, function as thresholds of interpretation and influence player's horizon of expectations. It has been suggested by media studies and game studies scholars that paratextuality is becoming central to viewer and player experience (Carter, 2015; Consalvo, 2009; Harper, 2014; Lunenfeld, 2000). Therefore, majority of works that explore paratextuality and paratexts are understandably concerned with objects and relationships that are in some sense explicitly paratextual. This approach however does not register the instances where paratextuality is missing for some reason and its absence can have a meaning of its own. Actually, we could argue that even missing paratextuality is a paratextuality of sorts; therefore I propose the concept of hidden paratextuality which explains the effects of concealed factual aspects of video games. In this paper, I will focus on theoretical implications of hidden paratextuality and support my claims with empirical evidence from video game culture.

It has been already noted that paratexts and paratextuality can exist even without a main text, an unfinished manuscript or an unreleased game can be promoted by paratexts (Genette, 1997; Ruffino, 2012). However, the opposite relationship of hidden paratextuality has so far been overlooked in game studies. The technical aspects of a video game artifact make the artificial origins of any game quite tangible. Along with the commodified form of video games, we have grown accustomed to certain paratextual knowledge about video games. We expect to know who the developers and publishers of a given game are, how much the game costs, in the PC context the game's system requirements, among other things. According to Genette (1997), any such factual information can function as a paratext (factual paratext) in the way it potentially influences player's interpretation of a video game. For example, knowledge about gender identity of a video game designer can influence how a player interprets gender representations in his or her game. At the same time, knowledge about unavailability of such information which is under normal circumstances expected in video game culture can also influence player's interpretation of such abnormal game.

Probably the most extreme case of hidden paratextuality was the game Sad Satan which was reportedly discovered in June 2015 on the dark web by the owner of Obscure Horror Corner YouTube channel (Hernandez, 2015). The rather crude horror video game which

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was presented in a Let's Play session attracted a lot of attention from players and the press largely because of its enigmatic origins. The actual existence of the game and the credibility of its finder were contested in the following discussions, however this does not change the fact that Sad Satan received rather wide coverage in gaming and tech press and the original video has accumulated over 1.5 million views on YouTube. I want to argue that the main reason behind the relatively large interest in Sad Satan was the hidden paratextuality of the game. The missing information about Sad Satan's author and origins were the things that had set it apart from the regular video game production. Also, as I have mentioned before, the unavailability of crucial factual information is what creates a special kind of paratextuality where absence of paratextual cues creates an important new meaning.

The concept of hidden paratextuality can also be applied to less extreme cases of missing factual information. Recently, the administrators of the European version of PlayStation Blog have announced that they would no longer post price listings for PlayStation Store weekly updates (Mead, 2016). The information about prices of newly released games can now be only accessed through the PlayStation Store interface or third-party websites. This announcement was received rather negatively and it was interpreted as a way to conceal different regional pricings in Europe, especially the difference between prices in Euro, GBP and other national currencies. Hidden paratextuality has in this case drawn attention to the potential reasons behind the absence of otherwise expected customer information.

This paper aims to draw attention to aspects of paratextuality that have been so far overlooked. We should not think of paratexts and paratextuality as mere links between texts by overlooking the factual content behind these transtextual relationships. While paratextuality of a text cannot be actually missing because a reader always connects a text to a social and historical reality from which they approach it, absence of certain factual information (dependent on regular practices within a given context) creates a new paratextual quality which in turn establishes a new threshold of interpretation.

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