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Historical Digital Game Promotion: Uses and Challenges

This presentation considers both the necessity of and challenges to the incorporation of promotional paratexts in analyses of historical digital games (see also. Wright, 2018). Through my own research, I have argued that promotional paratexts created by game developers are important spaces in which they make claims for a game's 'authenticity'. The inherently 'performative' nature of these materials (Barker, 2004; Aronczyk, 2017) means that they are also sites at which game companies and/or individuals representing them occupy and perform the role of 'developer-historian' (Chapman, 2016), commodifying their research labour, offering players insight into the 'true' history of certain periods and/or events, and implying the quality and value of these games as experiences and representations of the past. Ultimately, promotional paratexts for a range of historical visual media are sites that work to 'involve the consumer in the construction of their historical and cultural worth' (Ramsay, 2012).

In this presentation I will use Rockstar Games, and specific titles such as the *Red Dead Redemption* franchise (2010-2018) and *L.A. Noire* (2011), as a case study to explore some of the ways in which paratextual promotional materials created to accompany the release of historical digital games make explicit claims for their authenticity. Drawing on Peterson's (Peterson, 2005) notion of 'authenticity work', a variety of promotional materials created for these games – ranging from blog posts and downloadable content hosted on the official Rockstar website, trailers, and exclusive features published by select outlets of the gaming and entertainment press – provided information to potential players about the 'true' or 'real' basis of these games. Through these materials, game developers like Rockstar simultaneously communicate their brand values while commodifying their research process. By selecting and directing players toward certain (digital) historical sources, Rockstar, as developer-historian, create and deploy new narratives of American History – in particular the history of the American West – designed to offer players evidence of the 'real' foundations of their historical fictions, and justify certain game development choices. In doing so, what can be identified is a process by which complex and competing pre-existing formations of historical knowledge and American cultural history are deconstructed and reassembled into a promotional narrative that serves one core purpose: to generate certain *discourses of authenticity* around the release of Rockstar's games (Wright, 2017, 2019). It is through analysis of these discourses that we are better-able to unpack the ideological and political underpinnings of any game's historical representation, and ultimately, explore the way that digital historical games put promotional materials to service in an attempt to weaponise 'authenticity' and claims about historical 'truth' or 'realism' (see also Shaw, 2015; Hammar, 2017; Hammar, 2020; Walker, 2020).

However, despite the importance of paratexts to academic assessments of ubiquitous concepts like 'authenticity', studying them poses challenges. While there has more recently been an increase in publications that explicitly deal with promotional paratexts, the claims they make, and how players interact with them (e.g. Van Den Heede, 2020), game studies in general has been slow to explicitly centre paratexts as important sources for scholarly consideration. As a result, we

therefore lack defined methodological approaches that account specifically for digital games (as a medium and the industry surrounding it). Moreover, the ephemeral and dispersed nature of these largely digital materials further complicates potential methodological approaches to locating and analysing them, something that media scholars more generally have long discussed (e.g. Gray, 2016, p. 39; Barker, 2017, p. 237). This is also compounded by the fact that historically, the central focus of game preservation on hardware and/or software has marginalised considerations of *other* materials associated with game development and release, despite their crucial importance for potential future studies and histories of game play, gaming communities, and other aspects of game culture and heritage (see for example Newman and Simons, 2018; 2020; Staiti, 2019).

In this presentation I will offer some examples by discussing my own methodological approach to tracking down these sources and some of the challenges this process posed: when developer websites are reformatted; when sources fall foul of link rot; when content is moved around, and context is lost. Ultimately, I am working towards a broader consideration of and theoretical framework for studying the promotional surround of historical digital games, and argue that we must continue to urgently turn our attention to these sources: centring them, rather than allowing them to remain at the margins.

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