

Judging a Videogame by its Cover: How Paratexts (Mis)represent Gender

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Keywords

Paratexts, gender norms, inclusivity, diversity, discourse analysis

INTRODUCTION

Since the rise of “hegemonic games culture” (Dovey & Kennedy, 2007) in the 1990s, videogames have been socially constructed as masculine and male-dominated, often to the exclusion of those who do not fit the privileged image of the gamer: straight, white, male and skilled at so-called hardcore games (Braithwaite, 2016; Cote, 2015; Kirkpatrick, 2012). This is now changing, with shifting player demographics and the gradual (perhaps grudging) acceptance of new videogame forms and genres. Yet, stereotypes persist, game culture still appears exclusionary and hardcore games, epitomised by the shooter genre, remain at the heart of concerns about gaming’s gender inequality (Paaßen et al. 2016).

My ongoing research, however, shows key shooter games have slowly but significantly evolved in their representations of gender, marked by moments of contestation where the genre’s gendered norms are challenged, disrupted and renegotiated (see Lombardo & Meier, 2014). This includes, but is not limited to, a rise in female characters. Though such changes have become common, they have not yet dispelled myths of the male gamer or allayed the stigma of sexism that plagues shooter games.

This paper investigates the promotional narratives of publishers around the shifts towards gender diversity and inclusivity in their videogames. These narratives have the power to condemn or condone sexism and gender exclusion by disrupting or reinforcing gender norms. Though the narratives may play out in news or social media, I focus on official paratexts (see Consalvo, 2007) like cover art, as they exist to promote games to people of all levels of gaming knowledge, often at the point of sale. Thus, this paper considers the role of paratexts in promoting, concealing or minimising the appearance of gendered change. Though paratexts do not necessarily represent game content—indeed, Jenkins (1993) argues it is a “dubious assumption” (61) that cover art somehow reflects its primary text—they crucially “choose and highlight some of the games’ features over others, and by doing that they construct a discourse” (Oliva et al. 2016, 1). It is the gendered elements of this discourse, which may be distinct from the discourses privileged within the games, that are of interest.

To study the way official paratexts promote the gender diverse elements of notoriously masculine shooter games, this paper compares the discourses privileged by the cover art imagery of the Call of Duty (2003–), Halo (2001–) and Gears of War (2006–) series to the discourses disrupted by the games’ contestatory changes. The aim is to understand the

Extended Abstract Presented at DiGRA 2017

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discursive shifts over time to clarify when and how the cover art evolves to reflect the changing nature of the games, or fails to communicate key shifts. This research builds on previous work about the relationship between games and cover art (Oliva et al. 2016; Payne, 2012) and provides context for cover art content analyses (Burgess et al. 2007; Dunlop, 2007; Near, 2013; Provenzo, 1991), but differentiates itself by viewing paratexts as constructing industry-sanctioned discourses—ones which, due to their anachronistic nature, may conflict with those in the videogames.

With few exceptions, the covers continue to reflect outdated gender norms and privilege common discourses about gender, videogames and violence as though little has changed. While the artwork speaks to a range of demographic cohorts (and types of players) that may interpret symbols differently, the covers broadly tell audiences the fantasy contained within is masculine and for an audience that identifies with a male subject—despite the contestatory changes throughout each series.

In other words, the covers quite literally place masculinity and the male body front and centre in the genre. According to Chess (2011), such advertising “reinforces and reaffirms gender roles and stereotypes already a part of dominant ideologies” (231), but this persists in spite of, and not always in cooperation with, the game content. The cover art especially ensures the games appear normative and uncontroversial (Oliva et al. 2016, 3), minimising the contestatory changes and preventing visible disruption of the status quo. Thus, there is a tension between the efforts of game developers to disrupt gender norms and the efforts of game publishers to sustain the hegemonic ideal of the male gamer (who, for publishers, represents an importantly stable, niche demographic).

This consistency and conservatism in a risk-adverse industry is understandable and, yet, it problematically positions official paratexts as the final line of defence against change. It means, regardless of how gender inclusive shooter games may now be, they appear as masculine, male-dominated and exclusionary as ever to players and non-players alike. A decade after Fron et al. (2007) explained “advertisements tend to disenfranchise and alienate women, further contributing to the self-fulfilling prophecy that ‘women don’t play games’” (8), this persists. Videogames may be on a trajectory towards greater inclusivity, but, as this paper explains, individual efforts are scarcely promoted; instead, official paratexts generally minimise women and communicate they are not welcome.

OPTIONAL BIO

Erin Maclean is a PhD candidate, tutor and journalist based at Griffith University in Brisbane, Australia. She is interested in intersections between popular culture and journalism. Her thesis focuses on the tensions that arise in the news and gaming communities as popular shooter games evolve in the way they represent gender.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This research is supported by an Australian Government Research Training Program (RTP) Scholarship.

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