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"It's [not just] in the game": the promotional context of video games

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Exploring the Myth of the Representative Video Game Trailer

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Abstract

Since the 1980s trailers have been influencing the promotional practices of video game industry, first aesthetically and starting from 1993 also discursively. Currently, they can be considered one of the most prolific and influential tools behind video game hype and marketing. Nonetheless, trailers still fuel controversies due to the questionable representativity of the final video game product. This article explores the notion of a representative trailer by analyzing online user discussions of 12 official trailers for 8 mainstream video game titles published between 2009 and 2016. Results show that while some players are aware of potential misrepresentations caused by video game trailers and revisit old cases of disillusionment, others still expect accurate promotion and base their expectations of upcoming games on trailers.

Keywords: Trailer, Representativity, Paratextuality, Video game promotion, Player discussions

Trailers have become a centerpiece of video game promotion. The biggest industry events – such as the Electronic Entertainment Expo (E3) – are effectively just showcasing trailers and other audiovisual promotional media. The actual release of a trailer is often considered newsworthy enough that it warrants its own story. In 2016, video game fans have channeled their rivalry on the reveal trailers of the first-person shooters *Battlefield 1* (EA DICE, 2016) and *Call of Duty: Infinite Warfare* (Infinity Ward, 2016), making the former the most liked media trailer ever with more than two million likes and the latter one of the most disliked online videos in history with more than three million dislikes. While these numbers are exceptional even for such high-profile blockbusters, they nonetheless prove that trailers have become one of the most visible artifacts of video game culture. During the same year, trailers for the video game *No Man's Sky* (Hello Games, 2016) have been subjected to thorough criticism of allegedly misleading advertising. While the British Advertising Standards Authority (ASA) has not found any violation (ASA, 2016), upset fans have voiced their opinion in negative user reviews on Metacritic and Steam, and pursued refund options outside of standard return policies of online retailers (Kuchera, 2016). Although similar controversies are relatively common also in the film culture (Gray, 2010; Johnston, Vollans and Greene, 2016) and thus their occurrence can imply adoption of film trailer viewing practices throughout video game culture, such an interpretation nonetheless suggests that the myth of a representative trailer persists in video game culture.¹

What Is a (Video Game) Trailer?

Cultural epiphenomena (Klinger, 1989; Johnston, 2013) – such as trailers – are treated by competing frameworks which attempt to conceptualize various previously overlooked (and seemingly ancillary) texts and ephemera in the context of their respective cultural industries.² One branch of this research follows the groundwork laid out by Gérard Genette (1997a,

¹ Unfortunately, even some researchers fall for the myth of the representative trailer and consider analyses of trailers equivalent to analyses of actual video games (Mou and Peng, 2008).

² Keith M. Johnston (2013) uses the concept of epiphenomena as an umbrella term encompassing paratexts, promotional materials and other elements of screen industries suggesting a more neutral term free of the defining quality of subordination emphasized, for example, by Genette (1997a). However, the etymology of the word epiphenomenon itself implies a secondary role when compared to a phenomenon which would be a video game in the context of video game culture.

1997b) and applies his concept of the paratext to other media ecosystems beyond the original venue of literary publishing. Many scholars have already updated Genette's concept, generally criticizing the implicit hierarchies of his typology of transtextuality, which relegates paratexts to a role of subordinate texts (Consalvo, 2007; Gray, 2010; Jones, 2008; Lunenfeld, 1999; Švelch, 2016). Others have argued for more drastic redefinitions (Rockenberger, 2014; Wolf, 2006) or have completely steered clear of the framework (Guins, 2014; Johnston, 2009) while pursuing similar objects of study.

Despite conflicting conceptualizations, scholars seem to agree that the (film) trailer is in the most basic sense, an audiovisual form of promotion (Gray, 2010; Johnston, 2009; Kernan, 2004). Recently, Ed Vollans (2015) has explored how this particular promotional tool has been adopted by video game industry (along with book publishing and theater). According to his findings, one of the first mentions of the term trailer as a synonym for a video game commercial dates back to 1993 when it was used in press materials for the launch of the console version of *Mortal Kombat* (Midway Games, 1992). The respective terminological shift from "commercial" to "trailer" might suggest an overarching qualitative change in video game promotion, which as a whole gradually shifted from showing the hardware to actual gameplay footage (Young, 2007). However, formally similar audiovisual advertisements can be found as early as in 1982. For example, video game historian Mark J.P. Wolf (2008) has claimed *Zaxxon* (Sega, 1982) to be the first video game promoted with a televised commercial. Despite showing just a short glimpse of the actual gameplay, this 30-second long video could easily be identified as a trailer through a lens of current video game marketing lingo. Vollans has suggested the commercial for the *Raiders of the Lost Ark* video game (Atari, 1982) as the first historical video game trailer due to its "voiceover narration combined with wipes and dissolves that echo the studio era movie trailers" (2015, p. 119). It can thus be said that video game industry has gradually appropriated trailers, starting with cinematic aesthetics, which are at least vernacularly attributed to trailers, in the 1980s and continuing with the rhetoric and terminology in the 1990s.

Following the surge in popularity of trailer as a type of online content initiated by the promotional campaign for *Star Wars Episode I: The Phantom Menace* in 1998 (Johnston, 2008), video game counterparts slowly achieved comparable status within their own industry.

The foundation of the website GameTrailers in 2002, which started out as an archive of video game trailers before adding original journalistic content, serves as anecdotal evidence to this trend. Its shutdown in January 2016 does not undermine the importance of trailers in current video game culture, but merely points to the ubiquity of trailers; which can no longer be confined to one specific venue as they permeate gaming sites as newsworthy items and top viewership records on YouTube.

Still, one should not overlook that video game publishers employ other promotional genres – screenshots, concept art, making-of videos and features, developer interviews and playable demos or vertical slices³ – which complement trailers and influence their role in the overall marketing strategies. With the advent of social networking sites, fans are often invited to participate in building the hype through their activities and creations, such as fan art or cosplay (Helens-Hart, 2014; Stork, 2014; Švelch and Krobová, 2016). Video game trailers can be considered parts of greater textual systems often manifesting certain paratextual qualities, such as informing about socio-historical aspects of a video game, for example release date, age rating, authorship (Švelch, 2016). However, such fact alone does not reduce trailers to mere paratexts as they are capable of much richer transtextual relationships, for example in the sense of transmedia storytelling (Jenkins, 2006; Mittell, 2015).⁴ As has been previously argued, most trailers have paratextual qualities but they are at the same time texts in their own right (Hesford, 2013; Johnston, Vollans and Greene, 2016; Švelch, 2016; Vollans 2015). Compared to live gameplay showcases (such as livestreams or Let's Plays), trailers are attributed with staging of ideal performances and highlighting desired features while possibly hiding flaws and unfinished assets, effectively motivating unfoundedly positive expectations. Official video game trailers can then be understood as deliberately composed videos with a varying degree of cinematic expression which fulfill promotional functions aimed at a video game product (or a whole transmedia intellectual property) since it is revealed up until the post-launch stages characterized by updates, downloadable content (DLC) and expansions.

³ Vertical slice is a type of demo which is supposed to show majority of game features. It is often developed aside of the main game on request from investors or other influential stakeholders.

⁴ Trailers have been also appropriated by fans in creative ways (Ortega, 2014; Williams, 2012), surpassing the traditional boundaries of Genette's (1997a) framework.

The Dubious Representativity

In the context of film culture, trailers manifest an arguably close connection to the text they aim to promote. In the 1910s and 1920s, trailers and their makers repurposed actual footage from a film (Kernan, 2004), at first even without a permission of film studios. Due to this indexical⁵ connection between a film and a trailer, a certain degree of representativity could be claimed or at least understood and interpreted by their viewers. The term representativity here stands for the assumed or attempted accurate representation of a text (video game) by a trailer through use of audiovisual semiotic resources. This particular terminological choice⁶ is motivated by the industry practice and the video game vernacular, which uses the expression “representative” or “not representative of game experience” on a regular basis. Moreover, this term highlights the process of representation, which is socially perceived to be happening between a trailer and a video game.

This indexical relationship remains the norm for many current film trailers and the respective representational accuracy is often discussed by viewers (Johnston, Vollans and Greene, 2016). Still, this material connection does not make the representational process completely straightforward, not least due to the comparably short form of a trailer. For example, Lisa Kernan (2004) identified three broad categories of focus – genre, stories, and stars – that any film trailer might embrace in order to persuade a potential viewer. The range of different interpretations of cinematic texts offered through promotion and possibly challenging a unified accurate representation of a film has also been explored by Barbara Klinger (1989). Another aspect hindering complete representativity is the self-censorship employed in trailers by which publishers avoid spoiling the whole story (Johnston, 2015; Zanger, 1998).

The claim of representativity in video game trailers presents a more complex issue. First of all, the organization of a trailer text is mostly linear,⁷ while video games are usually considered to be ergodic (non-linear) texts (Aarseth, 1997). In consequence, even the scenes

⁵ Peirce’s (1985) categories of signs are not fully equipped to deal with complex multimodal signs (Van Leeuwen, 2005), such as trailers. Still, if one would apply Peirce’s criteria to the trailers which repurpose footage from the text they promote they would then be in primarily indexical signs as there is a causal connection between the two elements in question. In other words, the sign (gameplay trailer) is caused by the referent (video game).

⁶ For example, Johnston, Vollans and Greene (2016) use instead the term fidelity.

⁷ Video game trailers only rarely assume non-linear structure (Švelch, 2015).

portrayed in trailers using gameplay footage show just one of many potential performances of a given video game, excluding of course cutscenes and other non-interactive segments of a game. This disconnect between a text and its performance (Fernández-Vara, 2009) should logically impose a certain tolerance of representational difference on the level of promotional materials.⁸ Moreover, many video game trailers also use other types of footage, such as computer-generated imagery (CGI) specially created for a trailer, animation or live-action, which further distance them from the portrayed game. Distinguishing between different types of footage is key to interpreting the degree of representativity of a trailer but is not always apparent to the viewer without added paratextual cues. Thus the use of non-gameplay imagery is potentially confusing for viewers and is nowadays addressed by explicit disclaimers about the nature of the trailer content which also provide leeway for adjustments during development.

However, that was not always the case. Carlson (2009) has suggested that such disclaimers were embraced by the industry only after the controversial trailer for *Killzone 2* (Guerrilla Games, 2009) unveiled at 2005's E3. The video in question led many players to believe that the final game would have the same visual quality. However, at that time the game was in development for the already obsolete PlayStation 2 hardware and the trailer itself was outsourced to an independent CGI studio and showed nothing of the actual game (Almaci, 2011). In the case of *Killzone 2*, the claim of representativity was inverted as the trailer – otherwise an audiovisual text whose primary role is to represent another text (or a transmedia cultural property) – became the benchmark the final product aimed to achieve. However, this turn of events would not have happened if it had not been for the assumed representativity of video game trailers, which metaphorically forced the hand of Guerrilla Games to stay true to the vision of the game from the trailer.

To summarize, video game trailers inherit representational limitations of their film precursors and bring new qualities into consideration. The claim of representativity is a result of negotiations of various stakeholders within video game culture to an even greater extent than in more traditional cultural industries. Instead of searching for potential objective criteria by which one might measure the degree of representativity, I propose to analyze how the claim

⁸ Similar restraint on the part of a viewer might be also expected in the case of theater trailers (Preece, 2011).

of representativity is established and maintained through player discussions. After all, video game audiences are the primary target group of trailers and their reception, reactions and economic behavior influence the promotional practice.

Methodology

The aim of the article is to analyze discourses on representativity of video game trailers. To this end, 34 venues of online discussions about 12 video game trailers for 8 video game titles have been selected as the empirical material for a discourse analysis. Due to lack of previous empirical research, I opt for explorative design. As I do not attempt to provide a quantitative overview of discursive stances, many of the steps of the corpus selection and data collection are primarily oriented at acquiring a qualitatively saturated sample instead of a fully randomized or otherwise representative data set. Still, one of the few deliberate limitations of the empirical analysis is its focus to official trailers of mainstream video games due to the fact that they attract comparable viewership and play similar roles within the overall promotional strategies. For example, indie developers often distance themselves from the practices of mainstream publishers and subvert traditional marketing tools (Sharp, 2016).

The first step in creating a corpus of trailer discussions for a discourse analysis is to select diverse games from different areas of mainstream video game production. Considering that there is no authoritative typology of mainstream video games, which might guide a more rigorous process of creating the corpus, I depend on my expert knowledge as both a game studies scholar and a video game journalist. To limit any subjective bias that I might hold towards particular games, I apply specific criteria to create as varied and representative sample of recent mainstream video game production as possible.

Based on my expert knowledge and previous research (Švelch, 2015, 2016), the number of players (single-player/multiplayer) is chosen as the main selection criterion for the corpus of video games because persistent multiplayer games receive trailers even long after release, which might potentially change their reception. The second criterion is the date of release ranging from as early as 2009 to yet unreleased games at the time collection of empirical material on August 17, 2016. Lastly, all games are high-profile releases which have received

strong promotional support and press coverage. Out of the selected eight games, three represent online gaming experiences – *League of Legends* (Riot Games, 2009), *The Elder Scrolls Online* (ZeniMax Online Studios, 2014), and *Overwatch* (Blizzard Entertainment, 2016). Two titles fit into the traditional category of primarily single-player experiences – *BioShock Infinite* (Irrational Games, 2013) and *The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt* (CD Projekt RED, 2015). The three remaining games lie at the intersection of both categories with *Deus Ex: Mankind Divided* (Eidos Montreal, 2016), and *Mass Effect: Andromeda* (BioWare, 2017) leaning more towards a single-player campaign and *Battlefield 1* focusing on a multiplayer mode.⁹

Out of the eight games, only *BioShock Infinite* and *The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt* received coverage in gaming media due to the contested representativity of their trailers.

Game	Developer	Publisher	Date of release
League of Legends	Riot Games	Riot Games	October 27, 2009
BioShock Infinite	Irrational Games	2K Games	March 26, 2013
The Elder Scrolls Online	ZeniMax Online Studios	Bethesda Softworks	April 4, 2014
The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt	CD Projekt RED	CD Projekt	May 19, 2015
Overwatch	Blizzard Entertainment	Blizzard Entertainment	May 24, 2016
Deus Ex: Mankind Divided	Eidos Montreal	Square Enix	August 23, 2016
Battlefield 1	EA DICE	Electronic Arts	October 21, 2016
Mass Effect: Andromeda	BioWare	Electronic Arts	March 21, 2017

⁹ Out of the selected 8 games, I have myself played only two – *BioShock Infinite* and *The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt* – before the writing of the article. Thus, I would argue that my own subjective bias towards representativity of all 12 selected trailers is fairly minimal.

Table 1: List of selected mainstream games

In the second step, I have selected individual trailers on the video-sharing platform YouTube for the eight games based on two criteria: (1) vernacular distinction of footage used in a trailer (Carlson, 2009; Švelch, 2015) and (2) relative timing of a trailer release to a respective video game launch. Using the first criterion, I distinguish between three common types of footage – gameplay, CGI and live-action. While gameplay footage shows a staged performance of a game and promises the highest degree of representativity, the CGI and live-action trailer content allows for transmedia storytelling techniques by going beyond indexical representation of a video game title.

Regarding the second criterion, the majority of the corpus consists of regular pre-release promotional trailers (see table 2 with additional information). The two exceptions are *League of Legends Cinematic: A New Dawn* which was published roughly five years after the launch of the game, and *The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt – Blood and Wine Launch Trailer ("Final Quest")* promoting the last piece of DLC one year after the initial release of the main game. Moreover, the chosen date of data collection in August 17, 2016 influences the potential revisiting of trailers for already released games. Such retrospective viewing (Zanger, 1998), which applies to trailers 1–8, might inspire different readings, attract viewer's attention to discrepancies between a trailer and a game and create a shift in discussions towards representativity.

Trailer	Year	Length	Views	Comments	Footage
League of Legends Cinematic: A New Dawn (1)	2014	6:27	29 974 058	75 802	CGI
BioShock Infinite Beast of America Trailer (2)	2012	1:37	850 940	1 699	gameplay
BioShock Infinite TV Commercial (3)	2013	1:04	2 067 006	2 851	CGI
The Elder Scrolls Online – The Alliances Cinematic Trailer (4)	2013	5:47	6 061 571	25 375	CGI

The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt – The Sword of Destiny Trailer (5)	2014	2:21	4 509 977	10 530	gameplay
The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt – Blood and Wine Launch Trailer ("Final Quest") (6)	2016	1:37	2 819 338	2 963	gameplay
Overwatch Cinematic Trailer (7)	2014	6:00	9 639 137	19 744	CGI
Overwatch Gameplay Trailer (8)	2014	5:56	4 986 811	8 332	gameplay
Deus Ex: Mankind Divided – The Mechanical Apartheid (9)	2016	3:58	701 919	2 724	live-action
Deus Ex: Mankind Divided – 101 Trailer (10)	2016	6:10	1 462 004	2 208	gameplay
Battlefield 1 Official Reveal Trailer (11)	2016	1:19	44 326 916	349 963	game engine
Mass Effect™: Andromeda Official EA Play 2016 Video (12)	2016	1:58	2 548 268	7 828	mixed footage

Table 2: List of selected trailers

(in a chronological order of respective video game launch dates)

The last step of the data collection has been the selection of user comments for the discourse analysis (Fairclough, 2003) aimed at exploring the discussions about trailers and their perceived representativity and to identify individual discursive stances. Considering the high number of total comments (see table 2), I have reduced the scope of the empirical material due to the employed qualitative methodology. To this end 40 top comments (including the full quantity of replies¹⁰) per each selected trailer have been gathered on the official video pages on YouTube. In addition, three gaming news sites – Eurogamer.net, Kotaku and Polygon – have been searched for any articles covering the release of selected trailers. All respective user comments of 22 relevant news stories are included in the corpus.

¹⁰ YouTube displays 20 top comments in a default setting, by clicking on the “show more” button a user can reveal 20 more comments. The full amount of replies to individual comments is usually obscured in the default setting of YouTube, additional replies had to be manually revealed.

Altogether, 34 different venues of player discussions have been archived and analyzed. It is important to note that while trailers on YouTube get new comments as fans go back to watching them, the comments sections of news articles provide a snapshot of historical reception due to the way the respective stories are made irrelevant and obsolete within the logic of web ephemerality (Grainge, 2011; Pietrzyk, 2012). Quotes used in the article are anonymized to protect privacy of commenters stemming from the original context of what could be considered a fan discussion (Busse and Hellekson, 2012; Sveningsson, 2009). Additionally, they are labeled by their origin – (Y) signifies a YouTube comment or reply, (E) Eurogamer, (K) Kotaku, and (P) Polygon – and by the trailer they belong to according to the number (1–12) listed in table 2. Only minor spelling corrections have been made to ensure easier comprehension.

Discussing Trailers

User comments take many diverse forms and focus on different aspects of video game culture presented by trailers: the quality of a trailer, the game in question, memories and past experiences with a franchise among others. However, the task is not give an exhausting overview of the actual content of player discussions. The presented discourse analysis explores particular discursive stances which relate to the notion of representativity of video game trailers. Due to recent controversies of misleading trailers, issues of representativity are often mentioned in player discussions and involve intricate and sometimes contradictory mixtures of arguments. Video game trailers are carefully disseminated and players seem to differentiate between their forms – they especially focus on the nature of the used footage and construct dichotomies of gameplay versus non-gameplay trailers.

Beware of the Hype

Starting with discussions which precede the release of a game, one can see two opposing initial reactions to a trailer – (1) excitement and (2) cynicism – which are tied to the questions of representativity, i.e. basing one's expectations of a game on a trailer. The hype built up by trailers makes many fans feel both excited and cynical about an upcoming game as Jonathan

Gray (2010) has already argued in the context of potential resistance towards excessive paratextual presence of a cultural artifact. For example, pre-order incentives aim to increase the importance and lure of available promotional materials (including trailers) and persuade fans to make their buying decision based on these controlled streams of information. Such a feeling does not necessarily have to be rooted in a belief of representativity in the strict sense, however on an implicit level it still establishes a link, albeit emotional, between a trailer and positive expectations of the final product. Therefore, it serves as a relevant representation of a game to some players.

3P: [...] I think the trailer looks fantastic. It certainly has me excited. I'm more excited about playing this game than I have been about playing any other game in recent memory. I can't wait.

11Y: [...] Who else is hyped and ready to bash skulls, slit throats, and watch your enemies bleed in *Battlefield 1*?

12P: What I know from this trailer... it's going to be a long seven to nine months waiting for release.

The excitement sometimes directly translates into an economic decision. In case of an upcoming game, that usually means pre-ordering it. In the context of online discussions, some fans declare their buying decision, either in expressive ways that appropriate popular Internet memes or in a more straightforward manner.

6Y: CD Projekt RED take my money! Take my soul! Take my damn existence already!

11Y: Who else pre-ordered the deluxe edition?

However, players who show these relatively spontaneous reactions are discouraged by the more careful players who point to the realities of marketing and question any promises made by trailers. In their eyes, such excitement only leads to disappointment, as it is not grounded in actual gameplay experience but in carefully edited and staged videos. Some fans even feel responsible to warn others from trusting trailers too much and advise their fellow players to wait for more footage or until the launch when reviews become available.

4Y: Seeing all the people who are hyped saddens me as they have fallen for the trap. They are being blinded by false advertising. How many times has a game company done this and failed to deliver? Near enough every time.

9Y: Only idiots get hyped for a game... Don't be a sheep, wait for one or two days after release and read a few reviews.

11E: I really hope people don't preorder this game based on one trailer. We need real game playing footage to judge it. However, pre-order is completely stupid anyway, especially from Electronic Arts.

12Y: Do not preorder, wait for reviews so we know if Electronic Arts got in BioWare's way again.

These discussions polarize players into two broad camps – the enthusiastic fans consider the opposing group to be too cynical to look forward to a new game, while the more careful players accuse the first camp from blindly falling for the promotional schemes orchestrated by publishers. Still, these immediate reactions evolve into more elaborate opinions on trailers, which fragment both groups based on their understanding of various types of trailers and marketing strategies.

Debunking Representativity

The proponents of the most general discursive stance consider all trailers to not be representative of the final product. Such arguments are often refined and developed in more detail throughout discussions among fans, although they have some merit on their own as they address the potential issues of game development and the possibility of faithfully representing an unfinished game.

2E: You never know – they could go that way in the end. This trailer is action oriented, but you can't trust trailers.

4K: People see the commercial, assume that is the product, and then get duped when they realize it is not. Thus it is false advertising.

9Y: A good trailer does not imply a good game.

11Y: You know the game won't look like this when you play it, just saying.

However, this overall argument intensifies when it is confronted with general distrust towards non-gameplay trailers, at least in terms of potential representativity. The distinction between vernacular types of trailer is crucial for understanding of representativity as it creates opportunity to compare various ideal forms of trailers regarding the claim of representativity. For example, Rebecca Carlson (2009) has distinguished between two broader categories of video game trailers – (1) teasers, or teaser trailers, reveal a game long prior to its release and usually feature content that has been specifically created for such a video; (2) subsequent regular trailers, which are circulated closer to a game launch, use gameplay footage and tend to be longer, more informative and arguably more representative. According to Daniel Hesford (2013), trailers in general should be defined as a form of cinematic performance, which channels trailer’s film heritage and applies it to other cultural artifacts, such as video games or even political campaigning. However, one should not think of cinematic performance (or expression) as a binary but rather imagine it as a continuum with certain degrees and breaking points. In this figurative competition, non-gameplay footage (CGI, live-action) trailers come out as the most potentially misleading as they prioritize cinematic expression at the expense of accurate representation of a video game.

1P: It looks... weird. It feels a bit amateurish, the characters all have a slightly different style, the lighting is all over the place and the ground looks like a big mush. Close to none of the things you see are in the game, there is no real skill showcase, has nothing to do with actual gameplay. This money could’ve been better spent on fixing their servers.

3P: One thing that always bothered me about pre-rendered moves/trailers is the inconsistency with the actual game. *Deus Ex: Human Revolution* [the previous installment of the *Deus Ex* series] was a good example of this. The movies and trailers were not indicative of the visuals within the game, or the actual game play. The high compression rate of the movies did not help either.

4K: [...] It did nothing well aside from “look cool”. It really showed you nothing about the game, or the game world [...] All you get from this is there are three players (maybe?) who are fighting (maybe?) for some reason (maybe?) at some random place that seems to have an entirely different fourth group (maybe?). You could have literally taken that video and

applied it to *World of Warcraft* and it wouldn't overly seem out of place. That's how much of an utterly generic piece of trash trailer that was [...]

9Y: [...] I just don't get my hopes up too much just by watching the trailer. And they should make a trailer that is closer to the product. This will not be the case though.

These explicit criticisms about the vague relationship between cinematic trailers and a final product are often accompanied by calls for more gameplay to be seen, suggesting that such footage might be considered more representative.

9Y: I've seen it, just wish the story trailers were also using gameplay. I don't like live action stuff at all, makes it seem the game won't even bother actually speaking of these themes.

11E: Need to see actual gameplay and not just a cinematic movie made with the game engine to be convinced this is something to be excited about.

12Y: When they show a game at E3 should they or shouldn't they show the players, their paying customers, some gameplay to help influence them to buy their game?

Some players are however defending cinematic trailers arguing that they are capable of representing certain aspects of a game, for example its themes, story or overall tone. These arguments downplay the necessity of a direct indexical relationship between a game and a trailer, which might otherwise be established by using gameplay footage, and consider even cinematic trailers capable of capturing the essence of an upcoming game. Still, deciphering such a cinematic adaptation of a gameplay experience requires extensive knowledge about video game genres, particular forms and trends of current video game production. Therefore, this viewpoint is reserved only for involved video game fans.

3P: Sure, it's a bit stylish as a CGI trailer, but it's still got the mechanics of the actual gameplay. Skyhooking, landing the drop kill, using powers to save Elizabeth, using powers against the Handyman, and Elizabeth aiding Booker. At least that's what I see myself doing as I play.

4Y: This is a cinematic trailer. Its purpose is to give people a basic introduction to the storyline not go through the ins and outs of the gameplay, graphics, etc.

9Y: It [live-action trailer] shows the story, which is a part of the game too, you know...

Such defense of representativity (however limited) of cinematic trailers seems to align with the broader notion of extracting information from trailers and inferring about potential gameplay features. Since the overwhelmingly popular trailers for *Star Wars Episode I: The Phantom Menace* appeared online, fans have taken to scrutinizing these videos frame by frame in order to extract all the potential information about an upcoming cultural artifact (Johnston, 2008), be it a film or a video game. This practice has also been adopted by video game fans and even by journalists. For example, IGN's *Rewind Theater* offers trailer analyses of films, TV series, and video games on its YouTube channel. Through this lens, every piece of promotion might be used as valuable information for predictions about a final product, even to minutest details such as romanceable characters in role-playing games or playtime.

2E: What is *Infinite* other than *BioShock* in a new setting? Compare the original *BioShock* launch trailer [...] Essentially the same components (catchy soundtrack, pistol action, other assorted guns, gadgets and whatever you do with your left hand – in *BioShock* it was plasmids, in *Infinite* it's the hook, followed by plasmids). I am not saying that *Infinite* won't be a good game [...] I had hoped for a bit of a bigger step into something new.

4K: [...] you can usually filter out the things that will not be in the game and the things that will very likely be in it. The Pop-Block series on GameTrailers usually does a good job translating trailer features into what could likely be in the games.

6Y: The blonde on the right. You'll be able to bang her, 100% sure.

12Y: Looks like a 60-hour game. Nah, the Mako [a vehicle used for planet exploration] will make it a 120-hour game. I'm fine with that though.

This belief in value of information provided by trailers suggests that some fans trust in their ability to see through marketing strategies and uncover the truth about a game in question, or at least engage in supposedly rigorous predictions.

Representing Gameplay

The aforementioned perspective is not shared by all members of video game communities, the vocal opposition often manifests in analyzed discussions. The more general distrust for all

trailers and to the specific category of cinematic trailers has been already explored, however the arguments against the claim of representativity of gameplay still need to be addressed.

5Y: Target shot trailers never represent the final product. Wait for gameplay videos shortly before the game release. Target shot trailers are often taken from alpha versions, and that's how the developers want it to look, but in the end some of the details will always be altered/lowered/removed /and so on.

6Y: I think nowadays everyone should assume the final product will not look as good as promo gameplay. Be it either because of marketing or for technical reasons. Anyone hyping over E3 gameplay trailers is setting themselves up for disappointment.

10Y: The most normal way developers show their games these days is to make a game engine video which makes the game look better than it really does.

The discussion about misleading trailers continues after release of a game when it is brought up in retrospective viewing of trailers, which allows for direct comparison between the trailer and the game. Fans do not limit their interest to a particular game and also recount other instances of trailer controversies as evidence of a broader issue. According to this discursive stance, even gameplay trailers should not be considered representative. Its proponents conjure previous cases of disappointment to back their arguments.

3Y: Shame nothing from the pre-release trailers went into the fucking thing. Remember when they said there would be random zeppelin fights and how you could affect the fight between the Vox Populi and the Founders [warring factions of *BioShock Infinite*]? The only redeeming quality is that the DLC might fix it.

4Y: [...] *Assassin's Creed III* awesome cinematic trailers that were 100% lies. *Aliens: Colonial Marines* cinematic and gameplay trailers were lies [...] I would name more, but I can't be bothered to argue something which we all know is true, but yet everyone always think "this time will be better". Wait for gameplay when it comes out to find out if it really is the game you think it is.

5Y: They changed a shit ton of stuff since they have shown their early trailers, resulting in somewhat of a downgrade. They don't see it as a downgrade themselves, but they

acknowledge that gamers see otherwise, and they somewhat regret showing "misrepresentative" graphics in the first place.

8Y: It occurs to me just how much this game has changed, both from a gameplay standpoint and just aesthetic things like voice actors and voice lines.

Especially, the promotional videos for *BioShock Infinite* and *The Witcher III: Wild Hunt* have caused heated discussions about the expected results of video game development. The former case relates mostly to cut content as the respective trailers featured a scene with a wounded horse, which is missing from the final game. The appearance of the main heroine Elizabeth also underwent notable changes during development, especially in terms of her haircut and physique (Schreier, 2013). The latter's criticism relates to downgrade in graphical features such as particle effects or different lighting models. In general, audiences believe that a game at launch should at least deliver the same level of technical and visual quality as was presented in trailers. Thus, the progress from an alpha or beta version to a final product is understood as a process of enhancement. After the rumors of the downgrade had spread through forums and gaming media, developers of *The Witcher III: Wild Hunt* admitted that they were forced to adjust the game engine to ensure acceptable levels of performance on home consoles PlayStation 4 and Xbox One and that these changes might be interpreted as a decrease in visual detail (Purchase, 2015).

However, some players would still argue that such changes do not make a trailer completely unreliable as a source of predictions. More dedicated fans would often downplay the perceived severity of adjustments made to a game during development. Such apologetic stance depends on how much goodwill a developer can establish among its audiences. Arguably CD Projekt RED and Blizzard are often excused for minor changes while, for example, Electronic Arts is stigmatized and preventively distrusted, as previous quotes have shown.

5Y: Except the small downgrade, this is one of the few videogame trailers that doesn't lie to you about the content.

8Y: A bunch of the voice acting is different, but only slightly. They have the same lines and the same accents, just different delivery. It actually amazes me just how close this very first

trailer is to the final product. Most of the heroes are there, with all the same powers. Some stuff like Bastion's [a playable character] shield has been removed.

As one can see, the discussions on representativity are rich in the variety of the arguments employed. The connected issues of hype, predictions or potential deception are explicitly dissected on particular cases from recent video game history. In result, the contested claim of representativity of video game trailers polarizes discussions into many separate strands. One of the more apparent divisions is formed around the distinction between particular types of trailers, which suggests that players themselves might have different expectations of a trailer based on, for example, the footage used or the time distance from the actual release. Another factor is the general trustworthiness of a particular video game developer. The notion of representativity itself seems to be understood in different terms and relates to various distinct features of a game, including its game mechanics, story, themes or atmosphere. Overall, all this discourse about particular aspects of representativity of trailers revolves around a broader question of what actually is the purpose and role of a video game trailer. Different understanding of this fundamental issue then shapes other opinions and stances which are built on it.

The Role of Video Game Trailers

The underlying issue which influences the reception of trailers and the discussions on representativity is their perceived role within video game culture. Not all fans expect trailers to be representative, especially the non-gameplay trailers, which are more concerned with transmedia storytelling (Švelch, 2015) or cinematic expression (Hesford, 2013). Such trailers are often evaluated on different merits than videos which feature gameplay footage.

1Y: These cinematics are pure fan service nothing more.

3P: I don't understand why most of you appear to be bothered by the TV commercial not being representative of *BioShock Infinite*'s actual sequence of events/content. I, personally, liked the commercial for this very reason. I have always been fond of commercials that don't give up the entire medium via consistent events that happen in the very medium, mainly because these types of commercials are scarce today. I do not believe that a commercial's job

is that of spoiling the medium's content for the viewer, but instead, appealing to the viewer enough for him/her to crave more. And, needless to say, I do believe the commercial has fulfilled this.

4K: [...] I see a cinematic trailer like this as the company's vision for the game. But as with most things, (not just games and game companies, but in regards to individual as well) the biggest problem is going to probably be translating it from "what I envision" to "what actually exists". And if the game can manage to bridge that gap in a meaningful way, I will absolutely buy it.

Proponents of this discursive stance consider the claim of representativity unreasonable when applied to cinematic trailers. Other qualities, such as the cinematic performance or animation quality, come into the forefront. Some players even acknowledge the fact that a large number of CGI and live-action trailers are outsourced to specialized animation studios. In such light, the claims of a "company's vision" are ruled out as these trailers might more likely be understood as adaptations. For example, Studio Blur is relatively known for its work on video game trailers, including two trailers from the corpus.

1Y: Riot didn't technically make this. Blur did this one and A Twist of Fate.

4P: It's nice to see Blur still getting work, and continuing to make pretty cinematics.

The preference of cinematic trailers is tied to the question of spoilers and the potential self-censorship (Johnston, 2015; Zanger, 1998) publishers might undertake while promoting their games. The open confrontation of the players who seek representativity and those who do not want to spoil the future gaming experience is particularly apparent in the case of *Mass Effect: Andromeda* whose initial trailers have been scarce on actual gameplay footage. Some players have appreciated the more secretive style of promotion, also pointing to previous negative experience with another game from the same developer – *Dragon Age: Inquisition* (BioWare, 2014).

12K: I'm with you 100%, all these people in panic mode and I'm over here like "hey, can't they play it close to their chest until closer to release?" There's something to be said about

“Less is more”, in *Mass Effect*’s case, a bit of mystery and hype control is good in my opinion.

12P: Personally, I think they are trying to do the opposite of what they did for *Dragon Age: Inquisition*. They gave us so much information the year before launch that fans knew a huge amount about it. This time it seems like they want to keep as much as possible under wraps so some asshole doesn’t leak the ending again.

The other side of the argument has questioned the status of the videos, rejecting to call them trailers and instead has resorted to terms such as “teaser” or “highlight reel”, suggesting that a video game trailer should be representative of a game. Through this lens, non-gameplay trailers are valued less and often considered irrelevant in terms of informing about an upcoming game.

11E: I do hate these reveal trailers: “In-engine footage”, “Representative of”, “Not actual gameplay”... Just showing us the game in action would be a refreshing change.

12E: This is obviously not the proper trailer for the game since the game isn't ready anytime soon so no idea why people are disappointed. As a teaser it worked on me – can't wait to get back into that universe.

The role of a trailer is not static, in the eyes of many fans it changes throughout the development process. As a game gets closer to its launch date, gameplay trailers are expected and their absence might be interpreted as a sign of troubled development or delayed release.

12K: I’ll be amazed if *Mass Effect: Andromeda* hits its February release date. If the game was on schedule, there would’ve been a hell of a lot more gameplay in that trailer.

Therefore, it seems that many fans’ expectations of video game promotion align with the industry practice charted out by Carlson (2009), starting first with reveal trailers, which might be more cinematic in their focus and continuing with more gameplay videos as the game nears its launch. Different types of trailers are then judged not only by their type (which usually overlaps with the dominant footage used in the video) but also by their relative timing. Early gameplay trailers might be received cautiously, while late cinematic trailers are

understood as pointless or even as a sign that there is no presentable gameplay footage to be shown at a certain moment. The demand for accurate representation of a video game is more contingent than in film trailer audiences, which in general focus on the informational value of a trailer (Johnston, Vollans and Greene, 2016).

Conclusion – The Ambiguous Status of Video Game Trailers

Arguably, the notion of representativity of video game trailers is socially constructed and influenced by paratextual cues about the nature of trailer content. Various disclaimers conditionalize any potential reading of a trailer text in both possible directions, either by disconnecting the trailer from the game on a basis of alpha footage or non-gameplay scenes, or by strengthening the links of representativity by emphasizing that a viewer is indeed watching actual gameplay footage. These particular framings of trailers are addressed by players, but they do not lead to any consensus regarding representativity of video game trailers. Trailers are capable of evoking strong emotional reactions of excitement regardless of the footage used or of the timing of a trailer within a video game production cycle. However, not all players seem to be as trusting to a promise of a game delivered by the audiovisual form of a trailer. The resulting discussions between the enthusiasts and the cynics explicitly engage with the concept of representativity. Arguments about indicative or potentially misleading trailers are refined on the basis of distinction between different types of footage used. The resulting vernacular typology of trailers revolves around the dichotomy of gameplay versus non-gameplay footage. While the former category has potentially stronger claims for representativity, some players argue that also non-gameplay trailers are capable of conveying various ludic features in a faithful manner. Despite their more privileged position, gameplay trailers are often accused of being (potentially) misleading, especially given the recent controversies around *The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt* or *No Man's Sky*. Still, many players call for gameplay footage hoping that they would learn more about what the final product might hold for them, especially in reaction to cinematic trailers.

The overall question of representativity also relates to the relatively long-standing practice of frame-by-frame trailer analysis, which in the online environment dates back to 1998. Especially the second trilogy of *Star Wars* motivated and rewarded such participatory styles

of viewing (Johnston, 2008). This careful data mining process was also adopted by video game fans and applied to video game trailers. Fundamentally, it is based on a premise that players are able to extract valuable information, see past marketing strategies and make reliable predictions about the final game. Such educated guessing is present in the discussions and stands against the reservations which more cautious players hold against promotional gameplay footage used in trailers. However, at the same time these predictions are presented as rational readings in opposition to more emotional reactions of excitement or pre-ordering declarations.

The distinction between gameplay and cinematic trailers also uncovers different preferences among players regarding their expectation of this audiovisual form of video game promotion and video game culture in general. Those demanding representative marketing often ask for more gameplay scenes and criticize cinematic trailers as a waste of money that could have better spent on actual development or post-launch support in case of persistent online games such as *League of Legends*. These representativity-seekers focus on gameplay mechanics, technical details as well as graphics and expect (if not demand) trailers to be indicative of such game features. The other side of the spectrum is formed around players who avoid spoilers, prefer to keep some mystery about the game they eventually plan on buying and appreciate teasing trailers, which convey just the basic themes and manifest strong sense of self-censorship (Zanger, 1998). One could think of them as cinematic-connoisseurs who welcome the transmedia storytelling possibilities of non-gameplay trailers, which are not constrained by the limits of gameplay footage and can explore the same fictional worlds using different approaches. Of course, these two ideal perspectives are in reality rarely mutually exclusive. Players change their preferences and expectations of video game trailers based on the timing within the production cycle. Also, trailers do not exist in a vacuum – usually a rather large number of trailers promotes one game and together establishes the whole trailer surroundings of a video game. Both extreme tastes in trailers can then be catered to at the same time. However, prevalence of cinematic trailers might lead to negative prognoses about the state of development of a given game.

Are trailers considered representative then? As one fan (4Y) bluntly put it: “*The game represents the game.*” The representational capabilities of trailers are limited when it comes

to video games and some players are aware of it, especially due to recent controversies of misleading trailers, which sometimes resulted in official complaints to regulatory institutions. However, such knowledge does not stop players from approaching trailers as a source of valuable information while using their previous experience and knowledge about the video game industry, its genres and forms. While a certain degree of something that might be called “trailer literacy” is spreading through player communities and some members actively educate their peers about notable cases of disillusionment over trailers, other viewers still read and interpret these audiovisual texts rather naively. The vague meaning of the term trailer itself proves to be an important point of players’ discussions and shows first a lack of authoritative typology and second a fluid industry practice. Video game trailers manifest different degrees of cinematic expression, which influence the claim of representativity and to some extent even interfere with it. In consequence, two very broadly-stroked stances towards video game trailers can be identified, which either emphasize the cinematic flair or the representational accuracy of video game trailers, suggesting nearly contradicting perceptions of role of trailers in video game culture.

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