Introduction:

"It's [not Just] in the Game": the Promotional Context of Video Games

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> Advertisements do not lie to us. They show the mediating role that commodities could play in the relation between individual and expectations.
> (Jhally, 1990: 18)

> [T]he pages of the specialist gaming press brim over with anticipation, communicating palpable longing and desire for the next game. As such, one of the key discursive functions of the specialist gaming press arises out of its virtual contract with game developers and publishers, which sees it managing and shaping desire for forthcoming products.
> (Newman, 2012: 60)

In 2003, the authors of *Digital Play* made a strong case for the study of video game marketing and its integration in historical accounts of the medium. Yet despite such a call, little has been done to account for the forms, history and practices of promotion relating to gaming. This issue of Kinephanos seeks to address this key element of gaming culture. It builds on and develops our understanding of game promotion and representation at the point of sale and wider advertising contexts, shedding light on the context in which videogames are

consumed, and their position within the marketing of popular culture. By focusing on the consumer experience of game playing, studies have run the risk of suggesting that games appear in the public domain with little positioning. But in fact, promotion is antecedent to new products and feeds into the wider experience of awareness as much as it shapes consumer desire and consumption practices, while being a testament to the idealised audience and the positioning of games; and thus of historical, and discursive significance.

Far from just focusing on the audience experience, the papers in this issue also develop meaningful dialogue within and without the study of videogames, covering a whole range of communicative practices and promotional texts, which typically serve a dual role: informing and educating audiences as to the availability and possibilities of a new product, yet simultaneously holding back key information. As work on promotion by Kernan (2004), Hardy (2010), Grainge & Johnson (2015) has collectively demonstrated, the creation, form, and consumption of promotional material offers a unique insight into the workings of an increasingly competitive and lucrative industry, and this is demonstrated aptly throughout this issue. The papers herein discuss the intersection of promotion with many different perspectives, from audience expectations and game experience to the history of games, globalization and feminism, to film aesthetics, authenticity and gamification.

As Jhally noted in 1990, understanding the role of individual expectations and the wider experience of anticipation and awareness is key to understanding the *culture* of consumption. This sets up an interesting area of study, that of the pre-game experience. Within this issue, contributions from Jan Švelch, Theo Plothe, Sara Speedy & Zeynep Tanes focus explicitly on this topic and consider the role of audience consumption and anticipation in relation to games promotion by presenting important empirical studies that adds a valuable foundation for future inquiries. Combining the sphere of game studies with consumer research, Švelch makes significant exploratory steps in understanding the role of anticipation as it relates to perceived 'misleading' trailers, drawing on work from the field of film. Through an in-depth explorative study Švelch blends qualitative methods and existing literature, he unpacks the rather thorny concepts of audience anticipation, categorising game trailers as an experience in their own right and suggesting a further subtle distinction between trailers and the games promoted. Building from focus groups with 20 participants, Plothe argues that trailers are

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integrated in what he calls "gamerspace", which extends the limits of the play experience to encompass the "pre-game" and productions from fan cultures. The usage of live-action elements to represent gameplay, and the ability of these elements - or lack thereof - to engage viewers in this extended play experience, is central to the discussion.

Further along this line, Speedy & Tanes address the concept of persuasive forms of the trailer, drawing on consumer theory and prior studies in that field to quantify elements such as production quality. Through applying and developing a framework built upon the Elaboration Likelihood Model, they provide a rigorous discussion of both quality and persuasion within games trailers; shedding light on the combination of different forms of persuasive practices within trailers considered. Questions of persuasion based on cinematic qualities can also be manifested otherwise, as Esther Wright's work exploring the branded communication of Rockstar Games shows. Drawing on a range of public discourse devices, she provides a case study of the processes in which paratextual materials shape and develop expectations (namely of authentic and quality cinematic style), highlighting the very means by which a consumable identity is created, and in part how expectations as much as audiences are managed. This opens up the possibility of exploring games promotional discourse as discourse in its own right.

Discussions of gender have always been central to cultural studies of videogames: gender inequality in the industry workforce, in-game gender representation, the construction of the 'female gamer', and the apparent tendencies towards misogyny in gamer culture evidenced in the GamerGate controversy, to name just a few examples. Yet little is written about marketing materials, through which such discourses also circulate, often addressing what has traditionally been constructed and understood by the industry as a 'technomasculine' audience (Kocurek, 2015). Leandro Borges Lima seeks to address this through a configurative analysis of the changes in successive marketing campaigns for instalments of the *Mass Effect* franchise – a series often lauded for its apparently more inclusive approach to in-game representations of gender and sexuality. Applying this communications theory perspective to games promotion allows for an analysis of the complex interplay between the marketing texts, company branding/reputation and player opinion, all of which can be said to be continually configuring and reconfiguring each other. These dynamics fundamentally

problematise the construction of any straightforward narratives of progressive changes in the marketing discourse from producers BioWare, and the extent to which fans can be said to have influenced those changes.

Video games are typically discussed as a strongly globalized industry, with the classically-acknowledged divide between the United States of America and Japan standing in for a Western/Asian market split. In this context, promotion provides a unique opportunity for local game histories (following Melanie Swalwell and Jaroslav Švelch's initiative founding the Localgamehist mailing list), as each market received specific variations for pushing video game hardware and software following the local culture. While some localization practices were limited to slight alterations or translation of slogans, this is not the case for all marketing campaigns. André Fagundes Pase and Roberto Tietzmann demonstrate this by delving into the launch of the Atari 2600 in Brazil. The country's protectionist policy of "Market Reserve" paved the way for generalized practices of counterfeits, clones and a "legitimate" piracy industry, which in turn spurred promotional campaigns based on arguments of "authenticity", brand-name recognition, and a unique signature that coalesced into the "man's best enemy" campaign, which Pase and Tietzmann analyze through a corpus of eight television commercials and four double page color print ads.

Two contributions refine our historical understanding of game advertisements and propose methods that seek to inspire further research. Looking back in press archives for the rise of the term "trailer", Vollans unearths a fascinating history that highlights the rise of the form in the 1990s and the public discourse that surrounds this object. This inspection reveals here again that trailers often trigger conversations about the cinematic potential of games. Therrien and Lefebvre's contribution look exclusively at the promotional discourses found in video game print advertisements to identify and introduce a selection of marketing frames, "reoccurring formulas, both visual and textual, featured in printed ads". Their study treats promotion as an independent discursive phenomenon rather than a paratextual appendage to games, one that can be understood through a number of diegetic, experiential, and historiographical frames reoccurring through hundreds of advertisements. Documenting and analyzing advertising patterns such as "cuteness", "bellicosity", "sexualisation", "accessibility", "immersion" or "technological attraction" provides the groundwork for future

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research to ultimately map and understand how ads "reinforce specific conceptions about the history of video games itself" and how "the hundreds / thousands of ads consumed in and of themselves by members of the gaming community over their lifetime coalesce into the common video game legends we share collectively."

While many of the articles in this edition consider the marketing and promotion *of* videogames, Oliveira's contribution turns this on its head by considering advertising *as* game. She argues for a form of pervasive advertising which shares specific aesthetic characteristics with pervasive gaming, encouraging micro-suspensions of disbelief in its participants and interactions with brands by constructing them as a diegesis. This comparison moves away from well-worn discussions around 'gamification', and presents the beginnings of more nuanced analysis of 'playful' or 'gameful' advertising strategies and their relationship to pervasive gaming aesthetics. Oliveria also describes a 'social expansion' of these ludic marketing experiences, which occurs not only through the live experiences themselves, but also through the very act of sharing viral recordings of the events. This is key to understanding the impact of advertising which is both playful and pervasive, in a world where 'if it doesn't spread, it's dead' (Jenkins, Ford & Green, 2013).

In seriously looking at the promotion surrounding video games and gaming culture this issue provides a collection of case studies, and a broader framework for study that allows scholars to consider, amongst other things, the changing forms of industrial communication, the representation of games within popular culture, and the manner in which the entertainment industries see games themselves. Given the tendency within the existing games literature to overlook promotion as an object of study, this issue significantly develops the scholarship on game promotion, and we hope that it becomes the first point of call for future studies outlining both the key literature and areas of future study.

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