Chapter 14
Architextuality and Video Games: A Semiotic Approach

Maria Katsaridou
Aristotle University of Thessaloniki, Greece
Mattia Thibault
University of Turin, Italy

ABSTRACT

Even though literary genres are instrumental for the study and analysis of video games, we should also take into consideration that, nowadays, the boundaries of literature have been crossed and we have to deal with a broader transmedia reality. Approaching it can be quite challenging and, in addition to the already existing genre theory, it requires the implementation of appropriate analytic tools, both adaptable to different languages and media and able to reconstruct and motivate the isotopies woven into the net. In the authors’ opinion, semiotics is particularly suitable for this task, for many reasons. The aim of this chapter, then, is to propose a semiotic methodology, oriented toward the analysis of the architextual aspects of video games. Two case studies will be taken into consideration, in order to shed some light on the inner working of architexts featuring video games, as one of their most relevant components: the horror genre and the high fantasy genre.

INTRODUCTION

In a world where communication is more and more shaped by intermediality and where transmedia storytelling has emerged as a powerful trend, the need of studies on transtextuality is stronger than ever. Notably, three of the categories proposed by French narratologist Gérard Genette (1997, 2004) are of particular relevance: intertextuality, hypertextuality and architextuality. Intertextuality, according to Genette (1997), means the presence of a text or part of a text in another one. Quotes are a common example of intertextuality, but more complex relationships are possible – for example when it is a structural part of a text that is retrieved (e.g. an entire character).

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Hypertextuality, on the other hand, is defined as an imitation of the original text, able to generate new meaning without overshadowing its hypotext. Again, there are more straightforward examples of hypertextuality, such as parodies, and more complex ones, like remediations or intersemiotic translations (commonly called “adaptations”).

Finally, Gérard Genette, in his *Palimpsests* (1997), also describes architextuality, which comprehends “all general or transcendent categories – types of discourse, enunciation modes, literary genres, etc. – governing every single text” (p.1). The notion of architext is therefore similar to the idea of “literary genre”. As Daniel Chandler (1997) notes,

> Conventional definitions of genres tend to be based on the notion that they constitute particular conventions of content (such as themes or settings) and/or form (including structure and style) which are shared by the texts which are regarded as belonging to them. (p. 2)

Nowadays, however, many genre scholars such as David Duff (2000), Rick Altman (1999) and David Buckingham (1993) agree that new approaches to genres are needed in order to face a complex and heterogeneous multi-media reality.

Moreover, games (and especially the digital ones) apart from the “literary” genre that they belong to are subject to a sophisticated classification in “genres” based on the gameplay (first person shooter, RPG’s, adventure etc. see Baer & Wolf [2001]) and on many other characteristics:

> A game can simultaneously be classified according to the platform on which it is played (PC, mobile phone, Xbox), the style of play it affords (multiplayer, networked, or single user, for instance), the manner in which it positions the player in relation to the game world (first person, third person, ‘god’), the kind of rules and goals that make up its gameplay (racing game, action adventure), or its representational aspects (science-fiction, high fantasy, urban realism). All these possibilities for classification coexist in games, and none are irrelevant, but we would argue that the style of gameplay on offer is of fundamental significance. (Carr et al., 2006, p. 16)

This classification of game genres, obviously, can’t be applied to non-digital and non-playful texts, as films or fiction books, and therefore is limited to games themselves. However, this article aims at investigating the relations that incur also between different media and this can be achieved only by focusing on architexts that include texts belonging to each of them. This brings us back to Genette’s theories.

However, the three concepts mentioned above (architextuality, intertextuality and hypertextuality), if considered separately, are unable to adequately explain complex phenomena as transmedia storytelling (Scolari, 2013), which appear to pertain to all three categories. The authors, therefore, propose to use the term “architextuality” in a broader sense. The word “architext”, thus, will be used to refer to a set of text pertaining to different media which, thanks to a series of isotopies (the intertextual and hypertextual relationships that they share), are commonly identified as pertaining to the same genre. These architexts are multi-media sets of textualities that include many different cultural products, such as: games, movies, comics, novels, gadgets, short stories, but also practices, such as cosplay, conventions, LARPs etc. These relations are structured in an intricate architextual net, which is often impossible to reconstruct completely.

An analytic approach to an architext can’t simply consist in pinpointing commonalities between different texts, but it must investigate both the structural and semantic features that the texts of a same
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