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'Choose, collect, manage, win!': Neoliberalism, enterprising culture and risk society in video game covers

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Abstract

This paper aims to identify the relationship between video games and neoliberal values. To fulfil this aim, it analyzes the covers of the 20 top-selling video games in the US each year from 2010

to 2014 (a total of 80 different games). Video game covers are a type of paratext, i.e., texts that accompany another text to promote it and to guide its reading. Thus, video game covers choose and highlight some of the games' features over others, and by doing that they construct a discourse. In this article, it is argued that regardless of genre, the covers analyzed convey and promote neoliberal values, such as freedom and choice, entrepreneurship, consumption and accumulation of goods, customization, novelty, individualism and meritocracy. This promotion of neoliberal values is combined with an appeal to the concerns of 'risk society'. Thus, the covers of the top-selling video games play on fears linked to the new context created by the economic crisis while at the same time legitimizing the neoliberal ideal of the 'enterprising self' as a model for dealing with it.

Keywords

Video games, paratexts, neoliberalism, enterprising self, governmentality, consumerism, risk society, meritocracy, customization, covers

Introduction

In the last few years, the academic interest in what are called 'paratexts' has grown exponentially. Paratexts are texts that accompany, surround and refer to other texts, such as movie posters, DVD and video game covers, reviews, DVD extras, interviews with authors, advertisements, trailers, etc. All of these elements have two primary goals (Genette 1997; Gray, 2010): on the one hand, they aim to create expectation and hype around a text and catch potential customers' attention, while on the other hand, they 'condition our entrance to texts,

telling us what to expect' (Gray, 2010: position 558). Thus, 'each paratext acts like an airlock to acclimatize us to a certain text, and it demands or suggests certain reading strategies' (Gray, 2010: position 561). Paratexts, then, can influence an audience's interpretation of a movie, a book or a video game and thus change their meaning.

This paper's main aim is to build upon this body of work by analysing the values conveyed by the covers of the top-selling console video games in recent years. If 'paratexts can highlight themes identified as attractive by marketers and promoters, and subvert those designated as culturally troubling' (Cavalcante, 2013: 87), this study can help us identify which topics and values are proposed by the video game industry and how these values relate to the broader social context. Specifically, this paper will focus on how neoliberal values are legitimized and reinforced on the covers of the 80 top-selling console video games in the US from 2010 to 2014. Although the study of the connections between video games and neoliberal values has received some attention in the last few years (Baerg, 2012, 2014; Chess, 2011; Francombe, 2010; Millington, 2008, 2014), it still needs further examination.

The relevance of this article lies in the fact that video game covers have popular visibility and currency even among non-gamers: we encounter them in stores, magazines and advertisements. Moreover, they help to establish ideological guidelines for gamers, since paratexts highlight some of the values present in a particular game over others, and by doing so they build a discourse worth analyzing. Since no other study has systematically analysed the meanings and values conveyed by video game covers, this article aims to contribute to a better understanding of their paratextual discourse. Yet, it is important to bear in mind that paratextual analysis cannot supplant the study of video games themselves, since paratexts and games do not necessarily convey the same values.

Paratexts in academic research

Gerard Genette (1997) introduced the concept of paratext, which he developed within the field of literary analysis, and thus it was first applied to the elements that surround a literary work when published: cover, preface, title, afterword and so on. Genette's work had a taxonomical aim, trying to identify all literary paratexts and, to a lesser extent, their purposes. In turn, Jonathan Gray (2008, 2010) popularized paratext analysis within the field of popular culture and cultural studies, showing paratexts' expressive nature and the relevance of studying them.

Paratexts have been analyzed as discourses that try to create hype around a text, brand it, assign it commercial value as well as shape the audience's expectations (Gray 2008, 2010; Jones, 2008: 158-173). In this respect, DVD 'collectors' box sets' present a TV series or a film as something valuable and worth buying and owning (Kompere, 2006; Gray, 2010: position 2077-2134), and DVD extras can try to brand a big blockbuster movie such as *The Lord of the Rings: The Two Towers* as an independent film (Gray, 2010: position 1826-1925).

Another purpose of paratexts is to construct authorship (Alacovska, 2015; Brookey and Westerfelhaus, 2002; Grant, 2008; Gray, 2010: position 2134-2034; Johnston, 2014). For example, Mittell (2015: 86-117) shows how paratexts such as DVD extras, podcasts and interviews 'have helped create the phenomenon of star showrunners' (Mittell, 2015: 102) which has been strategic in order to produce television authorship and raise the medium's cultural worth.

The analysis of authorship shows paratexts' ability to shape social definitions of a text or even a whole medium and its consumers. In the specific field of video game studies, Mia Consalvo

(2007) analyzed how guides and video game magazines 'instruct the player in how to play, what to play, and what is cool (and not) in the game world' (Consalvo, 2007: 22). Thus, these paratexts teach their readers what is a 'good' video game (in other words, which criteria should be used when assessing a video game, 'teaching readers that while the graphics and sound might be poor, for example, the story and play control of a game might be superb' [Consalvo, 2007: 30-31]) and what an ideal gamer should be like ('young, male and heterosexual, with plenty of disposable cash' [Consalvo, 2007: 22]).

Paratexts can also help the audience to make sense of complex texts, such as contemporary TV series (Mittell, 2015: 261-291). Through 'practices of orientation and mapping', such as episode and character guides, maps, wikis or recaps, viewers try to 'help figure out how the pieces fit together or to propose alternative ways of seeing the story' (Mittell, 2015: 261-263). Video game walkthroughs are another example of 'orienting paratexts':

Walkthroughs are detailed guides to how a player should play sequentially to find all of the hidden bonuses and surprises, how to avoid certain deaths, and how to advance past difficult puzzles or trouble spots to best play and win the game. (Consalvo, 2003: 327-328)

They not only describe, but also shape and modify the actual gameplay of a video game (Newman, 2008: 91-122). In walkthroughs, which are often written by gamers, 'the author implicitly seems to take control of and normalise the gameplay of the reader/gamer' (Newman, 2008: 103), usually by favouring 'completion' but also by creating new modes of play.

Paratexts' capacity to 'promote the circulation of selected meanings of the primary texts' (Fiske, 1987: 117) has led a number of scholars to analyze the values they convey and their relationship with the values conveyed in the main text. In this sense, in his analysis of the

portrayal of transsexuality in three posters for the film *TransAmerica*, Cavalcante claimed that 'paratexts have the ability to neutralize and domesticate potential threats a narrative poses to a social or cultural status quo' (Cavalcante, 2013: 86).

Other authors have found other examples of paratexts that try to limit the progressive or/and controversial nature of their primary texts. This is the case of the promotional videos of Lifetime's series *Any Day Now*, which focusses on interracial friendship (Lotz, 2004); the promotional posters and advertisements for *Charlie's Angels* and *Alias*, which situated these film and TV series within normative femininity (Coon, 2005); and the extras that come with the DVD edition of *Fight Club*, which, according to Brookey & Westerfelhaus (2002), limit the film's homoeroticism.

Regarding the paratexts of video games, Payne (2012) analyzed the advertising campaign of *Call of Duty: Modern Warfare*. According to this author, these paratexts highlighted the video game's realism (regarding weapons, sound and gamers' experience), but at the same time they tried to separate the game from the social and political context (i.e., wars in Iraq and Afghanistan) in order to control the 'moral panic' that the game could generate.

Paratexts can also be viewed as a form of discourse on their own, which can be consumed by a high number of people, irrespective of whether they ultimately access the primary text. In this respect, there is a growing body of work that analyzes the values promoted by paratexts such as video game covers and advertising. The pioneering work by Provenzo (1991) is worth mentioning. Provenzo analyzed the top-selling Nintendo video games, as well as their manuals, advertisements, reviews and covers, in order to identify the values they conveyed. He found that in most games, 'violence and aggression [...] become the only viable operative principle by which the player can function. They become a substitute for personal reflection and contextual

judgment' (Provenzo, 1991: 127). Furthermore, he also stated that 'gender bias and stereotyping are evident throughout the games included in the Nintendo system' (Provenzo, 1991: 100). Nevertheless, Provenzo's work also shows one of the risks of paratextual analysis: using paratexts metonymically, as substitutes for the analysis of the video game itself. For example, in one passage of his book, Provenzo states: 'in regard to the question of gender discrimination and stereotyping, the extent to which sexist themes are included in the games can be determined by an examination of their covers and introductory descriptions' (Provenzo, 1991: 104). This is, of course, a methodological shortcoming that must be avoided.

Since Provenzo's work, a number of authors have also showed interest in gender stereotypes and the portrayal of violence in video game covers and advertising. For example, Behm-Morawiz (2014) claims that video game advertisements published in specialized magazines are mostly still constructed upon racial and gender stereotypes. Ramírez Macías (2011) analyzed the corporal stereotypes present on the cover of 100 sports video games. Burgess et al. (2007) analyzed the representation of men and women on the covers of 225 video games and concluded that women were present less often on the covers than men and that they usually played a secondary and sexualized role. This same topic was examined by Near (2013), who found a positive relationship between video game sales and the presence of women in secondary and sexualized roles on their covers. Dietz (1998) and Scharrer (2004) examined the portrayal of violence and its relationship with gender stereotypes in video game covers and advertising, respectively. Finally, in her analysis of Nintendo DS video game advertisements published in women's magazines, Chess (2011) argued that they promoted neoliberal values such as self-help and productivity.

Despite their different approaches, all the studies mentioned so far not only show the expressive dimension of paratexts but also demonstrate that paratexts are worthy of study. As stated above, this paper aims to extend the body of work on paratextual studies by showing how video game covers promote neoliberal values, which connect with contemporary Western governmentality.

Neoliberalism and governmentality

Neoliberalism is understood as a governmentality or 'political rationality', as 'a way of conceptualizing all those more or less rationalized programs, strategies, and tactics for the "conduct of conduct", for acting upon the action of others in order to achieve certain ends' (Rose, 1998: 12; see also Burchell, 1996: 19). Thus, following a theoretical tradition initiated by the work of Michel Foucault (1991, 2008) and developed by authors such as Nikolas Rose, Peter Miller (Miller and Rose, 2008; Rose and Miller, 1992; Rose, 1998, 1999) and Graham Burchell (1996), government should not be viewed as just the action of the state and other overtly political institutions but as a more comprehensive concept that refers to how the governance of individuals is thought of and conceptualized.

Liberalism and its newest form developed in Western countries since the 1970's and 1980's, called 'neoliberalism', are characterized by 'the limits [they place] on the legitimate exercise of power by political authorities' (Miller and Rose, 1992: 179) and the establishment of 'non-political' spheres (the private sphere, the market, the company) that have to conduct themselves in which the state must not act upon. Since liberal and neoliberal governmental reason try to determine 'how not to govern too much' (Foucault, 2008: 13), freedom becomes a core value.

Nevertheless, power and freedom should not be viewed as opposed to each other within this system. The conduct of individuals' conduct is based on methods of indirect government (or 'action at a distance') which are compatible with discourses that defend individual freedom (Rose and Miller, 1992: 180). According to these authors, under neoliberalism, power is dispersed among different institutions, techniques, expertise and individual citizens, who become 'the necessary (voluntary) partner or accomplice of government' (Burchell, 1996: 23). This means that neoliberalism is dependent on the existence of free and autonomous individuals who do not need to be continuously supervised, since they are capable of governing themselves (Rose, 1999: 227). The ideal subject of neoliberalism is an individual who is free and autonomous, but also disciplined and responsible, subjects 'that freely conduct themselves in a certain rational way' (Burchell, 1996: 24). Neoliberalism is based on placing the responsibility on individuals (Burchell, 1996: 29), who must become active citizens (Miller and Rose, 1992): they must look after themselves and chose what is best for themselves in order to become healthy, wealthy and happy individuals. Thus, instead of being external to subjects, power becomes internalized by them through practices of self-scrutiny, self-evaluation and self-regulation (Rose, 1999).

Enterprise and entrepreneurship provide a model to structure citizens' lives and subjectivity. Individuals must become 'entrepreneurs of themselves' (Rose, 1998: 150–168): 'individuals are encouraged to strive to optimize their own quality of life and that of their families' (Miller and Rose, 1992: 198). They must adopt values such as initiative, diligence, industriousness, energy, ambition and planning; they must work continuously on themselves and shape their life course through calculated choice. Although this notion of 'enterprising self' is constructed upon values such as freedom and autonomy, 'the self that is liberated is obliged to live its life tied to the project of its own identity' (Rose, 1999: 258). In this context, individuals accept this demanding

regime of work (i.e., scrutinizing, evaluating and conducting themselves) not as a response to coercion or as a way to subordinate themselves to social conventions, but as a way to seek happiness and become 'the self each of us wants to be' (Rose, 1999: 217).

Finally, meritocracy is another core value of neoliberalism (Littler, 2013). Generally understood as the ideal that 'whatever our social position at birth, society ought to facilitate the means for "talent" to rise to the top' (Littler, 2013: 52), meritocracy is a much more problematic concept than it seems to be at first glance. Neoliberal meritocracy views society as a hierarchical system where some people must necessarily stay (be left) behind or 'below', which in turn promotes a 'corrosive' competitiveness among individuals. In the end, meritocracy works as a particular 'myth', a story that exaggerates citizens' actual possibilities of pulling themselves up socioeconomically and reaching success in contemporary society through talent and effort alone.

In summary, according to neoliberal governmentality, social and political welfare have to be ensured through the enterprising actions of autonomous entities such as companies, organizations and individuals, each and every one of them trying to maximize their benefits and acting through a strategic calculation of costs and benefits. Social life is expected to guide itself, without the need for public intervention. This idea, of course, denies the need for public policies, since both citizens and companies are expected to look after themselves and even to look after other citizens in need through charity and philanthropic actions.

Neoliberalism has been mobilised as a core concept through which contemporary societies and their media representations can be analysed, especially within television studies. For example, makeover shows and lifestyle reality programmes such as *What Not to Wear* and *Honey We are Killing the Kids* (Heller, 2007; Ouellette and Hay, 2008; Palmer 2004, 2008; Redden, 2008)

have been linked to neoliberal values. In these programmes, citizens are represented as responsible for themselves (for being happy, healthy and employable), and those individuals who cannot adhere to these imperatives are identified as irresponsible. By doing this, these programmes offer an individual explanation of social and economical inequalities. Moreover, in these programmes consumption is viewed as means of self-improvement, since 'consumers are constituted as actors seeking to maximize their "quality of life" by assembling a "life-style" through acts of choice in a world of goods' (Rose, 1998: 162). Other reality TV programmes such as *The Apprentice* (Couldry and Littler, 2011) and *Big Brother* (Andrejevic, 2004; Couldry, 2008) have also been accused of promoting values such as neoliberal meritocracy, surveillance, individualization and self-commodification.

Within the field of video games, a number of authors have shown interest in the connections between video games and neoliberal values. For example, according to scholars such as Chess (2011), Francombe (2010) and Millington (2008, 2014), individualism, choice, self-surveillance, discipline and work on the self are values present in video games targeted at female audiences, such as *Wii Fit*, *We Cheer* and *Brain Training*. Baerg (2012, 2014) has also identified elements of the neoliberal entrepreneurial culture in video games such as RPGs, in which strategic character choice and creation is one of the key elements of the game. Players are encouraged to create the most efficient and effective character possible, a process that 'takes cost-benefit analysis to an extreme in embodying the neoliberal entrepreneurial self' (Baerg, 2012: 161). As stated above, this paper aims to contribute to this area of study through an analysis of the values promoted by the covers of the top-selling console video games.

Methodology

In order to analyze how video game covers promote neoliberal values, we constructed a sample that included the covers of the 20 top-selling console video games in the US each year from 2010 to 2014 according to the Entertainment Software Association. The sample contains a grand total of 80 covers.¹

After collecting all the covers, the images and texts were analyzed using a combination of inductive and deductive content analysis. Firstly, we conducted an exploratory analysis using NVivo, which is a software programme that makes it easier to organize and retrieve qualitative data. This analysis showed that there was consistency in the values conveyed by the covers of most of the video games in the sample, regardless of their genre. These similar values permeating most of the covers analyzed can be grouped under the concept of neoliberalism.

Through a survey of the literature (see above), we constructed a list of values and concepts characteristic of neoliberal governmentality. These elements were: individualism, freedom, personal choice, entrepreneurship and self-improvement, self-surveillance, responsabilization, consumerism, competition and meritocracy. We used these concepts as a guide for conducting a qualitative content analysis of the covers.

Video game covers and neoliberal values

Freedom, choice and enterprising culture

Regardless of the video game's genre, our analysis identified a heavy emphasis on values connected to neoliberal governmentality, such as freedom and individual choice. For example, in action and adventure video games, the existence of an open, broad and profoundly interactive virtual world that the player can freely explore is usually emphasized: 'bringing to life

a complete virtual world open for you to explore any way you choose (...) Skyrim isn't just a game – it is a fully interactive world' (*Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim*); 'Open-world mission structure' (*Assassin's Creed II*). Moreover, players' choice when it comes to strategic decision-making is also frequently highlighted: 'play your way – go tactical or guns blazing' (*Mass Effect 3*), 'explore, build, and conquer alone or with your friends' (*Minecraft*).

Of course, it could be argued that freedom and choice are two key attributes of games and video games (Caillois, 1967: 42-43; Huizinga, 1950: 13) and cannot be connected to neoliberal rationality. Nevertheless, in a number of games freedom and choice are related to the player's ability to construct, design, customize and develop the avatar, which connects these video games with the neoliberal imperative of self-improvement: 'evolve into the ultimate master assassin' (*Assassin's Creed II*), 'from a brash young pirate captain to an accomplished Master Assassin' (*Assassin's Creed IV: Black Flag*). This is a typical trait of role-playing video games that has expanded to other genres, such as sports video games and 'shooters': 'frenetic first-person action meets loot collecting, character building and role playing' (*Borderlands 2*); 'they must harness an expanding arsenal of weapons and abilities as they fight to survive' (*BioShock Infinite*). According to these covers, the player is expected to get their avatar to evolve through reflection and strategic decision-making. In this respect, it is worth noting the widespread presence of the word 'management' in the covers of the best-selling sports games. Sports franchises such as *FIFA*, *NBA* or *Madden* highlight their strategic component on their covers, related to the 'management' of the sports and economic evolution of the career of a player or a team (see also Baerg, 2014). Moreover, the idea that individuals shape their own destiny through choice can be found on a number of covers, establishing a direct relationship between player's actions and the fate of the avatar.

Personal improvement, not of the avatar but of the actual player, is the main value highlighted in the covers of what are called *exergames* (in which the player's workout is a part of the game). These games relate themselves to the concept of self-help, which is core in enterprising culture and neoliberal subjectivity (Rose, 1998), in which individuals are expected to take care of themselves. Thus, games like *Wii Fit* present themselves as means of personal improvement: 'Work out... in your living room (...) exercises to help improve balance and tone muscles' (*Wii Fit*); 'Get in shape with a customized program that's designed for you' (*EA Sports Bundle*). These paratexts encourage women to engage in 'behaviour modification that turns non-productive time into productive time through play' (Chess, 2011: 236), transforming free time into something productive in 'real life' and a way of working on oneself to increase the exchange value of individuals in the social and labour spheres, an idea that Gill (2007) linked to post-feminism.

Moreover, on *exergames'* covers, (self-)surveillance is promoted as a self-help technique: 'Track calories burned, weigh your baby or family pet' (*Wii Fit Plus*), 'Make Wii Fit part of your daily routine and keep track of everyone's progress towards a well-balanced lifestyle (...) Learn your Wii Fit Age and monitor your body's fitness on a daily basis by measuring your Body Mass Index (BMI)' (*Wii Fit*). Players are encouraged to self-scrutinize and self-evaluate in order to work endlessly on themselves (Rose, 1998). In addition, these games promote a standardized body through not only their cover texts but also their images, which portray an idealized feminine body whose slenderness embodies the ideals of work on oneself and discipline. This kind of game, then, connects with the concept of biopower (Foucault, 1990), which brings life (and the body) into the sphere of power work (for a discussion on this topic, see also Millington, 2008, 2014).

Another element that is heavily emphasized on the covers of the top-selling video games is the player's ability to customize the content and/or create levels for the game: *Assassin's Creed IV: Black Flag* includes a so-called 'Game Lab', and *HALO 3* offers a 'customizable Sandbox'; 'Customize your workout! Design your own routine or select a recommended workout based on your personal goals' (*Wii Fit Plus*); 'Create your own dances' (*Just Dance 3*), 'Embark on three exciting adventures, or create your own!' (Disney Infinity); 'Unleash your imagination! Create worlds limited only by your imagination' (*Minecraft*), etc. Thus, a 'modding culture' is referred on the covers of these games (although they are not examples of modding, in the strict sense).

Modding itself has been related to the neoliberal 'enterprising culture' by authors such as Hong (2013) and Kucklich (2009), since it turns free time into a productive activity: on the one hand through modding practice players improve their abilities and value in the labour market; on the other hand, the outcome of modding is a product with an economic value which is sometimes appropriated by video game companies (thus transforming play into 'precarious playbour' or 'free labour'). In the current video game culture, 'neoliberal subjectivities open modding practices to new intensive labor practices (...) remodelling modders into ideal neoliberal prosumer labor' (Hong, 2013: 984-985). So the covers of video games usually construct an ideal player that values this culture of productive leisure or playbour.

Finally, innovation is another value found on the covers analyzed that can be linked with the neoliberal enterprising culture: 'new', 'all-new', 'brand-new' are expressions found on all the covers in the sample, implying that 'newer is better'. The obsession with newness 'foreground[s], legitimate[s] and perpetuate[s] perpetual technology upgrade' (Ashton, 2011: 308), which is a characteristic of the new economy and the 'upgrade culture' that has been created around it. This 'upgrade culture' encourages us to work continuously on ourselves

(Ashton, 2011). Thus, video games promise a pleasure linked to the need to learn how to use new weapons, tactics and characters, spurring the player to identify with the ideal subject of neoliberalism, who continually works on their skills to remain valuable in the workplace.

Consumerism

From a neoliberal perspective, consumption is strongly linked to the aforementioned aspects such as choice (Gabriel and Lang, 2015: 25-46; Taylor, 2002), strategic self-management, the ethics of taking responsibility for oneself and the constant aspiration to self-improvement (Ouellette and Hay, 2008; Rose, 1998: 161-162). In most of the paratexts analyzed, there are significant resonances of consumerism associated with some of these factors.

Throughout all the genres analyzed, there is a recurring emphasis on the variety and number of characters, artefacts, game levels or game modes, highlighting the players' choice and the idea that 'more is better'. In the action-adventure genre we find sentences such as: 'a deadly arsenal of high tech weaponry and abilities' (*Halo: Reach*); 'expand your arsenal. Equip the versatile remote claw and devastating shock gloves' (*Batman: Arkham Origins*); 'over 70 unique and vibrant locations' (*Assassin's Creed IV: Black Flag*); 'new features, weapons, factions and foes (...) a colourful cast of characters, factions, special weapons, mutated creatures and much more' (*Fallout: New Vegas*).

Borderlands 2 and *Left 4 Dead 2* are two particularly illustrative cases because of the hyperbolic tone of their covers and what seems to be a certain reflective irony regarding the recurrent hype about 'novelty' and 'quantity' in this kind of paratext: 'A new era of shoot and loot! (...) A bazillion

of weapons! (...) Sweet sweet loot with millions and millions of incredible weapons and gear' (*Borderlands 2*); 'New friends. More zombies. Better apocalypse' (*Left 4 Dead 2*).

Likewise, in many Nintendo video games, which are partly addressed to children, there is a similar stress on actions related to collecting items and accumulating goods: 'New items! Mega Mushrooms, POW Blocks and Thunderclouds will give you the upper hand!' (*Mario Kart*); 'multiple karts per character' (*Mario Kart DS*); 'Gold Flowers, Gold Blocks, and Gold Rings - collecting coins has never been so fun!' (*New Super Mario Bros 2*). Finally, in the sports and *exergaming* genres we can identify several similar examples: 'traditional 11 vs. 11 or fast-paced 5 vs. 5, including three styles of playcall to fit your skill level' (*Madden NFL 11*); 'Over 40 training activities using the Wii Balance Board' (*Wii Fit*); 'More tracks - More fun' (*Just Dance 2*).

Taken together, they all connect the mainstream video game with consumerist pleasures, implicitly and metaphorically portraying the gameplay experience as a visit to a big supermarket. Curiously enough, in the action-adventure genre, these consumerist pleasures often appear 'disguised' as narratives of castaways, survivors and post-apocalyptic worlds. Video games such as *The Last of Us*, *Fallout: New Vegas* and *Left 4 Dead* take place in post-apocalyptic, desolate worlds, which directly or indirectly evoke the collapse of a capitalist society. In other cases, games are set in historical narrative worlds, where the past is associated with a certain resource scarcity and/or 'low-tech' resources, such as in *Red Dead Redemption*, which takes place in the Wild West, and in the *Assassin's Creed* franchise, such as *Assassin's Creed 2*, which transports the player into the Italian Renaissance and invites them to 'utilize an arsenal of weapons and gadgets designed by Leonardo da Vinci'.

The abovementioned video games' narratives seem to appeal to values related to austerity and ways of problem-solving opposed to consumption and consumerism. Nevertheless, behind

those narrative settings what prevails are gameplay dynamics that appeal, one way or another, to the aforementioned 'supermarket' with 'many', 'diverse' and 'brand-new' game elements.

In the previous section, we have dealt with the notion of strategic and calculating entrepreneurship, which is closely connected to the player's progressive character-building as well as to 'customization'. At the same time, this is interwoven with the neoliberal ideal of consumption. Actually, the management of a character's evolution, avatar customization and the possibility of adopting diverse 'gameplay styles' depend on the character/player's consumption capacity and on cyclic dynamics of strategic choice to provide the character with new 'goods'. Thus, a discourse is projected that prescribes consumption as an essential way to both create identity and seek social success strategically: 'Fully customizable weapons and upgrades' (*Mass effect 3*); 'Choose your own Mii as a racer!' (*Mario Kart with Wheel*); 'Unlock unique kart parts and customize your ride' (*Mario Kart 7*).

In summary, the experience of freedom advertised on these video game covers is based on the idea of consumption choices given by the market: acquiring objects, weapons or clothing, accumulating 'experience points' and investing them in new abilities for the character, customizing our avatar's appearance, etc. This emphasis on choice and customization can be connected to the concept of 'lifestyle' that links choice, consumerism and the strategic construction of our own identity (Rose, 1998: 162). That is, in neoliberal societies we are expected to construct, manage and project our identity through our consumption choices, and this identity must give us exchange value.

Meritocracy

As stated above, meritocracy is another core value of neoliberal governmentality. Through the rhetoric of 'equal opportunities' neoliberal meritocracy legitimizes social and economic inequalities and promotes individualism and competition (Littler, 2013). Again, it is possible to identify intense resonances of this neoliberal dimension in the paratexts of the top-selling video games in the last five years.

In action-adventure video games, the abundance of fictional worlds that are either post-apocalyptic or close-to-global-catastrophe, together with a certain emphasis on the need to protect your relatives or close friends in a hostile and chaotic environment, and the reiteration of not being able to trust anybody, project a strongly competitive spirit: 'Survive in a ruthless city in which they can trust nobody' (*Grand Theft Auto V*); 'When federal agents threaten his family, former outlaw John Marston is forced to pick up his guns again and hunt down the gang of criminals he once called friends' (*Red Dead Redemption*); 'I will seek vengeance upon those who have betrayed my family, only to uncover a conspiracy bigger than I could have imagined' (*Assassin's Creed 2*).

In many video games targeted at children and in the sports genre as well, a strong echo of competitiveness and the environment's hostility can be observed, as well as a stress on the desirability/necessity of being 'the best': 'Race and battle with faraway friends or players worldwide!' (*Mario Kart*); 'Smash through your foes in a blue Koopa shell!' (*New Super Mario Bros DS*); 'Build your army and defend your bases in the biggest Lego Star Wars battles ever!' (*Lego Star Wars III*); 'Become the greatest - Jordan challenge' (*NBA 2K11*). In this vein, in many paratexts the possibility of competing against other players (friends) is framed as a part of the proposed 'fun' experience: 'best your friends', 'battle wireless buddies', 'challenge a friend'.

Although cooperative gameplay modes are also highlighted relatively frequently, it is usually related to making up teams that must often compete against other teams and/or against the rest of the world within the games' fictitious world. This is coherent with the idea that neoliberalism is not opposed to social groups (family, enterprise) but rather to the idea of 'community' and communal cooperation in a broad sense (Littler, 2013: 61).

Finally, regarding neoliberal meritocracy as a narrative that exaggerates the possibilities of social mobility and explains it as a consequence of individual talent and effort, we can find certain nuances behind the paratexts analyzed. In this sense, most of the paratexts in our sample implicitly offer the fantasy of interacting in a virtual world that is supposedly 'fair' in the meritocratic-neoliberal sense, that is, a world where the player's effort and skills will be gradually rewarded through many diverse valuable objects, new character abilities, etc. This connects with the aforementioned assumption that since a player's actions have very transcendent consequences in the character's evolution, 'our destiny is in our hands'.

Although it could be argued that these traits are characteristic of most sports and video games, it is worth noting that sports have been identified as an idealized representation and ideological legitimization of capitalist society precisely because they portray a system that promises its players fairness, equal opportunity and unequal results as a consequence of individual talent and effort (Fiske, 1989: 83-90).

In conclusion, mainstream video games convey the neoliberal ideal of a society where everybody ends up getting what they deserve, setting aside (forgetting) structural questions, background inequalities and any factor other than personal merit which might also be crucial in getting the desired rewards (or not), at least in the real world. In the end, this evokes

neoliberalism's use of meritocracy as an explanation and (above all) legitimization of social inequalities.

Risk society

In spite of the widespread presence of a neoliberal discourse and the values attached to it in the covers of the video games analyzed, we also observed aspects that could be related to the theory of risk society, especially in the case of video games that are set in post-apocalyptic future worlds. This theory describes a society challenged by latent, unpredictable risks where no certainty or security can be provided (Beck, 1992; see also Ungar, 2001). At the same time, in some respects the main characteristics of risk society match the values promoted by neoliberalism, as risk society suffers from individualization, the weakening of social structures and an increase in inequalities (Beck, 1992). Thus, video games such as *Call of Duty: Black Ops II*, *Fallout: New Vegas* and *The Last of Us*, with heroes who must survive, resist and adapt to a new environment and defend, react and protect against the hostilities coming from this environment, reveal some of the risk society's characteristic fears. In this sense, we find sentences in the paratexts such as 'epic fight for survival' (*Red Dead Redemption*), 'with survivors scattered and civilization in ruins, time is running out for Delta Squad' (*Gears of War*) and 'They must survive a brutal journey across the US in a dangerous post-pandemic world' (*The Last of Us*).

However, the definitions of risk are not innocent, and some of the video game covers analyzed make this evident: risks are something that arise suddenly, with no clear cause (as in the case of *The Last of Us* or *Call of Duty: Black OPS*) or they are the fault of a big corporation or public institution ('with the panicking population baying for their blood, and the military all too happy to

oblige, they have no choice but to run for their lives' [*Final Fantasy XIII*], 'stop whoever is continuing Umbrella's evil legacy' [*Resident Evil*]). But they do not reflect one of the main characteristics of risk society: the fact that the victims, as individuals who share the values of the society that has produced the risks, are also partially responsible for them (Beck, 1992). Nor do they show one of the issues posed by Beck: criticism of scientific rationalism, which can generate natural disasters that are lethal for humanity with its zeal for productivity.

Many of these texts also show another issue stressed by the theory of risk society: catastrophes as ideal triggers to reorganize power. Thus, in these post-apocalyptic worlds, characters must survive in environments where power hierarchies are not clear, which means they cannot trust anybody and anyone can suffer abuse from anyone else ('survive in a ruthless city in which they can trust nobody' [*Grand Theft Auto V*]). In fact, in risk society everybody is a potential victim, and as a consequence, those who held a privileged status in the previous class society now are at the risk of losing it. At the same time, in risk society nature becomes political (Beck, 1992), i.e., it cannot be separated from society, which is profoundly and increasingly affected by nature. This is also shown in some video games in which interaction with nature is essential to establish hierarchies: those more capable of profiting from it will have more power and more chances of survival ('the world is your weapon. Interact with everything around' [*Injustice: Gods among Us*]).

Finally, it is also interesting to take a look at the definition of risk proposed by Castel (1991) because it has connections with sport video games in which players manage teams, athletes or bodies, something which is heavily emphasized on the covers, as we have seen. According to Castel, a risk is a probability, not a real danger, and for this reason actions aimed at minimizing risk should consist in designing preventive policies. These preventive policies act by trying to

rationally control risks using statistics and defining characteristics considered to be risk factors. With all these elements, individuals are classified not through a diagnosis performed by experts but using a probability calculation performed by managers, and actions are planned. Many video games present this task of managing risks using statistics as something that improves and adds value to the player's experience. Thus, the covers of those video games where the player manages teams or exercises contain sentences such as 'keep track of everyone's progress' (*Wii Fit*), 'view standings and stats, make trades, manage depth charts and more' (*Madden NFL 10*), 'make key personnel decisions when players are injured based on real-time player ratings changes. Keep them in the game and risk further injury or take them out and risk losing the game' (*Madden NFL 10*), or 'monitor progress' (*EA Sports Active Bundle*). As we can see, the player is impelled to 'manage' the characters by monitoring their performance and taking decisions about them in order to avoid risks. At the same time, this emphasis on calculation and strategic management of teams and people also has connections with the construction of the enterprising self.

In conclusion, although the values of neoliberalism are predominant in the video game paratexts analyzed, it is also true that we can find some values and situations related to the theory of risk society, especially in those action and adventure video games that show post-apocalyptic worlds where power hierarchies are reorganized.

Conclusions

In the last few years, the body of academic work on paratexts has grown. Nevertheless, the ideological discourse promoted by paratexts such as video game covers is still an understudied subject. Video game covers choose and emphasize some of the traits and values present in a

particular game over others, and by doing so they build a distinctive discourse. The analysis of video game covers cannot replace the analysis of the games themselves, and we must avoid confusing the values conveyed by a game with the values conveyed by its cover or other paratexts. Nevertheless, video game covers have high visibility among both players and non-players and seek to shape players' expectations not only a particular game but also about what is a 'good' or 'fun' video game and what pleasures they can find in it. The consistency of the values conveyed by the covers of the top-selling console video games in the US from 2010 to 2014, regardless their genre, is remarkable. These covers urge us to 'choose', 'collect', 'manage' and 'win', defining what we should expect of a 'good' game or a 'good' player experience. By highlighting traits such as novelty, freedom of choice, customization, the accumulation of goods and self-improvement, covers connect video games to a particular social, political and cultural context: neoliberal governmentality. If power is a decentralized network of institutions, individuals and practices in contemporary Western society (Rose and Miller, 1992), video game covers are one of the sites where neoliberal rationalities of government are legitimized, naturalized and promoted.

In this regard, we should note one seeming paradox. On the one hand, the tone of the texts analyzed was positive, optimistic and enthusiastic. This is consistent with the idea that neoliberalism encourages citizens to act in accordance with its principles not by coercion but through the promise of happiness and personal fulfilment. On the other hand, several of the top-selling video games are set in post-apocalyptic worlds, such as *The Last of Us*, *Fall Out: New Vegas*, *Left 4 Dead 2* or *Call of Duty: Black Ops II*. These games, as discussed above, connect with certain social fears characteristic of 'risk society'.

This apparent contradiction between the appeal to both happiness and fear makes sense when the political, social and economic context of Western countries, marked by the economic crisis, is taken into account. Thus, the covers of the 80 top-selling video games in the US in the last five years refer to the anxieties of a society living in a hostile environment because of the crisis, a crisis that has often been explained with the metaphor of 'natural catastrophe' (Arrese, 2015; Bickes et al., 2014; Cortés de los Ríos, 2010) and thus has appealed to the fears of the risk society. Despite the initial claims to a hypothetical 'refounding of capitalism', the crisis has instead led to a deepening of neoliberal discourses, which have prescribed individual solutions to the crises based on entrepreneurship and self-help (Banet-Weiser, 2014; Peck, 2013; Steinkopf and Bond, 2013). Therefore, the paratexts analyzed harness fears linked to the new environment created by the crisis, while at the same time legitimizing the enterprising self as an ideal model for dealing with this hostile environment.

The question remains whether the values represented and promoted by contemporary top-selling console video game covers can also be found in other genres or in video games published in other time periods. Consequently, future research on video game covers should expand the present study to see whether other kinds of games (such as social and casual games such as *Candy Crash*, *Farmville* or *Angry Birds*) are also promoted through appeals to the pleasures of novelty, customization, accumulation or self-improvement. The so-called 'indie games' (Anthropy, 2012; Lipkin, 2013; Simon, 2013) seem like a particular relevant object of study. Since they are produced 'outside' the mainstream industry, indie games' promotional paratexts might challenge what is thought to be a 'good' video game and call neoliberal values into question. Moreover, since both casual and indie games are essentially distributed and commercialized online, future paratextual research should also take into account how

promotional paratexts try to entice buyers and assign value to games in a new ecosystem in which digital downloads are replacing hard copies.

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The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

Notes

¹ We should take into account that some video games were among the ranks of the top-selling video games for more than one year.

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