

Easter Eggs in Digital Games as a Form of Textual Transcendence (Case Study)

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ABSTRACT:

Easter eggs are a well-known and popular phenomenon throughout the whole of pop culture, and the interactive nature of digital games unleashes the full potential of their implementation, as well as integrating them into the gamers' experience. The study focuses on Easter eggs in digital games from a structural point of view to understand them on the fundamental text level. With this aim, the analysis consists of applying Genette's textual transcendence to a specific digital game, *The Talos Principle*. The paper represents part of the introductory theoretical framework to the following research on comprehensive Easter eggs' classification.

KEY WORDS:

digital games, Easter eggs, textual transcendence, *The Talos Principle*, transtextuality.

Introduction

Easter eggs are hidden elements implemented particularly in outcomes of pop culture (comics, movies, etc.), but can also be discovered in other spheres, such as computer software (e.g., the hidden flight simulator game in MS Excel 97). They are, however, usually associated with digital games.¹ This figurative (media) meaning of Easter eggs is more recent, coming from the Easter traditions of Western Europe and the United States, which contain non-Christian elements like the myth of the Easter bunny and practicing Easter egg hunts. The establishment of these traditions is associated with the late 19th century, although decorating eggs' traditions are represented in some form within history, cultures, and folklore across Europe, going back to the Hebrews and the Persians.² Easter eggs are intended to be found and, in digital games, act as a certain reward for gamers who willingly spend their time playing any game, not just for its basic purpose – to win (beat the game), but trying to uncover everything that the game offers. The first Easter egg in a digital game was created by W. Robinett in 1979, who hid a simple text, an author's signature, 'Created by Warren Robinett' in the Atari game *Adventure*^{3,4} Since then, Easter eggs have become a common part of digital games, the interactive nature of which enables their implementation in numerous ways. Their integration into the gamers' experience has also expanded. For some specific types of gamers like 'Easter egg hunters', the search for Easter eggs becomes even the primary motivation for playing digital games.

Definitions of Easter eggs are unified regarding their hidden, secret and surprising characteristics, but they often diverge in their general naming of these elements, e.g., messages, objects, interactions, tricks and unusual behaviours.⁵ The reason is that Easter

- 1 BOGOST, I., MONTFORT, N.: *Racing the Beam: The Atari Video Computer System*. Cambridge : The MIT Press, 2009, p. 59.; NOONEY, L.: Easter Eggs. In RYAN, M.-L., EMERSON, L., ROBERTSON, B. J. (eds.): *The Johns Hopkins guide to digital media*. Baltimore : The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2014, p. 165.
- 2 BARNETT, J. H.: The Easter Festival – A Study in Cultural Change. In *American Sociological Review*, 1949, Vol. 14, No. 1, p. 65.
- 3 ATARI: *Adventure*. [digital game]. Sunnyvale : Atari, Inc., 1979.
- 4 ROBINETT, W.: *Adventure as a Video Game: Adventure for the Atari 2600*. In SALEN, K., ZIMMERMAN, E. (eds.): *The Game Design Reader: A Rules of the Play Anthology*. Cambridge : The MIT Press, 2006, p. 693-713.
- 5 BOGOST, I., MONTFORT, N.: *Racing the Beam: The Atari Video Computer System*. Cambridge : The MIT Press, 2009, p. 59.; NOONEY, L.: Easter Eggs. In RYAN, M.-L., EMERSON, L., ROBERTSON, B. J. (eds.): *The Johns Hopkins guide to digital media*. Baltimore : The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2014, p. 165.

eggs have no constant form. Their design is subject to the game in which they are implemented, and their final processing also depends on the intended purpose of each Easter egg. One of the ways to research their existence within digital games might be to think about them as one would think about a text. According to J. Švelch, digital games can be considered as media, because they are characterized by typical methods of production, distribution, and marketing, and by specific content, differentiating them from other software and traditional media.⁶ Within media practice, any media product (including digital games) consists of a media text that can be examined. From the ludological perspective, E. Aarseth defines digital games as *cybertext* – a specific form of text also reflecting interactivity, a fundamental part of games.⁷ Because Easter eggs are an integrated part of digital games, from both communication-related as well as ludological points of view, they can be considered as a text that is in some relation with other texts either internal or external (outside the game). Such an approach shifts research of Easter eggs in digital games to the structural level.

Easter Eggs and Textual Transcendence within The Talos Principle

For a better understanding of Easter eggs in digital games in terms of text, we focus on identifying intertextual relationships, which exist between Easter eggs, digital games in which they are integrated, and out-game texts (e.g., other pop culture artifacts) as well. Easter eggs have already been marginally interpreted as intertextual recognitions and surrounding texts (paratexts),⁸ but it does not seem to be a comprehensive enough approach. Therefore, we apply to this issue the entire theory of *textual transcendence*, still considered the most comprehensive system describing intertextual relationships. G. Genette defines transtextuality as everything that brings text into relation (manifest or hidden) with other texts.⁹ The research question is formulated as follows: *Is it possible to characterize Easter Eggs in digital games by all types of transtextuality?* Genette distinguishes five types of transtextual relations, namely *intertextuality*, *paratextuality*, *metatextuality*, *hypertextuality*, and *architextuality*, which reflect increasing abstraction, implication, and comprehensiveness.¹⁰ We use these types as categories for the qualitative content analysis of Easter eggs within a specific digital game's case – *The Talos Principle*¹¹. It is a philosophical narrative-based first-/third-person puzzle digital game developed in 2014 by the Croteam studio, with average ratings over 80%. During gameplay, the player controls an unnamed android and explores a mysterious calm world, in which he has to deal with a number of puzzles. It includes a lot of features, mechanics and visual settings (dimension, perspective, etc.), typical for many games and game genres, therefore

6 ŠVELCH, J.: Počítačové hry jako nová média. In *Mediální Studia*, 2008, Vol. 3, No. 1, p. 13-14.

7 AARSETH, E.: *Cybertext: Perspectives on Ergodic Literature*. Baltimore : The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997, p. 216.

8 CONWAY, S.: A circular wall? Reformulating the fourth wall for videogames. In *Journal of Gaming and Virtual Worlds*, 2010, Vol. 2, No. 2, p. 146-154.; CONSALVO, M.: *Cheating: Gaining Advantage in Video Games*. Cambridge : The MIT Press, 2007, p. 240.

9 GENETTE, G.: *The Architext: An Introduction*. Berkeley : University of California Press, 1992, p. 81.

10 GENETTE, G.: *Palimpsests: Literature in the Second Degree*. Lincoln : University of Nebraska Press, 1997, p. 1.

11 CROTEAM: *The Talos Principle*. [digital game]. Austin : Devolver Digital, 2014.

despite the qualitative character of the analysis, its results might be valid in the wider context of understanding Easter eggs in digital games.

Intertextuality

Intertextuality defines the most common intertextual relationships, which are present in all functional styles of language and text types. G. Genette understands intertextuality as a simultaneous occurrence of two (or several) texts, thus the presence of one text in another. He determined three forms of intertextuality – quoting, plagiarism, and allusions.¹² Although intertextuality cannot describe the first Easter eggs, like Robinett's, it certainly describes the most prevalent Easter eggs' implementations in the present. Simple extradiegetic references or gags incorporated in games are often referred as Easter eggs by gamers themselves.¹³ In *The Talos Principle – World B-6*, after climbing columns on the roof of an Egyptian temple, the door to a modern living room appears containing *Serious Sam*¹⁴ game series items – photos of the main character, showcases with weapons and heads of monsters like trophies. There are dozens of Easter eggs alluding to *Serious Sam* in *The Talos Principle* because both games have the same developer, but there are also references to other media products. *The Talos Principle – World B-5*, a small part of the temple is sticking out of the water wherein a player can discover a sightseeing binocular machine. When he looks through it, he sees half of the Statue of Liberty on the opposite shore, obviously referring to the iconic movie *Planet of the Apes*¹⁵.

Some Easter eggs may be created as multiple references, like the secret room in *The Talos Principle – World B-7*. The gamer must find the crowbar marked as 'CRObar' (a reference to developer Croteam), and then use it to knock down a wooden door to an underground room, where cubes (thematic items) from several games are exposed, e.g., *Portal*¹⁶, *Minecraft*¹⁷, and *Serious Sam*. Even not so hidden references, as Easter eggs used to be, belong under intertextuality. In such cases, the hiddenness is supplanted by the implicitness of reference meaning, which often requires considerable knowledge of pop culture as a whole or notable experience with various pop-cultural products. After solving the secret puzzle in *The Talos Principle – World B-5*, the gamer will enter a dark cave, where an outline pyramid bends a light beam into the colour spectrum as a glass prism. The scene is a representation of Pink Floyd's eighth album cover, *Dark Side of the Moon*¹⁸, the meaning of which is as similarly mysterious as *The Talos Principle*.

Paratextuality

Paratextuality is probably the simplest way to define the relationship between digital games and Easter eggs. According to G. Genette, paratexts are texts accompanying the

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- 12 GENETTE, G.: *Palimpsests: Literature in the Second Degree*. Lincoln : University of Nebraska Press, 1997, p. 1-2.
 - 13 NOONEY, L.: Easter Eggs. In RYAN, M.-L., EMERSON, L., ROBERTSON, B. J. (eds.): *The Johns Hopkins guide to digital media*. Baltimore : The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2014, p. 166.
 - 14 CROTEAM: *Serious Sam: The First Encounter*. [digital game]. New York : Gathering of Developers, 2001.
 - 15 SCHAFFNER, F. J. (Director): *Planet of the Apes*. [DVD]. Los Angeles : 20th Century Fox, 1968.
 - 16 VALVE CORPORATION: *Portal*. [digital game]. Bellevue : Valve Corporation, 2007.
 - 17 MOJANG: *Minecraft*. [digital game]. Stockholm : Mojang. 2011.
 - 18 PINK FLOYD: *Dark Side of the Moon*. [CD]. London : Abbey Road Studios, 1973.

original text, e.g., a title, author's name, a table of content, an introduction, notes, covers or illustrations, which provide the main text and extend recipients' experience with it.¹⁹ M. Consalvo considers Genette's conceptualization of the paratext as a better way to think about texts surrounding the game industry, and includes Easter eggs to paratexts, along with cheats.²⁰ "The Easter egg and its eager reception set the stage for a paratextual industry to spring up, to alert players about what to look for in games, help them through the games, and in the process, shape and stabilize a game market that would need assistance after the crash of the industry in the early 1980s".²¹ Numerous QR codes placed across the entire *The Talos Principle* belong to the most obvious examples of paratextual Easter eggs. They contain various types of texts (notes, epitaphs, etc.) extending the main game storytelling, nevertheless, some of them are not so easy to find. A different example is situated in World C-4. There is a secret square with a balcony with photos of game developers hanging on a clothesline (the printed part of the photos is visible only from the wall side). In a semiotic sense, the image is just another text, thus this Easter Egg represents a similar (if not the same) paratext to Robinett's signature in *Adventure*.

An interesting example is a floppy disc labelled as 'Top Secret' that can be discovered in *The Talos Principle* – World A-4 when the player takes the trial of the walls' tops. The disc content can be displayed on a nearby computer, and (among others) contains photos of some kittens. The white cat is a philosophical part of the game's central theme, included in the game's cover and posters. As developers from Croteam posted later, a cat should originally have had a bigger role in the game. Although this plan got scrapped, they still wanted the already made poster to communicate the idea of an android with feelings, hinting at the whole premise of the game.²² The abovementioned floppy disc Easter egg is thus in line with Genette's understanding of paratext, as an accompanying text that makes it easier to reveal or understand the meaning of the text, a part of which it is.²³ This Easter egg refers to another appearing later within gameplay (World B-7) – the secret room, where the player can release the cat from a box as a result of which the secret ending of the game becomes available to him. However, that Easter egg already has more metatextual character.

Metatextuality

The next transtextual relationship, *metatextuality*, "unites a given text to another, of which it speaks without necessarily citing it (without summoning it), in fact sometimes even without naming it".²⁴ Regarding metatextual relations, Easter eggs usually refer to the game in which they are implemented (including features, mechanics, etc.). As an example, we might consider the Easter egg in *The Talos Principle* – World B-7. There is a palm tree next to an Egyptian obelisk not too far from the main route to the pyramid. A table with the inscription 'DONT LOOKUP' is nailed to the trunk. When the player directs the camera up, a coconut immediately falls on the player's character, and the blurred vision will be simulated for a short time. A specific metatextual case occurs, when an Easter egg alludes to itself, in

19 GENETTE, G.: *Paratexts: Thresholds of Interpretation*. Cambridge : Cambridge University Press, 1997, p. 427.

20 CONSALVO, M.: *Cheating: Gaining Advantage in Video Games*. Cambridge : The MIT Press, 2007, p. 240.

21 Ibidem, p. 20.

22 *The cat is (not) a lie*. [online]. [2019-03-30]. Available at: <<http://www.croteam.com/cat-not-lie/>>.

23 GENETTE, G.: *Paratexts: Thresholds of Interpretation*. Cambridge : Cambridge University Press, 1997, p. 427.

24 GENETTE, G.: *Palimpsests: Literature in the Second Degree*. Lincoln : University of Nebraska Press, 1997, p. 4.

both literal and figurative meanings of Easter Eggs. S. Conway uses the term 'meta-eggs'.²⁵ S. Conway uses the term meta-eggs. For example, in *The Talos Principle – World A-4*, a bird's nest with a decorated Easter egg can be found. Similar Easter eggs in digital games are uncommon, but not so rare. A different metatext is situated in the part 'Tower'. The gamer has to jump over the railing and, after a long fall, lands on the roof of the third floor to discover the hidden QR code. Unlike other QR codes in-game, the message of this one looks like partially encrypted or damaged information. Nevertheless, phrases like 'fall down here', 'this area look very gl#tchy', 'secret/easte&\$egg here' were purposely readable.

Hypertextuality

Hypertextuality is defined by G. Genette as any relationship of newer text (hypertext) to an older one (hypotext), but not like a commentary. He distinguishes two basic types – transformation (deformation) and imitation, realized by ludic, satiric, or serious methods, combinations of which six techniques (genres) of architextuality are formed (Table 1).²⁶

Table 1: The structure of Genette's concept of hypertextuality

	Relation type	Function	Technique (genre)
Hypertextuality	transformation	ludic	parody
		satiric	travesty
		serious	transposition
	imitation	ludic	pastiche
		satiric	persiflage, caricature
		serious	forgery

Source: own processing; GENETTE, G.: *Palimpsests: Literature in the Second Degree*. Lincoln : University of Nebraska Press, 1997, p. 490.

Easter eggs as hypertexts are generally very frequent in digital games, especially regarding a form of parody, thus they are sometimes defined as joyful parodic allusions.²⁷ For example, at the beginning of *The Talos Principle – World C-3*, Gnaar (one of the Serious Sam's monsters) hanging from the cliff may be discovered. When the player comes to close him, Gnaar says 'Fly you fools!' and then falls, apparently parodying the scene of Gandalf's fall from the movie *The Lord of the Rings: The Fellowship of the Ring*²⁸. Also not so far from there, in the cave under the cliff, the player can find some high-tech sarcophagus of a man wearing sunglasses with raised hands. The man's appearance indicates referring to the main character of the Serious Sam game series, and at the same time, parodying Han Solo frozen in carbonite from another iconic movie *Star Wars: Episode V – The Empire Strikes Back*²⁹.

25 CONWAY, S.: A circular wall? Reformulating the fourth wall for videogames. In *Journal of Gaming and Virtual Worlds*, 2010, Vol. 2, No. 2, p. 152.

26 GENETTE, G.: *Palimpsests: Literature in the Second Degree*. Lincoln : University of Nebraska Press, 1997, p. 5-12.

27 URIBE-JONGBLOED, E., SCHOLZ, T. M., ESPINOSA-MEDINA, H. D.: The Joy of the Easter Egg and the Pain of Numb Hands: The Augmentation and Limitation of Reality Through Video Games. In *Palabra Clave*, 2015, Vol. 18, No. 4, p. 1179.

28 JACKSON, P. (Director): *The Lord of the Rings: The Fellowship of the Ring*. [DVD]. Burbank : New Line Cinema, 2001.

29 KERSHNER, I. (Director): *Star Wars: Episode V – The Empire Strikes Back*. [DVD]. Los Angeles : Twentieth Century Fox Home Entertainment, 1980.

Architextuality

G. Genette sees *architextuality* as the most abstract and implicit of all transtextual relationships. It includes the entire set of transcendent categories (types of discourse, modes of enunciation, literary genres, etc.) to which individual texts belong and take over certain characteristics from them. Due to that, he was originally using the term architextuality instead of transtextuality but later classed it as a type of transtextuality. G. Genette also emphasizes that an architextual relationship is not obvious, rather expressed by other transtextual relationships, mostly paratexts.³⁰ An affiliation to the genre (literary, film, game, etc.) is perhaps the best observable illustration of architextuality regarding Easter eggs in digital games. The Easter egg located in *The Talos Principle* – World B-2 consists of two parts. First, when the player aims a connector at the side of the Moon in the night sky, it starts to rotate, and a luminous symbol will appear. The symbol refers to the logo of Aperture Science Laboratories from the game *Portal*. Then, if the player finds a key, he can use a sightseeing binocular machine placed on the wall to look closer at the Moon, now actually on the *Portal* logo. On its top, a small spherical robotic eye (so-called 'personality core') named Wheatley, from *Portal 2*³¹, can be seen (Picture 1). It could be initially considered as an intertextual reference, but it just articulates an architextual one, referring to the mutual genre of both games, and possibly to the significantly similar design, including androids, puzzles, artificial intelligence, etc.



Picture 1: Architextual Easter egg in the game *The Talos Principle*

Source: author's screenshots; CROTEAM: *The Talos Principle*. [digital game]. Austin : Devolver Digital, 2014.

Additionally, other interesting transtextual relationships should be identified here as well. The puzzle title 'Moonshot' is a paratext to the game *The Talos Principle*, referring to the mentioned Easter egg in an intertextual way. Further analysis of this example even indicates that the previously mentioned Easter egg, Pink Floyd's *Dark Side of the Moon*,

30 GENETTE, G.: *Palimpsests: Literature in the Second Degree*. Lincoln : University of Nebraska Press, 1997, p. 1-4.

31 VALVE CORPORATION: *Portal 2*. [digital game]. Bellevue : Valve Corporation, 2011.

placed earlier in the game, might act as another clue or inspiration for players to find out how to look at the other side of the Moon. That can be interpreted as an intertextual, paratextual, even metatextual relationship.

Discussion

The conducted analysis showed that Easter eggs can be described by all five types of textual transcendence. It means that transtextuality seems to be the more effective and comprehensive tool to define the Easter eggs phenomenon, rather than just paratextuality as stated by M. Consalvo,³² or the simplest understanding of Easter eggs through the widest conceptualisation of intertextuality,³³ among others reflected in the most common approach of gamers towards them (based on the observation of gaming portals' content including Easter eggs). Additionally, as The Talos Principle case proved, individual Easter Eggs' implementations even within one digital game may reflect all types of transtextual relationships. Evidence that the relationship between Easter eggs and digital games can be understood within the transtextuality suggests their deeper mutual structural interconnection. On the one hand, this can explain the frequent linking of the Easter eggs' existence just with digital games in general, possibly in the sense of self-reference.³⁴ On the other hand, the last analysed Easter egg example, 'Moonshot', included in multiple transtextual relationships at the same time – between Easter eggs and digital games, between Easter eggs themselves, and between Easter eggs and pop culture. It seems these relations are not being created just within the inward structure, but outwards at the same time, particularly related to pop culture and its artifacts. In the context of pop culture, transtextuality could be understood as a tool or way that contributes to creating fictional canons, and it would mean that Easter eggs might have the same purpose.

Conclusion

Easter eggs are popular phenomena throughout the entire pop culture; however, they are currently usually associated particularly with digital games, which enable the utilization of their whole potential. Taking into account that on a structural (textual) level, Easter eggs can be considered as a text from both the communication-related as well as the ludological points of view, they might be analysed based on intertextual relationships. To examine if it is possible to characterize Easter Eggs in digital games by all types of Genette's theory of textual transcendence, the study utilized a qualitative content analysis of Easter eggs in digital games within categories of intertextuality, paratextuality, metatextuality, hypertextuality, and architextuality, utilizing the game The Talos Principle as the research material. The results show that all transtextual relationships are applicable to describe individual Easter eggs' integrations in digital games, even within a single game. We further found an implementation of an Easter egg that included multiple

32 CONSALVO, M.: *Cheating: Gaining Advantage in Video Games*. Cambridge : The MIT Press, 2007, p. 240.

33 KRISTEVA, J.: *Séméiotikè. Recherche pour une sémanalyse*. Paris : Seuil, 1969, p. 145-173.; BARTHES, R.: *Le plaisir du texte*. Paris : Seuil, 1973, p. 112.; CONWAY, S.: A circular wall? Reformulating the fourth wall for videogames. In *Journal of Gaming and Virtual Worlds*, 2010, Vol. 2, No. 2, p. 146-154.

34 SANTAELLA, L.: Computer Games: The epitome of self-reference. In NÓTH, W., BISHARA, N. (eds): *Self-reference in the Media*. Berlin : Walter de Gruyter GmbH & Co., 2007, p. 206-217.

transtextual relations between it, the game and other Easter eggs. It indicates deeper structural interconnections both inwards (to the game and its design elements) and outwards (to other artifacts or eventually to the entire pop culture). Referential examples from the game *The Talos Principle*, used as illustrations within the analysis, revealed that the meaning of Easter eggs, as well as their intended purpose (even commercial), might play an important role during the process of their design and following their implementation. In conclusion, transtextual relations on their own might not be sufficient to base on them the classification of Easter eggs in digital games, but we consider them as an important part of a fundamental theoretical framework that we must extend by Easter eggs' levels of meanings, functions and the pragmatics (or purposes), to be able to later create a comprehensive classification of Easter eggs in digital games.

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