

Play-By-Play : Audio Commentary in Digital Games

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- Abstract** This paper examines audio commentary in digital games, a paratextual “special feature” modelled on DVD and Blu-Ray commentary tracks, which usually feature developers, producers or artists discussing a game while the listener plays. Although there is some overlap between movie and game commentary tracks in terms of form and content, the peculiarities of the digital game medium require these paratexts to be implemented in unique ways. This paper explores a variety of different ways audio commentary has been incorporated and mobilized in games, and, using concepts from cinema and media studies and game studies, theorizes the ways in which commentary functions as a paratextual re-framing of the game's meaning, intentionality, and authorship, as well as a spatial re-mapping of the game's fictional world.
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1. Introduction

Since digital storage media became the standard for home video, audio commentary tracks by directors, cast members, critics, and other people of interest have become a staple of DVDs, and now Blu-Ray discs, alongside behind-the-scenes footage, essays, posters, trailers, and so on. As in the film industry, digital games are now often packaged with special features and bonus content. Adapting the model of DVD commentary, a small number of digital games have incorporated in-game audio commentary tracks, usually featuring developers, producers, or artists discussing the game while it is being played. In spite of the game industry's tendency towards increasingly elaborate, Hollywood-inspired collector's editions, audio commentary has not been widely embraced – only two dozen or so games have included commentary, and the feature is not widely discussed in reviews or online forums. It is a cliché to note that, in spite of their ubiquity, most people do not actually listen to DVD commentaries, and game commentaries are much less common, a niche option that the vast majority of players either ignore or are simply unaware of. In this paper, I will examine a variety of examples of audio commentary in digital games. In particular, I am concerned with the different ways games mobilize this paratextual device, and to what end. Although there is considerable overlap in form and content between film and game commentary tracks, the peculiarities of the digital game medium require these paratexts to function in unique ways. In addition to their economic and marketing function, commentary tracks work discursively to elevate individual games, legitimate games in general as a cultural form, construct authorship, and inscribe meaning. As Jonathan Gray (2010) argues, “a paratext constructs, lives in, and can affect the running of the text” (p. 6). Building on studies of DVD commentaries, and putting them in dialogue with theory and concepts digital game studies, I will explore how game commentary tracks act as a paratextual re-framing and spatial re-mapping of the game's rules and fictional world.

2. Varieties of audio commentary in games

Perhaps one of the reasons for the unpopularity of audio commentary in games is that it is somewhat difficult to implement due to the non-linearity of digital gameplay. Unlike a film, which unfolds at a steady rate, the same every time, even the most rigidly structured of digital games

allow the player some measure of agency to act within a possibility space defined by coded rules (Bogost, 2008, p. 121), meaning that while one player might speed through an area or challenge without stopping, another might spend time wandering and exploring, or take several tries before figuring it out. More open-ended games, in which players are given free roam in a large environment, are even more variable. The standard model, then, of a continuous audio track recorded “live” during a screening of a film, is untenable for digital games. Furthermore, while the DVD as a medium has an in-built ability to store and playback different audio tracks, for games, as computer software, additional coding and design work is required to include audio commentary.

Game producers have tackled these issues in a variety of different ways, to varying degrees of success, and in order to account for this range, I selected 16 of the roughly 25 games that have been released with in-game developer commentary. My selections were based on availability and popularity, and guided by journalistic and popular discourse. Wherever possible, I played an hour or two of each game, from the beginning, with the commentary turned on. Some I could not play myself, either because they were made for older gaming hardware (such as *Star Wars: Episode I – The Battle for Naboo* [2000]), or because the commentary needed to be “unlocked” by playing through the whole game (as in *The Chronicles of Riddick: Escape from Butcher Bay* [2004]). In these cases, I relied on screenshots and videos of gameplay with commentary, captured and posted online by fans. I took detailed notes on the form and content of the audio commentary in each game, with particular attention to the ways in which it is integrated into ‘ordinary’ gameplay, its discursive function. Based on this qualitative survey, three general tendencies can be observed: pre-recorded video commentaries, triggered commentaries, and commentary nodes.

The most straightforward approach is to simply circumvent the problem of in-game commentary, opting instead to offer as a bonus feature pre-recorded commentary videos of gameplay footage or non-interactive narrative “cutscenes,” rather than allowing the player to listen in “real-time” during gameplay. *Bayonetta* (2010) and *Halo: Reach* (2010) are two high-profile examples. These “canned” commentary videos are much closer to traditional DVD commentaries, in that they essentially turn the game into a linear movie for the purposes of commentary. While

these pre-recorded commentaries unquestionably participate to the discursive framing of games, for the purposes of this paper, I am primarily interested in *in-game* audio commentary tracks that are integrated into the listener's actual gameplay experience.

The earliest examples of audio commentary in digital games, including *Star Wars: Episode I – The Battle for Naboo*, *Star Wars: Rogue Squadron II: Rogue Leader* (2001) and *Sly Cooper and the Thievius Raccoonus* (2002), all use what I will refer to as “trigger” commentary systems. Audio clips of around one to five minutes play at predetermined times or locations in the game. In some cases, this is an automatic process – in *Battle for Naboo* and *Sly Cooper*, for example, the commentary always plays at the beginning of each level. Once the audio clip ends, gameplay continues as normal. This approach doesn't allow for direct commentary on the player's specific actions and location, instead focusing on the game and the level or area more generally. In more recent games, such as *Alan Wake* (2010), automatic triggers are located at several different points in each in-game area, rather than just at the beginning of levels, and so the commentary is tailored more directly to the moment at hand. (*Alan Wake* is also unique in that it uses picture-in-picture video of the commentators, not just audio.) In games with a less linear structure, such as the Special Edition of *Monkey Island 2: LeChuck's Revenge* (2010), a special icon appears in corner of the screen when the player arrives at a trigger time or location, prompting the player to manually activate the commentary. Unlike automatic triggers, these manual triggers mean that the commentary can be selectively ignored, or returned to later. In all of these cases, the commentary can be interrupted by gameplay: if the player dies, or leaves the trigger area, the audio is cut off.

The third and currently most popular approach is the insertion of interactive objects called “nodes” directly into the game space. Pioneered by the game studio Valve, and included in all of their games since *Half Life 2: Lost Coast* (2005), this system allows players to manually activate nodes to play a clip relevant to their physical location. While this is similar in some ways to the manual trigger approach noted above, commentary nodes generally use shorter audio clips focused on very specific aspects of the game, such as lighting, story, level design, or character modelling. Unlike trigger commentaries, which are usually conversational and unscripted, nodes tend to be scripted and more

formal. Other games, including *Tomb Raider Anniversary* (2007), *Amnesia: The Dark Descent* (2010), and *Gemini Rue* (2011) have also adopted the node strategy from Valve. Some games, particularly multiplayer games, are not conducive to commentary in regular gameplay, and so include special commentary modes that decrease difficulty significantly, such as *Left 4 Dead* (2008), or remove the ordinary goals and challenges of the game altogether, such as *Team Fortress 2* (2007). In these cases, the player can more freely explore the game in sort of self-guided tour from node to node, separate from regular gameplay, without worrying about other players, advancement, or performance. Valve's commentaries sometimes take advantage of this separateness by "spawning" character models or objects being referenced for the player to examine or interact with while listening, using picture-in-picture windows to show before and after images, or superimposing graphs and other data visualizations to illustrate a point. Sometimes, the game will take control of the in-game "camera" to focus on something of note, temporarily removing the player's agency.

3. Functions of audio commentary in games

Having given a general overview of how audio commentary in digital games is implemented, I will now consider in depth some of their different paratextual *functions*. What is at stake in developer commentaries? How do they frame and shape the meaning and status of game texts? How do they change the experience of playing games? While I will be using examples from a variety of different games, I will return frequently to games by Valve, partially because they have released more games with commentary than any other developer, but also because they represent a particularly interesting case study. None of this analysis should be taken to be universal across all game commentaries, and I will try to point out differences and counter-examples as I go.

The most immediate and practical function of game commentaries is, of course, economic. As Robert Alan Brookey and Robert Westerfelhaus (2002) suggest, DVD commentary tracks are "the ultimate example of media-industry synergy, in which the promotion of a media product is collapsed into the product itself" (p. 23), and this extends to games as well. Whatever else can be said of game commentaries, they are first and foremost a marketing tool. In special edition boxed sets, commentary tracks are one of many "value-added" paratexts designed to encourage

consumers to splurge on the more expensive editions. Commentary tracks also encourage repeat playthroughs, which are highly valued by the industry as a way of extending a product's lifespan. Some games, such as *The Chronicles of Riddick: Escape from Butcher Bay* (2004) and *Sly Cooper*, make the feature an unlockable reward, only available to players once they complete the whole game, or certain levels.

Audio commentaries in games thus far remain the province of designers, programmers, artists and other participants in the development process – so far there is no digital game equivalent to the third-party critical commentaries popularized by the Criterion Collection. In terms of content, developer commentaries tend to return to the same handful of subjects: References to the origins of game ideas, as well as changes, scrapped material and out-takes, are common; discussions of gameplay mechanics, the fictional world of the game, and the relationship between them are a recurring theme; “under-the-hood” explanations of software engines, graphical rendering, and so on help give a sense of the technical underpinnings of the game; level and character design, as well as audiovisual style, is frequently addressed, perhaps due to the “location” of the player within the game while the commentary plays; in rare cases there are references to influences and inspirations, helping to align a game with other acclaimed or popular texts – *Alan Wake* references *Twin Peaks* (1990-1991), *The Shining* (1980) and Stephen King's novels as key influences, drawing on the prestige of those canonical works. Much of the content of game commentaries is technical and immediate – there is very little explicit discussion of the over-arching vision of a game's design, its artistic value or meaning, its generic classification, or its situation within a broader context. As Giorgio Bertellini and Jacqueline Reich (2010) write of DVD commentaries, the information provided is “both useful and useless (if highly marketable),” which seems an apt description of game commentaries (p. 105).

4. Meaning and interpretation

The power of commentary tracks to reinforce “intended” meanings and construct a particular understanding of the text is an important function. Bertellini and Reich (2010) refer to the “suggested readings” provided by film commentaries (p. 105), and Ewan Kirkland (2010) coins the term “preferred gaming” to discuss how paratextual materials invite players to apprehend games in a certain way, although “preferred playing” might be

more accurate (p. 317). According to Brookey and Westerfelhaus (2002), “Individuals involved in the film’s production are presented in the [commentary] as having privileged insights regarding a film’s meaning and purpose, and, as such, they are used to articulate a ‘proper’ (i.e., sanctioned) interpretation” (p. 23). The privileged insights of game developers, as noted above, are not particularly profound or nuanced, but nevertheless do encourage a particular interpretation or “preferred playing.” In the commentary for *Alan Wake*, one of the game’s writers says that the main character is supposed to be “kind of a dick,” and not particularly likable or sympathetic. While according to the commentary this is intentional, some players criticized the game because they found the character hard to identify with: Writing for *Gamestyle*, reviewer Jason Julier writes, “Alan Wake himself is a cold, moody and clinical character, so much so that Gamestyle felt no affinity with his onscreen presence.” The preferred interpretation in this case is at odds with the popular reception, but paratextual framing attempts to smooth over these differences by presenting an “official,” authoritative version.

In doing so, however, as Deborah Parker and Mark Parker (2004) point out, “the DVD commentary track enforces a heightened attention to intricacies of intention as it plays out over the course of the film,” and this heightened attention can serve to *complicate* the preferred meaning as much as reinforce it (p. 20). In the commentary for *Half Life 2: Episode One* (2006), a Valve developer mentions that in earlier versions of the game, the player’s near-constant companion, Alyx Vance, took on a leadership role, guiding the player through the game’s puzzles and action sequences, shouting frantic instructions. According to the commentary, this was intended to help convey a sense of urgency, but playtesters found “Bossy Alyx” irritating, and she was revised to take on a more submissive role, with the player’s avatar, Gordon Freeman, as the active agent. This produces an interesting problematic, given that Alyx is frequently cited as one of the few examples of strong, intelligent and three-dimensional female characters in the typically misogynistic culture of digital games, which deals primarily in objectifying stereotypes of women. As in *Alan Wake*, the preferred playings offered by commentary tracks are by no means stable or monolithic – rather, they add yet another layer of intentionality and meaning to the already complex process of interpretation.

5. Authorship

Much of the scholarship on film commentaries, and on paratexts in general, discusses them in terms of the construction of authorship and authorial intention. Game commentaries, however, present an interesting case. Authorship in these paratexts is distributed, almost always involving many multiple commentators. In Valve's commentaries, the speakers are effectively anonymous, identified only by name and not by role (although their area of expertise is usually clear based on their comments). Given the difficulty of pinpointing the singular author of a large-scale game production, as in film, it is surprising that there is not more discursive work put into the identification and elevation of, say, creative directors or lead designers as authors. In the Valve commentaries, a diverse range of workers are given equal footing to read scripted comments on aspects of the game related to their role in the studio. Co-founder and managing director Gabe Newell, who might ostensibly be framed as the primary creative force and public face of the studio, opts for more of an overseeing-producer role in the commentaries: he introduces the commentary node system and wishes the player well in the first node in each game, and is absent for the rest, never commenting directly on the game or discussing his role in its development. Neither do other commentators highlight any particular person as the author or creative force behind of any of Valve's games.

Gray (2010) writes extensively about how the DVD commentaries on *The Lord of the Rings: The Two Towers* (2002) reinforce a very specific conception of the people involved in the production, highlighting camaraderie between individual personalities, all guided by the vision of director Peter Jackson (who, of course, channels J. R. R. Tolkien himself) (p. 83). Likewise, Kirkland (2010) argues that the survival horror game series *Silent Hill's* paratexts present three key figures as the authors of the game – the producer, the sound director, and the CGI and character designer – over the other 50-odd members of the development team (p. 324). Yet in Valve's commentary tracks, there isn't an individual or small group being constructed as the author. Rather, I would argue that Valve and certain other game studios (BioWare, Bethesda, Rockstar, etc.), are discursively and paratextually constructed as meta-author entities, similar to major film corporations in studio-era Hollywood, with distinctive styles and themes identified by critics and fans across their

bodies of work. Game scholar Ian Bogost (2012) alludes to this conceptualization of game authorship in an article on “artgame” developer Thatgamecompany titled “A Portrait of the Artist as a Game Studio.” While individuals are not singled out in Valve’s commentary, references to the studio’s internal best practices and design principles across different games abound. In particular, there is strong emphasis placed on the idea of carefully “training” players to reproduce intended behaviours, by introducing concepts gradually as they play – an idea also developed in other paratexts, including the company’s official blog and critical discourse from reviewers and journalists. While the *Two Towers* paratextual materials obscure New Line and Time Warner in favour of Peter Jackson (Gray, 2010, p. 101), Valve itself, as an abstract whole, is constructed as the locus of intention and creativity. Similarly, the commentaries for *Alan Wake*, *Amnesia: The Dark Descent* and *Cthulhu Saves the World* (2010) downplay individual authorship and privilege instead the studio itself, however large or small.

There are counter-examples, however, of game commentaries that do engage in a more traditional construction of authorship. *Monkey Island 2: LeChuck’s Revenge Special Edition* adopts a unique style, in which writer-designers Ron Gilbert, Tim Schafer and Dave Grossman provide wry, off-the-cuff “live” commentary on the game. This approach is much closer to the traditional DVD commentary, in that they are reacting casually, rather than reading scripted comments: behind-the-scenes videos show the three developers in a recording studio with a large screen, on which the game is being played in its entirety by someone in the next room. During the game, when commentary plays, the three designers are represented in the foreground in cartoony silhouette as if they are hecklers in a movie theatre, likely inspired by the cult TV series *Mystery Science Theatre 3000* (this visual reference in and of itself can be seen as a way of situating the game and its authors in alignment with a particular vision of ironic, pop-culture-savvy nerd culture). The *Monkey Island 2* commentary is also much less reverent than other examples, and much less focused on the actual design and technical aspects of the game. Instead, Gilbert, Schafer and Grossman wax nostalgic, crack jokes, and make fun of one another (and the game), foregrounding the strong individual personalities who are understood to be the authors of the game. The humorous, nostalgic tone of the commentary matches the game, which is widely acclaimed for its comedic writing, as well as the public personas of the creators

themselves – Tim Schafer’s more recent work, with his studio Double Fine, is framed in terms of his unique personal vision and quirky sense of humour.¹

6. Game commentaries as embedded meta-narrative

Taken in conjunction, the various textual and paratextual operations of audio commentary can fundamentally transform the experience and meaning of a text in any medium (Gray, 2010, p. 104). As Catherine Grant (2008) argues, DVD commentary can be seen as the “re-writing” of a film – a reconfiguration and translation of its sensible elements into something new and different (p. 104). By the same token, I contend that developer commentary in games represents not only a re-writing of the game’s meaning, but also a *re-mapping* of the game world as a navigable virtual space and fictional world. Many digital games, Katie Salen and Eric Zimmerman (2003) point out, embed “fixed and predetermined units of narrative content,” such as non-interactive cutscenes or in-game text and dialogue, into their structure, in order to frame otherwise abstract gameplay and make it meaningful (p. 383). One common form of embedded narrative is what Henry Jenkins (n.d.) calls “environmental storytelling” or “narrative architecture,” in which fragments of narrative – or in Michael Nitsche’s (2008) terms, “evocative narrative elements” (p. 3) – are distributed throughout the fictional world and navigable space of the game, waiting to be uncovered (or ignored) by the player. Perhaps the most familiar form of environmental storytelling in digital games is the exploration of a dangerous ruined place – an ancient dungeon or an abandoned spaceship – throughout which can be found and triggered written journal entries and messages, audiovisual logs and recordings, or magical “memories” that gradually reveal the cause of its downfall. As Daniel Vella (2011) suggests, “games, in contrast to media such as literature or film, can offer narratives that are encoded spatially rather than temporally: story is actually inscribed into the gameworld.”

Audio commentaries in games, tied as they are to specific in-game levels and locations, similarly inscribe the space of the game with an additional embedded meta-narrative about its own construction and significance. According to Jenkins (n.d.), this kind of narrative is “pre-

¹ See, for example, the comical videos featured in the successful Kickstarter fundraising campaign for Schafer’s *Double Fine Adventure* project.

structured but embedded within the mise-en-scene awaiting discovery. The game world becomes a kind of information space, a memory palace.” When played with commentary, the game is navigated as a space in which different kinds of history, legitimacy, value, meaning and authorship are constructed, while simultaneously these discourses act upon and construct the game space itself. The player also participates in this co-constitution: as Nitsche (2008) argues in his study of game spaces, embedded narratives “are not ‘stories’ but suggestive markings” that guide the player towards particular interpretations, but nevertheless can be misinterpreted, resisted and subverted by the player’s agency within the affordances and limitations of the game (p. 44).

When Valve games are played with audio commentary, the game world becomes a carefully-designed space in which fiction and gameplay are both integrated and constantly in tension, as well as a systematic training ground designed to produce particular kinds of player behaviour. This space is situated as part of an oeuvre authored by the entity that is Valve, through which recurring themes and preoccupations circulate and familiar trademarks can be identified. In the special *Team Fortress 2* commentary levels, the experience of this competitive, team-based game is transformed into a kind of virtual museum through which the solitary player charts a new path through its simulated spaces, moving freely from node to node in any order, rather than always towards choke points, the enemy base, or the flag (as dictated by the goals of the ordinary game), exploring, looking, and listening, stitching together disparate fragments of developer insight and behind-the-scenes information into a revised experience of the game and its significance. To paraphrase Parker and Parker (2004), when played with commentary the game “becomes another text, intimately related to the [game], complicating the experience of the [game], but nevertheless not quite the [game]” (p. 13).

7. Conclusion

In closing, I would like to propose another function for game commentaries, as a potentially useful resource for academic game scholars. While the actual content of commentaries is of questionable research value (depending on what exactly is being studied), the reflexive mode of engagement they encourage is certainly worth thinking about. Bobby Schweizer (2012) has mentioned in passing the usefulness of

playing games on the easiest difficulty setting, not as a substitute for “regular” play, but as a way of taking a critical step back from the text and evaluating it from a different perspective, and I think audio commentary provides a similar opportunity. Beyond this pragmatic value, the paratextual framing of a text plays a foundational role in its interpretation and cultural status, and as such, in spite of their seemingly peripheral or secondary position in relation to the text, paratexts are of central importance to the study of any cultural form. Bonus features and packaging, game manuals (as discussed by Michael James Hancock [2012], also at this year’s CCA conference) and player guides both official and unofficial, unlockable and downloadable content, marketing materials, institutional distribution and exhibition networks, popular and critical reception, and countless other paratextual materials, practices, and discourses constitute an sprawling network that is inseparable from the digital game object itself. Without examining this network in all its complexity, scholars are left with only a partial view.

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