

# The Aesthetics of Human Body in eSports-related Paratexts

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## ABSTRACT

The topic of electronic sports has already been researched from multiple perspectives, including studies focused on players' physical health (Kari & Karhulahti, 2016) and corporeality of eSports broadcasts (Ferrari, 2013). However, the existing scholarship on this topic still remains scarce and largely disconnected from the current development of rapidly globalizing eSports, with increasing investment from commercial entities aiming at taking over the public image and key aesthetics elements of this phenomenon. In this research, I propose to make a map of aesthetic discourses used to shape the current public image of eSports, with special focus on the negotiation between the fans' and commercial actors' take on production and circulation of visual-based paratexts.

The crucial theoretical concept implemented extensively during the research would be the paratext. Conceptualized in modern game studies as a tool assisting in media convergence (Švelch, 2019), this Genettian term would be implemented to assess the fans' production with regard to eSports related activity on the streaming platforms. According to seminal definition by Gerard Genette, paratexts are situated in an "undecided zone between the inside and the outside" (Genette, 1997, 2), occupying a threshold space simultaneously building and altering the given text of culture. Paratexts permeate both ludic spectacle and mediated participation aspects of large-scale eSports events. Ranging from promotional visual materials to fans' video collages and eSports related plugins and additions on Twitch.tv channels, they vary in their form and scope. To reliably assess their influence on commercial eSports broadcasts, an overarching framework is needed to pinpoint their function in relation to one of the crucial points of reference pertaining the persons involved in eSports events. The importance of paratexts in the current media landscape stems from their ability to convey meanings between the various communication channels used in the internet-based media industries. Jonathan Gray claims that paratexts fill the space between the audience, particular texts of culture and industry (Gray, 2010, 25), thus functioning as the carriers and conductors of diversified meanings and their interpretations. My approach would stem from the similar notion, i.e. that eSports paratexts, especially those produced by the fans' communities, circulate between the various levels of electronic spaces (streaming platforms, social media) as well as non-digital spaces (on-site cosplay, hand-made banners).

Even though it has been argued that the narratological conceptualization of the term "paratext" is hard to reconcile with the constantly changing properties of the video game titles and needs to be reframed or replaced with another concept (see the idea of "orthogame" and "paragame", Carter, Gibbs, & Harrop, 2012), I would argue that the Genettian notion of paratextuality as a way to "ensure the text's presence in the world" (Genette, 1997, 1) still applies to modern eSports titles. My rationale stems from the interpretation of eSports events as a separate and contextualized "assemblages of play" (T. L. Taylor, 2018, 80), where the core game – a *codex* of sorts – in form of a particular

Proceedings of DiGRA 2020

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iteration of a live-played and live-streamed act affords the emergence of paratextual production which happens at a given time.

Building on the corporeal analysis of streaming media aesthetics (Anderson, 2017), I will implement the constructivist variant of grounded theory approach (Charmaz, 2006) to analyze eSports related paratexts in three main digital media platforms: Twitch.tv, YouTube and Reddit. The analyzed corpus will comprise of data pertaining large-scale eSports events (e.g. Intel Extreme Masters tournaments, HomeStory Cup) and will include the data gathered from August 2019 to March 2020. The goal of the study is to propose an interpretation framework focusing on the ways in which human bodies (players, hosts and audience) are presented in the digital coverage and fans' paratextual production, including clips, visual collages and memes circulated throughout the three aforementioned platforms. Data samples will be collected mainly through the open source online repositories and then analyzed throughout the grounded theory coding process and theoretical sampling up to the point of satisfactory saturation. Besides being appropriate to the analysis of the still evolving phenomena, the grounded theory approach also allows for looking into gender (N. Taylor, 2009) and other dimensions of the topic in question.

The study will encompass the intersection of two areas: the on-site spectacle and its digital coverage, manifested through online paratexts. The broader research agenda associated with this project is to assess the techniques used to mediate the image of human body to fit the cultural codes of fans' paratextual communication and commercial/professional coverage via streaming platforms. The negotiation between these two spheres will provide the overarching context for the in-depth analysis of phenomena such as: the aesthetics of pre- and post-match interviews, award ceremonies, the usage of third-party actors (cosplayers, hosts, in some instances – hostesses), and fans' online and offline creative production involving such elements.

The research will be focused on the specific elements constituting the online and offline eSports spectacle. The analyzed subject includes the assessment of gaming paraphernalia: how sponsors gain on-screen time in connection to the players' physique; the aesthetics of team uniforms (especially in case of Korean players); and the influence of nationalist and identity-based aesthetics (based on the research material gathered in Eastern Europe). I would analyze how all of these elements are implemented in the paratextual production of fandom (Twitch.tv clips, gifs, YouTube compilations) and business levels (commercials, televised/streamed product placement, design of the competitors and hosts' clothes), and how these two groups relate to each other.

## **ACKNOWLEDGMENTS**

This paper is a part of the research project "Masowe wydarzenia sportu elektronicznego w Polsce i w Hongkongu", no 2019/32/C/HS2/00614, financed by the National Science Centre, Poland.

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