

Beyond Paratexts, Towards Paratextuality: A Case for Granular Analysis of Video Game Paratextuality

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INTRODUCTION

Paratext is a widely used concept in game studies and other related fields such as film and television studies or literary theory. However, its current use is at odds with the original meaning of the term as it was proposed by Gérard Genette in 1982. More importantly, scholars have not fully acknowledged what has changed over the last 36 years. The seminal book *Paratexts: Thresholds of Interpretation* (Genette 1997b) from 1987 is partly to blame for the resulting multiplicity in approaches to paratextuality. Genette only briefly touched upon the theoretical foundations of the concept and instead dedicated the majority of his monograph to a very detailed, yet still incomplete analysis of selected literary paratexts. Originally a part of a system of five so-called transtextual relationships (Genette 1997a), paratextuality was later picked up by other scholars while its original context had been largely forgotten, effectively undermining the analytical value of a suddenly standalone concept.

This arguably unfortunate fate of paratext was noted by Georg Stanitzek in 2004: “*That Genette, a structuralist literary theorist with both a talent and a predilection for classification, should extract in 1987 one concept—and specifically this one—from his original conceptual inventory and send it on a more or less isolated journey through the cultural disciplines and that later it should find such acceptance are indications of a problematic situation that needs to be diagnosed from a cultural perspective.*” (Stanitzek 2005, 29) While Stanitzek suggested that this de-contextualization was of Genette’s own doing, I would argue that it was instead a result of selective reading by other scholars. After all, the basic theoretical foundations were laid out in *Palimpsests: Literature in the Second Degree* (Genette 1997a) in 1982 and they were also summarized in Richard Macksey’s foreword to the English translation of *Paratexts: Thresholds of Interpretation* published in 1997. Still, Stanitzek’s warning was not heeded and the scholarly treatment of paratextuality continued to diverge in the 2000s.

Nowadays, even though some researchers still adhere to the original meaning of paratext, two noteworthy revisions can be identified: (1) a reduced one and (2) an expanded one

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(Švelch 2017). The reduced framework (Wolf 2006) is mostly missing from game studies with two exceptions (Jara 2013; Rockenberger 2014). It is characterized by limiting paratext to verbal phenomena that are spatially bound to a text. In Genette's terminology, Wolf's paratext more or less equates to verbal peritext. Much more influential than the reduced version is the expanded framework, which is represented by Mia Consalvo (2007, 2017) and Jonathan Gray (Gray 2010; Brooke and Gray 2017). Their approach to paratextuality strips away the authorial limitation that is otherwise central to the original definition of the relationship where it is used to distinguish between metatexts (external commentary) and paratexts. By opening up the creation of paratexts to non-official parties, nearly anything can become paratext as long as it does not hold the dominant form of a given cultural industry. In the context of video games, this means that trailers, livestreams, walkthroughs, guides, or tie-in novels are all classified as paratexts despite their different authorship, functions and roles within the video game culture. This approach closely resembles the notion of cultural epiphenomena (Klinger 1989), which follows the hierarchical structure of a cultural industry. In other words, video games are the main phenomena (texts) of the video game culture, while everything else is relegated to the status of epiphenomena (paratexts). In result, paratext has become a catch-all-term for the various artifacts that are considered subordinate or secondary to video games. Even though the proponents of the expanded framework openly criticize this subordination, which is included in Genette's vision of paratextuality, they in a way replicate it on a larger scale of texts, which would have not been originally understood as paratexts and thus not necessarily as ancillary to some more privileged phenomena.

Genette's original framework is not without a fault, especially if it is to be applied to the video game culture, but in order to refine it and update, scholars should pay attention to its theoretical foundations. This paper presents a thorough review of paratextual theory and of the two alternative frameworks and proposes an updated version of the concept, which acknowledges the existence of the whole system of transtextual relationships. It redefines paratextuality as a link to the socio-historical context and rejects the label paratext on a level of individual texts. Classifying phenomena as paratexts has been counterproductive as it has obscured the complex relationships between texts, their creators, audiences and the socio-historical reality. Instead, paratextuality should be analyzed on a more granular level as one of many potential qualities of any text (or of its part). To support the updated theoretical framework, I look for empirical evidence by analyzing video game trailers as potentially bearing paratextual (and other transtextual and textual) qualities by looking both at their formal traits and their audience reception. Recently, scholars have suggested that trailers exceed the role of mere paratexts (Hesford 2013; Johnston, Vollans, and Greene 2016; Vollans 2017), yet their relation to the paratextual framework has not been properly addressed. To this end, I analyze a sample of twelve video game trailers for eight mainstream video games released between 2009 and 2017, including *The Witcher III: Wild Hunt*, *Overwatch*, *Battlefield 1*, or *Mass Effect: Andromeda*. The results show that formally trailers exhibit certain paratextual qualities while being partly autonomous texts due to various features such as original content or cinematic editing. Audiences approach them both as informational sources on video games and as entertaining cinematic texts in their own right, suggesting an ambiguous role of video game trailers in the video game industry, which cannot be classified as merely paratextual.

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