

Paratextuality 2.0: Updating Genette's Framework for Complex Game Systems

Jan Švelch

Charles University in Prague

Smetanovo nábřeží 6

110 01 Praha 1

+420777198142

honza@svelch.com

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Paratexts have become a catch-all phrase of game studies. Simply put, most of the video game epiphenomena have been labeled “paratext” since Consalvo's (2007) influential introduction of the term to the field. Game guides, manuals, patch notes, errata, rulebooks, trailers, demos, previews, developer diaries, game statistics, introductory sequences, easter eggs or even online discussions about video games were identified and studied as paratexts during the last 8 years. I would argue that such breadth of the term is detrimental to its potential analytical value, and that paratext as a concept needs to be reevaluated, otherwise it loses its meaning.

However my rather harsh criticism of the recent adoption of the term should not let us think that Genette's (1997b) original framework has not been challenged and appropriated along its way from literature theory to game studies. Starting with Lunenfeld, the implicit hierarchy of paratext was criticized in the context of new media where “backstories are probably more interesting, in fact, than the narratives themselves” (1999, p. 14). This remains true for video games as was also pointed out by Consalvo. Other problematic aspects have been picked up by and addressed, for example the spatial distinction between peritexts and epitexts (Carter, 2015; Jones, 2008). Recently, Rockenberger (2014) applied Wolf's (2006) critique of paratext rooted in literature theory to video games. However, all these valuable contributions seem to be content with arguably the biggest weakness of the framework – the tendency to label texts based on only one particular type of textual relationship (paratextuality) and to overlook other forms of textual transcendence. We should also note the works which deliberately avoid using the flawed concept of paratext, including Johnston's (2013) studies on media trailers and Guins's (2014) cultural analyses of video game packaging.

I would argue that the underlying fundamental flaw of Genette's framework is the connection between the typology of textual relationships and the typology of texts. Genette (1997a) himself acknowledged that textual relationships often come hand in hand, however he still resorted to labeling various book publishing practices paratexts.

Given Lunenfeld's quotes on centrality of backstories and the popularity of transmedia storytelling techniques, it is at the very least anachronistic to think about texts as

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subordinate just on the basis of a paratextual relationship. Genette himself was aware that some transtextual relationships caused texts to be considered improper literary works, but his framework only strengthened these preconceptions. While some game studies scholars explicitly acknowledged these flaws (see Carter, 2015; Consalvo, 2007), adherence to the term paratext actually undermines these reservations. However, Galloway (2012) suggests that we could think of paratextuality as a process of connection between a text and a social reality akin to the differences between diegetic and nondiegetic elements of text. Going one step further, I propose to avoid the term paratext altogether due to its misleading properties and instead focus on paratextuality as a relationship and on its sources in texts – the links that connect texts and textual systems to social history and in turn to each other. After all, Genette’s idea of paratextuality as a threshold is based on these links between text and surrounding social and historical reality. It is only in this context that we are able to form our expectations facilitated by paratextuality and other transtextual relationships.

The proposed redefinition also deals with the critique of the spatial classification of paratexts. The new framework allows for a much more nuanced analysis of video game culture where the boundaries between texts are often too fluid and complicated to be put into two clear-cut categories (peritexts and epitexts), for example in digital distribution systems such as Steam or home console dashboards. The new framework has clear analytical consequences. Without the term paratext scholars would be forced to pinpoint the exact sources of paratextuality; it would no longer be sufficient to label texts based on their perceived ancillary role within a greater system of texts. The future analyses would be enriched by acknowledgement of other possible types of so-called textual transcendence and more detailed exploration of paratextual cues within textual systems.

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