Chapter 15
Paratext: The In-Between of Structure and Play

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ABSTRACT

This chapter examines paratext as an active element within video games. Paratext, as taken from Gérard Genette’s works has often been cited within the context of video games, but not examined in detail. Current scholarship focuses on epitext, but not peritext, which is Genette’s primary focus. Mia Consalvo and Peter Lunenfeld’s work discuss the epitextual importance of paratext within video games, with only a hint towards the importance of peritext. Through a brief exploration of paratext’s history in both literature and games, this chapter will reveal a need for deeper analysis within video game studies. Focusing on in-game, in-system and in-world types of paratexts this paper will attempt to formalise the unaddressed issue of paratext in video games.

INTRODUCTION

Paratext in video games has been, more or less, a succinct byword for the extension of narrative beyond the players’ experience of games. Paratext is broadly considered to be the elements which surround a text¹, but are not part of it. In a book this might be the composition of chapters, or paragraphs, or something as unique as the typeface. This is only one part of paratext. Paratext can also be expanded to include efforts to advertise a text, in interviews, posters, trailers, and word of mouth. All of these examples are a form of paratext, but video game scholarship has tended to focus on the later, the epitextual (external influences to the text), rather than the former, peritextual (internal influences to the text), in their use of the term. This development of paratext, while it can be understood historically as a development out of media studies, is not an accurate representation of “what paratext is” within literature. As such, the current representation of paratext only displays one possibility out of many for the use of paratext within video games. As paratext can be applied to texts, video games can also be considered as a form of text. The text being the notion of gameplay or narrative, not just purely the idea of a narrative. This chapter highlights what paratext can do to further video game studies, specifically in relation to a textual analysis.

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Paratext, in regards to its earlier form in literature, can provide game scholars with a wider scope to analyze and present elements that target reader and game character; its structure and diegesis (within the story); and its system mechanics that directly and indirectly affect the playing of a game. While these elements are present within games (saving, loading, cut-scenes, menus, etc.), they are rarely discussed in a manner that deals with both their importance and their overall effect on the appreciation of the game. Paratext fills this in-between status looking at elements that both help structure the game, but also provide a better enjoyment of the game. Games scholarship occasionally delves into discussion related to paratext, but rarely intentionally – as often good paratext achieves its goals without drawing attention to itself. As such, there is an inherent need to look at these elements to better analyze and design video games.

This chapter is divided into two sections. The first section discusses the history of paratext within the context of literature, media and video game studies. The second section provides a re-definition of paratext which will be introduced through applying Genette’s theory to video games.

Through providing a history of the term paratext an overview of the concept can be developed. This focuses on Gérard Genette’s definition of the term in literature, in relation to his notion of paratext as being made up of two parts: peritext and epitext. From there, the chapter explores the differences in the term’s use from literature to media and video game studies, focusing on theorists such as Mia Consalvo and Peter Lunenfeld. To counter these prominent viewpoints within the field, there will be a comparison with the word’s use through David Jara’s work, who argues for a return to Genette’s original notion of paratext.

The re-definition of paratext applies these prior works, with an emphasis on peritextual analysis, to video games. This model focuses on three distinct areas within video games where paratext can be discovered: in-game, in-system, and in-world. These areas, while not all encompassing, provide some direction as to how to view games with a paratextual analysis. This re-definition is not just concerned to what Genette’s work suggests, but also addresses a need within game studies for a tool which deals with this in-between area of structure and text.

The last section of this chapter will discuss the uses of this peritextual approach, and how it situates itself with the already prominent epitextual use of paratext that currently dominates the field. It is the hope of this chapter to clearly show the need for a peritextual focused paratext within the pre-existing literature.

**HISTORY OF PARATEXT**

**Literary Paratext**

The term, paratext originally came from Gérard Genette in his early text *Introduction à l’architexte* (1979) and then elaborated upon in *Paratexts. Thresholds of Interpretation* (1997). In both, Genette demarcates the types of textual relationships that books and other types of media have in relation with each other. Originally slated as a further explanation of transtextuality with intertextual, hypertextual, and hypotextual relationships, Genette quickly focuses upon the individual text as a topic worth discussing. In particular Genette’s discussion focuses on the relationships at work within the individual text itself, leading to the development of paratext. This concept deals with the relationship of the structuring or physical elements that make up the text, and the text itself. An idea that “make[s] present, to ensure