Chapter 16

“Footage Not Representative”: Redefining Paratextuality for the Analysis of Official Communication in the Video Game Industry

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ABSTRACT

This chapter provides a revised framework of paratextuality which deals with some of the limitations of Gérard Genette’s (1997b) concept while keeping its focus on the relationship between a text and socio-historical reality. The updated notion of paratextuality draws upon Alexander R. Galloway’s (2012) work on the interface effect. The proposed revision is explained in a broader context of intertextuality and textual transcendence. Regarding Genette’s terminology, this chapter rejects the constrictive notion of a paratext and stresses that paratextuality is first and foremost a relationship, not a textual category. The new framework is then put to the test using four sample genres of official video game communication – trailers, infographics, official websites of video games and patch notes.

INTRODUCTION

The concepts of paratexts and paratextuality are not new to the area of game studies (Carter, 2015; Consalvo, 2007; Harper, 2014; Jara, 2013; Jones, 2008; Paul, 2010, 2011; Payne, 2012; Rockenberger, 2014). Still, their implementation and use has been rather nonsystematic, taking bits and pieces from Gérard Genette’s (1997b) framework and combining it with different approaches to paratextuality (Jara, 2013; Rockenberger, 2014; Wolf, 2006) or intertextuality in general. Considering the vast number of promotional and technical texts circulated by the video game industry and the recent emergence of transmedia storytelling techniques, it seems even more urgent to appropriate the fairly medium-specific framework of paratexts to an ecosystem of a different medium.

Many scholars have already noted the importance of paratexts and ancillary texts in both the traditional media industries, such as film and TV (Gray, 2010), and in new media. Peter Lunenfeld in 1999 already

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suggested that the new media paratexts were becoming more important than the main texts themselves, arguing that digital media blur the traditional distinction between content and packaging because they effectively consist of the same data: “In addition, the backstory – the information about how a narrative object comes into being is fast becoming almost as important as that object itself. For a vast percentage of new media titles, backstories are probably more interesting, in fact, than the narratives themselves.” (Lunenfeld, 1999, p. 14) Regardless of this power relationship between texts and paratexts in general, video game publishers also seem to be crossing the traditional boundaries between the texts and their surrounding promotional activities. The fictional worlds of video games are expanded through various means – from tie-in novels, board games, trailers or by website presentations – while these same means ground the text(s) in the historical condition and establish a conversation between the text, the producers and the audience.

Due to this simplifying division between main texts and paratexts this chapter goes further and provides an updated framework of paratextuality. In addition, the exploratory part of the chapter will then focus on paratextuality of four specific types (or genres) of video game culture: trailers, infographics, official websites and patch notes. This selection does not strive to paint an exhaustive image of video game paratextuality. Its goal is rather to demonstrate the variety of paratextual relationships regarding the specific topics such as representativity or ephemerality, but also to account for different levels of multimodality and different stages of a video game’s life cycle.

BACKGROUND: PARATEXTUALITY REVISITED AND REVISED

The term paratext is closely connected to two key topics of literary theory that have since been picked up by many other scholarly fields (game studies included) – intertextuality and reception. In order to update and revise the concept of paratextuality, it is first necessary to understand its role regarding the two aforementioned concepts.

Paratextuality in game studies is most often conceptualized as a system of relationships between the main texts – video games – and surrounding texts. However, the traditional hierarchy between texts and paratexts is often contested by many scholars who argue that paratexts are not peripheral, but central to gameplay experience (Carter, 2015; Consalvo, 2007; Harper, 2014). Still, many applications of Genette’s concept overlook its role within the broader context of intertextuality. Before moving on, it is important to note that the Genettian umbrella term transtextuality (or textual transcendence) closely corresponds to broad definitions of intertextuality used by Julia Kristeva (1985), Michael Riffaterre (1984) or Linda Hutcheon (2012). The difference between these notions of textual relationships is mostly terminological. Genette uses a more restrictive version of intertextuality that accounts only for presence of one text within another, albeit not necessarily explicit or declared. Paratextuality, as it is defined by Genette (1997a), is just one of five relationships between texts and cannot be fully understood without the others.

Apart from intertextuality and paratextuality, Genette (1997a) distinguishes three more relationships. It is necessary to understand all of them, to elaborate on the position of paratextuality within the greater debate on intertextuality. The third relationship – metatextuality – is that of a critical commentary. While reviews come first to mind when speaking about metatextuality, Genette acknowledges the existence of less obvious commentaries that do not require citing the main text or even naming it at all. Hypertextuality is another relationship that creates slight terminological confusion because it is in no way connected to Ted Nelson’s (1992) notion of textual organization. Instead, Genette uses the prefix