Paratext: a more interactive movement

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines paratext as an active element of video games. Through a brief exploration of paratext's history in both literature and games, this paper will reveal a need for closer analysis in video game studies. Focusing on In-game, In-system and In-world types of paratexts this paper will attempt to formalise the under-addressed issue of paratext in video games.

Keywords

paratext, meta-narrative, Genette

INTRODUCTION

Paratext can be defined as the features that surround a text, yet are not recognised as part of it. Gérard Genette formalises this concept by defining parataxt as that which presents the text or "make[s] present, to ensure the text's presence in the world…" (Genette, 1991). These features can include font, imagery, publisher information, blurbs, and additional academic tools (such as an index or footnotes), as long as it originates from the writer or publisher. Genette (1997) separates paratext into two sections: peritext, that which pertains to and of the text itself, and epitext that which is external to the text but still originating from a writer or publisher (interviews or marketing). Any aspect of production which cannot be considered part of the main text but which shapes the reader's perception of what the text is considered to be paratext. This concept of paratext extends beyond literature, and can also be seen in videogames.

Video game paratext occurs much the same way as paratext does in literature, except to a much more complex degree due to its multimedia representation (making use of sound, in-game graphics, and physical appearance, as well as in the code level of a game). One example of this is in the installation of a PC game – this mechanical step is often required to play a video game but is not part of it and as such is considered to be paratext. Traditionally this step is perceived as simply a preparation for the playing of a game, and only minutely seen as influencing player perception of the game. However video games such as Red Alert 2 and Crimson Skies, use these paratextual elements to provide players with backstory to the game. Another example is loading screens in-game, which are used to convey reminders to players, while preparing a level. Both Spec Ops: The Line and FarCry 3, uses this to point out player-avatar relationships, driving at a greater moral

theme. Although these paratextual elements are not directly part of the game (in a traditional diegetic sense), they still affect its presentation.

These sorts of video game paratexts are rarely mentioned or even recognised as such in games scholarship. Papers such as the discussion of agency in Bioshock with its incorporation of objectives (Tulloch), or Jordan Mercher discussing the narrative choices of Sands of Time (Harrigan) only hint at the potential for peritext based paratext, and never directly discuss it. Mia Consalvo's "Cheating: Gaining advantage in videogames," introduces the idea of paratext within game studies but does so by purely focusing on the epitext aspect of paratext and furthermore conflates it with Genette's idea of intertextuality. Consavlo uses any external text that refers to a central text (those not of the author or publisher's intent), as an explanation of Genette's paratext. Since many of these external texts aren't dependent, or rather independent enough, to be read by themselves, this falls into a different category of relational texts, intertextuality. Intertextuality, from Genette's "Palimpsests," is the relationship between two or more texts, evidenced by the referencing of one text in another. This makes paratext, if at all present, mostly an abstraction of an epitext focused approach – pushing paratext from that which exists on the fringes of the text towards the call and response of critics, reviews, franchising and audience interaction (an idea akin to Henry Jenkin's idea of convergence).

David Jara, in "A Closer Look at the (Rule-) Books: Framing and Paratexts in Tabletop Role-playing Games," offers a rare example of an interaction with Genette's notion of paratext, and address Consalvo's oversight through Werner Wolf's framing techniques. This places the idea of paratext back to a peritext approach. Unfortunately this interpretation of paratext seems to be the exception, instead of the rule within game studies.

After establishing some of the history and failures of previous investigation of video game paratext, this presentation will attempt to formalise the different incorporations of paratext from in-game, in-system, and in-world perspectives. It will show examples of the different types of paratext for each. With in-game paratext the focus is on the surrounding support for a game (menus, system mechanics, videos, commentaries, loading bars), which are not direct elements of gameplay (core to player control). With in-system paratext, the elements are considered to be those restricted to the process of accessing the game on a system (game files, installation). With in-world paratext the physical interaction with video games will be examined (disks, box, manual, figurines, and maps). Each of these categories relate to the main "text" in different ways but each are paratext, and influence in some way how players interact with games. As research into this area grows, the complexity of players' interaction with games will be seen as not just playing the game, but a player's entire interaction with the central text.

BIO

Daniel Dunne is a current research student at the Swinburne University of Technology, completing his PhD in "Narrative structures in Video Games." Previously he has completed a minor thesis on "Interactivity and Narrative: the role of a videogame writer," for his honours year at the University of Melbourne. He hopes that through his research new and alternative methods of creating narrative, specifically in video games, can be developed.

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