

Benjamin Beil,  
Gundolf S. Freyermuth,  
Hanns Christian Schmidt (eds.)

# Paratextualizing Games

Investigations on the Paraphernalia  
and Peripheries of Play



[transcript] Studies of Digital Media Culture

Benjamin Beil, Gundolf S. Freyermuth, Hanns Christian Schmidt (eds.)  
Paratextualizing Games

## Editorial

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**[transcript]**



This publication was made available via Open Access within the framework of the funding project 16TOA002 with funds from the German Federal Ministry of Education and Research.

### **Bibliographic information published by the Deutsche Nationalbibliothek**

The Deutsche Nationalbibliothek lists this publication in the Deutsche Nationalbibliografie; detailed bibliographic data are available in the Internet at <http://dnb.d-nb.de>



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### **First published in 2021 by transcript Verlag, Bielefeld**

© Benjamin Beil, Gundolf S. Freyermuth, Hanns Christian Schmidt (eds.)

Cover design: Kordula Röckenhaus, Bielefeld

Cover illustration: From "Tiny Bookshop" by Raven Rusch and David Wildemann

Printed by Majuskel Medienproduktion GmbH, Wetzlar

Print-ISBN 978-3-8376-5421-9

PDF-ISBN 978-3-8394-5421-3

EPUB-ISBN 978-3-7328-5421-9

<https://doi.org/10.14361/9783839454213>

ISSN of series: 2702-8240

eISSN of series: 2702-8259

Printed on permanent acid-free text paper.

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## Preface and Acknowledgements

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BENJAMIN BEIL, GUNDOLF S. FREYERMUTH,

HANNS CHRISTIAN SCHMIDT

The fact that new communication media have always produced new possibilities for cultural evaluation, analysis, and participation is particularly true of digital games. In recent years, video games have found a wide variety of new thresholds that lead to novel paths for us to approach them. Gaming no longer only takes place as a ‘closed interactive experience’ in front of TV screens or PC monitors at home (or at work), but also as broadcast on video-sharing and streaming platforms or as cultural events in exhibition centers and e-sport arenas. The development and popularization of new technologies, forms of expression, and online services—from Let’s Play videos to live streams, from video essays to podcasts—has a considerable influence on the academic and journalistic as well as on the popular discourse about games.

In 2015, Ian Bogost asked: How to talk about video games?<sup>1</sup> To further investigate and to expand upon this question was the idea of our Game Studies Summit that took place at the Cologne Game Lab of TH Köln in November 2019 as part of the tenth *Clash of Realities—International Conference on the Art, Technology, and Theory of Digital Games*. At that time, we did not just want to ask which paratexts gaming cultures have produced, i.e., in which forms and formats and through which channels we talk (and write) about games. We have also dealt with questions like: How do paratexts

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1 Bogost, Ian: *How to Talk about Videogames*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press 2015.

influence the development of games? How is knowledge about games generated today, and how do boundaries between (popular) criticism, journalism, and scholarship have started to blur? How do new forms of communicating about games affect the medium of the game itself? In short: How does the paratext change the text?

This anthology attempts to provide some answers to this question. It documents the lectures given at this summit and adds further perspectives and contributions, collecting various analyses of new forms of paratexts, their relationship to games and gaming culture as well as more theoretical work on the concept itself.

In the introductory essay “Paratext | Paraplay. Contextualizing the Concept of Paratextuality,” Gundolf S. Freyermuth outlines the cultural and media technological conditions of the concept of paratextuality in three chapters. He explores the emergence of modern text culture, the development of modern audiovisuality, and the rise of digitalization, resulting not only in a multitude of new paratextual forms but also new ways of dealing with games that transcend regular playing—paraplay.<sup>2</sup> After that, the contributions are divided into three major areas: “Histories,” “Performances,” and “Peripheries.” An overview of the individual contributions to these three parts, their highly diverse topics, methodological approaches, and insights, can be found at the end of the introductory essay.<sup>3</sup>

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This anthology would not have been possible without the hard work of many people and the support of several sponsors. The *Clash of Realities* conference was planned by a Program Board chaired by Björn Bartholdy and Gundolf S. Freyermuth of the Cologne Game Lab (CGL). Cooperating institutions were the Institute for Media Research and Media Pedagogy of TH Köln, the ifs—internationale filmschule köln, and the Institute for Media Culture and Theater of the University of Cologne. The conference was financed through the generous support of TH Köln, Film und Medien Stiftung NRW, the State

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2 In this volume pp. 13-52.

3 In this volume pp. 42-46.

Chancellery of North Rhine-Westphalia, the City of Cologne, and Electronic Arts Germany. Our sincerest thanks go to these institutions and companies.

Both, the Game Studies Summit “Paratextualizing Games” and this volume, were planned and organized by Benjamin Beil, Gundolf S. Freyermuth, and Hanns Christian Schmidt. The summit owes much of its success to the extraordinary staff of the *Clash of Realities* conference, in particular, Judith Abend, Rüdiger Brandis, Sebastian Felzmann, Alexandra Hühner, Tobias Lemme, Judith Ruzicka, Su-Jin Song, and the many members of CGL student support groups as well as Mathias Mehr (CGL) who provided technical assistance. The present volume was tirelessly layouted by Raven Rusch. We thank them all for their extraordinary help!

We owe the deepest debt and gratitude, however, to the speakers and presenters who came to Cologne from all over the world, as well as to the authors who wrote additional contributions. Last but not least, we would like to thank the TH Köln for supporting this publication.





# Paratext | Paraplay

## Contextualizing the Concept of Paratextuality

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GUNDOLF S. FREYERMUTH

The term paratextuality is a little over three decades old. French literary scholar Gérard Genette introduced the concept in the late 1980s as part of his exploration of phenomena that transcend single texts, i.e., varieties of transtextuality. “Architextuality,” he called the relations of a text to cross-textual categories such as literary genres or linguistic styles (1979);<sup>1</sup> “palimpsestuality,” the relations of a text to older texts that precede it (1982);<sup>2</sup> and “paratextuality,” the relations of a text to other external texts that frame it, and thus prefigure and co-constitute its meaning (1987).<sup>3</sup> In addition, Genette differentiated between paratexts close to the text and paratexts further away from the text. The former—from the author’s name to the preface to the blurb—he called peritexts. The latter—from advertising materials to author interviews and reviews to academic studies—he called epitexts.

Genette’s concept of paratextuality gained influence not only in literary studies. In the past quarter-century, film studies, game studies, and media studies adopted and adapted it. In this introductory essay, I will investigate the causes and circumstances of Genettes’ ‘discovery’ of the paratextual, i.e.,

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- 1 Genette, Gérard: *The Architext: an Introduction*, Berkeley: University of California Press 1992 (\*1979).
  - 2 Genette, Gérard: *Palimpsests: Literature in the Second Degree*, Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press 1997 (\*1982).
  - 3 Genette, Gérard: *Paratexts: Thresholds of Interpretation*, Cambridge; New York, NY: Cambridge University Press 1997 (\*1987).

the historical index of his theoretical concept, in order to explore whether and how it can be appropriated for digital media and games in particular.

At first glance, the sudden visibility of paratextual practices in the 1980s is reminiscent of the discovery of mediality, which occurred only three decades earlier.<sup>4</sup> Of course, media for cataloging possessions and outstanding debts, codifying religious and secular laws, expressing individual thoughts and feelings, and communicating and playing with one another mark the beginnings of human culture. However, while the growing number of media were put to practical use for millennia, their existence remained mainly invisible to theoretical reflection. Even the advanced philosophical-aesthetic theories of the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries were hardly aware that we are culturally not only dealing with artistic-playful practices and their aesthetic results—with literature, painting, music, theater, ball, board, and card games, and so on. What was missing was an understanding and, above all, a term for the fact that these practices were based on various means of mediation—media—which correlated in their form and performance with the changing state of technology. Only in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, especially in Walter Benjamin's examination of the new 'arts' of photography and film,<sup>5</sup> do we find the beginnings of a new perspective. It looks beyond the individual arts and recognizes the media available to society for both artistic and non-artistic forms of documentation, communication, expression, and play. The explicit discovery of the media and the first fundamental analyses of their qualities and functions then came to Marshall McLuhan in the 1950s and 1960s,<sup>6</sup>

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4 Cf. Freyermuth, Gundolf S.: "Thesen zu einer Theorie der Transmedialität," in: *Intermedialität // Transmedialität. Figurationen* 02/07 2, no. 8 (2007), pp. 104-117, here pp. 105-106.

5 Benjamin, Walter: "Short History of Photography," in: *Artforum*, February, 1977 (\*1931), <https://www.artforum.com/print/197702/walter-benjamin-s-short-history-of-photography-36010>; Benjamin, Walter: "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," in: *Illuminations. Essays and Reflections. Edited and With an Introduction by Hannah Arendt. Preface by Leon Wieseltier*, New York: Schocken Books 2007, pp. 217-252.

6 McLuhan, Marshall: *The Gutenberg Galaxy: The Making of Typographic Man*, Toronto: University of Toronto Press 1962; McLuhan, Marshall: *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man*, Berkeley: Gingko Press (Kindle Edition) 2013 (\*1964).

stimulated essentially by the experience of the ‘new’ electronic broadcasting technology of radio and television that, with all their conceptual demands, could no longer be subsumed under the arts.

Paratexts have an equally long history of invisibility. They, too, have existed since the beginnings of culture, precisely since there have been texts and images, and their function and effects have likewise remained largely unreflected. So why was it possible to recognize the function and effect of paratextuality—only—towards the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century? And which pre-conditions made it possible to transfer the literary concept, with minor modifications, to other media and especially to the audiovisual media of film and games?

I will explore this question in three steps. In the first chapter, I outline the main path that led to the formation of the modern text culture—the so-called “Gutenberg Galaxy”<sup>7</sup>—and, in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, to the poststructuralist “pan-textualism which reads the entire fabric of nature and culture as a network of signs.”<sup>8</sup> The chapter will trail this path from the pre-modern book religions, which constructed their authority around sacred scriptures, but were based on paratextuality in their everyday performance, to the establishment of secular literacy. It set in with the Renaissance and initiated a cultural turn from paratexts to the texts themselves through the new technology of printing. The implementation of this central element of the Gutenberg Galaxy—standardized textuality based on individual authorship—ultimately instigated the Enlightenment and industrialization that escalated literacy and the textualization of knowledge in all areas of life. Industrial mass media not only produced a variety of wholly new texts and paratexts but also undermined individual authorship and laid the technological foundation for the digital deconstruction of analog book culture. In this context—at the apex and tipping point of the Gutenberg Galaxy—the omnipresence of transtextuality and specifically paratextuality suddenly became visible (*I The Texts That Mean the World: Read!*).

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7 M. McLuhan: *The Gutenberg Galaxy*.

8 Mitchell, W.J.T.: “‘Critical Inquiry’ and the Ideology of Pluralism,” in: *Critical Inquiry*, Vol. 8, No. 4, Summer 1982, pp. 609-618, here p. 617. See also White, Hayden: “Historical Pluralism,” in: *Critical Inquiry*, Vol. 12, No. 3, Spring 1986, pp. 480-493.

In the second chapter, I follow another—the other—path to modern textuality. As McLuhan explicated, painting, theater, photography, and film contributed essentially to the Gutenberg Galaxy via the homogenization of perspectival image space. My second historical review strives to demonstrate the development of modern audiovisuality between Renaissance and post-modernism and, in its context, the rise of the two main variants of playfulness—mimetic representation and sporting competition. In particular, the process of industrialization set in motion a medial audiovisualization that created not only a multitude of new paratextual forms of representation and expression. Further results were the implementation of collective authorship with divided responsibilities and a cultural reevaluation of the playful, which began in the early days of digital technology and work. Thus, parallel to the modern dominance and democratization of writing, visual and playful audiovisual ‘textualities’ emerged. Since the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century, they contributed to the demise of the analog book—text—culture and to the process of cultural ludification (*II The Audiovisions That Mean the World: Watch!*).

In the third and last chapter, the historical account leads, with a focus on digitalization and digital games, to the exposition of four significant changes in the production and reception of texts and paratexts as well as in their relations to each other: the emergence of a new digital textuality that is software-based, generative, transmedial, and open, i.e., transtextual; the democratization of audiovisual textual and paratextual production; the formation of distributed authorship, and, above all, the enablement of new ways of dealing with games that transcend regular playing and are to be understood as paraplay or paragaming (*III The Games That Mean the World: Play!*).<sup>9</sup>

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9 Some of the ideas I present in this introductory essay on paratextuality I have already developed in previous publications and other contexts, notably on the evolution of the modern image space in Freyermuth, Gundolf S.: “From Analog to Digital Image Space: Towards a Historical Theory of Immersion,” in: Dogramaci, Burcu/Liptay, Fabienne (eds.), *Immersion in the Arts and Media*, Amsterdam: Rodopi 2015, pp. 165-203. And on the construction and deconstruction of authorship in the modern era in: Freyermuth, Gundolf S.: “Wolfgang Menge: Authentizität und Autorschaft. Fragmente einer bundesdeutschen Medienbiographie,” in: Freyermuth, Gundolf S./Gotto, Lisa (eds.), *Der Televisionär: Wolfgang Menges transmediales Werk: Kritische und dokumentarische Perspektiven*, Bielefeld: transcript 2016, pp. 19-214; Freyermuth, Gundolf S.: “Transmedia. Twelve

A summary concludes the historical survey, followed by an outlook on the contributions of this volume.

## I THE TEXTS THAT MEAN THE WORLD: READ!

No paratexts without texts. But what is a text? The extended poststructuralist concept transcends the written word and includes all ‘woven’ units of immaterial or material signs that carry and convey meaning(s); thus, in addition to the written word, also the auditory, visual, and audiovisual media. In this sense, the origin of all texts lies in the cognitive revolution tens of thousands of years ago. ‘Big History’ or macrohistory, the investigation of developments over very long periods, teaches us that since our species acquired language, we have the unique “ability to transmit information about things that do not exist at all.”<sup>10</sup> From an evolutionary perspective, the creation of collective fictions such as religions, currencies, or nations, and the weaving of texts around them, usually in the form of stories—experienced as well as invented—serves to organize individuals into cooperative units. “All large-scale human cooperation is ultimately based on our belief in imagined orders.”<sup>11</sup> Yuval Noah Harari, therefore, refers to fiction as “the most powerful force on earth.”<sup>12</sup> The social and individual functions of fictional narrative texts correspond to the evolutionary one. They shape images of the world and humanity. Epochal “grand narratives”<sup>13</sup>—like capitalism, democracy,

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Postulates,” in: Clash of Realities (eds.), *Clash of Realities 2015/16: On the Art, Technology and Theory of Digital Games. Proceedings of the 6<sup>th</sup> and 7<sup>th</sup> Conference*, Bielefeld: transcript, 2016, pp. 97-126.

10 Harari, Yuval N.: *Sapiens: A Brief History of Humankind*, New York: Harper 2015, p. 24.

11 Harari, Yuval N.: *Homo Deus: A Brief History of Tomorrow*, Kindle ed., New York, NY: Harper 2017, loc. 2601. See also Y. Harari: *Sapiens*, p. 25.: “Sapiens can cooperate in extremely flexible ways with countless numbers of strangers.”

12 Y. Harari: *Homo Deus*, loc. 2742.

13 Lyotard, Jean-François: *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press 1984 (\*1979).

Enlightenment—and “consensus narratives”<sup>14</sup>—culturally accepted contexts of meaning that are effective in the present—create cohesion in collectives by communicating norms, values, orientation knowledge, and significance of life to individuals.<sup>15</sup>

A major increase in the ability to tell stories across time and space to an ever-greater number of people came about 5000 years ago with the invention of media systems for writing them down—the birth of text in the narrower sense. “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God,” proclaims the Gospel of John. However, from Roman antiquity through the Christian Middle Ages to modern time, this “word” developed a large part of its power as scripture. In this, Christianity was no exception. Dozens of religions, from Judaism to Islam, codified their fictions in holy books.<sup>16</sup> Thus, textualization became established in advanced civilizations. The intersubjective perception of the world and accepted action in it as well as individual foundations of meaning were based on writings. The so-called “book religions” prefigured the modern “Gutenberg Galaxy,” at least among the ruling and administrative elites, for they “increasingly saw reality through the medium of written texts.”<sup>17</sup> The majority of contemporaries, however, were not literate. The broad impact of scripture-based religions up to the industrial era was primarily due to paratextual popularizations—oral sermons, song texts to be memorized, iconographic representations, vernacular interpretations and commentaries, and so on.

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14 The term was coined by David Thorburn and popularized by Bruce Sterling. Cf. Thorburn, David: “Television as an Aesthetic Medium,” in: *Critical Studies in Mass Communication* 4 (1987), pp. 161-173; [http://web.mit.edu/thorburn/www/publications/Thorburn\\_TelevisionAsAestheticMedium.pdf](http://web.mit.edu/thorburn/www/publications/Thorburn_TelevisionAsAestheticMedium.pdf); Sterling, Bruce: *Zeitgeist*, New York: Bantam Books 2000.

15 See for example Paul Ricoeur’s theory of narrative identity: Ricoeur, Paul: “Life in the Quest of Narrative,” in: Wood, David (ed.), *On Paul Ricoeur: Narrative and Interpretation*, London/New York: Routledge 1991, pp. 20-33; P. Ricoeur: “Narrative Identity,” in: *ibid.*, pp. 188-199.

16 Cf. Lang, Bernhard: “Buchreligion,” in: Cancik, Hubert/Gladigow, Burkhard/Laubscher, Matthias Samuel (eds.), *Handbuch religionswissenschaftlicher Grundbegriffe*, Stuttgart: Kohlhammer 1990, pp. 143-165.

17 Y. Harari: *Homo Deus*, loc. 2892.

The beginning of a cultural turn from paratexts to the sacred texts themselves and to ‘original’ texts in general dates to the early modern period. Two innovations initiated it: the invention of letterpress printing and the translation of the Bible. The first book that Gutenberg reproduced in 1455 was the Bible, albeit still in Latin. The higher accessibility through the transition from single handwritten copies to multi-digit print runs laid the foundation for Martin Luther’s effort 90 years later: After centuries of primarily paratextual Christianity, his translation of the Bible into the vernacular opened up the Holy Scriptures to direct reading.

Both innovations, however, did not—only—have the desired effects. On the one hand, the printed book became a central metaphor for understanding the world. The Christian Middle Ages had already looked at nature as a text written by God’s hand, which humankind had to learn to read alongside the Bible.<sup>18</sup> With the increased distribution of printed volumes, people now also understood the social world as a book and began, for example, to read their counterparts in everyday life, ideally like an open book. On the other hand—and more importantly—the printing of books not only increased the distribution of Bibles and other religious and secular writings. As a medium, the texts of letterpress printing, standardized in typeface, created, as McLuhan stated in the subtitle of his classic study on the birth of the modern world, a new social character, the “typographic man.”<sup>19</sup> The emerging modern consciousness characterized homogenization and secularity. The experience of visual standardization—in the printed typeface as well as in the more and more perspectival image spaces<sup>20</sup>—resulted in more ‘realistic’ views, ideas, and novel ways of thinking. Printing brought about new ‘intersubjective fictions’ and ‘grand narratives.’ To its formative power, McLuhan attributes, among other things, the rise and imposition of Protestantism, capitalism, nationalism, and rationalism. The latter led to the scientific revolution and the Enlightenment, with the book as its central medium.

The process of secularization combined the focus on printed texts (and paratexts) with that on their authors. This perspective, too, was new. In pre-

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18 Konrad von Megenberg wrote his *Book of Nature* around 1350. It was first printed in 1475: Megenberg, Konrad von: *Buch der Natur*, Augsburg: Johann Bäumler 1475.

19 M. McLuhan: *The Gutenberg Galaxy*.

20 See chapter II.



modern times, the manual production of media—texts, images, sounds—was by no means necessarily linked to individual persons and their talents. The term author,<sup>21</sup> like authority,<sup>22</sup> derives from the Latin ‘augere,’ meaning ‘to make’ and ‘to increase.’ In the Christian Middle Ages, however, only God was thought to be able to create. Human writers—in English they were called authors only since the late 14<sup>th</sup> century<sup>23</sup>—increased God’s fame rarely by their own, original contributions. They concentrated on paratextual activities: copying, compiling, publishing, collecting. Moreover, as part of ecclesiastical and secular institutions, the writers of most texts worked in collectives and remained anonymous. The identifiable individual author as an aesthetic ideal is a cultural construct of the modern era.

Both as a social phenomenon and legal construction, authorship is closely linked to the individualization processes of the Renaissance and the new media technology of printing. “Print is the technology of individualism,” McLuhan states.<sup>24</sup> The first foundations for the rationale of the economic value of medial creations were laid in the 17<sup>th</sup> century by John Locke’s theory of individual property. Applying these ideas to intellectual and artistic work, the

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21 See [22 See \[23 See footnote 21.\]\(https://www.etymonline.com/word/authority?ref=etymonline\_crossreference:c. 1200, autorite, auctorite ‘authoritative passage or statement, book or quotation that settles an argument, passage from Scripture,’ from Old French autorité, auctorité ‘authority, prestige, right, permission, dignity, gravity; the Scriptures’ \(12c.; Modern French autorité\), from Latin auctoritatem \(nominative auctoritas\) ‘invention, advice, opinion, influence, command,’ from auctor ‘master, leader, author’ \(see author \(n.\)\).”</a></p>
</div>
<div data-bbox=\)](http://www.etymonline.com/index.php?term=author&allowed_in_frame=0:mid-14c., auctor, autour, autor ‘father, creator, one who brings about, one who makes or creates’ someone or something, from Old French auctor, acteor ‘author, originator, creator, instigator’ (12c., Modern French auteur) and directly from Latin auctor ‘promoter, producer, father, progenitor; builder, founder; trustworthy writer, authority; historian; performer, doer; responsible person, teacher,’ literally ‘one who causes to grow,’ agent noun from auctus, past participle of augere ‘to increase,’ [...] From late 14c. as ‘a writer, one who sets forth written statements, original composer of a writing’ (as distinguished from a compiler, translator, copyist, etc.).”</p>
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24 M. McLuhan: *The Gutenberg Galaxy*, p. 158.

British “Statute of Anne” (1710) codified the Anglo-Saxon—publisher-centered—copyright. Seventy-five years later, at the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, Immanuel Kant established the idea of originaive authorship in his theory of individual creativity.<sup>25</sup> From it, property rights could be derived. Only a little later, the Constitution of the United States (1790) and legislation of the French Revolution (1791) institutionalized author’s rights. After 1800, they became the standard in most countries. A cultural idolization of individual creativity that began with Romanticism’s ‘cult of the genius’ accompanied this legal protection. In the art religions of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, authors assumed the position of God.

Parallel to these developments in high culture, however, industrialization gave rise to mass culture and mass education. The former largely eliminated the freedoms of individual authorship in favor of standardized production, a process that Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno later called the rise of the “culture industry.”<sup>26</sup> Following the invention of the steam press at the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and the introduction of wood paper around the middle of the century, the mass press marked the beginning of industrial media production. With it, new paratextual genres emerged, such as the (short) review, the (author’s) portrait, or the (author’s) interview. Since newspapers and magazines were either tied to political parties or aimed at increasing circulation through entertainment and editors edited all contributions to make them suitable, the mass press offered little freedom to individual authorship. Moreover, since the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, the new industrial media of film, radio, and television’s technological modes of production prevented individual authorship. The practical reality of mass media thus institutionalized collective authorship based on the division of labor, beyond the existing legal framework and contrary to the culturally prevailing values and prejudices. Mass education, in turn, successively replaced oral and mostly narrative instruction with more abstract written accounts. A growing number of social spheres previously based on personal communication, on master-apprentice relationships, on direct interaction between teachers and learners, became

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25 Kant, Emanuel (sic!): “Of the Injustice of Reprinting Books,” in: *Essays and Treatises on Moral, Political, and Various Philosophical Subjects*, ed. Emanuel (sic!) Kant, London: William Richardson 1798 (\*1785), pp. 225-239.

26 Horkheimer, Max and Theodor W. Adorno: *Dialectic of Enlightenment: Philosophical Fragments*, Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press 2002.

textualized and thus part of the “Gutenberg Galaxy,” the “visual homogenizing of experience of print culture, and the relegation of auditory and other sensuous complexity to the background.”<sup>27</sup>

Theoretical reflection reacted to these (mass) cultural changes by, on the one hand, questioning the central role of individual authorship and, on the other, inferring from increasing textualization the text-like structuring of culture itself. Both insights have their origins in the Russian and Czech formalism of the 1920s and 1930s, especially in the works of Mikhail Bakhtin and Roman Jakobson. After a detour via the exile of Jakobson and Claude Levi-Strauss in the US, these ideas gained broad impact in French postwar structuralism and poststructuralism.<sup>28</sup> Also, Walter Benjamin, already during his pre-war exile in Paris, recognized “that we are in the midst of a mighty recasting of literary forms [...]”<sup>29</sup> In 1934, in an address that he probably never gave, “The Author as Producer,” he noted that the reader as an expert in his profession “gains access to authorship. Work itself has its turn to speak.”<sup>30</sup> This change, Benjamin predicted, “revises even the distinction between author and reader.”<sup>31</sup> For him, the empowerment of readers to become writers decisively included the reevaluation of paratextual activities:

“There were not always novels in the past, and there will not always have to be; there have not always been tragedies or great epics. Not always were the forms of commentary, translation, indeed even so-called plagiarism playthings in the margins of literature [...]”<sup>32</sup>

Another insight, which was to reveal itself half a century later, was constitutive for the ‘discovery’ of paratextuality: Umberto Eco’s theorem, published in 1962, of the closed (art) work’s end and the ensuing end of the dominance

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27 M. McLuhan: *The Gutenberg Galaxy*, p. 124.

28 Sylke Rene Meyer analyzes this process in her forthcoming doctoral thesis *The Unintentional Storyteller* at the University of Cologne.

29 Benjamin, Walter: “The Author as Producer,” in: Jennings, Michael W./Eiland, Howard/ Smith, Gary (eds.), *Selected Writings*, Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press 1999, pp. 768-782, here p. 771.

30 Ibid.

31 Ibid., p. 772.

32 Ibid., p. 771.

of authorship over the form and reception of texts.<sup>33</sup> Eco's seminal work escalated the deconstruction of the culturally dominant notions of authorship and unity of artworks. At the same time, artistic experiments aimed at reducing the role of the author and opening up works to freer modes of reception. For example, writers Raymond Queneau and Francois Le Lionnais founded *Oulipo*, a "workshop for potential literature," in 1960.<sup>34</sup> Its central goal was to limit authorial freedom through formal constraints. And in 1961, Marc Saporta published his *Composition No. 1*, consisting of 150 unnumbered pages delivered in a box to be read in any order without direction from the author.<sup>35</sup> The cultural turning point then came at the end of the 1960s with the complete negation of individual authorship. Eight decades after Nietzsche's dictum that God was dead, killed by the Enlightenment, which had replaced God with the creating individual—the author—, Roland Barthes and Michel Foucault now proclaimed the "death of the author": Barthes in favor of the recipients,<sup>36</sup> Foucault in favor of cultural discourses.<sup>37</sup>

The abandonment of the concept of individual authorship, i.e., of subjective intentions, talents, and passions, resulted from a new understanding of textuality. Poststructuralism conceived works of all media—as well as culture itself—as text, and all texts as no longer autonomous, but as interfaces of discourses, as montages and collages of non-original elements. The exact process, of course, can also be looked at in reverse: The death of the author brought with it, in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, a gradual devaluation of the traditional structures and narratives that had organized knowledge in modern culture. The loss of authorship initiated a continuous loss of authority and authenticity. The transition to postmodernism and, with it, the end of modernity was then completed in 1979 when Jean-François Lyotard

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33 Eco, Umberto: *The Open Work*, Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press 1989 (\*1962).

34 Oulipo is short for "Ouvroir de littérature potentielle," i.e., "workshop for potential literature."

35 Saporta, Marc: *Composition no. 1. A novel*, New York: Simon and Schuster 1963.

36 Barthes, Roland: "The Death of the Author," *Aspen Magazine*, Fall-Winter, 1967; <http://www.ubu.com/aspen/aspen5and6/threeEssays.html#barthes>

37 Foucault, Michel: "What Is an Author?," in: Faubion, James D. (ed.), *Aesthetics, Method, and Epistemology: Essential works of Foucault, 1954-1984*, New York: New Press 1998 (\*1969), pp. 205-222.

proclaimed the end of the “grand narratives”<sup>38</sup>—calling into question those intersubjective and community-forming fictions that until then had meant the evolutionary advantage of our species.

Gérard Genette’s concept of transtextuality and particularly paratextuality, which he conceived in the intellectual sphere of Barthes and Foucault and almost simultaneously with Lyotard’s analysis of postmodernism, belongs to this historical and theoretical context. However, digital textuality developed in parallel to the theoretical reevaluation of analog textuality—and with at least as much consequence. Its origin came from Vannevar Bush’s 1945 design of a transtextual knowledge machine for “memory extension,” which he called Memex.<sup>39</sup> A central innovation of this possible apparatus was to be a personalization of cultural knowledge through “associative indexing” and the linking of text passages through traces of the reading process that Bush called “trails.” Inspired by this concept, in the 1960s, Ted Nelson and Douglas Engelbart—first independently, then together—realized in the medium of software the ‘hyperlink’ for associating a text passage with any other, wherever they might be: elsewhere in the same document, in other documents, in the storage of the same computer, or on a server on the other side of the world.<sup>40</sup> For this linked reference, which can be realized interactively, it is, of course, irrelevant whether the associated passages originate from texts or paratexts.

During the 1960s and 1970s, Nelson and Engelbart’s research on hyperlinking remained at the level of laboratory experiments. The first mass-scale implementations of digital transtextuality did not occur until the late 1980s. In 1987, the year in which Gérard Genette also published his analysis of paratextuality, Apple Computer launched the *Hypercard* program, the first

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38 F. Lyotard: *The Postmodern Condition*.

39 Bush, Vannevar: “As We May Think,” in: *The Atlantic Monthly*, July (1945); <http://www.theatlantic.com/unbound/flashbks/computer/bushf.htm>

40 Nelson supposedly coined the term in 1963. The first documented source is a short article describing a lecture Nelson gave in 1965 at Vassar College: Wedeles, Laurie: “Professor Nelson Talk Analyzes ‘P.R.I.D.E.’,” in: *Miscellany News (Vassar College)*, February 3, 1965; [http://faculty.vassar.edu/mijoyce/MiscNews\\_Feb65.html](http://faculty.vassar.edu/mijoyce/MiscNews_Feb65.html). See also Nelson, Theodor H.: *Computer Lib / Dream Machines*, Chicago: Nelson: Hugo’s Book Service 1974.

hypermedia system for personal computers.<sup>41</sup> Simultaneously, Jay David Bolter, Michael Joyce, and John B. Smith introduced *Storyspace*, a program for creating hypertext literature.<sup>42</sup> Two years later, Timothy Berners-Lee conceived a hypertext mask for the internet, laying the foundation for today's World Wide Web. In sum, innovations and implementations of digital textuality deconstructed the same properties and characteristics of analog textuality that poststructuralism questioned: in addition to individual authorship, above all, the linear cohesiveness of works, which makes the distinction between texts and paratexts meaningful in the first place. Hypercard stacks, hypertext literature, Hypercard-based games like the legendary *MYST* (1993),<sup>43</sup> and of course, the WWW of the early 1990s, written in HyperText Markup Language (HTML), were no longer experienced in a linear reading process that focused on one text at a time. Instead, the habit of 'surfing' evolved—a playful, experimental clicking back and forth between different texts or text fragments.

From the perspective of the digital present, Genette's terms 'transtextuality' and 'paratextuality' conceptualize textuality in an industrial mass culture that is already in the process of disappearing in the last decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. At its core, Genette's theory of transtextuality harbors the parallelism of a postmodern omnipresence and growing powerlessness of analog texts and their individual or collective authors. In retrospect, then, despite or precisely because of the multiplication of analog textuality and the dissolution of its traditional boundaries, a devaluation is salient: a successive transition from the paradigm of the book and reading—the closed work and its interpretative comprehension—to the paradigm of games and playing—the open work and its participatory appropriation.

In the second chapter, I will explore how, since the Renaissance and parallel to the establishment of standardized textuality, the foundations were laid

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41 Lasar, Matthew: "30-Plus Years of HyperCard, the Missing Link to the Web," in: *Ars Technica*, May 25, 2019; <https://arstechnica.com/gadgets/2019/05/25-years-of-hypercard-the-missing-link-to-the-web/>

42 Barnet, Belinda: "(Re)minding: The Development of Storyspace," in: *Digital Humanities* 6, no. 2 (2012); <http://www.digitalhumanities.org/dhq/vol/6/2/000128/000128.html>

43 With more than four million copies, *MYST* was the most successful game of the 1990s.

for the 20<sup>th</sup>-century dual process of medial audiovisualization and cultural ludification.

## II THE AUDIOVISIONS THAT MEAN THE WORLD: WATCH!

The invention of letterpress printing did not—alone—establish what McLuhan called the “Gutenberg Galaxy”: the dominance of the visual over the oral in modern culture. The “uniformity and repeatability of typography”<sup>44</sup> merely intensified many times over the process of visual homogenization that painterly experiments with linear perspective had already begun in the early 15<sup>th</sup> century. In 1435, a decade before Gutenberg introduced movable type, Leon Battista Alberti, in *Della Pictura*,<sup>45</sup> codified the theory of perspective and thus the production of pictorial space on a mathematical basis. “The world of visual perspective is one of unified and homogeneous space.”<sup>46</sup>

This unity was marked by the picture frame, which separated the stretched canvases of perspective paintings from the environment and within which realistic pictorial worlds opened up as in an open window; “una finestra aperta,” as Alberti wrote.<sup>47</sup> The linear perspective painting established a new aesthetic standard for the visual and the audiovisual. Within a few decades, the first modern proscenium stages, also called picture-frame stages, were built. These stages, which meant the world in the pre-industrial era,<sup>48</sup> differed in their design and illusionary effect drastically not only from

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44 M. McLuhan: *The Gutenberg Galaxy*, p. 128.

45 Alberti, Leon Battista: *On Painting*. Translated with Introduction and Notes by John R. Spencer, New Haven: Yale University Press 1970 (\*1435, \*1956); <http://www.noteaccess.com/Texts/Alberti/>

46 M. McLuhan: *The Gutenberg Galaxy*, p. 136.

47 “I inscribe a quadrangle of right angles, as large as I wish, which is considered to be an open window through which I see what I want to paint.” L. Alberti: *On Painting*, <http://www.noteaccess.com/Texts/Alberti/1a.htm>

48 The English translation of the famous poem “To My Friends” (1803) by the German poet Friedrich Schiller renders some verses very freely. “Yet we see the great of every age / Pass before us on the world’s wide stage / Thoughtfully and calmly in review” reads in the German original: “Sehn wir doch das Große aller Zeiten /

the ancient amphitheaters and medieval stages but also from the Shakespear-ean stage. The new proscenium stages took over the framing of the stage space from painting and imitated perspective through staggered backdrops, with the vanishing point often being a perspectival painting. A framed window view then continued to characterize the new industrial image media of photography, film, and television. In their duality of prospect and distance, all these window views, from Renaissance painting to the television screen, are characterized by the principle of a threefold separation of the image space: firstly, from the environment through framing; secondly, from the viewer or spectator, in particular through the spatial distance necessary for optimal perception of perspective, but also through material coverings such as curtains, doors, or panes of glass; thirdly, from the modern text space, which came into being at the same time through the invention of letterpress printing with movable type.

In the transition from painting to the stage, from the still image to moving actions, the separated image space evolved into a secluded playground. Thus, the illusion theater emerged from the combination of classical traditions and modern technology. With its separation from the everyday world—the auditorium—, modern theater can be located in the tradition of pre-modern rituals and games, as Johan Huizinga stated in his epochal study, *Homo Ludens*:

“The arena, the card-table, the magic circle, the temple, the stage, the screen, the tennis court, the court of justice, etc., are all in form and function play-grounds, i.e. forbidden spots, isolated, hedged round, hallowed, within which special rules obtain. All are temporary worlds within the ordinary world, dedicated to the performance of an act apart.”<sup>49</sup>

At the same time, the theater of illusion continued the emancipation of drama from the rituals and games of the religious sphere. This process had begun in Greek and Roman antiquity but had been interrupted in the Christian Middle

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Auf den Brettern, die die Welt bedeuten, / Sinnvoll still an uns vorübergehn.”  
Literally, the theater is spoken of here as “the boards that mean the world.”

49 Huizinga, Johan: *Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play Element in Culture*, Boston: Beacon Press (Kindle Edition) 1955 (\*1938), loc. 221. Cf.: “In history, art and literature everything that we perceive as beautiful and noble play was once sacred play.” (Ibid., loc. 1951.)



Ages when hardly any secular theater culture existed. Not least because the stage soon offered dramatic representations of contemporary life, it became the dominant medium of social introspection in the pre-industrial modern era, a mirror of the world. Huizinga refers to the pre-industrial centuries as the age of the “world theater”:

“Drama, in a glittering succession of figures ranging from Shakespeare and Calderon to Racine, then dominated the literature of the West. It was the fashion to liken the world to a stage on which every man plays his part.”<sup>50</sup>

In the 18<sup>th</sup> century, the bourgeois tragedy, in particular—tragic plays of George Lillo, Denis Diderot, Gotthold Ephraim Lessing, Friedrich Schiller—staged throughout Europe the escalating conflicts that the rising bourgeoisie had to fight out with the ruling aristocracy. By helping to forge collective and individual identities, the modern stage and the texts and paratexts that emerged around this new playground—modern dramas, theater critiques, theoretical manifestos, coffeehouse debates, and so on—proved to be no less constitutive for the formation and cohesion of societies and cultures than religious rites, both before and at the same time.

This guiding function of the stage as a medium—to re-enact everyday conflicts, make them visible, and present possible solutions—was taken over by cinema in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and by television in the second half. Feature films and TV series mirrored social life, however distortedly, and thus reshaped social self-perception and the world’s perception. At the same time, industrialization led to the popularization and professionalization of sporting games. Around 1900, the new mass sport of soccer and the revival of the Olympic Games afforded the construction, for the first time since antiquity, of enormous venues separated from everyday life, stadiums that could hold many tens of thousands and soon more than 100,000 people. Consequently, in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, entirely new paratextual media and forms evolved, including popular magazines specializing in film and sports and reviews of movies and sporting events in daily newspapers, general interest weekly and monthly magazines, on radio and television.

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50 Ibid., loc. 128.

The ascendancy of the two main variants of the playful,<sup>51</sup> mimetic representation—in the media of mass culture—and competition—in mass sports—initiated a fundamental cultural reassessment. Its beginning marked Johan Huizinga's *Homo Ludens*.<sup>52</sup> In his cultural history, he defined the playful as the central element of a good life: "What, then, is the right way of living? Life must be lived as play [...]." <sup>53</sup> Indeed, in 1938, Huizinga was right to lament the decline of the playful in industrial societies. However, during and after the Second World War, the technological foundations were laid for the transition from industrial to digital civilization. In the process, a variety of linear, causal, and passive practices, values, and principles of cognition successively gave way to multilinear, contingent, and interactive ones. Early examples are the mathematical game theory developed by John von Neumann and Oskar Morgenstern in the 1940s,<sup>54</sup> and the beginnings of artificial intelligence, whose pioneers Alan Turing and Claude Elwood Shannon, as well as a host of other researchers, relied on the proceduralization of analog games, in particular chess, as 'proof of concept'.<sup>55</sup> In 1952, IBM introduced the first digital chess game. Soon, computers were winning against amateurs. In 1962, SPACEWAR!, the first computer game for pure entertainment purposes, was created.

Allucquere Rosanne Stone took this appropriation of expensive computing power to indicate the complementation and modification of the industrial work ethic by a new popularization of the playful.<sup>56</sup> This change has

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51 "The two ever-recurrent forms in which civilization grows in and as play are the sacred performance and the festal contest." (Ibid., loc 918.)

52 Huizinga's study was published shortly before World War II. The book's international impact did not unfold until more than a decade later. The first English edition appeared in 1949, the first German in 1956.

53 J. Huizinga: *Homo Ludens*, loc. 3843.

54 Von Neumann, John and Oskar Morgenstern: *Theory of Games and Economic Behavior*, Princeton: Princeton University Press 1944.

55 See Donovan, Tristan: *Replay: The History of Video Games*, Lewes, East Sussex: Yellow Ant (Kindle Edition) 2010, loc. 112. Cf. Freyermuth, Gundolf S.: *Games | Game Design | Game Studies: An Introduction*, Bielefeld: transcript 2015, p. 62.

56 See Stone, Allucquere Rosanne: *The War of Desire and Technology at the Close of the Mechanical Age*, Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press 1995, pp. 13-14.

generally been evident in Western culture since the 1960s.<sup>57</sup> From Eric Berne's bestseller *Games People Play: The Psychology of Human Relationships* (1964)<sup>58</sup> to Joe South's hit song *Games People Play* (1968), which it inspired, and Clark C. Abt's book *Serious Games* (1970)<sup>59</sup> to the *New Games* movement that Stewart Brand initiated in the atmosphere of San Francisco's hippie culture and which stayed popular from the late 1960s to the early 1980s.<sup>60</sup>

Technological as well as economic factors fueled this process of ludification. Marshall McLuhan emphasized the influence of the new electronic media: "Instead of tending towards a vast Alexandrian Library the world has become a computer, an electronic brain,"<sup>61</sup> Networked digital work and communication—in McLuhan's words: "electronic interdependence"<sup>62</sup>—was going to replace the individualistic culture of letterpress printing. At the same time, around 1960, Peter F. Drucker observed the emergence of new professions and forms of work. He subsumed them under the term 'knowledge work' and, in the following decades, traced its swift rise in the wake of the implementation of digital technology.<sup>63</sup> In contrast to industrial work, which is performed in the material world, digital knowledge work takes place in virtuality. It is characterized by self-determined, creative, explorative, and thus playful interaction with virtual symbols, i.e., software programs and files. As knowledge work grew to be a leading source of economic value generation, especially in the so-called 'creative industries,' changes in cultural behavior emerged. The contradiction between work ethics and play

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57 The following passage is taken from Freyermuth: *Games | Game Design | Game Studies: An Introduction*, pp. 230-231.

58 Berne, Eric: *Games People Play: The Psychology of Human Relationships*, New York: Grove Press 1964.

59 Abt, Clark C.: *Serious Games*, New York: Viking Press 1970.

60 Foundation, New Games and Andrew Fluegelman: *The New Games Book*, Garden City, N.Y.: Dolphin Books 1976.

61 M. McLuhan: *The Gutenberg Galaxy*, p. 32.

62 Ibid., p. 31.

63 Drucker used the term *knowledge work* first in 1959, the term *knowledge worker* first in 1967. Cf. Drucker, Peter F.: *Landmarks of Tomorrow: A Report on the New 'Post-modern' World*, New Brunswick, N.J.: Transaction Publishers 1996 (\*1959); Drucker, Peter F.: *The Effective Executive*, London: Heinemann 1967.

ethics, which industrial rationality presupposed and existed in factories and bureaucracies, started to dissolve at the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century to the same extent as the Gutenberg Galaxy.

In his “Manifesto for a Ludic Century,” Eric Zimmerman argued in 2013 that there is a structural affinity between the fundamental properties of digital technology and the fundamental properties of analog and digital games: “Games like Chess, Go, and Parcheesi are much like digital computers, machines for creating and storing numerical states.”<sup>64</sup> In addition, digital networking promotes the establishment of increasingly complex information systems. For such a digital culture characterized by systems, games are the ideal medium because they are also systematic:

“[G]ames are dynamic systems [...] While every poem or every song is certainly a system, games are dynamic systems in a much more literal sense. From Poker to PAC-MAN to WARCRAFT, games are machines of inputs and outputs that are inhabited, manipulated, and explored.”<sup>65</sup>

Film and television, the defining media of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Zimmerman claims, corresponded to the information and entertainment needs of industrial work and culture in the linearity of their audio visions, which could only be received passively. With digitalization, however, there has been a categorical transformation: “In the last few decades, information has taken a playful turn. [...] When information is put at play, game-like experiences replace linear media.”<sup>66</sup> Games are evolving into the most important medium of the 21<sup>st</sup>—ludic—century: “Increasingly, the ways that people spend their leisure time and consume art, design, and entertainment will be games—or experiences very much like games.”<sup>67</sup> By now, ludification has permeated all areas of Western civilization, as Joost Raessens et al. have analyzed:

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64 Zimmerman, Eric: “Manifesto for a Ludic Century,” in: *Kotaku*, September 9, 2013; <http://kotaku.com/manifesto-the-21st-century-will-be-defined-by-games-1275355204>

65 Ibid.

66 Ibid.

67 Ibid.

“In our present experience economy, for example, playfulness not only characterizes leisure time (fun shopping, game shows on television, amusement parks, playful computer, Internet, and smartphone use), but also those domains that used to be serious, such as work (which should above all be fun nowadays), education (serious gaming), politics (ludic campaigning), and even warfare (computer games like war simulators and interfaces). According to Jeremy Rifkin, ‘play is becoming as important in the cultural economy as work was in the industrial economy,’ Postmodern culture has been described as ‘a game without an overall aim, a play without a transcendent destination.’ Sociologist Zygmunt Bauman maintains that human identity has even become a playful phenomenon. In ludic culture, he argues, playfulness is no longer restricted to childhood, but has become a lifelong attitude: ‘The mark of postmodern adulthood is the willingness to embrace the game whole-heartedly, as children do.’”<sup>68</sup>

In retrospect, it becomes apparent that the decline of the Gutenberg Galaxy has already largely unfolded, as Marshall McLuhan predicted in the early 1960s. Slowly, “typographic man” is turning into a “homo ludens.” The analog culture of the book—of linearity, interpretation, and causality—transformed into a digital culture of play—of multilinearity, interaction, and contingency. However, as McLuhan also realized, at the moment of its demise, in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century, the Gutenberg Galaxy and its book culture were becoming more recognizable than ever:

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68 Frissen, Valerie et al.: “Homo Ludens 2.0: Play, Media, and Identity,” in: Frissen, Valerie et al. (eds.), *Playful Identities*, Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press 2015, pp. 9-50, here pp. 9-10. The Rifkin quote is taken from Rifkin, Jeremy: *The Age of Access: The New Culture of Hypercapitalism Where All of Life is a Paid-For Experience*, New York: J.P. Tarcher/Putnam 2000, p. 263. The Minnema quote is taken from Minnema, Lourens: “Play and (Post)Modern Culture. An Essay on Changes in the Scientific Interest in the Phenomenon of Play,” in: *Cultural Dynamics* 10, 1 (1998), pp. 21-47, here p. 21. The Baumann quote is taken from Bauman, Zygmunt: *Life in Fragments: Essays in Postmodern Morality*, Oxford, Cambridge Mass.: Blackwell 1995, p. 99.—The above quoted passage was already published similarly in Raessens, Joost: “The Ludification of Culture,” in: Fuchs, Mathias et al. (eds.), *Rethinking Gamification*, Lüneburg: Meson Press, 2014, pp. 91-114, here p. 95.

“[A]ny new technology gradually creates a new human environment. Environments are not passive wrappings but active processes. [...] ‘The medium is the message’ means, in terms of the electronic age, that a totally new environment has been created. The ‘content’ of this new environment is the old mechanized environment of the industrial age.”<sup>69</sup>

Framing by new media thus confers stronger visibility to older ones. McLuhan’s insight may be taken as an explanation both for the findings of post-structuralism *in toto* and for Genette’s theory of transtextuality and especially his ‘discovery’ of paratextuality in the early days of digitalization. As Genette formed his theory in confrontation with the fading analog text culture, the question arises what adaptation it requires to retain validity in the ludic 21<sup>st</sup> century.

To answer this question, I will now, in the last chapter, outline how the historical development of the modern text, image, and play culture continues into the present and how the relationship between texts and paratexts is re-configured in the digital transmedium of software.

### III THE GAMES THAT MEAN THE WORLD: PLAY!

In comparison to the modern culture between Renaissance and postmodernism, four transformative changes have become apparent since the 1990s. First, digital textuality in both the narrower and broader sense emerged; second, new forms of paratextuality; third, new practices of authorship. At the center of these three developments were aesthetic and technical advances in the production and distribution of digital games and their economic and cultural rise. Fourth, in consequence, entirely new practices of engaging with digital games evolved.

Insofar as digital games can be regarded as texts, a central characteristic of their textuality is the potential for generativity. Games do not present themselves as finished texts for reading or watching. Instead, they open up spaces for potential actions. Janet Murray recognized this potential for generativity already in the late 1990s when she, in her seminal study *Hamlet on the Holodeck*, determined procedurality as the technological basis of digital

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69 Ibid., pp. 6-7.

games.<sup>70</sup> Since then, game engines have become the most important means—medium—of this procedurality.<sup>71</sup> Their real-time generated, increasingly photorealistic images and cinematically staged 3D action spaces can be ‘entered’ by players and navigated interactively by choosing between multiple procedural progressions. From a media-historical perspective, today’s game engines realize in the medium of software what, under analog conditions, Vannevar Bush longed for when he proposed his theoretical machine Memex in 1945,<sup>72</sup> and what avantgarde authors such as the members of the Oulipo group literarily aspired to in the 1960s: a generative text production for which traditional authorship is no longer essential. Like the Memex or a ‘book’ such as Queneau’s *Cent mille milliards de poèmes* (*Hundred Thousand Billion Poems*),<sup>73</sup> digital games generally ‘are’ not one text. Rather, they hold the potential for the creation of many texts. Only the process of playing generates, through numerous interactions between the procedures set up in the game engine and the players’ decisions, one of the game’s potential texts—the structured web of ludic and narrative elements that individual players experience.

Moreover, like all software, games are fundamentally transmedial by technological principle, i.e., in games, on the one hand, auditory, visual, and textual elements come together, and on the other hand, games can contain any number of other works and media—virtual books and libraries, films and cinemas, radio or television stations, and, of course, other games.<sup>74</sup> Last but

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70 Murray, Janet Horowitz: *Hamlet on the Holodeck: The Future of Narrative in Cyberspace*, New York: Free Press 1997, p. 181.

71 Of particular importance were and are the Unreal Engine (Epic Games, since 1998), the CryEngine (Crytek, since 2004), and the Unity Engine (Unity, since 2005).

72 V. Bush: “As We May Think.”

73 Queneau, Raymond: *Cent mille milliards de poèmes*, Paris: Gallimard, 1961. An English interactive online version can be found here: <http://www.bevrowe.info/Internet/Queneau/Queneau.html>

74 This affordance was probably first emphasized by Jesse Schell: “There is nothing that cannot be part of a game. You can put a painting, a radio broadcast, or a movie into a game, but you cannot put a game into these other things. [...] At their technological limit, games will subsume all other media.” (Schell, Jesse: *The Art of Game Design: A Book of Lenses*, Amsterdam/Boston: Elsevier/Morgan Kauf-

not least, the aesthetic openness of digital games corresponds to the technological openness that is inherent in all software. In contrast to works of analog culture, books or movies,<sup>75</sup> games are in principle ‘unfinished’ and can be continuously and arbitrarily expanded and modified through updates, addons, and DLCs (downloadable content). Thus, digital textuality is characterized by the fact that it is potentially generative—i.e., texts can be generated by sets of rules—and that, as software, it is in principle transmedial and aesthetically and technologically open in the sense of Umberto Eco’s *Open Work*.

Second, the paratexts changed no less radically than the texts themselves. When Genette developed his concept of paratextuality in the 1980s, he could still concentrate his attention on texts in the narrower sense. This focus was justified “by the fact that practically all the paratexts considered will be themselves of a textual, or at least verbal, order: titles, prefaces, interviews, so many utterances, of very differing extent, but which all share the linguistic status of the text.”<sup>76</sup> As exceptions, Genette mentioned typography and illustrations. However, with digitalization—the transition from the Gutenberg Galaxy to the Turing Galaxy<sup>77</sup>—the means of production and conditions of distribution for linear as well as multilinear-interactive audiovisual content became democratized on a scale that seemed unimaginable in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. On the one hand, the continuous decline in price and simplification of use lowered the high barriers to entry that stood in the way of audiovisual production during the industrial age. In particular, the advent of smartphones

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mann (Kindle Edition) 2008, loc. 1326-29. See also G. Freyermuth: *Games | Game Design | Game Studies*, p. 130.

75 As soon as books or films become digital, they are no less open in terms of technological principle. In artistic practice, however, this new affordance is hardly exploited.

76 G. Genette: *Paratexts*, p. 6.

77 The term was coined in 1993 by Wolfgang Coy in a talk entitled “Die Turing-Galaxis. Computer als Medien” (“The Turing Galaxy. Computers as Media”) at the Interface II conference in Hamburg, Germany. Cf. Grassmuck, Volker: “A Hitchhiker’s Guide to the Turing Galaxy: On Naming the Age of the Networked Digital Computer,” in: *Researchgate* (2007), p. 2; [https://www.researchgate.net/publication/26975803\\_A\\_Hitchhiker%27s\\_Guide\\_to\\_the\\_Turing\\_GalaxyOn\\_naming\\_the\\_age\\_of\\_the\\_networked\\_digital\\_computer](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/26975803_A_Hitchhiker%27s_Guide_to_the_Turing_GalaxyOn_naming_the_age_of_the_networked_digital_computer)



with high-resolution cameras in the 2010s meant that audiovisual expression no longer faces higher financial or technical hurdles than written expression. This democratization of production has been matched by the democratization of distribution. In recent years, online platforms such as YouTube, Vimeo, Instagram, TikTok, and Twitch have made everyone who wants to publish audiovisual content—whether pre-recorded or live—independent of the established distribution channels of film and television.

The democratization of audiovisual expression had consequences not only for the texts—films, television programs, and games—but also for the paratexts framing them and reacting to them. The primacy of the textual in the narrower sense gave way to audiovisualization and transmedialization. Not least, this made it possible for the authors of paratexts relating to cinematic or playful audiovisions to quote these works and to even appropriate them in mashups or remixes. Looking back at the dramatic rise of audiovisual paratexts, it seems that the democratization of the production and distribution of both linear and multilinear audiovisuals affected the paratexts even more than the texts themselves.

The formation of new practices of authorship contributed significantly to this qualitative and quantitative increase in paratextuality. The third change in the wake of digitalization originated in the development of digital games. Not unlike theater, film, or television productions, games require more than one author, the combination and integration of very different talents. However, since games are created in the medium of software, the individuals involved no longer have to work together collectively in the traditional way, i.e., organized hierarchically, at the same place, and at the same time. Virtualization and digital networking have enabled a historically new form of authorship: the collaboration of individuals who design, write, produce, modify, and update transmedia projects largely independently of one another and without spatial and temporal constraints. Moreover, in the development of digital games, this distributed authorship is not about creating a text in the narrower or broader sense but about the design of spaces and possibilities for action. Authors thus turn from writing to designing, for example, ‘narrative corridors’ that players can traverse and experience with a certain range of variation on their way from A to B. Yet, the distribution of creative work is not limited to professionals such as game designers, game artists, or game programmers. Another critical characteristic of distributed authorship is the

inclusion of amateurs and fans, of readers, viewers, players, users—precisely “the people formerly known as the audience.”<sup>78</sup>

Fourth, this empowerment of users through virtualization and digital networking initiated new ways of engaging with digital games. Many of them can no longer be entirely subsumed under the terms of playing or gaming. These new practices for interacting with games autonomously include video game photography,<sup>79</sup> machinima—telling one’s own stories through videos recorded in games<sup>80</sup>—, glitch hunting, glitch art, and databending—meta-gaming modes that derive their pleasure and success from discovering, exploiting, or even creating programming errors<sup>81</sup>—, griefing—disrupting the game experience of other players<sup>82</sup>—, and of course modding, the cooperative modification of games that can range from simple interventions to complete redesigns of game worlds or game texts.<sup>83</sup> In all these behaviors in and towards games, the actors are not concerned with experiencing games according to their rules. Instead, they strive for commentary and criticism, analysis in the sense of dissection, and also improvement of the games. Following the example of Genette’s “paratext” concept, these alternative ways of

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78 Rosen, Jay: “The People Formerly Known as the Audience,” in: *press think*, June 27, 2006; [http://archive.pressthink.org/2006/06/27/pp1\\_frmr.html](http://archive.pressthink.org/2006/06/27/pp1_frmr.html)

79 Cf. Möring, Sebastian/de Mutiis, Marco: “Camera Ludica: Reflections on Photography in Video Games,” in: Fuchs, Michael/Thoss, Jeff (eds.), *Intermedia Games—Games Inter Media: Video Games and Intermediality*, New York: Bloomsbury Academic 2019, pp. 69-94.

80 Cf. Fassone, Riccardo: “Machinimas, Let’s Plays, Streams, and the Linearization of Digital Play,” in: Fuchs, Michael/Thoss, Jeff (eds.), *Intermedia Games—Games Inter Media: Video Games and Intermediality*, New York: Bloomsbury Academic 2019, pp. 135-152.

81 Cf. Nunes, Mark (ed.): *Error: Glitch, Noise, and Jam in New Media Cultures*, New York: Continuum 2011.

82 Rubin, Victoria L./Camm, Sarah C.: “Deception in Video Games: Examining Varieties of Griefing,” in: *Online Information Review* 37 (3) (2012); pp. 369-387.

83 Curtis, Joanna/Oxburgh, Gavin/Briggs, Pam: “Heroes and Hooligans: The Heterogeneity of Video Game Modders,” in: *Games and Culture* 0(0) (2021), pp. 1-25.

engaging with digital games seem to be aptly referred to as “paraplay”<sup>84</sup> or “paragaming.”<sup>85</sup>

Prime and, at the same time, most recent examples of paraplay in the proposed meaning of the term provide the different media environments for

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84 The term “paraplay” has existed for some time. For example, in 2006, there was a “ParaPlay” festival in Amsterdam “intended to be a playful awareness raising program about databodies, i.e. your digital identities.” (Borra, Erik: “ParaPlay at Paradiso,” *Institute of Network Cultures*, November 2, 2006; <https://networkcultures.org/events/paraplay-at-paradiso/>). The term was then introduced academically in 2013, however, limited to denote “playful activities that take place within the context of an interactive game or other play activity, but outside the activity itself.” (Downs, John/Vetere, Frank/Howard, Steve: “Paraplay: Exploring Playfulness Around Physical Console Gaming,” in: Kotzé, Paula et al. (eds.), *Human-Computer Interaction—INTERACT 2013: 14th IFIP TC 13 International Conference, Cape Town, South Africa, September 2-6, 2013, Proceedings, Part I*, Berlin/Heidelberg: Springer, 2013, pp. 682-699, here p. 682). The paper makes no reference to paratextuality in any way.—Such a connection, however, exists explicitly in Riccardo Fassone’s analysis of two variants of paratexts, let’s plays and playthroughs, which he calls “para-ludic products”: “It might be useful to divide, albeit in an inevitably arbitrary fashion, these para-ludic products in two general categories. On the one hand, there are let’s plays, whose characteristics are synchronicity and currentness. [...] The second category—that of longplays or playthroughs—is not concerned with currentness, but rather with thoroughness.” (R. Fassone: “Machinimas, Let’s Plays, Streams, and the Linearization of Digital Play,” p. 141.)

85 The term “paragame” was introduced during a 2009 DiGRA panel on bad games. The term was derived from “paracinema” (bad movies) and denoted “Good Fun with Bad Games.” (Juul, Jesper: “Paragaming: Good Fun with Bad Games,” *The Ludologist*, September 24, 2009; <https://www.jesperjuul.net/ludologist/2009/09/24/paragaming-good-fun-with-bad-games/>.)—A different usage of the term was proposed in 2012: “the term paragame refers to that which is performed peripheral to, but alongside the orthogame.” (“Orthogame” denoting “the ‘right and correct game.’” See Carter, Marcus/Gibbs, Martin/Harrop, Mitchell Harrop: “Metagames, Paragames and Orthogames: A New Vocabulary,” *Researchgate*, May 2012; [https://www.researchgate.net/publication/254005976\\_Metagames\\_paragames\\_and\\_orthogames\\_A\\_new\\_vocabulary](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/254005976_Metagames_paragames_and_orthogames_A_new_vocabulary).)

87 YouTube Gaming was founded in 2015 to counter the success of Twitch. At the beginning of 2021, the service had an average of around 640,000 concurrent viewers. Cf. Clement, J.: “Average Number of Concurrent Viewers on YouTube Gaming Live from 2nd quarter 2018 to 1st quarter 2021,” in: *Statista*, May 25, 2021; <https://www.statista.com/statistics/761100/average-number-streamers-on-youtube-gaming-live-and-twitch/>

89 Johnson, Eric: “A Million Gamers Cooperated to Win Twitch Plays Pokémon. Did They Just Invent Something New?,” in: *Vox*, March 2, 2014; <https://www.vox.com/2014/3/2/5491141/twitch-plays-pokemon>.

ing is beginning to influence the design of digital games themselves. “Game developers have also woken up to this new paradigm [i.e., “spectator-participation”], and now design games with spectatorship and audience participation in mind.”<sup>90</sup> Paraplay thus seems poised to become a constitutive component of digital culture.

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In summation, the concept of paratextuality proves to be an insight that Gérard Genette gained at the end of the 1980s by looking, as it were, with one eye into the analog past of modern book culture and with the other already into the digital future. The review of the fading Gutenberg galaxy I undertook in the first chapter suggested that its book culture emerged essentially as a secularization of book religions and their creation of meaning through narratives: as a mutation of the hypertrophy of sacred scriptures and their divine authors to the hypertrophy of secular texts and their human authors. The challenging and deconstruction of these two central elements of the Gutenberg Galaxy—the self-contained structure of texts and the dominant authorial function—set in during the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, both in the artistic practice of the avantgardes and in theoretical reflection. From the approaches of formalism to Walter Benjamin’s version of critical theory to Umberto Eco’s version of semiotics, the deconstruction of the closed work and individual authorship continued until it culminated, since the 1960s, in poststructuralism and its pan-textualism. In this context, Genette recognized that the fixation on closed works by individual authors had led to a disregard for the multiple transtextual relationships that always existed.

However, since the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century, a radically different digital textuality emerged, largely beyond the perceptual horizon of humanistic studies and artistic experiments. It was envisioned transtextually from the outset and technologically realized as transmedia software from the 1960s onward. The implied use characterized experimental-playful browsing and manipulation

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x.com/2014/3/2/11624084/a-million-gamers-cooperated-to-win-twitch-plays-pokémon-did-they-just

- 90 Backmann, Anton: “How the Updated Gaming Stack Affects Game Design: Live Streaming,” in: *Medium*, March 9, 2020; <https://medium.com/@backman/how-the-updated-gaming-stack-affects-game-design-live-streaming-dc06261e778b>

of text datasets that were open by principle. In the 1980s, when Genette presented his theory of transtextuality, a cultural paradigm shift took shape: from the paradigm of the book and reading to the paradigm of play and thus of looking, surfing, and playing.

This paradigm shift was also significantly fostered by the other constitutive element of the modern Gutenberg Galaxy, which I discussed in the second chapter: the media of visual homogenization. The secularization of religious rituals and games in stage spectacles commenced in the Renaissance with the ‘playground’ of the illusionary stage separated from the everyday world and decorated in perspective. The industrial media of film and television, as well as the emergence of mass sports, then popularized, to an extent that no culture had known before, the two—according to Huizinga—main variants of play, i.e., performance and contest,<sup>91</sup> or—in Caillois’ terminology—mimicry and agon.<sup>92</sup> The development and implementation of digital technology have reinforced since the 1950s this cultural ludification; on the one hand, through the early research focus on games, which eventually gave rise to the new audiovisual medium of digital games; on the other hand, through the inherently playful-experimental quality of virtual trial-and-error actions, as made possible for the first time by digital software and its affordance of ‘unlimited undo.’ In creative knowledge work, as it evolved in the process of digitalization, this playful, explorative activity advanced to become a central economic factor. The modern social character of the analog book culture, the “typographic man” (McLuhan), shaped by textual linearity, hermeneutical interpretation, and causality thinking, is thus gradually giving way to the “homo ludens” (Huizinga), characterized by transmedial multilinearity, playful interaction, and contingency thinking.

The first mass impact of digital textuality in the narrower understanding of the term came with the hypertext-heavy WWW of the early 1990s and in the broader sense with games. Both variants are fundamentally transtextual, transmedial, and fluid, i.e., designed for continuous modification. Furthermore, digital textuality possesses the potential for generativity, which makes text production at least partially independent of human authorship in the traditional sense. Paratextuality is also affected by the increasing affordability

91 J. Huizinga: *Homo Ludens*, p. 48.

92 Cf. Caillois, Roger: *Man, Play and Games*, Urbana: University of Illinois Press 2001 (\*1958).

and simplification of audiovisual production and distribution, which opens audio-visuals to paratextual purposes and forms of expression. The consequences resulting from both changes are drastic: In the production of trans-medial artifacts, the practice of distributed authorship emerges—alongside individual authorship and collective authorship. In the case of digital games, the author function is no longer directed at the writing of linear-fixed texts but at the design of possibilities to generate different texts in the process of playing. The qualities of software textuality also allow amateurs such as users or players for the first time to participate in the professional production of digital works, texts or paratexts. This empowerment has ultimately resulted in entirely new ways of engaging with digital games. They are playful but operate beyond the modes of play envisioned in their design. Like the regular playing of digital games, these variants of paratext or paragaming connect to the fascination and function that storytelling had since the dawn of human culture: organizing individuals into cooperative units, creating images of the world and people, conveying values and meaning in life.

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The contributions to this volume fall into three categories: paratextualities related to historical topics, ludic performances, and the peripheries of play.

The first section, “Histories,” opens with Benjamin Beil’s exploration “‘And You Didn’t Even Look at It!’ ASSASSIN’S CREED’S (Self-)DISCOVERY TOUR.” Based on the observation of a ludonarrative dissonance between the detailed accuracy of the different historical environments in Ubisoft’s series and the quite sameness of the game mechanics, Beil asserts the principle of the DISCOVERY TOUR in the dual process of a transformation from paratext to text and parallel musealization: “the DISCOVERY TOUR comes into its own as a schizophrenic and fascinating paratext.”<sup>93</sup>

This paradigmatic analysis of a new type of paratext that is in a unique way almost identical to the respective historical games is followed by two examinations of paratextual elements that provide guidance to the players’ actions from either outside or inside of games. In “The Cartography of Virtual Empires: Video Game Maps, Paratexts and Colonialism,” Souvik Mukherjee focuses on the persistence of colonial practices of space division

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93 In this volume, pp. 55-74, here p. 70.

and domination even in games that are not about the colonial past or take decidedly postcolonial perspectives. In analyzing, on the one hand, blanks and gaps in the maps, and on the other hand, the disregard of indigenous knowledge that could fill these gaps, he demonstrates “how map-interfaces may play a crucial part in the game’s perpetuation of colonial ideas of power.”<sup>94</sup>

In “Unboxing Age of Empires. Paratexts and the Experience of Historical Strategy Games,” Richard Cole undertakes a close reading of the material paratexts that accompanied the 1997 release of *AGE OF EMPIRES*—map, manual, technology tree. Examining the function of these—in later editions virtualized—artifacts for the experience of the game itself, he finds: “the paratexts of *AGE OF EMPIRES* provide a historical experience that combines popular and lesser-known historiography with interactive, behind-the-scenes insight into historical components and the making of game-based historical representations.”<sup>95</sup>

The historical part is concluded by René Glas’ “Making Mario. Shaping Franchise History Through Paratextual Play.” Glas observes how Nintendo, through its partly textual, partly paratextual *SUPER MARIO MAKER* game creation systems, attempts to rewrite its own history in the interest of streamlining present and future successes: “the SMM games have a dual function of being making-ofs of the old, and a way to present a new direction for the franchise as more user-creation driven.”<sup>96</sup>

The second section, “Performances,” starts with a thorough examination of emerging forms of play on streaming platforms like Twitch and YouTube Live. In their investigation of streamer types and the new asymmetrical mixture of watching, paratextual activities, and participatory playing, Rüdiger Brandis and Can Mert Bozkurt define the “newly developing affordances of interactivity [...] such as straw polls, donation messages, and stream integrated games” as “audience gaming” (“Player Agency in *Audience Gaming*”<sup>97</sup>).

Pioneering paratextual forms of communication and play on streaming platforms and mainly Twitch are also addressed by Nicolle Lamerichs. In

94 In this volume, pp. 75-95, here p. 86.

95 In this volume, pp. 97-130, here p. 116.

96 In this volume, pp. 131-161, here p. 157.

97 In this volume, pp. 165-180, here p. 165.



“Material Culture on Twitch. Live-Streaming Cosplay, Gender, and Beauty,”<sup>98</sup> she concentrates on Twitch’s tag “cosplay” and demonstrates how “cosplayers comment and build upon narrative and engage in what might be called *embodied paratextuality*.”<sup>99</sup> Looking ahead, however, Lamerichs calls for a revision of existing theories of paratextuality: “To capture platform fandom, we need to look beyond individual texts and signs, and consider these texts as a system.”<sup>100</sup>

That and how performative play—paratextual Let’s Play videos—can contribute to a better understanding of digital games in scholarly research is considered by Katarzyna Marak’s study “Benefits of Including Let’s Play Recordings in Close Readings of Digital Game Texts. Discussing Multiple Player Competences in Selected Game Texts.”<sup>101</sup> Via example analyses, she comes to the understanding that by using Let’s Plays, “scholars can not only explore elements of the personal gameplay experience of other players but also learn about relevant cultural and linguistic limitations of the game.”<sup>102</sup>

Let’s Play videos are also the focus of Miłosz Markocki’s contribution. However, his investigation is not concerned with their influence on research but the development of digital games. In two case studies, “Fame or Infamy: The Influence of Let’s Plays on Independent Game Developers”<sup>103</sup> tracks whether creative individuals grow artistically as a result of paratextual criticism and encouragement, thereby establishing that “Let’s Plays of independent games can be treated as a proper communication channel between players and game developers.”<sup>104</sup>

The last contribution of this second section is concerned with the comparatively new paratextual form of the video essay. Starting from the fact that games are of growing interest to cultural critics and that video essays first became popular in film criticism, Rudolf Inderst’s analyses of video channels prove the potential of audiovisual paratextuality for both popular and scholarly communication: “Certain systemic and technical processes

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98 In this volume, pp. 181-211.

99 Ibid., p. 190.

100 Ibid., p. 207.

101 In this volume, pp. 213-236.

102 Ibid., p. 233.

103 In this volume, pp. 237-255.

104 Ibid., p. 241.

which build the foundation of an audio-visual medium such as video games can be described and examined in a more nuanced way by a *sui generis* show-do-not-tell approach of video essays.” (“Here Comes a New Challenger” Will Video Game Essays be the New Champion of Game Criticism?”<sup>105</sup>)

The third section, “Peripheries,” gathers five contributions to phenomena on the margins of gaming—from packaging to advertising trailers to game-books in the broadest sense. Eminent game scholar Mark J.P. Wolf launches the section with a personal tribute to the elaborate packaging that once distinguished video games and, in the “Golden Age of Video Game Packaging,” was a great incentive to collect them: “Packaging attracted you in the store, enticed you into buying something (or at least consider buying it), and exuded an attitude about what game was contained, usually hyping it up and exaggerating the action and excitement [...]” (“The Impending Demise of Video Game Packaging: An Eulogy.”<sup>106</sup>)

The second contribution interrogates paratexts for their playfulness and thus for their specific relationship to the game texts they promote or on which they comment. In “The Ludic Nature of Paratexts. Playful Material In and Beyond Video Games,” Regina Seiwald looks at games within games on the one hand and on the other hand playful marketing elements from trailers to real-world treasure hunts. In doing so, she emphasizes “how crucial a consideration of the concept of playfulness is in paratextual study and [...] in Game Studies in general.”<sup>107</sup>

Game trailers and their functioning in the macro-network surrounding games are the focus of Ed Vollans’ paper “[Para]Textually Here: Paratexts and Presence in Games. How Paratexts Extend the Game’s Network.”<sup>108</sup> Drawing heavily on his own preliminary work, Vollans studies the relationship between narrative aesthetics and advertising function. In the process, he discovers a “tension between entertaining promotion (that stands in for an entertaining product) and the economic purpose of the promotion—to not be more entertaining than the product [...]”<sup>109</sup>

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105 In this volume, pp. 257-278, here p. 273.

106 In this volume, pp. 281-291, here p. 281.

107 In this volume, pp. 293-317, here pp. 312-313.

108 In this volume, pp. 319-339.

109 Ibid., p. 335.

Literary texts have played an essential role in the media environment of digital games since the 1970s. The last two contributions explore the persistence of this close relationship in contemporary culture. Giovanni Tagliamonte and Yaochong Yang review the popular sub-genre of Isekai novels—their typical elements, their production cycles, their game logic, and protocological character—as well as two game adaptations of this literary phenomenon. They argue that Isekai novels, by adapting elements of Japanese Role-Playing Games (JRPG), are critical paratextualizations of game systems while the adaptations of these novels back into games “end up undermining the essence of their original works—[Isekai novels] are critiques of systems but once adapted into systems they lose their respective critiques.” (“Isekai: Tracing Interactive Control in Non-Interactive Media.”<sup>110</sup>)

*Paratextualizing Games* is concluded by Hanns Christian Schmidt’s “The Paratext, the Palimpsest, and the Pandemic. Finding Meaning in THE DIVISION’S Diegetic Artifacts.”<sup>111</sup> The study explores how the game’s environmental storytelling expands—through Alex Irvine’s tie-in novel *New York Collapse: A Survival Guide to Urban Catastrophe*—from the virtual game space where players can find some of the book’s pages into a material object that they can buy in the real word. The paratextual novel, however, is not just a regular book; it’s a hybrid of paratext and palimpsest containing puzzling handwritten annotations, a subway ticket, etc.: “*New York Collapse* creates a game of its own, staging many of the narrative functions of the diegetic artifacts of THE DIVISION’s environmental storytelling in a medium-specific way.”<sup>112</sup> With this outstanding example of transmedial paratextuality Schmidt proves “the importance of paratexts: How to read a game is not dependent on its text alone but also on the many texts that surround it.”<sup>113</sup>

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110 In this volume, pp. pp. 341-372, here p. 369.

111 In this volume, pp. 373-397.

112 Ibid., p. 390.

113 Ibid., p. 395.

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- POKÉMON RED (Nintendo 1996, O: Game Freak)
- SPACEWAR! (Steve Russell 1962)
- WARCRAFT: ORCS & HUMANS (Blizzard Entertainment 1994, O: Blizzard Entertainment)

# Histories



# “And You Didn’t Even Look at It!”

## ASSASSIN’S CREED’S (Self-)DISCOVERY TOUR

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BENJAMIN BEIL

### PROLOGUE: NEW-OLD CHAMBERS

On 3 November 2017, a curious headline appeared on the video game website *Kotaku*: “This Week’s Giza Pyramid Discovery Was Already Built into ASSASSIN’S CREED ORIGINS.”<sup>1</sup> What had happened? A few days earlier, researchers had made public the discovery of two previously unknown rooms near the upper royal burial chamber of the 4,500-year-old Great Pyramid of Giza. The rooms were detected with the help of new scanning technologies. The Great Pyramid of Giza appears as a virtual replica in the action-adventure video game ASSASSIN’S CREED ORIGINS (2017). Players can explore the structure and, in addition to the burial chambers that have been known for some time, actually enter the two antechambers that were still undiscovered at the time of the game’s release on 27 October 2017.

The ASSASSIN’S CREED series is known for its meticulously designed historical settings, for which the developer studio Ubisoft consults historians, archaeologists, and other experts. In the case of ASSASSIN’S CREED ORIGINS, French architect Jean-Pierre Houdin, who has published some controversial theories about the construction of the Egyptian pyramids, was an advisor to

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1 Totilo, Stephen: “This Week’s Giza Pyramid Discovery Was Already Built into Assassin’s Creed Origins,” in: *Kotaku* (2017); <https://kotaku.com/thi-s-week-s-gi-za-pyramid-discovery-was-already-built-in-1820130886>

the development team. Following Houdin's hypotheses, Ubisoft had speculatively included the two chambers in the virtual Great Pyramid of Giza.

This anecdote may be a strange coincidence; however, it illustrates the complex interplay between history as an academic discipline, popular historical discourses, and representations of history in entertainment media, i.e., forms of public history. Stephen Totilo addresses this area of tension in his *Kotaku* article:

"Players who don't know the history of the Great Pyramid, let alone the controversy over how it was built, might mistake the innards of the structure as poor game design. From a video game standpoint, climbing through the pyramid isn't all that exciting. It's far less interesting a feat than climbing through many other areas in the long-running ASSASSIN'S CREED series. But those armed with the knowledge of what's in the actual pyramid, and who understand what the interpretation presented in the game represents, might find this to be a fantastic opportunity not just for virtual tourism but for an exploration of theoretical history."<sup>2</sup>

In this way, the new-old chambers also hint at a certain dilemma of the ASSASSIN'S CREED series, which on the one hand is often praised for its detailed historically reconstructions, but on the other hand, is a frequently mentioned example of a significant dissonance between its historical story world and its gameplay mechanics.

The Ptolemaic Egypt is just one of numerous historical settings of the ASSASSIN'S CREED games: from ancient Greece to Jerusalem and Damascus at the time of the Third Crusade to Renaissance Florence and Rome to Paris during the French Revolution.<sup>3</sup> The series' historical architectures and characters show an impressive visual detail, which increases with each new entry, not least due to the rapid technical evolution of video games. In addition, virtual reconstructions of historical buildings have been part of the archaeological toolkit for quite some time. Thus, it seems only a small step to the

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2 Ibid.

3 For a detailed overview of the different historical epochs of the ASSASSIN'S CREED series cf. de Wildt, Lars: "Everything Is True; Nothing Is Permitted. Utopia, Religion and Conspiracy in Assassin's Creed," in: Beil, Benjamin/Freyermuth, Gundolf S./Schmidt, Hanns Christian (eds.), *Playing Utopia. Futures in Digital Games*, Bielefeld: transcript 2019, pp. 149-185.

virtual worlds of contemporary games. Ubisoft was even recently a cooperation partner of the exhibition *From Mosul to Palmyra: A Virtual Journey through World Cultural Heritage*,<sup>4</sup> in which museum-goers were able to 'visit' virtual reality reconstructions of numerous cities and monuments destroyed by war.

However, as (technologically) fascinating as the virtual replicas of ASSASSIN'S CREED's historical sites may seem at first glance, their combination with gameplay mechanics is often conflicting at second glance. While the historical scenario changes with each new game in the series, the gameplay remains more or less identical. Players fight and sneak their way through the game world, improving the avatar's skills in the process. This mixture of action-adventure and role-playing elements seems largely detached from the various historical settings. In other words, it hardly makes a difference in terms of gameplay whether the avatar climbs over the roofs of an ancient temple complex or a modern factory building. In both cases, the setting is primarily a "playground,"<sup>5</sup> an obstacle course occasionally interrupted by combat.

Such a ludonarrative dissonance<sup>6</sup> is by no means unique to the ASSASSIN'S CREED series. It characterizes most video games that make use of historical settings. History becomes an assemblage of sceneries and props that primarily serve to embellish the story world. Thus, these games do not offer "performatory challenges,"<sup>7</sup> historical knowledge is not required for the successful completion of the game. History "takes place around and above

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4 Bundeskunsthalle Bonn 2019; Institut du Monde Arabe: *Von Mossul nach Palmyra: Eine virtuelle Reise durch das Weltkulturerbe*, München: Hirmer 2019.

5 Schwarz, Angela: "Quarry, Playground, Brand. Popular History in Video Games," in: Lorber, Martin/Zimmermann, Felix (eds.), *History in Games. Contingencies of an Authentic Past*, Bielefeld: transcript 2020, pp. 25-45, here p. 29.

6 Cf. Hocking, Clint: "Ludonarrative Dissonance in Bioshock," *ClickNothing* (2007); [https://www.clicknothing.com/click\\_nothing/2007/10/ludonarrative-d.html](https://www.clicknothing.com/click_nothing/2007/10/ludonarrative-d.html)

7 Chapman, Adam: *Digital Games as History. How Videogames Represent the Past and Offer Access to Historical Practice*, London/New York: Routledge 2016, p. 205.

the players, but their experience of history is fragmented, ontological and particularized.”<sup>8</sup>

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As a field of research in both history and media studies, the representation of history in video games has gained considerable attention in the last years, from empirical studies<sup>9</sup> to detailed analyses of specific historical periods<sup>10</sup> to memory culture<sup>11</sup> or phenomenological approaches;<sup>12</sup> also the *Clash of Realities* conference has dedicated itself to the topic in depth.<sup>13</sup>

This vivid and wide-ranging debate will not be discussed in detail in the following; it rather serves as a background and starting point for the study of a peculiar paratext: the DISCOVERY TOUR BY ASSASSIN’S CREED: ANCIENT EGYPT (from here on DISCOVERY TOUR). The DISCOVERY TOUR will be explored as a kind of paratextual confrontation of the ASSASSIN’S CREED series with its own pop-cultural status—and its complex relationship to history.

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8 de Groot, Jerome: *Consuming History. Historians and Heritage in Contemporary Popular Culture*, London/New York: Routledge 2009, p. 155.

9 E.g., Schwarz, Angela: “Computerspiele. Ein Thema für die Geschichtswissenschaft?” in: Schwarz, Angela (ed.), *Wollten Sie auch immer schon einmal pestverseuchte Kühe auf Ihre Gegner werfen? Eine fachwissenschaftliche Annäherung an Geschichte im Computerspiel*, Münster: LIT 2010, pp. 7-28.

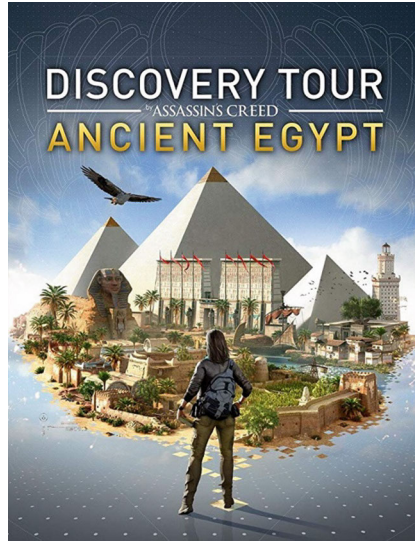
10 E.g., Heinze, Carl: *Mittelalter Computer Spiele. Zur Darstellung und Modellierung von Geschichte im populären Computerspiel*, Bielefeld: transcript 2012; Kerschbaumer, Florian/Winnerling, Tobias (eds.): *Frühe Neuzeit im Videospiel. Geschichtswissenschaftliche Perspektiven*, Bielefeld: transcript 2014.

11 E.g., Nolden, Nico: *Geschichte und Erinnerung in Computerspielen. Erinnerungskulturelle Wissenssysteme*, Berlin: de Gruyter 2019; Bender, Steffen: *Virtuelles Erinnern. Kriege des 20. Jahrhunderts in Computerspielen*, Bielefeld: transcript 2012.

12 E.g., A. Chapman: *Digital Games as History*.

13 Lorber, Martin/Zimmermann, Felix (eds.): *History in Games. Contingencies of an Authentic Past*, Bielefeld: transcript 2020.

*Figure 1: DISCOVERY TOUR BY ASSASSIN’S  
CREED: ANCIENT EGYPT*



Source: Ubisoft/Ubisoft Montreal 2018;  
Screenshot by B. Beil

## THE DISCOVERY TOUR AS A PARATEXT

The DISCOVERY TOUR was released in February 2018 as an expansion of the main game and has also been available as a standalone version since May 2018.<sup>14</sup> In this game mode, there are no enemies and only rudimentary parkour obstacles—and thus no typical gameplay challenges. Players can freely explore virtual Egypt, including the Great Pyramid of Giza, and experience the game world as a huge open-air museum. In addition to the game’s

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14 Another DISCOVERY TOUR was released in 2019 for the sequel ASSASSIN’S CREED ODYSSEY (2018) and an additional expansion has been announced for the latest title of the series, ASSASSIN’S CREED VALHALLA (2020); cf. <https://www.pcgamer.com/assassins-creed-valhalla-will-add-druids-the-french-and-the-disco-very-tour-in-post-launch-dlc/>



protagonist, Bayek of Siwa, various non-player characters are available as avatars. The expansion includes 75 guided tours in the style of a museum multimedia guide, directing the player through the world along several short stops. The tours, which last between five and 20 minutes, focus either on specific monuments (e.g., “The Secrets of the Great Pyramid,” “The Great Library of Alexandria”) or on life in ancient Egypt (e.g., “Agriculture & Seasons,” “Evolution of Pottery in Ancient Egypt”).

The categorization of the DISCOVERY TOUR as a paratextual artifact proves difficult. Is it simply an additional game mode? Is it a serious game or an applied game (and/or primarily part of an image campaign by Ubisoft)? Or is the standalone version even a game in its own right and thus not actually a paratext of the main game? Of course, the problem of a paratextual classification of the DISCOVERY TOUR points first of all to the inconsistent use of the term paratext. Even in Gérard Genette’s original work,<sup>15</sup> different definitions of the concept can be found<sup>16</sup>—apart from the issue that Genette developed his theory for literature (and that he would probably have regarded a media genre such as the “standalone video game expansion” with a certain degree of skepticism). Jan Švelch has proposed a heuristic distinction between three different definitions (or framings) of paratexts—*original*, *reduced*, and *expanded*:

- The *original definition* refers primarily to Genette’s work: “Elements that form a figurative threshold of a text and ground it in a socio-historical context. Ideally, they are subordinate to the text.”<sup>17</sup> This definition also includes the distinction between peritext and epitext. Peritexts are directly connected to a work (the cover of a book, the opening credits of a film, the start menu of a video game), while epitexts are spatially removed (interviews, advertisements, making-ofs). An important (and not uncontroversial) aspect of Genette’s concept is the authorship of these

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15 Genette, Gérard: *Paratexts: Thresholds of Interpretation*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1997; Genette, Gérard: *Palimpsests: Literature in the Second Degree*, Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press 1997.

16 Cf. Švelch, Jan: “Paratextuality in Game Studies: A Theoretical Review and Citation Analysis,” in: *gamestudies.org* 2 (2020); [http://gamestudies.org/2002/articles/jan\\_svelch](http://gamestudies.org/2002/articles/jan_svelch)

17 Ibid.

epitexts: "They must be created by the text's producers or their associates."<sup>18</sup>

- The *reduced definition* was coined by Werner Wolf.<sup>19</sup> This concept only considers peritexts as paratexts, "while various promotional materials located outside of the game were redefined as other types of framings."<sup>20</sup>
- Finally, the *expanded definition* is the most open of the three approaches: "Any element that forms a figurative threshold of a text and grounds it in a socio-historical context. There are no limitations on authorship or cultural status of a paratextual element."<sup>21</sup> The expanded definition thus also includes phenomena such as game journalism or fan fiction and fan art, which for Genette would fall into categories like hypertext or metatext. In film and television studies, the extended definition was popularised by Jonathan Gray's widely cited book *Show Sold Separately: Promos, Spoilers, and Other Media Paratexts*;<sup>22</sup> in games studies, the monographs of Mia Consalvo<sup>23</sup> and Stephen Jones<sup>24</sup> are important points of reference.

Such a conceptual differentiation may be enlightening, but it also seems cumbersome, because ultimately, the different framings primarily reflect different disciplinary cultures and different epistemological interests. While the expanded definition is useful for research on community structures, fan cultures, or game criticism, the original definition has conceptual advantages in studying discourses of authorship. Finally, the reduced definition allows for

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18 Wolf, Werner: "Introduction: Frames, Framings, and Framing Borders in Literature and Other Media," in: Bernhart, Walter/Wolf, Werner (eds.), *Framing Borders in Literature and Other Media*, Amsterdam: Rodopi 2006, pp. 1-40.

19 J. Švelch: "Paratextuality in Game Studies."

20 Ibid.

21 Ibid.

22 Gray, Jonathan: *Show Sold Separately: Promos, Spoilers, and Other Media Paratexts*, New York: New York University Press 2010.

23 Consalvo, Mia: *Cheating: Gaining Advantage in Videogames*, Cambridge, MA: MIT Press 2007.

24 Jones, Stephen E.: *The Meaning of Video Games: Gaming and Textual Strategies*, London/New York: Routledge 2008.

precise terminological differentiations (or at least shifts terminological escalations into a field beyond the paratext definition).

In this way, the DISCOVERY TOUR could be examined, e.g., within the framework of the expanded definition with regard to its discursive status as an educational game (or maybe as an adverggame), from discussions in expert circles<sup>25</sup> to the actual use in the classroom.<sup>26</sup> Another focus could be the authorship question: The DISCOVERY TOUR was developed by a small team within the Ubisoft Montreal studio led by Ubisoft's in-house 'franchise historian' Maxime Durand.<sup>27</sup> And finally, the question remains whether the DISCOVERY TOUR might be better defined as a hypertext, a transformation, or an adaptation; after all, the DISCOVERY TOUR is playable as a standalone expansion separate from the main game.

## PARATEXTUAL PLAY

While some of these categorizing attempts will be briefly touched upon in the following, the focus of the analysis will be a different one. Because, in a certain way, all these paratextual definitions seem somehow unsatisfactory as they largely ignore the peculiar technical and aesthetical structure of the DISCOVERY TOUR, namely that it is almost the same game as the original. The DISCOVERY TOUR uses the same game world, the same characters, and most of the gameplay mechanics; only the combat system and certain elements of the parkour are missing. Also, the story world is apparently a different one, or perhaps there has just been a slight shift in perspective from assassin to tourist or museum visitor. The DISCOVERY TOUR illustrates the possibilities of transforming game worlds to an extent that clearly goes

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25 Cf. Coert, Jean: "Discovery Tour by Assassin's Creed: Ancient Egypt," *H-SOZ-KULT* (2018); <https://www.hsozkult.de/webreview/id/rezwww-174>

26 Cf. LFK—Landesanstalt für Kommunikation Baden-Württemberg: "Assassin's Creed Origins—Discovery Tour" (2020); <https://games-im-unterricht.de/unterrichtskonzepte/assassins-creed-origins-discovery-tour>

27 Cf. Reparaz, Mikel: "Assassin's Creed—Origins Discovery Tour Q&A with Historian Maxime Durand," (2018); <https://news.ubisoft.com/en-us/article/46PIC3yAeikjDI652TayLm/assassins-creed-origins-discovery-tour-qa-with-historian-maxime-durand>

beyond a Director’s Cut, resulting in a blurring or interlacing of text and paratext.

Intersections of text and paratext are also the topic of René Glas’ essay *Paratextual Play*, in which he points out a special form of game making-ofs:

“Since the early 2000s, making-of material of digital games have developed in new directions, from being a purely external objects to becoming an integral part of digital games themselves. They have become something players encounter *during* play and as part *of* play, as well as something to collect and proudly display as a form of gaming capital.”<sup>28</sup>

The making-of material thus subverts its form as a ‘simple’ epitext:

“Making-of material has become a feature which has a visible presence during play, and at times can only be accessed by unlocking them, which invites players to forms of paratextual play. In these play situations, paratext and text entangle.”<sup>29</sup>

In addition to paratexts as an unlockable achievement, Glas also refers to other forms of entanglement at the end of his article: to *SUPER MARIO MAKER* (2015) as a kind of “a making-of Mario”<sup>30</sup> and to the so-called museum ending of *THE STANLEY PARABLE* (2013):

“In a postmodern take on the gaming experience, *THE STANLEY PARABLE* for instance has one ending during which you enter a museum which has an exhibition of the game’s own creation process, including a scale mockup of the main level design layout, outtakes from the recordings of the game’s narrator, concept art framed as

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28 Glas, René: “Paratextual Play: Unlocking the Nature of Making-of Material of Games,” in: *DiGRA/FDG '16—Proceedings of the First International Joint Conference of DiGRA and FDG*, Dundee, DiGRA 2016, pp. 1-13, here p. 2; emphasis in original.

29 Ibid., p. 1.

30 A follow-up of this idea in the form of a detailed analysis of *SUPER MARIO MAKER* can be found in René Glas’ contribution to this volume: “If making-of material aims to convey how the creative process of a game took form, *SUPER MARIO MAKER* actually presents a situation where one could try out the process oneself.” (p. 134)

paintings and early models of furniture. The museum is something you encounter during regular play and as such never feels as an additional feature or in-game reward. It is a fitting element in a game which plays with game conventions and expectations.”<sup>31</sup>

Similar to *THE STANLEY PARABLE*, the *DISCOVERY TOUR* performs a shift from paratext to text. *THE STANLEY PARABLE* integrates (and transforms) its paratext into the main game by exhibiting it. The *DISCOVERY TOUR* maintains the separation between the main game and the paratext, but at the same time goes a step further by transforming the entire game world<sup>32</sup> into an exhibition<sup>33</sup>—in two ways, because the *DISCOVERY TOUR* also wants to be an open-air museum of ancient Egypt. The question of whether this twofold trans-

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31 R. Glas: “Paratextual Play,” p. 11.

32 Such transformations of a game world can also be found in certain Valve games. The *HALF-LIFE 2* episodes (2006/2007) and the *PORTAL* games (2007/2011), for instance, offer an alternative game mode in which floating speech bubbles are placed in the game world. When the player clicks on these bubbles, short anecdotes from the development team can be heard, usually corresponding to the section of the game the player is crossing. Cf. Beil, Benjamin: “‘I Love How You Can See the Bottom of the Universe from This Room.’ The Real-Virtual Architecture of Davey Wreden’s *The Beginner’s Guide*,” in: Bonner, Marc (ed.), *Game, World, Architectonics. Transdisciplinary Approaches on Structures and Mechanics, Levels and Spaces, Aesthetics and Perception*, Heidelberg: Heidelberg University Publishing 2021, pp. 169-185.

33 The fact that all these examples include exhibitions may be a coincidence—or perhaps the reason is a certain structural similarity between museums and video games, which Nicole Carpenter recently pointed out in her essay *In-game Museums Are Great Because All Video Games Are Museums*: “Most video games are built as museums to themselves—inside the menus and beyond the stories are collections of items and lore. Instead of housing a world of information in grand, historic buildings, these museums are based in code. Each is an abstract retelling of the player’s journey thus far.” (Carpenter, Nicole: “In-game Museums Are Great Because All Video Games Are Museums,” *Polygon* (2021); <https://www.polygon.com/2021/1/24/22244838/video-game-museums-the-last-of-us-miles-morales>)

formation and musealisation<sup>34</sup> succeeds will be the subject of the last section of this chapter.

## ASSASSIN'S CREED'S SELF-DISCOVERY TOUR

Ubisoft promotes the DISCOVERY TOUR as "a mode that will allow you to explore ancient Egypt without being interrupted by combat or quests. Purely educational, the mode is a virtual museum with guided tours and historical sites to discover."<sup>35</sup> Apart from the interesting choice of words "interrupted by combat or quests," which almost sounds like a critique of the main game, the label "purely educational" should, of course, be taken with a grain of salt. It is certainly the case that video games have now found their way into history lessons; the DISCOVERY TOUR is indeed sometimes recommended as teaching material.<sup>36</sup> However, the didactic potential of such games is promising but not uncontroversial<sup>37</sup>—apart from the point that (educational) games

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34 It could be argued that every musealisation is a twofold one, following Stephen Bann, who describes the ideal museum as an *ironic museum*, a museum that reveals itself as constructed and assembled, thus realizing an equal coexistence of different presentation and interpretation layers. However, these further complications will not be pursued here. Cf. Bann, Stephen: "Historical Text and Historical Object: The Poetics of the Musée de Cluny," *History and Theory* 17/3 (1978), pp. 251-266.

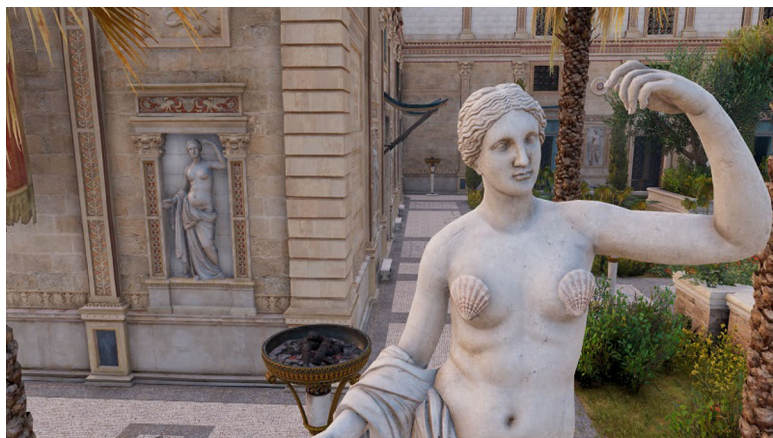
35 <http://support.ubisoft.com/en-gb/Article/000062699/Discovery-Tour-Mode-of-Assassins-Creed-Origins>

36 LFK: "Assassin's Creed Origins."

37 Cf. Bunnenberg, Christian: "Digitale Zeitreisen in die Vergangenheit? Computerspiele mit historischen Inhalten und geschichtskulturelles Lernen im Geschichtsunterricht," in: Aßmann, Sandra et al. (eds.), *Spielend lernen! Computerspiele(n) in Unterricht und Schule*, Düsseldorf/München: kopaed 2017, pp. 117-126; Kühberger, Christoph: "Computerspiele als Teil des historischen Lernens," in: Bernsen, Daniel/Kerber, Ulf (eds.), *Praxisbuch Historisches Lernen und Medienbildung im digitalen Zeitalter*, Bonn: BPB 2017, pp. 229-236; Wagner, Michael/Gabriel, Sonja: "Game-Based Learning—Computerspiele im Geschichtsunterricht," in: Bernsen, Daniel/Kerber, Ulf (eds.): *Praxisbuch Historisches Lernen und Medienbildung im digitalen Zeitalter*, Bonn: BPB 2017, pp. 337-346.

should always be didactically framed and linked to other learning media. They are not a “substitute for the textbook.”<sup>38</sup> The question of how successfully the DISCOVERY TOUR can provide knowledge about ancient Egypt cannot be answered by this chapter anyway. The following argumentation will rather highlight some of the pitfalls that arise from the transformation of an action-adventure open world to an open-air museum.

Figure 2: DISCOVERY TOUR BY ASSASSIN’S CREED: ANCIENT EGYPT



Source: Ubisoft/Ubisoft Montreal 2018; Screenshot by B. Beil

The absence of ludic challenges noticeably reduces the dissonance between the gameplay and the historical representation of the story world; the historical sites no longer fade behind ceaseless fighting, climbing, and sneaking activities. However, the change of genre to an educational game leads to some other dissonances. Unlike in the main game, in the DISCOVERY TOUR the intimate zones of all statues in the game world are covered with shells. This ‘cover-up action’ is mainly due to the regulations of the international

38 Jenkins, Henry et al.: “From Serious Games to Serious Gaming,” in: Ritterfeld, Ute et al. (eds.), *Serious Games. Mechanisms and Effects*, London/New York: Routledge 2009, pp. 448-468, here p. 449.

media markets.<sup>39</sup> While *ASSASSIN'S CREED ORIGINS* received an M-rating (Mature, 17+) in the United States, the *DISCOVERY TOUR* was approved for a T-rating (Teen, 13+). This means that the *DISCOVERY TOUR* can be used more flexibly in schools. In Germany, the USK (Unterhaltungssoftware Selbstkontrolle) gave the main game an age rating of 16+, while the *DISCOVERY TOUR* was approved for young people aged 12 and up—though the absence of fighting (and thus the killing of virtual characters) and not the covering of naked statues may have been crucial for this classification.

Beyond these adjustments, a different kind of criticism can be raised about the *DISCOVERY TOUR* as an educational game. The expansion, like the main game, works exceptionally well as a sensory experience, a simulation of an audio-visually magnificent, lively world. However, there are some clear shortcomings in the didactic potential, especially with regard to historiographical discourses. The historical details provided by the various guided tours are often rather brief and superficial. Additionally, these materials are usually presented as unambiguous scientific facts; academic debates and contradictions are largely ignored—or as John Walter puts it in his excellent essay *We Perhaps Need a Little Bit More Education*:

"I had been hoping for what had been promised—a delivery of the information gathered from academics, learned over the four years of making the game. [...] What I've got is something akin to a haphazard audio tour to distract tourists from how much they spent on the entry fee."<sup>40</sup>

Historiographical debates shimmer through in some places, and the *DISCOVERY TOUR* becomes particularly interesting when the developers reveal that they have deliberately changed certain historical details: The Pyramids of Giza, e.g., were raised a few meters to make them more visible from a distance. As a result, they become more noticeable as landmarks and as a point of orientation within the open world. Such production notes offer small

39 Cf. Good, Owen S.: "Assassin's Creed Origins Guided Tour Mode Covers Up Nude Statues," *Polygon* (2018); <https://www.polygon.com/windows/2018/2/21/17037958/assassins-creed-origins-discovery-tour-statues-nudity>

40 Walker, John: "We Perhaps Need a Little Bit More Education: Assassin's Creed Origins' Discovery Tour," *RockPaperShotgun* (2018); <https://www.rockpapershotgun.com/2018/02/22/assassins-creed-origins-discovery-tour-review/>



but highly interesting glimpses into a design process constantly oscillating between historical, aesthetic, technical, and game-mechanical aspects. Unfortunately, they are very rarely found in the DISCOVERY TOUR.

Most of the information is presented as brief historical facts, even though in some cases a discussion of historiographical disputes would have been a perfectly suitable topic, as Stephen Totilo notes in his commentary on the ‘new’ chambers in the Great Pyramid of Giza: „a fantastic opportunity not just for virtual tourism but for an exploration of theoretical history.“<sup>41</sup> While Houdin is briefly named in the “Secrets of the Great Pyramid” tour, his controversial position within academic circles is not mentioned.

The pitfalls of translating complex expert discourses into more accessible and popular formats are, of course, not only to be found in virtual worlds. The DISCOVERY TOUR is advertised by Ubisoft as a virtual museum, and indeed, the virtual ancient Egypt resembles an open-air museum in a certain way—however, not only in terms of its sensual qualities but also with regard to the didactic/discursive problems of this form of education.

“Open-air museums are audience-friendly; their presentation is easy to grasp. Crucial to their attractiveness is the possibility of a holistic/comprehensive presentation of areas of life. The realization of an open-air museum, however, places high demands on the detailed knowledge and scientific conscience of those responsible. In very few cases will archaeological knowledge be sufficient for a complete reconstruction. Rather, this is usually the result of scientific research, comparative observation, experimental experience, craftsmanship, and a good pinch of imagination. Archaeological reconstructions are therefore tools for thinking and approximations to historical snapshots; however, they can hardly ever claim to represent the full reality. Yet, reconstructions are undoubtedly thought-provoking, have an enormous visual impact, and remain in the visitor’s memory better than any other form of museum presentation.”<sup>42</sup>

Thus, it is not without a certain irony that the DISCOVERY TOUR is problematic precisely because it recreates Ptolemaic Egypt in a particularly lavish

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41 S. Totilo: “This Week’s Giza Pyramid Discovery.”

42 Höneisen, Markus: “Archäologische Museen zwischen Erlebnispark, Kunstausstellung und historischer Wissensvermittlung,” in: Fayet, Roger (ed.), *Im Land der Dinge. Museologische Erkundungen*, Baden: hier+jetzt Verlag 2005, pp. 58-70, here p. 65-66; translated by BB.

and detailed way and quickly makes players forget that it is only an approximation and ultimately a fiction. As in the case of the open-air museum, the “proclamation of an authentic place as an experience [...] makes the virtual world attractive,”<sup>43</sup> however, this “immersion in history [...] carries the danger of falling into a nostalgic rapture in a historicized Disneyland.”<sup>44</sup>

The virtual setting of *ASSASSIN’S CREED ORIGINS* is technically too perfect and offers no room for historiographical blind spots. The *DISCOVERY TOUR* suggests that the Great Pyramid of Giza looked exactly like this. Discursive speculations and disputes do not shine through the photorealistic surface of the game world. Only very few players will have been surprised by the two ‘new’ chambers in the Great Pyramid of Giza—at least if they had not happened to read a certain epitext on *Kotaku*. So, what remains of the *DISCOVERY TOUR*? John Walker has made an interesting suggestion:

“The more I play, the more regions I visit and the more tours I follow, the more I think I understand what’s really happening here. Perhaps this is an exercise in frustration from a development team who worked extraordinarily hard to provide one of gaming’s most extraordinarily detailed places, that was then used as the backdrop for a very silly game. As I wander through the Library of Alexandria [...] what I sense from the nature of the tours is a desperation for people to know just how bloody hard the team worked to build this, and how incredibly accurate the depictions are. [...] See that statue? The one you just ran past and didn’t give a second glance, because you were trying to stab some made up man to death? That was Hypatia! And she was bloody brilliant! She was one of the greatest scientists of the day, and we made that statue based on the worn remains that still exist today, but meticulously restored it and put it in the Library exactly where we believe it would have stood! AND YOU DIDN’T EVEN LOOK AT IT!”<sup>45</sup>

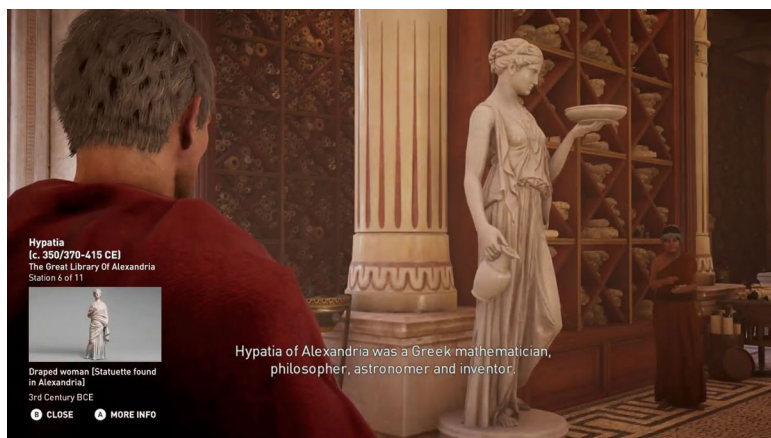
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43 Scholze, Jana: *Medium Ausstellung: Lektüren musealer Gestaltung in Oxford, Leipzig, Amsterdam und Berlin*, Bielefeld: transcript 2004, p. 206; translated by BB.

44 Ibid.; translated by BB.

45 J. Walker: “We Perhaps Need a Little Bit More Education.”

Figure 3: *DISCOVERY TOUR BY ASSASSIN'S CREED: ANCIENT EGYPT*



Source: Ubisoft/Ubisoft Montreal 2018; Screenshot by B. Beil

Perhaps *DISCOVERY TOUR*'s real potential does not lie in its ability to impart historical knowledge, for then it would be just another serious game, albeit a very pretty one. What remains may not be the sometimes interesting but also often quite dry or even banal snippets of historical information from the guided tours, but rather the rare production notes that show the constant struggles of the Ubisoft developers with their work, which is supposed to be a historical (story) world and an adventure playground at the same time. The historical setting of *ASSASSIN'S CREED ORIGINS* reveals itself in such moments as an artificial, a staged one, and the *DISCOVERY TOUR* comes into its own as a schizophrenic and fascinating paratext. The more interesting way to look at historical representations in video games, then, concerns their production, the question of how historical knowledge and historical materials find their way into a virtual game world, how they are formatted and assembled and fitted to (or forced into) the medium of video games—and in turn develop a paratextual life of their own.

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# The Cartography of Virtual Empires

## Video Game Maps, Paratexts, and Colonialism

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SOUVIK MUKHERJEE

“I wisely started with a map, and made the story fit [...] The other way about lands one in confusions and impossibilities.”

J.R.R. TOLKIEN<sup>1</sup>

“So, geographers, in Afric maps,  
With savage pictures fill their gaps [...]”

JONATHAN SWIFT<sup>2</sup>

## MAPS AS PARATEXTS

There seems to be a recurrent question these days regarding video games: Is the paratext the text? Deriving from Gérard Genette’s work, paratexts in Game Studies “constitute all elements surrounding a text that help structure it and give it meaning,”<sup>3</sup> as eminent games scholar Mia Consalvo puts it. Jonathan Gray, in his *Show Sold Separately*, makes a strong case for re-searching paratexts:

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1 Tolkien, J. R. R.: *The Letters of J.R.R. Tolkien*, Boston: Mariner Books 2000.

2 Swift, Jonathan: *On Poetry: A Rhapsody*, 1733.

3 Consalvo, Mia: *Cheating: Gaining Advantage in Videogames*, Cambridge, MA: MIT Press 2009, p. 21.



“Paratexts, this book argues, are a central part of media production and consumption processes. [...] Taking the eye off the paratext, as media studies has often done, impoverishes our understanding of production and regulation cultures, and hence our ability to intervene meaningfully in these cultures.”<sup>4</sup>

His comment underlies an important oxymoron: the centrality of paratexts (which are by definition extraneous to the main text, or a fringe or threshold in Genettian terms). It is in this context that a rather neglected element in video game studies shall be viewed here: the map. Speaking of *THE LORD OF THE RINGS*, J.R.R. Tolkien says that he created the map of Middle-earth first and then made his story fit. Video game maps may be paratexts, but they, too, are also central to thinking about the gameplay, as it will be argued here. Further, how these maps are made, what they represent, and how they project the world also need to be addressed and analyzed critically. Of particular interest to this essay are the ‘gaps’ in the video game maps and how they are represented or ‘filled.’ These will be further examined in terms of their colonial underpinnings within the frameworks of postcolonial cartography.

Before entering any discussion of maps and cartography, it will be useful to explain how paratexts are being viewed here. Genette uses the term to mean a “zone not just of transition but of transaction,”<sup>5</sup> a fringe which is the site of the formation of meanings and potentialities that is crucial to the interpretation of the text. Writing of books, Genette offered a long list of paratexts, including covers, title pages, typesetting, paper, name of author, dedications, prefaces, and introductions as examples of ‘peritexts’—paratexts within the book—and interviews, reviews, public responses, and magazine ads as ‘epitexts’—paratexts outside the book. He also allowed for paratexts of fact so that, for instance, knowing an author’s gender could serve its own paratextual function. Genette argued that we can only approach texts through paratexts so that before we start reading a book, we have consumed many of its paratexts.<sup>6</sup>

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- 4 Gray, Jonathan: *Show Sold Separately: Promos, Spoilers, and Other Media Paratexts*, New York, NY: NYU Press 2010, p. 16.
  - 5 Genette, Gerard: *Paratexts: Thresholds of Interpretation*, Cambridge/New York, NY: Cambridge University Press 1997, p. 2.
  - 6 Jonathan Gray: *Show Sold Separately*, p. 25.

It can certainly be so for video game maps. On opening the game's package, manuals and the maps pop out for physical copies of games, and often the map is opened even before the game has been loaded. In many cases, the game's map is leaked online before the game's release: the *FAR CRY 4* (2014) map is a case in point. In the days of Steam, Origin, or UPlay, paper maps are more of a rarity; however, many open-world games come equipped with a map (usually an interactive one) within the game's framework. A blogpost relating to video game cartography comments on the importance of these in-game maps:

"Open a map in one of this year's big video games and you'll see mostly blank space. Sometimes it's pitch dark outside the bubble of detail around your landing in the world. Sometimes the landscape is sketched out but not yet colored with icons, which spread wherever you set foot. We don't ask how our character draws the map, or why, in a modern setting, she would ever need to. Though not common to all games, these conventions are instantly recognized. Beating the game means illuminating the map. [...] The map of a game like *GRAND THEFT AUTO V* [2013] or *FAR CRY 4* works more like a memory than a pocket reference. The real work of navigation is usually done by floating icons onscreen, distance counters, and GPS overlays; the skin of the map grows in as you chase symbols. The characters of *GTA V* should be able to see every corner of Los Santos just by glancing at their phones. Instead they do the legwork themselves, filling in the city like a giant scratch card."<sup>7</sup>

For Breault beating the game means removing the blank (or rather, dark) spaces in the map. His metaphor is like that of the peeling off of a layer obscuring what is underneath. This is again similar to the 'fog of war' in the real-time strategy (RTS) games where the map is more obvious, especially as one plays on it. Unlike the RTS games, in other genres, the map is something that is occasionally referred to during gameplay but not necessarily the site of gameplay.<sup>8</sup> It is these maps that are on the fringe of the main 'text' of the gameplay that are being viewed as paratextual here. Indeed, illuminating the map becomes a direct result of the actions of the player within the game.

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7 Breault, Chris: "Cartographic Survey: The Year in Video Game Maps," in: *Read-Write*, December 18, 2014; <https://readwrite.com/2014/12/18/video-game-maps-2014-grand-theft-auto-kill-screen/>

8 Ibid.

The question asked in the opening lines comes back again—is the map the story, then? Which is the paratext, and which is the text? The paratext is also a para-dox here in the sense that what was considered marginal also lays claim to a centrality in the gameplay. Elsewhere, I have addressed the marginal centrality of the paratext using the framework of the “supplement”<sup>9</sup> as described by Jacques Derrida in the context of writing, among other things.<sup>10</sup>

Two types of maps are being addressed here: one is the printed paper or cloth map that is often used to accompany the video game disc or the collectible print-map that can be bought separately, and the other is the in-game map that may or may not be part of the game screen or HUD (heads-up display), but that can be opened up separately within the game. Similar to and different from the first kind of map, there are also websites, both created by the publishers or by fans, where one can access the game map *outside* the game. The latter maps often contain spoiler alerts, especially as all undiscovered events (and surprises for the player who has not visited the areas) can also be revealed in an extra layer on the map.

Of course, another type of map exists in video games—here, the map is part of the play area, creating our perspective on the game’s events and the interface of the game. This is more common in the RTS games, as already mentioned. The centrality of these maps to the gameplay is obvious. The non-interface maps might be viewed as paratextual in comparison; however, going by the framework of the Genettian theory of paratexts and Derrida’s concept of the “supplement,” maps are crucial to the way gameplay is constructed in video games. It must be added here, that there is currently very little research on paper-based video game maps as paratexts, although more interest is now being evinced in video game cartography.

## ASPECTS OF VIDEO GAME CARTOGRAPHY

Once the centrality of the map supplement is understood, it is important to see *how* these maps are constructed. For this, a comparison with cartogra-

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9 Derrida, Jacques: *Of Grammatology*, Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press 1976, p. 281.

10 Mukherjee, Souvik: *Video Games and Storytelling: Reading Games and Playing Books*, New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan 2015.

phical practices used in the more traditional geographical sense (maps of real-life places as opposed to virtual spaces) will be helpful. Let us take the FAR CRY 4 map and THE ELDER SCROLLS V: SKYRIM (2011) map, for example. FAR CRY 4 is set in the fictional country of Kyrat, which is a Himalayan kingdom modeled on Nepal and divided into “six playable locations in the game, including Himalayan, Mountainous [sic] (Coniferous and Larch), Midlands (Mixed Forest and Quercus) and Terai.”<sup>11</sup> SKYRIM features a map of the fictional fantasy world of Tamriel that is full of caves, dragon lairs, Nordic towers, and ruins. As Andreas Inderwildi comments on another game in the THE ELDER SCROLLS series, MORROWIND (2002): “the Vvardenfell map doesn’t merely show routes and topography either, but also various architectural styles of cities and fortifications: hinting at its various factions, cultures, and their seats of power.”<sup>12</sup> Manuel Parra and Enrique Saga comment on how even when the video game map is used as a support, it uses a graphical language that fits the overall tone of the game and is closely related to the player’s experience. According to them, in competitive titles, the map determines a lot in the sense that the player’s plotting of her position is crucial. This is something that is worth returning to in a later section. For the present, to quote Parra and Saga,

“If it’s a game with fast paced action, the map will be a tool in a discreet corner of the screen, or an element that sporadically appears to be quickly consulted, like in DIABLO III [2012]. However, if the game moves at a slower pace where the player has to consider every decision, the map should be able to allow handling multiple variables with ease and be able to concentrate a lot of information in a style that is pleasant to look at and not overwhelming.”<sup>13</sup>

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11 Emilygera: “Report: Far Cry 4 Map Shows How Big the Game Really Is,” in: *Polygon*, November 11, 2014; <https://www.polygon.com/2014/11/11/7192615/report-far-cry-4-map>

12 Inderwildi, Andreas: “The Video Game Cartographers,” in: *Kotaku UK*, April 27, 2017; <https://www.kotaku.co.uk/2017/04/27/the-video-game-cartographer>

13 Parra, Enrique/Saga, Manuel: “Cartography in the Metaverse: The Power of Mapping in Video Games,” in: *ArchDaily*, March 2, 2016; <http://www.archdaily.com/782818/cartography-in-the-metaverse-the-power-of-mapping-in-video-games>

The position of the map in the game and how it handles the changing information are indeed important. Speaking of positioning, the video game map itself often is drawn with a certain vantage-position in mind: Inderwildi comments that like Jerusalem in many medieval maps, video game maps are also based on seats of power that are depicted as the ‘navels of the world,’ such as the Red Mountain in *MORROWIND*. Malindy Hetfeld comments on how “when we see an empty spot on such maps, we tend to assume that nothing of interest awaits.”<sup>14</sup> Breault, as mentioned earlier, also mentions how video game maps are about blank spaces and how the gameplay is about filling in the blank spaces. Aaron Kylie points out how the map of the Aegean Sea in *ASSASSIN’S CREED: ODYSSEY* (2018) is very similar to the real geographical map of the region, but that the urban areas are portrayed as being much larger than in the real maps.<sup>15</sup>

There are, of course, other points of comparison within video game maps themselves—in-game maps allow the user more agency, as commentators such as Sybille Lammes argue. Contrasting with Michel de Certeau’s binary opposition of mapping versus touring, Lammes states that

“de Certeau’s argument—written in the pre-digital era—also hinges on the fact that analogue maps are frozen representations. [S]ince the digital maps under scrutiny in this article have lost such preset qualities, this argument needs critical reconsideration. The mutability of the digital maps that the player can manipulate prompts questions about how and to what extent spatio-cultural meanings shift when maps become more alterable.”<sup>16</sup>

Whereas Lammes is discussing RTS maps here mainly and in a later section the postcolonial implications of her argument will be addressed, a similar

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14 Hetfeld, Malindy: “The Brilliance of Video Game Maps,” in: *Eurogamer*, December 12, 2018; <https://www.eurogamer.net/articles/2018-12-12-the-brilliance-of-video-game-maps>

15 Kylie, Aaron: “Inside the Intricate World of Video Game Cartography,” in: *Canadian Geographic*, May 31, 2019; <https://www.canadiangeographic.ca/article/inside-intricate-world-video-game-cartography>

16 Lammes, Sybille: “Terra Incognita: Computer Games, Cartography and Spatial Stories,” in: Lammes, Sybille et al. (eds.), *Digital Material*, Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press 2009, pp. 223-236, here p. 224.

argument as hers has been made for the maps of other video game genres where the map is not necessarily the interface of the game. In his Masters' thesis, Ross Thorn describes the types of interactivity in video game maps:

"for example, the videogame THE ELDER SCROLLS V: SKYRIM affords primary interaction through a cartographic interface, allowing the user to pan across and annotate the map. The game also affords secondary interaction when the player-controlled avatar discovers a new location [...] visually overlaying or resymbolizing new symbols to the map."<sup>17</sup>

A very direct claim for the power of the cartographer-player in the game comes from Daniel Lipscomb:

"A map, within a game, puts the viewer of the object in control. You can look at a physical map, or even call up a location on your phone, but you take no action further than that. The beauty of games is being able to discover. They place a power in the hands of the player who, through exploration, wandering or general movement slowly uncovers a sprawling metropolis to be constantly recalled."<sup>18</sup>

The power is not only connected to the illumination of the dark spaces or the 'fog of war' of the game's map but also to the agency to change the interface through interaction—the visual overlays and resymbolizations mentioned above. These interactions have also been compared to the 'Pegman' avatar in Google Street Maps. The difference regarding interactivity aside, the similarity to real-world maps is a seemingly important recommendation in game design and urban game-researcher Konstantinos Dimopoulos explains, "[a]n imaginary, exotic place that hopes to provide us with even a momentarily convincing illusion has to play by the rules we understand."<sup>19</sup> The earlier

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17 Thorn, Ross: "How to Play with Maps," Thesis, University of Wisconsin Madison 2018; <https://minds.wisconsin.edu/handle/1793/7891>, p. 12.

18 Lipscombe, Daniel: "The Miles We Walk: How Physical Maps Can Guide the Development of Sprawling Game Worlds," in: *gamesradar*, January 21, 2020; <https://www.gamesradar.com/the-miles-we-walk-how-physical-maps-can-guide-the-development-of-sprawling-game-worlds/>

19 Ibid.

comparison with Google Street Maps also indicates how there is an appeal to the realistic.

## CARTOGRAPHY, POWER, COLONIALISM

These video game maps almost mimic real maps and, according to Inderwildi, are very different from the more abstract medieval maps (for example, the T-O [orbis terrarum] maps and Portolan charts).<sup>20</sup> It must be understood, however, that the so-called real maps are not perfect representations of a certain terrain but also based on a series of assumptions and politics and often serve as a tool for distinct functions. These assumptions are based on a notion of the exercise of power, and the maps themselves are media that shape the understanding of the world. J.B. Harley describes maps as being “inherently rhetorical.”<sup>21</sup> The symbols, blank spaces, projection, colors, and boundaries are often influential in that they exercise instrumental power. As J.H. Andrews writes, “[m]aps are universally admitted to help those who exercise power as it is normally understood, for instance in waging war, levying taxes, enforcing law and order, administering justice, and managing landed property.”<sup>22</sup> Cartographic world-making can easily translate into real world-making: speaking of Columbus and other explorers, Harley notes that “their toponymic actions meant that the worlds that they brushed against were never quite the same.”<sup>23</sup> He says that the Spanish and Portuguese possessions in the New World were demarcated on a map by Pope Alexander VI, and this parceling out of land was carried out with little reference to the indigenous people. He also mentions the scramble for Africa where the map of Africa (especially after the Berlin Conference of 1885) was divided up piecemeal between the European powers, as becomes evident in the contrasting maps of Africa in the 1870s and another made in 1910; finally, he mentions the

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20 Even if these video games are set in medieval times or in fantasy worlds that draw on medieval lore, their maps almost always aim at some degree of realism.

21 Harley, J. B.: “Historical Geography and the Cartographic Illusion,” in: *Journal of Historical Geography* 15.1 (1989), pp. 80-91.

22 Harley, J. B.: *The New Nature of Maps: Essays in the History of Cartography*, Baltimore: JHU Press 2002, p. 22.

23 J.B. Harley: “Historical Geography,” p. 25.

partition of India where “the stroke of a pen across a map could determine the lives and deaths of millions of people.”<sup>24</sup> Harley calls cartography the science of princes because it is about “reifying power, reinforcing the status quo, and freezing social interaction within charted lines.”<sup>25</sup> Lisa Jardine comments on how in the “Conquest of Tunis” tapestry, the Holy Roman Emperor Charles V “places the familiar topography of Europe behind him and looks across the water toward the unconquered Turkish territories to which he lays claim—anticipating becoming ‘Lord of all that he surveys.’”<sup>26</sup>

In his essay on “Decolonizing the Map,” Graham Huggan addresses two features of the map that have important implications in terms of how they shape the reading of the world that they portray. First, the question of the map projection system needs to be taken into account. Secondly, the blank spaces in the map need to be considered:

“Swift’s famous derision of those seventeenth-century European cartographers who ‘in their Afric-maps with savage-pictures fill[ed] their gaps’ neatly complements Rabasa’s deconstructive analysis of Mercator’s (contemporary) Atlas, which highlights conspicuous gaps, absences and inconsistencies in the presented text as a means of exposing flaws in the wider discursive system it exemplifies.”<sup>27</sup>

To these, Mathias Fuchs adds the dimension of “orientation.” Fuchs comments that “in *On Orientation* Immanuel Kant reflects about how we orient ourselves when reasoning, and starts to build up his argument from observations about geographical orientation.”<sup>28</sup> Kant also goes on to speak of how to

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24 Ibid., p. 59.

25 Ibid., p. 79.

26 Jardine, Lisa: “Mapping Space,” in: Penz, François/Radick, Gregory/Howell, Robert (eds.), *Space: In Science, Art and Society*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2004, pp. 105-132, here p. 129.

27 Huggan, Graham: “Decolonizing the Map: Post-Colonialism, Post-Structuralism and the Cartographic Connection,” in: Ashcroft, Bill/Griffiths, Gareth/Tiffin, Helen (eds.), *The Post-Colonial Studies Reader*, London/New York: Routledge 1995, pp. 115-131, here p. 128.

28 Fuchs, Mathias: “Itineraria Scripta, Itineraria Picta,” in: Aarseth, Espen/Günzel, Stephan (eds.), *Ludotopia: Spaces, Places and Territories in Computer Games*, transcript 2019, pp. 215-230, here p. 215.



use one's right and left hands to "orient" oneself in the correct direction. The very idea of the Orient has been problematized by Edward Said as being viewed as "imaginative geography" that allowed European colonial powers to manage and even produce the Orient.<sup>29</sup> Maps are instrumental in creating this manufactured sense of direction and orientation. This manufactured sense of the Orient can be viewed in John Mandeville's extremely fantastic depiction of the people of India ("folk that dwell nigh that water be of evil colour, green and yellow") or, in cartographic terms, in the 1510 Hunt-Lenox Globe, which is famous for the phrase "Hic Sunt Dracones" ("Here Be Dragons") written, obviously, in the Eastern extremity. One more extremely important element of colonial cartography has not been highlighted by the commentators discussed so far. This is the question of how important surveying was to the colonial enterprise. John Keay comments,

"at a time when to foreigners India was more a concept than a country, a place of uncertain extent and only fanciful maps, the Great Arc and the surveys based on it were indeed tools of imperial dominion as well as scientific enterprises"<sup>30</sup>

about the Great Trigonometrical Survey that was responsible for mapping the British Raj's vast domains in the Indian subcontinent—all the way to Mount Everest (the name itself is that of a British surveyor). Jeffrey C. Stone comments that under colonial rule, the cadastral survey (with its pecuniary connection) is considered more important than topographical surveys.<sup>31</sup> In his article, Louis Craib invokes Mary Louise Pratt's idea of the *seeing-man*, "he whose imperial eyes passively look out and possess"<sup>32</sup> and adapts it to colonial cartography as the "seeing-map."<sup>33</sup> "Similarly, one can imagine a seeing-map: a creation (and thus a creator) portrayed as innocent of imperial

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29 Said, Edward W.: *Orientalism*, New York, NY: Vintage 1979, p. 11.

30 Keay, John: *The Great Arc: The Dramatic Tale of How India Was Mapped and Everest Was Named*, London: Harper Collins 2010, p. 5.

31 Stone, Jeffrey C.: "Imperialism, Colonialism and Cartography," in: *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers* 13.1 (1988), pp. 57-64.

32 Pratt, Mary Louise: *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation*, London/New York, NY: Routledge 2007, p. 9.

33 Ibid.

behavior or power, revealing what is out there and thus possessing it.”<sup>34</sup> To reinforce Harley’s point cited above, postcolonial thinker Walter Mignolo comments, “European maps and Spanish territorial administration historically became the ‘true representation’ of a new world and the ‘Indias Occidentales’”<sup>35</sup> where although maps are *not* the territory, yet paradoxically they *are*—at least that is how ‘truth’ is constructed cartographically. Also, he points out how places are named often obliterate their identities, just as ‘New Spain’ is created to “silence, all over again, the presence of indigenous groups and their territorial representations that preceded, complemented, co-existed with, and competed with those of the Spanish.”<sup>36</sup> The Spanish cartographers mapping the New World displaced an entirely different mode of perceiving and ordering space. Not that such modes were erased; they were, to use the terminology of Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, “rendered subaltern.”<sup>37</sup> The Inca quipu or knotted data-recording devices made of string were used for land surveys as well as for other data, and these continued in existence even during the early years of the Spanish conquest. Another important example is the Aztec map of Tenochtitlan published in the Codex Mendoza in 1542. The map is rather peculiar when compared to European cartographic systems in that it shows the city and its surrounding lakes and canals as an X set into a rectangle; the center of the city map shows the image of a cactus on a rock, which is the place-name for the city.<sup>38</sup>

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34 Craib, Raymond B.: “Cartography and Power in the Conquest and Creation of New Spain,” in: *Latin American Research Review* 35.1 (2000), pp. 7-36, here p. 7.

35 Mignolo, Walter: *The Darker Side of the Renaissance: Literacy, Territoriality, and Colonization*, Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press 2003, p. 313.

36 Ibid.

37 Spivak, Gayatri C.: “‘Can the Subaltern Speak?’ Revised Edition: From the ‘History’ Chapter of the Critique of Postcolonial Reason,” in: Morris Rosalind (ed.), *Can the Subaltern Speak? Reflections on the History of an Idea*, New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 2010, pp. 21-80.

38 Mundy, Barbara E.: “Mapping the Aztec Capital: The 1524 Nuremberg Map of Tenochtitlan, Its Sources and Meanings,” in: *Imago Mundi* 50 (1998), pp. 11-33, here p. 17.

## VIDEO GAME MAPS: POSTCOLONIAL APPRAISALS

Considering how video game maps have been described in the earlier section, especially how they mimic real maps and how they are supplements to the core play experience of video games, it is possible to see a connection between real-life cartographic conventions, video cartography, and how these, in turn, influence play. Video game cartography often replicates some established conventions of colonial cartography, as described in an earlier section. Commentators such as Lammes,<sup>39</sup> Shoshana Magnet<sup>40</sup>, and myself have already pointed out how map-interfaces may play a crucial part in the game's perpetuation of colonial ideas of power and how the maps in RTS empire-building games also, contrarily, function as "postcolonial playgrounds."<sup>41</sup> In fact, Sybille Lammes states:

"This is rather different from how maps have figured in colonial ideologies. Since the renaissance maps have been constructed as fixed and objective, while they are actually socially produced, ideologically coded, and one of the main institutions for national states to 'imagine' their power. In this asymmetrical set-up maps appear as objective and fixed scientific representations, while they are actually socially produced. Surely these games do not reiterate this seemingly objective status of maps. Instead they 'grant' the player a position of power that is reminiscent of a (military) cartographer, giving players the means to transform maps according to their needs and purposes."<sup>42</sup>

There are two points of departure here that need to be looked at. One is the granting of a position of power to the player to "transform maps according to their needs and purposes." This does open up postcolonial possibilities in the video game map, but the power of being a military cartographer is indeed worrying and somewhat reminiscent of the spirit of colonialism and imperia-

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39 Lammes, Sybille: "Postcolonial Playgrounds: Games and Postcolonial Culture," in: *Eludamos. Journal for Computer Game Culture* 4.1 (2010), pp. 1-6.

40 Magnet, Shoshana: "Playing at Colonization Interpreting Imaginary Landscapes in the Video Game *Tropico*," in: *Journal of Communication Inquiry* 30.2 (2006), pp. 142-162.

41 S. Lammes: "Postcolonial Playgrounds."

42 Ibid., p. 3.

lism. As de Certeau's division of the mapmaker and the tourist does not hold for video game maps, according to Lammes, therefore

"players are endowed with a power of marking territories and empires and can thus create their own postcolonial stories by translating world histories into personal stories. Thus, colonial histories are mutated and altered and our colonial legacies are being tested, scrutinized and transformed."<sup>43</sup>

The *context* of such alterations is important. However, as I have argued elsewhere,<sup>44</sup> there is always the possibility to perpetuate the same logic of empire and imperial expansion in the transformed map instead of being a postcolonial response. The second point of departure would be the claim that video game maps are different from those that "figured in colonial ideologies." Agreed, interactivity does make the video game map different from static maps; however, the similarity of video game maps—both physical (print or cloth-bound) and in-game—to real maps cannot be denied, as has already been pointed out in an earlier section.

Herein, some video game cartography features discussed earlier will be relevant. Based on the previous section on colonialism and cartography, it will be argued here that the notion of 'real' is based on a deep-rooted Western bias. Where Inderwildi has pointed out that video game maps often follow medieval maps where Jerusalem was shown as 'the navel of the world,' privileging a certain perspective or projection is a common colonial and Eurocentric practice as Rabasa and Huggan both point out as seen in the earlier section. Mercator's projection is created with Europe as the center of the world (map), and it can be argued that there is a similar centering in video game maps as Inderwildi states. In the printed map of RED DEAD REDEMPTION 2 (2018, which is enclosed with the game disc), the map centers on the predominantly white states of New Hanover, West Elizabeth, and LeMoyne, while the Wapiti Indian Reservation is located on the northern edge of the map. Again, there is a clear cartographic marginalization being witnessed here.<sup>45</sup>

43 Ibid., p. 4.

44 S. Mukherjee: *Videogames and Postcolonialism*.

45 One also needs to take into account the fact that Google still uses the Mercator projection. This has been proved grossly incorrect by research such as the Equal

Once again, the question of blank spaces, as raised by Huggan earlier and in the context of video games by Hetfeld, arises. There are two aspects to the issue of blank spaces. One is the notion of the ‘fog of war’ where the darkened space overlay is cleared to reveal the map of the game world. Although usually applied to RTS games, this is also true of sandbox games where travel and game experience may contribute to the revealing of in-game possibilities and events. *FALLOUT 3* (2008) and the subsequent games in the franchise, for example, do this with their maps. In a sense, all the blank spaces that Swift had earlier laughed about in his poem as being filled with savage pictures by the early cartographers of Africa were also partly altered by explorers such as Dr. Livingstone and numerous colonial functionaries who surveyed different stretches of land. Livingstone supposedly said when drawing his map of Central Africa, “I go back to Africa to try to make an open path for commerce and Christianity.”<sup>46</sup> Like the famous explorer, video game players are also charting out open paths and on the map. Just as Livingstone’s map contains notes such as “Mr Stanley’s arrival” and “Scenery lovely”—similarly in the interactive in-game maps, players can often annotate them with photos such as in *ASSASSIN’S CREED: ODYSSEY* can record their in-game activities or discoveries in an added layer.

Tomasz Majkowski makes another interesting comparison between video game map discoveries and those by another European explorer in Africa, Mungo Park. Majkowski points out how in *THE ELDER SCROLLS: SKYRIM*, his experience of being guided to find places by the game’s tutorial is like the colonial explorer being led by the native informant:

“The only role of such a native guide, a person who obviously knows the area the explorer is going to traverse, is to lead the European toward an important land-formation and to allow its discovery. This is precisely what the guide in *SKYRIM* does—he explains the world to the Dragonborn, the protagonist, and leads him or her towards important places and landmarks. [...] It is obvious that the guide knew all those places before, as he explains all important details. The village is populated. Yet, the

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Earth project and also challenged by the Gall-Peters projection. In both the African continent appears considerably larger than it seems on ‘standard’ maps, including Google Maps.

46 Brotton, Jerry: *Great Maps: The World’s Masterpieces Explored and Explained*, New York, NY: DK 2014, p. 199.

knowledge of the indigenous population means nothing: only the protagonist (and the player) has the ability to make discoveries, as the act is directly related to marking newly-located places on the map that only the player can access.”<sup>47</sup>

One needs to account for the places not considered important by the colonial cartographer; these are left blank on the map. Compare this now with those vast spaces on video game maps that are left blank because, as Hetfeld states, there is an assumption that nothing of interest awaits in those regions. This second way in which blank spaces are portrayed in video game maps is yet another colonial practice. The premise is that the colonial explorer is finding some new thing; it leads to a forgetting of the fact that the original inhabitants might know about a lot more things that the explorer cannot find. Knowledge of such spaces is rendered subaltern in the sense used by Spivak and the members of the Subaltern Studies group. Speaking about the colonial underpinnings of the roleplaying-game (RPG) genre, Michael Fuchs, Vanessa Erat, and Stefan Rabitsch discuss how maps become the “contact zones,”<sup>48</sup> echoing Genette in a certain way, and described by Pratt as “social spaces where disparate cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other, often in highly asymmetrical relations of domination and subordination.”<sup>49</sup> Here, colonizers encounter the Other. They go on to say that “any action players take in the virtual world is predetermined; thereby interpellating them into specific subject positions.”<sup>50</sup> Game maps can be the sites of this interpellation even before the player enters the game—the paratextual printed or cloth map already shapes the players’ approach to the game. In the case of in-game maps, too, the agency that has been claimed for the player is illusory, as many commentators have written: one only needs to look at the hardcoded notions of colonial cartography that drive player actions. As Majkowski comments

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47 Majkowski, Tomasz: “King Solomon’s Mines (Cleared). Cartography in Digital Games and Imperial Imagination,” in: *Charting the Digital: Discourse, Disruption, Design, Detours*, Venice, Italy: European Research Council 2016, pp. 55-72, here p. 56.

48 Fuchs, Michael/Erat, Vanessa/Rabitsch, Stefan: “Playing Serial Imperialists: The Failed Promises of BioWare’s Video Game Adventures,” in: *The Journal of Popular Culture* 51.6 (2018), pp. 1476-1499.

49 M.L. Pratt: *Imperial Eyes*, p. 4.

50 M. Fuchs: “Playing Serial Imperialists,” p. 1484.

about SKYRIM, the knowledge of the indigenous inhabitants means nothing—the gameplay has to project the cartographic discoveries by the player-protagonist, thereby privileging certain perspectives while at the same time occluding others.

## CONCLUDING REMARKS

Colonial underpinnings may be common in video game maps. Whether digital or physical, they may not always be the interface of the game, but they are, nevertheless, “the playing fields of empire.”<sup>51</sup> Speaking of fields, it is important to consider the territory of the games. As the paratextual map, despite its minority and purported marginal position paradoxically has a very central position in terms of gameplay, one can also see an element of play that disrupts the structure-margin binary. Similarly, it is play that can potentially also affect the territory that the map tries to represent. It is possible to see in the game a departure from what the game ostensibly wants. Players often resort to physical modifications (modding, hacks, etc.), and they can also play ‘against the grain,’ not adhering to the overarching logic of the game map and the interface. The territory itself is altered—this is a process that Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari call “deterritorialization;”<sup>52</sup> this is always followed by a reterritorialization. In this connection, Deleuze and Guattari view the map as “open and connectible in all directions;”<sup>53</sup> as such, exploring the fuller potential of video game interactions, the multiplicity of possibilities of gameplay, and the diverse range of paratextual material all involve a rhizomatic mapping. As Huggan says,

“whereas Derrida’s deconstructive analysis of the concepts of ‘centred’ structure and ‘interested’ simulacrum engenders a process of displacement which undoes the supposed homogeneity of colonial discourse, Deleuze and Guattari’s rhizomatic map

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51 I have used this phrase elsewhere (S. Mukherjee: *Video Games and Storytelling*) in connection to RTS games. Since then, however, I have seen much reason to broaden the application to all other game genres.

52 Deleuze, Gilles/Guattari, Felix: *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987, p. 54.

53 Ibid, p. 4.

views this process in terms of a processual transformation more pertinent to the operations of postcolonial discourse and to the complex patterns of de- and reterritorialization working within and between the multicultural societies of the postcolonial world.”<sup>54</sup>

The map-paratext is a supplement that challenges the centrality of the game-play experience; indeed, it *forms* the gameplay experience. The colonial conventions of cartography may be hardcoded into the way most video game maps are conceptualized, but the centrality of such notions is continuously challenged by the play experience itself. In the Derridean sense, the centrality of structures is disrupted because the construction of meaning is, as it were, *in play*. Play needs to be viewed as processual and, therefore, opening up the territory that maps represent to constant change. The deterritorialization of colonial cartography through the process of play is accompanied by reterritorialization: the postcolonial challenges that are posed by reading the game-maps ‘against the grain’ nevertheless keep encountering the reterritorialized colonial cartographic conventions even in games (such as *MASS EFFECT*, 2007, or *DRAGON AGE: INQUISITIONS*, 2014) as commentators have pointed out. They can also open up ways of challenging already existing interpretations. For example, as Emil Hammar points out, in *MAFIA III* (2016), the 2-D in-game map keeps showing the player which shops the protagonist Lucius Clay will not be allowed in. Clay is the victim of racism in the USA, and Hammar describes this as the “virtual Jim Crow.”<sup>55</sup> Games can be subversive and push players to rethink sociopolitical issues.

Video game maps, arguably, have an important role in shaping gameplay. The experience, however, is grossly skewed towards colonial cartographic conventions, as many commentators have pointed out. This is true even for maps of fictional worlds. The fact that these maps are part of the process of play is undeniable, and inasmuch as they are playful, they open up avenues of challenge and disruption. Nevertheless, such challenges and reading the maps against the grain can only be conceived *within* the existing cartographic framework. Even as paratexts, maps then influence the experience of most

54 G. Huggan: “Decolonizing the Map,” p. 126.

55 Hammar, Emil Lundedal: “Playing Virtual Jim Crow in *Mafia III*—Prosthetic Memory via Historical Digital Games and the Limits of Mass Culture,” in: *Game Studies* 20.1 (2020); <http://gamestudies.org/2001/articles/hammar>



video games, even those without any ostensibly colonial connection (as the empire-building games have), through their inherent cartographic assumptions that are drawn from Eurocentric and colonial mapmaking. Again, as paratexts, these maps also invite questions about the centrality of colonial assumptions and keep open the fissures wherein the logic of empire is under continual scrutiny.

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# Unboxing AGE OF EMPIRES

## Paratexts and the Experience of Historical Strategy Games

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RICHARD COLE

### UNBOXING THE PAST

In 2016, an unboxing video posted by the YouTube channel Retro Tech Museum took as its focus Microsoft's iconic 1997 real-time historical strategy game AGE OF EMPIRES.<sup>1</sup> By repurposing the internet phenomenon of unboxing products, where consumers upload a video of themselves unboxing and/or demonstrating often high-end contemporary gadgets, the video provides an interesting retrospective on the nature of early video games. The unboxing of AGE OF EMPIRES was, like many video games of the 1990s, a ritual experience. From the A4-sized game box complete with historically stylized cover art, in-game screenshots, and technical requirements, to the game manual, printed technology tree foldout, and CD-ROM cases, AGE OF EMPIRES offered numerous ways to anticipate and explore its gameworld ahead of installation. This unboxing, and in particular the materiality of its partitioned contents, remains unique in the history of video game packaging, which has since transitioned away from large-scale containers to DVD formats and, more recently, digital download keys and online distribution platforms. The ability to browse, purchase, and play a game, often at the click of

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1 See Retro Tech Museum: "Unboxing Microsoft—Age of Empires," March 22, 2016; <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BipAsZTEmGM>

a button via a single service, is a far cry from the medium's commercial origins.

Unboxing videos actualize products in an increasingly virtual world. They rely on revelatory, descriptive, and performative methods to generate interest in the product and unboxing process, as well as the host channel itself. By adapting these recurring methods for a classic game, Retro Tech Museum's unboxing of *AGE OF EMPIRES* offers a retrospective on how early game developers marketed their digital products, in particular how they used paratexts to engage audiences and disclose the workings of the game ahead of play. The initial packaging for *AGE OF EMPIRES* offered a step-change in the design of historical games, adapting the iconography of historical fictions set in antiquity (in particular the focus on historical figures and maps), and merging this with the peripherals of tabletop gaming and the technical communication guides from home computing to create something distinct.<sup>2</sup> This combination established the potential for playful exploration, not only of the game's rules and systems outside of digital space, but also the historical content and concepts that it adopts. Scholars have considered how in-game paratexts, deployed during loading transitions, can help to extend the gameworld beyond its technical confines.<sup>3</sup> With the paratexts for *AGE OF EMPIRES*, we see not only an extension of the gameworld—with units, icons, and rules fully documented in the game's manual and technology tree foldout—but also insight into the way in which early historical video games managed the player's transition from reality to the virtual, along with the transactions that accompany such paratextual navigation.<sup>4</sup>

In this chapter, we will consider what contribution the paratexts of *AGE OF EMPIRES* made to the gaming experience, how they could be exploited by

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2 For an overview of the cover art of historical fictions set in antiquity, see Cole, Richard: *Fiction and the Historical Frame*, PhD Dissertation, University of Bristol 2019, pp. 94-107.

3 See Harpold, Terry: "Screw the Grue: Mediality, Metalepsis, Recapture," in: Whalen, Zach/Taylor, Laurie (eds.), *Playing the Past: History and Nostalgia in Video Games*, Nashville, TN: Vanderbilt University Press 2008, pp. 91-108.

4 Genette raised the issue of paratextual 'transaction,' which has since been taken up by framing theorists interested in the metacommunicative; here, I apply the latter approach; see Genette, Gérard: *Paratexts: Thresholds of Interpretation*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1997, pp. 104-105.

players, and how, through sustained usage, such items have been subsumed into the virtual worlds of more recent games. Retro Tech's video is a part of this trend, whereby earlier material paratexts are being revisited, revised, and reformatted for the digital age. This re-examining is part of a broader cultural move to integrate and harmonize the experience of play. It is also, however, a nostalgic reflection on the speed of technological change. AGE OF EMPIRES, as one fan commented on Retro Tech's video, was their "favorite game of all time," which they played "back when there was no cdkey" and access to games was "via dial-up connection."<sup>5</sup> This nostalgia, at least in part, explains why several major studios have recently released remastered versions of their historical strategy titles.<sup>6</sup> By incorporating the experience of early paratexts into new and remastered titles, studios have acknowledged their impact and guaranteed their place in the wholly digital worlds of contemporary strategy games.

Before we look at how the paratext has changed the text, let us first expand upon the relationship between paratexts and audiences. Developments in the theory of paratexts have revealed their potential beyond those originally sketched by Genette, with media scholars considering the framing effects of paratexts around a range of fictional experiences, including the way in which they can perform worldbuilding functions.<sup>7</sup> By focusing on video

5 See Retro Tech Museum: "Unboxing Microsoft."

6 For example, Xbox Game Studios have recently released several Definitive Editions of their AGE OF EMPIRES series, while Sega recently published a remastered version of ROME: TOTAL WAR (2004/2021).

7 For these developments, see in particular Stanitzek, Georg: "Texts and Paratexts in Media," in: *Critical Inquiry* 32, no. 1 (2005), pp. 27-42; Wolf, Werner/Bernhart, Walter: *Framing Borders in Literature and Other Media*, Amsterdam: Rodopi 2006; Birke, Dorothee/Christ, Birte: "Paratext and Digitized Narrative: Mapping the Field," in: *Narrative* 21, no. 1 (2013), pp. 65-87; Mahlke, Johannes: "The Textual Paratext. The Cinematic Motto and its Visual Presentation on the Screen," in: *Word and Image* 27, no. 1 (2011), pp. 77-89; Batchelor, Kathryn: *Translation and Paratexts*, Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge 2018; for the worldbuilding functions of paratexts, see Gray, Jonathan: *Show Sold Separately: Promos, Spoilers, And Other Media Paratexts*, New York: NYU Press 2010; for earlier forays into paratexts and video games, see e.g. Consalvo, Mia: *Cheating: Gaining Advantage in Videogames*, Cambridge, MA: MIT Press 2007;



game iterations of Genettean peritexts (the developer-produced manual and technology tree foldout for AGE OF EMPIRES, which despite their material separation from the gameworld, facilitate the introductory and authorizing functions of the peritext, namely to “present and comment on the text,”<sup>8</sup> as Genette puts it), I aim to further unpack the nature of paratexts in video games by considering their imaginative, historiographical, and action-orientated possibilities, as well as player responses to these.<sup>9</sup> For the imaginative, I explore how the manual’s use of cover art, screenshots, and behind-the-scenes sketches act as a bridge between the production of historical experiences, the historical imagination of the player, and the gameworld. In doing so, the manual primes the player to be strategic. For the historiographical, I am interested in how the manual and technology tree shed light on the game’s mechanics. As a result, these paratexts construct spaces to explore the idea of historical progression, cultural relationships, and technological development at the same time as revealing the developers’ approach to these issues. This enables the manual and technology tree to have a practical as well as conceptual function. For action-orientated possibilities, I will detail how the manual and technology tree offer players the possibility to hone their technical understanding and mastery of the game, while also developing their appreciation of its historical simulation. These functions mean that the manual and technology tree take on a real-time consultative role that complements the real-time action of the strategy game.

The self-contained nature of the game’s paratexts suggests they are less peripherals and more a central part of the experience. The manual establishes the parameters of play, while the technology tree encourages players to

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Mukherjee, Souvik: “Videogames as ‘Minor Literature:’ Reading Videogame Stories through Paratexts,” in: *Gamma: Journal of Theory and Criticism*, Vol. 23 (2006), pp. 60-75; Rockenberger, Annika: “Video Game Framings,” in: Desrochers, Nadine/Apollon, Daniel (eds.), *Examining Paratextual Theory and its Applications in Digital Culture*, Hershey, PA: IGI Global 2014, pp. 252-286.

8 G. Genette: *Paratexts*, p. 345.

9 On player responses, I am picking up on a hitherto somewhat ‘neglected’ aspect of historical video game studies, as noted in a recent book review by Cromwell, Jennifer: “Review: Classical Antiquity in Video Games: Playing with the Ancient Past,” July 8, 2020; <https://www.manchestergamestudies.org/blog/2019/8/20/lclassical-antiquity>

formulate tactics that can then be applied to campaigns and historical scenarios. This type of interactive potential exists both before and during play. It has also left a lasting impression. Players, like the fan who responded to Retro Tech Museum's video, have commented on the way in which the game's paratexts evoke their experience of AGE OF EMPIRES, demonstrating the reflective and mnemonic power of gaming paratexts. I, therefore, conclude the chapter by considering how subsequent historical strategy games—including the DEFINITIVE EDITION of AGE OF EMPIRES (2018) and other installments in the series—incorporate these functionalities into their marketing materials, as well as the game itself. In doing so, these games remove the need for material paratexts while preserving the core functions they performed.

## IMAGINATION

The purpose of a game manual is to introduce the player to the game and its controls ahead of play, while also providing a flavor of the type of gameplay on offer. The 1997 manual for AGE OF EMPIRES achieves this and more, contributing significantly to the game's imaginative setup. Upon reading the manual, players learn that the game is a real-time historical strategy game that covers “the rise of the first great civilisations over the 12,000 years that followed the last Ice Age” and that the goal is to “build your tribe into a mighty civilisation” through resource-gathering, base-building, and military skill.<sup>10</sup> The manual goes on to embellish this theme using no less than ten different types of paratextual discourse, from cover art and tutorials to images of in-game units as pre-rendered wireframe constructs. A complex paratextual artifact, the manual demonstrates how the developers of historical strategy games, from the genre's earliest iterations, set about generating unique ephemera different from those produced by other forms of historical fiction. These paratexts, in turn, require a more nuanced approach than the

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10 Microsoft Corporation: *Age of Empires: An Epic Game of Empire Building and Conquest*, Game Manual, Ireland: Microsoft 1997, p. 2; all future references are to this edition of the manual.

text-centered, interpretive one offered by paratextual scholars and framing theorists.<sup>11</sup> Imagination, I suggest, is one such avenue.<sup>12</sup>

Let us take a closer look at how the manual repurposes traditional methods of paratextual address. To begin with, the manual is presented in the form of a historical novel (albeit a short one), and thus keys into a long-standing method for representing history in fiction.<sup>13</sup> Both the game box and the manual share the same illustrative cover art (Figure 1). In the image, and against a backdrop of soldiers fighting over land and sea for control of the ancient world, three male figures embody the cultures of Greece, Egypt, and Mesopotamia. In adopting the style of historical fiction, the cover art then adapts this by supplying a layered perspective that models the way in which players will interact with the past in-game. Only through taking control of one of the key civilizations will the player be able to micromanage the action taking place in the background, and in turn, build (or destroy) the empires depicted. This premise is performed literally, with some of the units and buildings directly inspired by or echoing those found in-game. It is important to note, however, that these assets are captured at a higher resolution than the early graphics could render. In combining clearly defined assets with the idea of the ancient world captured in the larger-than-life figures and aesthetics of the backdrop, the cover art suggests a wider context within which the game can be played, whether or not that context is evident in the game itself. To put it

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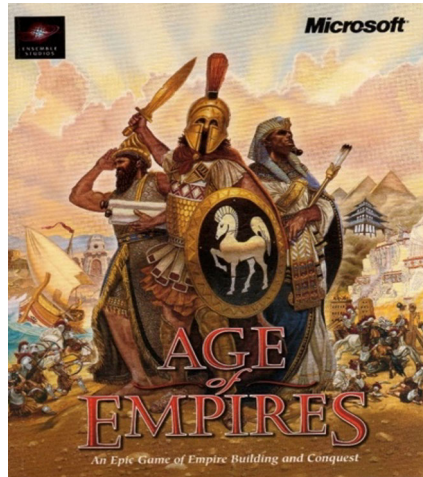
11 See, for example, G. Genette: *Paratexts*; MacLachlan, Gale L./Reid, Ian: *Framing and Interpretation*, Carlton, Vic.: Melbourne University Press 1994.

12 In offering imagination as a function, along with those explored below (the historiographic, participatory, integrative, and mnemonic, I hope to expand on the sixteen potential paratextual functions recently explored by A. Rockenberger: "Video Game Framings."

13 On this point, see Lukács, György: *The Historical Novel*, Mitchell, London: Merlin Press 1962; see also De Groot, Jerome: *Remaking History: The Past in Contemporary Historical Fictions*, London: Routledge 2016; De Groot, Jerome: *The Historical Novel*, London: Routledge 2009; for a discussion of cover art in historical fiction, see R. Cole: *Fiction and the Historical Frame*, p. 94-107; Burge, Amy: "Do Knights Still Rescue in Distress? Reimagining Medieval in Mills & Boon Historical Romance," in: Cooper, Katherine/Short, Emma (eds.), *The Female Figure in Contemporary Historical Fiction*, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan 2012, pp. 96-114.

another way, while the cover art does not depict precisely what the game offers, it powerfully evokes how it could be played if the player takes on board its imaginative cues.

*Figure 1: AGE OF EMPIRES cover art from the 1997 release of the game*



Source: Microsoft/Ensemble Studios 1997;  
Screenshot by R. Cole

The LGR review for the game noted that “an epic game deserves an epic cover illustration.”<sup>14</sup> As the reviewer goes on to note, AGE OF EMPIRES does not disappoint, with “incredible” cover art that “lets you know right off the bat that this is going to be historically intense.”<sup>15</sup> While the manual goes on to outline the game’s historical offering, this is already implicit in the cover art, as well as the tagline that follows the title: “An epic game of empire building and conquest.” The artwork forgoes the earlier periods playable in the game in favor of recognizable monuments (the Egyptian pyramids,

14 See LGR: “LGR—Age of Empires—PC Game Review,” February 6, 2015; [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=evp0dI\\_2JJc](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=evp0dI_2JJc)

15 Ibid.; this review also showed that there were different versions of the manual, some of which contained further historical information on each civilisation.

Grecian triremes), historical shorthands (the use of ‘Empire’ in the title), and combat scenes. This grounds the game in historical *doxa*, while also helping to capture the realism that underpins its mechanics.<sup>16</sup> In addition to this, the cover art unpacks some of the game’s more ambitious, if not always entirely successful, themes.

The Mesopotamian figure carries scrolls, suggesting learning and culture, while behind the stoic features of the Egyptian pharaoh, it is possible to discern a tower of Far Eastern origins. The cover art speaks to more than just the combat elements of the game. It encapsulates the differences and connections of the ancient world, hinting at the melting pot of the ancient Mediterranean and beyond, highlighting the civilizations that brought about systemic change. While there is a notable lack of female characters, likely due to the demographics of the industry and the game’s anticipated audience, the cover art grants the player a panorama of antiquity.<sup>17</sup> In fact, the cover art speaks to the title of the game, of its attempt to reconstruct an age of expansion and collapse. The contents page continues with this theme, introducing the player to the game through a digitally rendered image (taken from the in-game loading sequence) that speaks to how audiences typically access the civilizations warring on the cover: namely, through artifacts and bones. This hints at what might befall the player if they lose, while also introducing historiographical ideas that center on the nature of evidence and how one might use this to reconstruct the past. Thanks to the image and chapters listed (“Exploring the

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16 To note, this applies to most of the game’s mechanics; as I explore below under ‘Participation,’ it is possible for players to cheat, thus undermining the game’s historical realism.

17 This was addressed in later installments, whether in-game as in *AGE OF EMPIRES II* (1999), where players fielded both male and female villagers, as well as in the legacy cover art for *AGE OF MYTHOLOGY* (2002) and *AGE OF EMPIRES III: DEFINITIVE EDITION* (2020), as demonstrated on the *AGE OF EMPIRES* website homepage, see <https://www.ageofempires.com/>; the credits in the 1997 *AGE OF EMPIRES* manual reveal that the overwhelming makeup of Ensemble Studios was male, while Nick Yee demonstrates that at least some historical strategy games continue to appeal more to male players than female; Yee, Nick: “Beyond 50/50: Breaking Down the Percentage of Female Gamers by Genre,” in: *Quantic Foundry*, January 19, 2017; <https://quanticfoundry.com/2017/01/19/female-game-rs-by-genre/>

map,” “Building your civilisation,” “Engaging in combat”), the manual makes it apparent that such reconstructions can come about through gameplay.<sup>18</sup> The introductory cover art thus establishes multiple ways into the game’s source material, making use of arresting visuals and established historical tropes, and pairing these with the unique offering of video games.

From here, the novelistic comparisons segue into tabletop gaming analogies. The manual, it becomes clear, has been printed to imitate torn and weathered parchment. The implication is that the manual, while apart from the game, is also *a part* of the game, a relic of the AGE OF EMPIRES. At the same time, its purpose is to explain everything from how to play to the victory conditions for a game. As such, the manual offers a recursive means of expressing the conditions of engagement, in that it outlines the game procedures as if from within the game itself. The metareferential relationship between the AGE OF EMPIRES manual and gameworld extends beyond the material and carries over into the content of the manual itself.<sup>19</sup> The player is presented with a commentary that, on the one hand, bears close resemblance to the prefaces of self-aware historical novels, such as Gore Vidal’s 1964 novel *Julian*, and the rulebooks of tabletop games, for instance the board-game *Risk*, in that it introduces the game’s historical setting and the rationale behind certain representational strategies, while also detailing its underlying rules. On the other hand, the manual refers directly, from its privileged position beyond the confines of the gameworld, to the nature of that world, whether as data on a CD that requires installation, a space to explore historical content and concepts, or as an environment constructed on the basis of sketches, graphical models, and interfaces. While the paratextual discourses that mirror those found in novels and tabletop games are perhaps less likely to elicit metareferential commentary and subsequent self-reflection in the player due to their familiarity, the latter examples certainly have potential in the way that they draw attention to the medial artifact and educate players in how to approach the game.<sup>20</sup> Wolf has explored how metareference may

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18 Microsoft: *Age of Empires*, p. 1.

19 For a full discussion of metareference, see Wolf, Werner: “Metareference Across Media: The Concept, its Transmedial Potentials and Problems, Main Forms and Functions,” in: Wolf, Werner et al. (eds.), *Metareference Across Media: Theory and Case Studies*, Amsterdam: Rodopi 2009, pp. ix-85.

20 Ibid., p. 65.

“work as a gratifying intellectual stimulus for recipients who are capable of responding to it and who are thus given insights into the structure, aesthetic, and other facets of the work under consideration and at the same time are invited to quasi cooperate in its production.”<sup>21</sup> Video games are, of course, different from other media, not only in their participatory mode, but also because metareference emerges more out of necessity and the practicalities of play than as a result of artistic experimentation.<sup>22</sup> Nevertheless, the player of *AGE OF EMPIRES* is encouraged by the manual to realize the potential of the simulation contained on the CD, to test the limits of the virtual by bringing the past to life through such tools.

Drawing explicit attention to *AGE OF EMPIRES* as a game is hardly surprising when one considers that the manual is, in part, a technical support manual. However, it is precisely the adaptative combination of existing paratextual formats that makes the game manual interesting. The use of cover art alongside notes on how to skip the opening animations shows how the manual simultaneously frames the game’s reconstruction of history, while also commenting on how to go about using it. Screenshots of the in-game user interface further this approach, offering a direct example of what players will experience in-game, while at the same time drawing attention to each aspect of this interface in order to break down its construction and offer players a means to make best use of its functionality.<sup>23</sup> Such examples show how early gaming paratexts managed the division between reality and virtual worlds, between ideas (a user interface for a historical simulation), controls (how to manage the simulation), and their application (the act of play). Unlike book paratexts, which typically frame their text either in situ or at a habitual distance (e.g., an online interview), or film paratexts, which are either market-orientated or part of the filmed sequence, early gaming paratexts operated across spatial domains, helping to extend the experience of the game-world. I mean this not only in the sense outlined above but also in the way that they bridged the different elements that constituted the game. Thus the manual for *AGE OF EMPIRES* refers the player multiple times to the “Technology Tree Foldout” as a place to discover the “special attributes of each

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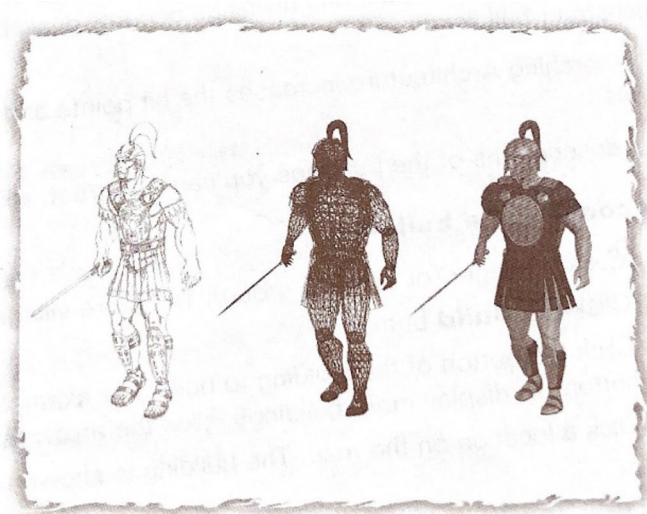
21 Ibid., pp. 67-68.

22 See Freedgood, Elaine: “Fictional Settlements: Footnotes, Metalepsis, the Colonial Effect,” in: *New Literary History* 41(2) (2010), pp. 393-411, here 399.

23 Microsoft: *Age of Empires*, p. 14.

civilisation,” as well as how in-game scores are tallied, which in certain circumstances determines the victory conditions for a match.<sup>24</sup> The manual further informs the player that the technology trees of each civilization can be found on the “Docs folder on the Age of Empires disc.”<sup>25</sup> This folder, in addition, contains historical information covering topics such as “Religion,” “Agricultural revolution,” and “Boats and sea travel,” as well as detailed unit and building information, articles on gameplay mechanics, and a bibliography to bolster the game’s historical credentials and encourage trust.<sup>26</sup> More than just a guide to the game, the manual thus acts as a guide to the broader paratextual features of AGE OF EMPIRES, offering the player scope to delve further into the underlying structures that make up the gameworld, as well as the historiography that underpins this.

*Figure 2: ‘Making of’ detail from page 24 of the AGE OF EMPIRES manual from the 1997 release of the game*



Source: Microsoft/Ensemble Studios 1997; Scan by R. Cole

<sup>24</sup> See *ibid.*, p. 8 as well as p. 7 and p. 25.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 25.

<sup>26</sup> See LGR: “LGR—Age of Empires.”



The game manual functions like the entryway/exitway paratexts of other media, framing the player's entry to an interrelated system of items that determine the parameters of play, and easing their exit with a page dedicated to the designers and developers of the gameworld in the form of credits. It also, however, functions in a manner similar to those paratexts (Genette terms them epitexts) usually found at a remove from the text, ones which provide context and critical commentary in a more "indirect" way than the peritext.<sup>27</sup> The 'making of' images that offer insight into the game's developmental processes are a good example of this.

Today, such sketches would be found in a marketing video used to drum up interest about upcoming titles. In the manual, however, they offer a comparative insight into the work behind the scenes to shape both the gameworld, and its arrangement of historical ideas. The opening infographic, for instance, distills the game's approach to historical progression through recourse to a linear series of columns and pediments that evolve from simple timber construction to the elaborate Ionic style familiar from ancient Greek temples.<sup>28</sup> Some of these graphics can be found on the left of the technology tree (Figure 3) as well as in-game when a player selects to progress to the next 'age.' There are further sketches of the "Wonders" for each civilization, which the developers deploy as an example of the pinnacle of each civilization, as well as military figures and siege units (Figure 2), demonstrating the level of detail and control that players can look forward to in-game.<sup>29</sup> Some of the 'making of' images even include editorial notes, with one sketch of a town center annotated with the following: "add skins/paved walkway ... add more bowls."<sup>30</sup> The manual includes everything from the minutiae of development to experimental concept art and fully realized military spectacles. In addition, the player is presented with in-game screenshots of the loading screen and campaign menus, which translate the 'making of' images into actual gameplay experience.<sup>31</sup> When combined with cover art and tutorials that offer hints and tips for exploring the game's terrain and the very units and buildings introduced via formative sketches, these paratextual discourses

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27 G. Genette: *Paratexts*, p. 346.

28 Microsoft: *Age of Empires*, p. 2.

29 Ibid., pp. 6-7 and pp. 17-19.

30 Ibid., pp. 22-23.

31 Ibid., pp. 8-13.

connect the game's production of historical experience to its realization of this same experience. In doing so, the manual benchmarks the developers' interaction with (and deployment of) the historical imagination, alongside the player's own historical imagination. Scholars use various terms to describe the complex processes by which the past is realized and experienced both collectively and personally, from "historical consciousness" and "historical psychology" to the "historical imaginary."<sup>32</sup> What these terms capture is the "imaginative sympathy" required to bring the past into being in the present, which triggers "self-knowledge [and] self-discovery."<sup>33</sup> By reading the manual, the players begin relating their experiences to the game's historiographical approach. More, they are able to explore its reconstruction of the past through a sympathetic understanding of the virtual past presented *and* its inception. Such insight, whether or not players are familiar with historical strategy games, positions them intuitively to make informed gameplay decisions.

## HISTORIOGRAPHY

As we have seen, the manual performs a significant amount of the historical framing around the game, encouraging specific forms of reminiscence. This can be seen in the cover art, the graphics that detail the artifacts of empire, and the 'found document' feel of the manual. Many of these initial themes are expanded on in-game. For instance, the user interface contains an

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- 32 For historical consciousness, see White, Hayden V.: *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth-Century Europe*, Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press 1973, pp. 1-2; Wyke, Maria: *Projecting the Past: Ancient Rome, Cinema, and History*, New York: Routledge 1997, p.13; Roberts, David et al.: *The Modern German Historical Novel. Paradigms, Problems, Perspectives*, New York: Berg 1991, p.1; for historical psychology, see De Groot, Jerome: *Consuming History: Historians and Heritage in Contemporary Popular Culture*, London: Routledge, Taylor & Francis 2016, p. 207; for the historical imaginary, see J. De Groot: *Remaking History*, p. 2 and pp. 152-153.
- 33 See Hopkins, David: *Conversing with Antiquity: English Poets and the Classics, from Shakespeare to Pope*, Oxford: Oxford University Press 2010, p. 32-33, who develops this through reference to Hume and Collingwood.

architectural ‘frieze’ at the bottom of the screen that evolves across each ‘age’ in much the same way as the pediments evolve in the manual. There are, however, several other methods by which the manual situates the game historically. These include the titles of campaigns and in-game victory conditions, the mechanics of resource gathering, and the modes of diplomatic engagement. I will cover each of these before considering how the technology tree expands on such methods.

The manual defines the game’s campaigns as follows: “a predesigned series of related scenarios that chronicle the rise of one of the mighty civilisations of antiquity.”<sup>34</sup> Titles such as “Ascent of Egypt Learning Campaign,” “Glory of Greece,” and “Yamato Empire of the Rising Sun” determine the context for each of these campaigns and situate them within a triumphal understanding of history. Only the “Voices of Babylon” campaign hints at the more nuanced picture that emerges from the titles and scenarios of the individual missions in each campaign. The “Voices of Babylon” campaign suggests a dialogue, and in fact offers narratives of rise and fall and rise again (under the player’s control). Similarly, the missions for the other campaigns explore the complex narrative legacy that makes up the apparent ‘rise’ of a civilization. The “Glory of Greece” campaign, for example, offers insight into the mythological history of the Trojan War, the internal conflicts between Athens and Sparta during the Peloponnesian War, and the conquests of Alexander the Great. In doing so, the campaign pays tribute to ancient epic (e.g., Homer’s *Iliad* and *Odyssey*), as well as Greek historiography (e.g., the histories of Herodotus, Thucydides, Xenophon, and Arrian), while also combining these different types of account in the form of a linear, playable chronology. The titles of these campaigns reveal an unresolvable tension at the heart of the game, which revolves around how to define, catalog, and make playable the game’s 12,000 years of history. The same tension exists in the game’s victory conditions. While the game mechanics favor conquest as the primary means to achieve victory (gameplay largely involves constructing military buildings and upgrading military units), conflict is, in fact, only one of six possible victory conditions. Apart from the time limit condition, all other victory conditions embed historiographical ideas that flesh out the game’s depiction of historical progress. Wonders, for example, are buildings “that have become icons for their civilization” and which grant victory if they

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34 Microsoft: *Age of Empires*, p. 10.

stand for 2000 years.<sup>35</sup> In alluding to the wonders of the ancient world and their historiographical significance, the game, in turn, reifies the idea of these constructions, turning them into literal icons of victory. The score system, meanwhile, encompasses the “lasting legacy of architecture, literature, language, ideas, and technological innovation that influences those that followed.”<sup>36</sup> Artifacts and ruins, moreover, “bring prestige to the civilisation that controls them,” and confer victory the longer the player holds all of them. Even the ethically questionable conquest mechanic delivers a commentary on history. Players, the manual tells us, “do not need to destroy trade vessels, transport vessels, fishing vessels, Artifacts, Ruins, or walls.”<sup>37</sup> While this makes a conquest victory easier, it is also a side note on the survival of certain aspects of civilizations beyond their ‘fall.’ The campaign titles and victory conditions chart possible modes of play, offering a top-down approach to understanding historical progress that ramifies the more the player engages with the components of the game.

Being a historical strategy game, the manual has to balance its introduction to in-game mechanics (e.g., resource gathering) with the historical thinking behind them. This balance is often weighted in favor of the game mechanics, with the manual listing the types of resources available, as well as how to go about collecting using ‘villagers.’ However, there are moments when this type of descriptive account gives way to historiographical engagement. For instance, the player is told that the “Gold” resource “represents all types of precious metals, including gold, silver, bronze, and copper.”<sup>38</sup> In defining this mechanic, the manual goes on to show, in the chapter “Engaging in combat,” how it facilitates the historical idea of tribute between states, especially vassal states. Meanwhile, the use of other headings such as “Diplomacy,” “Allied Victory,” and “Converting enemy units” in the same chapter demonstrates the ways in which the game embeds ancient inter-state relations on a macro as well as micro-level. Contextualizing the game mechanics not only defines how the developers have codified historical development in the form of victory conditions, resource gathering, and intercultural

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35 Ibid., p. 6.

36 Ibid., p. 7.

37 Ibid.

38 Ibid., p. 21.



games), as technologies that can be developed and unlocked by the player also include social and religious developments.”<sup>41</sup> The game fuses these developments in the form of the technology tree, which, as the manual notes, “shows all of the technology paths you can pursue in Age of Empires ... depend[ing] on the civilisation you are playing.”<sup>42</sup> Where the game manual offers narrative explanation, the technology tree provides a concise example of the way in which the game regulates its historical contents and concepts. Players are, in turn, invited to investigate and consider how to make best use of these standards in-game.

Taking inspiration in part from character inventories in historical novels and itemized unit cards in tabletop games, the technology tree (Figure 3) offers a comprehensive breakdown of the game’s historical elements and integral mechanics.<sup>43</sup> By orienting the player and determining the type of game-play available, the technology tree facilitates tactical planning. This is achieved through an overview of in-game icons for every building, unit, and technology, including the requirements for each. It is important to stress that the technology tree was not available in-game in the original 1997 release and that without this paratext, it is not clear which building might offer which technology or how to go about consolidating economic or military strength. As fans have reflected in forums, the best way to comprehend how the different buildings and units of their burgeoning empire might perform, change, or develop over time was to consult the paper copy.<sup>44</sup> The technology tree pieced together what was much harder to grasp in-game, and therefore enabled the player to plan ahead. This can be understood generally, but also in a culturally specific manner, with the technology tree attempting to account for the historical context of each culture. The “Civilization Attributes” section on the reverse challenges players to consider the best tactics when they cannot, for example, field archers as the Greeks, or siege equipment when

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41 Flegler, Alexander: “The Complexities and Nuances of Portraying History in Age of Empires,” in: Rollinger, Christian (ed.), *Classical Antiquity in Video Games: Playing with the Ancient World*, London: Bloomsbury Academic, pp. 205-216, here p. 207.

42 Microsoft: *Age of Empires*, p. 25.

43 For an overview of character inventories in historical novels, see R. Cole: *Fiction and the Historical Frame*, pp. 130-145.

44 See <https://forums.ageofempires.com/t/tech-tree-availability-in-menu/67029/7>

playing as the Phoenicians, as well as how they might go about defeating civilizations that lack certain technologies. Whether this is as successful as in later installments in the AGE OF EMPIRES series, where cultures have their own tailored units, is debatable. However, the approach taken by the developers in the original game, especially when considering the fact that each civilization had a different ‘look,’ demonstrated an ambition to simulate difference and empower players to develop their own affinities, strategies, and counters within the context of the game.

More than just a practical tool, the technology tree frames historical, economic, and religious developments in an authentic, if not entirely accurate, manner.<sup>45</sup> In their discussion of the historical video game *Red Dead Redemption 2* (2018), set in the American West, Donald and Reid connect authenticity with cultural memory and suggest that for developers (and players) “it is less about getting the past completely accurate and more about getting the feeling of period and timeline correct.”<sup>46</sup> Some unit names in the AGE OF EMPIRES technology tree are certainly questionable, as is the sense of historical progress born out of military investment and cultural supremacy. However, as fans of AGE OF EMPIRES have suggested, the technology tree uses the build-up of ages as a way to understand the overwhelming complexity of history in one infographic.<sup>47</sup> The map-like quality of the technology tree allows it to incorporate the topographies of ancient civilizations, which are then indexed by the manual’s explanation of each ‘age,’ along with the in-game historical notes that accompany campaign scenarios. The technology tree thus allows a move from the historiographically general to the historically specific in-game. This takes place at a narrative level, with each campaign scenario limiting the technologies available based on the time period covered, and also at the level of design. From the manual’s sketches of resource mining to the final icons in the technology tree, the player is presented with condensed graphics that encapsulate ideas and their potential for

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45 A. Flegler: “The Complexities and Nuances,” pp. 206–209.

46 Donald, Iain/Andrew Reid: “The Wild West: Accuracy, Authenticity and Gameplay in *Red Dead Redemption 2*” in: *Media Education Journal*, (66) (2020), pp. 17.

47 This insight came about during an interview with the creative director of Friday Sundae Studio; see Cole, Richard: “Introducing Friday Sundae,” *VROracle*, 16 March, 2021; <http://www.vroracle.co.uk/article/7/>

exploration in real-time strategy. Thus, ancient religion is contained in the idea of the “Priest” unit, who can heal other units and convert enemies, as well as supplementary technologies including “Polytheism” (which can be upgraded to “Monotheism”) and “Afterlife.” These technologies have a respective impact on gameplay. “Monotheism” enables priests to convert buildings and enemy priests, while “Afterlife” increases conversion range. They also attempt to align with the sweeping changes that took place in the ancient world, with the former hinting at the immense socio-cultural impact of monotheistic religions and the latter modeling the impact of ancient mystery cults and the theologies of emerging religions.

The technology tree offers branching possibilities for play, much like a *Choose Your Own Adventure* novel. In this, it is similar to other technology trees in non-historical strategy games.<sup>48</sup> At the same time, it embeds historical potentials as the foundation of the game’s ludic experience. While scholars, as Flegler points out, have critiqued games like AGE OF EMPIRES and CIVILIZATION for the way their technology trees can be interpreted as “teleologic or deterministic,” this is not the only means of conceptualizing the types of narrative structure on offer.<sup>49</sup> For Flegler, the preconditions in the technology tree are “not necessarily trying to convey that events *had* to happen that way in history, just that they *did* end up doing so”, and are thus an attempt by the developers to represent historical contingencies.<sup>50</sup> Moreover, the experience of players cannot be forgotten. Flegler points out how player experience can challenge the “linear ... culture-optimistic conception of history” presented by the game’s mechanics in a variety of ways, including losing or indeed choosing not to progress to the next age for strategic reasons.<sup>51</sup> Chapman has gone a step further and argued that an ideological critique of such structures in historical games has to confront the same organizing principles at work in historiography itself, while de Groot has pointed out how the randomness and replayability of historical strategy games outweigh any baked-in determinism. It is, therefore, perhaps more fruitful to consider the latency in paratexts such as the AGE OF EMPIRES technology tree, a latency fed by the participation of players who can just as easily reinvigorate the

48 A. Flegler: “The Complexities and Nuances,” pp. 207-208.

49 Ibid., p. 208.

50 Ibid.

51 Ibid., p. 2010-213.



ideas of progress, imperial expansion, and military dependency embedded in the technology tree as challenge them.<sup>52</sup>

The technology tree has both a pragmatic, tactical-orientated effect, in that the player can make use of its “Attributes” pages to determine the best way to play a civilization, but also a paradigmatic one. It acts as a game-inspired substitute for complex historical processes, offering a set of assumptions, values, and practices that model a historically-aligned engagement with the past as represented in games. In revealing the mechanics of the game alongside the way in which these systems distill historical ideas and events, the technology tree opens up the possibility for players to reflect on the potential organization and mutability of historical content and historiographical concepts in video games. Coupled with the manual’s top-down campaign titles, victory conditions, and narrative descriptions of historical scenarios, the paratexts of *AGE OF EMPIRES* provide a historical experience that combines popular and lesser-known historiography with interactive, behind-the-scenes insight into historical components and the making of game-based historical representations. Far from being a trivial substitute for historical engagement, these paratexts have contributed to formative experiences. Adam Chapman, a scholar of digital games, prefaced his monograph on the subject with a retrospective on *AGE OF EMPIRES*, which, in 1998, enabled him to discuss the “importance of technology in history.”<sup>53</sup>

## PARTICIPATION

Gaming paratexts exist in that space between the player and interactive play. Such a division, as we will see, has become increasingly hard to mark.<sup>54</sup> With the material paratexts of the 1997 edition of *AGE OF EMPIRES*, however, this

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52 See J. De Groot: *Consuming History*, pp. 157-158 and Chapman, Adam: “Is Sid Meier’s *Civilization History*?” in: *Rethinking History* 17(3) (2013), pp. 312-332.

53 Chapman, Adam: *Digital Games as History: How Videogames Represent the Past and Offer Access to Historical Practice*, New York: Routledge 2016, p. 4-5.

54 M. Consalvo: *Gaining Advantage in Videogames*, pp. 21-22 explores how this has been the case for a while, and may even be integral to digital media, though this is partly disputed by A. Rockenberger “Video Game Framings,” who argues that distinctions are possible, and, in fact, vital.

spatial arrangement is much easier to determine. This has enabled us to consider the ways in which the manual and technology tree frame access to the game and its source material. The question remains, though, as to how these paratexts might be used by the player to achieve a specific outcome, as well as how they might be repurposed country to expectation in ways that inform the experience. Let us now consider how the “embedded narratives” provided by the developers in the manual and technology tree can become catalysts for action, preparing and shaping the “emergent narratives”<sup>55</sup> produced by the player during play.

The technology tree equips the player to make informed decisions about which units to field against others. The “Unit Attributes” page details the special abilities of units, including generic examples such as how cavalry will be effective against infantry, as well as less obvious ones, such as how chariots are resistant to conversion. These mechanics gain additional complexity when the benefits of each civilization are also in play. As the manual notes, “if a world has extensive seas, choose to play a civilisation with advantages in ship building or speed ... If you are competing with the Persians, prepare for eventual clash with War Elephants.”<sup>56</sup> The player can make use of these suggestions, along with the mechanics from the technology tree, to craft their own strategy guide, which is likely to produce better results than trial and error alone. Whether or not the player uses this strategic potential for a quick victory or a challenge (e.g., fielding units against their counters), the manual and technology tree empower players to take advantage of the cultural and military affordances of ancient civilizations, to consider why these led to certain outcomes as detailed in the game’s campaigns (e.g., Athens’ empire, built on its navel strength). As each campaign is about more than just the units fielded, the technology tree further facilitates decision-making around other aspects of empire building. Thus, players can use the technology tree to set their economic as well as military agenda for each game, perhaps focusing on resource gathering and technological advancement in order to make it to the next ‘age’ ahead of the AI. As Flegler writes,

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55 Salen, Katie/Zimmerman, Eric: *Rules of Play*, Cambridge, MA: MIT Press 2003, p. 383; A. Flegler: “The Complexities and Nuances,” pp. 205-206 also draws on this terminology to discuss the different narrative experiences at work when playing AGE OF EMPIRES.

56 Microsoft: *Age of Empires*, p. 8.

the balancing act of when to advance through the ‘ages’ has been considered by players to be “a meaningful part of the game system where individual decisions can mean victory or defeat.”<sup>57</sup> The technology tree is not an end in itself, a graph that all players will learn by rote to apply in every situation. Indeed, its options are, like those in history, contingent on external factors. The player, especially at higher difficulty levels or when playing against experienced players, will require a flexible approach that only the technology tree can offer. Not only that, but they will also need to appreciate the finer practicalities of the game, as listed on the “Hot Keys” page of the technology tree. Here, the player can learn which hotkeys will offer an advantage in the heat of battle. YouTube streamers of the series rely on the game’s shortcuts to micromanage units and buildings, to gain the strategic benefits only available through mastery of its controls.<sup>58</sup> While it is certainly possible to learn and adapt simply by playing the game, the paratexts of *AGE OF EMPIRES* can be thought of as an early example of the hints and tips often deployed in contemporary games during loading screens, including historical games such as *Assassin’s Creed Odyssey* where such tips offer both practical as well as educational information. The technology tree foldout demonstrates that another level of mastery can be obtained, so long as the player takes advantage of certain rules listed on its pages. These rules range from the game’s scoring system to civilization bonuses, technological options, and input mechanisms. The developers thus made possible a mode of play that relied on the study, consultation, memorization, and subsequent appreciation of the game’s underlying mechanics as revealed by its paratexts. By making use of these paratexts, players, in turn, have participated in the historical structures that they generate, while also shaping such structures according to their playstyle.

*AGE OF EMPIRES* offered a further means for players to explore ideas and opportunities based on the game’s format. In the manual, players are told that “the scenario builder lets you create randomly generated or custom maps,” while the “campaign editor lets you create your own campaigns by

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57 A. Flegler: “The Complexities and Nuances,” p. 213.

58 See, for example, *AOE Tips: “5 Tips on Economy Micromanagement”*, April 25, 2021; [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9oA8\\_63sCB4](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9oA8_63sCB4), a video devoted to breaking down micromanagement in the *AGE OF EMPIRES: DEFINITIVE EDITION*, which cites Hotkeys as one of the key areas to master; micromanagement became even more important in later instalments as further grouping keys were released.

combining scenarios into a custom campaign that you can distribute to other players.”<sup>59</sup> The manual directs players to the “Help” section on the game disk for further information about using the editor, which in turn could be consulted when attempting to configure the game’s constituent parts, including player settings and the full roster of unit options. The LGR YouTube review for the 1997 game expressed how “fantastic” this innovation was, which let players “create anything you saw in the main campaigns and allow you to test scenarios [...] without requiring any external programs.” This functionality was so useful as to make “third party expansions to the game that added a slew of new scenarios and campaigns,” redundant.<sup>60</sup> The editor takes the idea of the manual’s ‘making of’ sketches to their logical conclusion, placing the game’s environment at the mercy of the player, enabling them to generate everything from historically-inspired battles to maps that put the AI at a disadvantage, and share these with other players. The game’s paratexts are a call to use the full functionality provided, even where this may run counter to the game’s historical framings or victory conditions. This is true of both the campaign/scenario editor, but also other functions, such as the “Enable Cheating” option listed in the manual, which “determines whether players can use the cheat codes.”<sup>61</sup> These codes bypassed the game’s rules and added an element of parody to its setting, spawning everything from additional resources to the “laser wielding nuke trooper that will cut through anything ancient Egypt had to offer.”<sup>62</sup> As the LGR reviewer goes on to say, “unrealistic—yes—did I care—not one bit.”<sup>63</sup> In terms of undermining victory conditions, the technology tree score system suggests ways in which players might set themselves challenges. While virtually all contemporary games set challenges for the player in the form of in-game achievements, these early paratexts are not prescriptive. Rather, they break down the mechanics that underpin possible in-game achievements by listing the scores players could aim for by pursuing, for instance, religious supremacy in a campaign. The freedoms within AGE OF EMPIRES are perhaps best summarized by Flegler

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59 Microsoft: *Age of Empires*, p. 16.

60 LGR: “LGR—Age of Empires.”

61 Microsoft Corporation: *Age of Empires: An Epic Game of Empire Building and Conquest*, p. 13.

62 LGR: “LGR—Age of Empires.”

63 Ibid.

when he notes that “it is quite legitimate to set oneself the goal of cutting down all forests and cultivating the entire map with fields instead of defeating the opponents.”<sup>64</sup> The game’s paratexts showed players how they could tailor their experience, finetuning the level of historical realism as well as the type of play they might wish to pursue.

The 1997 paratexts of *AGE OF EMPIRES* charted an interactive, immersive experience that is about more than just the player and a computer simulation. The game’s paratexts are sites of playful engagement with the content and concepts of the game. They foster ludonarrative opportunities and give rise to creative engagements. Their potential to continually structure and redirect the experience of the game suggests that rather than being adjacent to the experience, they are fragmented parts of the experience that have, over time, been brought together.

## INTEGRATION

Inspiring players to take action is a core part of the manual and technology tree for *AGE OF EMPIRES*. It is hardly surprising, then, to note that later games co-opted such paratexts into their digital spaces and marketing drives. Subsequent installments such as *AGE OF EMPIRES II: THE AGE OF KINGS* (1999) and *AGE OF MYTHOLOGY* (2002) continued to offer a game box, manual, and technology tree but went on to supplement these with access to the technology tree in-game. The 2018 *DEFINITIVE EDITION* of *AGE OF EMPIRES*, meanwhile, dispensed entirely with material packaging. For the first time ever, and likely in response to calls for this very feature on the *AGE OF EMPIRES* forums, players could access the technology tree of their chosen civilization within a campaign.<sup>65</sup> The *DEFINITIVE EDITION* also made important changes to the introductory sequence and home screen. The cover art, which we explored at the start of this chapter, forms the basis of both the introductory sequence and the main menu, only this time, the visuals are rendered graphically. This marks a departure from the 1997 game, which led with a graphically rendered combat scene also found on the technology tree. More than

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64 A. Flegler: “The Complexities and Nuances,” p. 213.

65 See <https://forums.ageofempires.com/t/will-aoe-de-have-the-tree-of-technologies/27519>

20 years on, the AGE OF EMPIRES cover art remains central to the memory and experience of the game, which tallies with Jonathan Gray's argument that paratexts not only package texts but help to "create [...] and continue them."<sup>66</sup> This legacy can also be traced in the box art for other historical games, in particular, TOTAL WAR: ROME II (2013) and ASSASSIN'S CREED ODYSSEY (2018), which use the same techniques of a superimposed figure against a compound background of classically inspired, combat-orientated imagery. The AGE OF EMPIRES cover art can also be found on the Definitive Edition website, alongside every civilization's technology tree.<sup>67</sup> The website acts as a repository for the game's paratexts, including the earlier "Help" folder, hosting screenshots, tech support, and historical context. This information has not only been updated but also embellished.<sup>68</sup> The updates are mostly confined to the visuals and the historical notes, with the technology tree itself only undergoing minor changes. In terms of the website embellishments, there are now interactive, multimedia learning opportunities tied to the history of each civilization, as well as live forums and a 'before-after' image slider that draws comparisons between the original game and the Definitive Edition.<sup>69</sup> The website, while still separate to the base game, draws together the fragmented paratexts of the 1997 release, retaining their benefits while merging them with more recent paratextual innovations, such as the "Age Up!" video series that documents the "awe-inspiring stories behind the civilizations in AGE OF EMPIRES."<sup>70</sup> Many of these adornments can also be found on the distribution platform Steam, which makes available thousands of reviews to read alongside more traditional paratexts. While players do not have to engage with any of these paratexts, whether the early iterations or indeed those released today, the fact that they are now integral to contemporary games, including their marketing and point of sale strategies,

66 J. Gray: *Show Sold Separately*, p. 10, and also pp. 2-7.

67 See <https://www.ageofempires.com/games/aoe/> and <https://www.ageofempires.com/aoetechtree>

68 See [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=o95T\\_Hn0ncw](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=o95T_Hn0ncw). Players are aware that history changes and that this was written in 1997.

69 See <https://www.ageofempires.com/history> and <https://www.ageofempires.com/games/aoe/>

70 See Age of Empires: "Age Up Episode 12—The Man in the High City", June 5, 2018; <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2uNuphW-kC8>

demonstrates how, over time and through use, they have moved from periphery to center.<sup>71</sup> Mia Consalvo pointed out in 2007 that, for certain games, at least in theory, “the paratext and the text are now functioning as an interrelated unit.”<sup>72</sup> The wholesale adoption of this dynamic has since resulted in a change to the essential composition of the gameplay experience.

Beyond the series, we can see evidence of this trend in the way that paratexts such as the technology tree are now habitual in historical strategy games, whether real-time, turn-based, or role-playing. For instance, the TOTAL WAR series (2004-) included in-game overviews of all buildings and units in *ROME: TOTAL WAR* (2004), as well as a wholly interactive technology tree and comprehensive online encyclopedia for *TOTAL WAR: ROME II*. The recent *TOTAL WAR SAGA: TROY* (2020), meanwhile, split the functions of the technology tree into multiple game mechanics. Thus, players are able to micromanage the divine will of the gods by investing in certain paths. Separately, they can oversee the issuing of royal decrees, which cost time and resources but deliver powerful in-game benefits. Managing technology trees is now a prerequisite of historical strategy games, with players having to master a layered experience of games-within-games, relying on extensive micromanagement skills to build their empire.<sup>73</sup> This is particularly true of historical role-playing games like *ASSASSIN’S CREED ODYSSEY*, where players must micromanage their armor stats, abilities, and the mercenary system, as well as their ship’s attributes, side quests, and plot-orientated assassinations.

To help players digest this, historical games now typically deploy short in-game tutorials. These build on the learning campaign and scenario

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71 See J. Gray: *Show Sold Separately* for this point generally, as well as p. 205 specifically where he notes that ‘for some, in other words, the outskirts *are* the centre, a point that I return to below when thinking about paratexts and nostalgia.

72 Consalvo, Mia: *Cheating: Gaining Advantage in Videogames*, Cambridge, MA: MIT Press 2007, p. 22.

73 See, for example, Soraya for an overview of the “highly individuated levels of selection [and] extreme personalization and asset micromanagement” that make up the interactive menus of the stealth game *METAL GEAR SOLID V: THE PHANTOM PAIN* (2015); Murray, Soraya: “Landscapes of Empire in *Metal Gear Solid V: The Phantom Pain*,” in: *Critical Inquiry* 45(1) (2018), pp. 168-198, here p. 185.

instructions that AGE OF EMPIRES provided for each campaign by animating and combining them with many of the strategic and tactical suggestions contained in the manual and technology tree. In TOTAL WAR: ATILLA (2015), for example, the campaign advisor opens each campaign by explaining the game's historical context, making strategic suggestions for the player to consider, and drawing attention to the unique nature and benefits of the civilization under discussion. These tutorials also present an overview of the user interface and suggest how to go about achieving the victory conditions of a campaign.

In addition to in-game tutorials, most contemporary AAA games release trailers ahead of publication that feature behind-the-scenes development and deliver gameplay previews. While a short trailer was released for AGE OF EMPIRES, this had limited circulation.<sup>74</sup> Moreover, it only sketched the possibilities of the game. For contemporary titles, it is not unexpected to have extensive video commentary that offers the same benefits distilled in the AGE OF EMPIRES manual and technology tree. For example, the "Age Up" series attached to the Definitive Edition of AGE OF EMPIRES, as well as the "Guide To" series released ahead of the Remastered edition of ROME: TOTAL WAR (2021), both cover in detail the historiography behind their respective games.<sup>75</sup> Other trailers, such as those for ASSASSIN'S CREED ODYSSEY, look at the game's artwork, style, and gameplay possibilities, outlining the ways in which players can interact with the gameworld.

## PARATEXTS AND MEMORY

With the paratexts for AGE OF EMPIRES, players could imagine and anticipate the world of the game. Now, a good deal of that work is done for players online using a single point of access service. While helping to cut down on the material produced, this development is not always seen as a universal good. As Gavin Lane recently wrote for *Nintendolife*, "nowadays, there's

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74 See Khalbrae: "Age of Empires Official Trailer (1997, Ensemble/Microsoft)," July 7, 2015; [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=R\\_Rs-uFGJB8](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=R_Rs-uFGJB8), along with the comments section.

75 For example, see Age of Empires: "Age Up Episode 12—The Man in the High City", June 5, 2018; <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2uNuphW-kC8>



little practical need for a printed manual; all relevant info is communicated through in-game tutorials, cutscenes and menus. Still, sometimes we long for a little leaflet to flick through.”<sup>76</sup> The poll at the end of the article, which asked readers whether they genuinely missed game manuals, shows that out of 1,595 votes, 78% agreed with the statement. This is supported by the qualitative statements below the piece, with users reflecting that they “miss the manuals because [they] miss the ‘complete package’ feel that games used to have [...] or any amount of extra effort that heightened the presence of the object as a thing to have.” Others stated their preference for “a nice hardback full of development art and discussion.”<sup>77</sup> Threads on Reddit offer much the same analysis, with fans reminiscing about how game manuals initiated and enhanced the gaming experience. Whether they were read on the way back from purchasing a game, or, as one user noted, in the bathroom, the use of these paratexts extended from the informative to the formative.<sup>78</sup> Lane expresses this best when he notes that “the concept of the instruction manual is tied up inextricably with those glorious moments of anticipation—the time when you’re on the cusp of a new experience when anything feels possible.”<sup>79</sup> Online guides written by players, as well as streaming videos, attempt to confer similar gaming capital, but forum discussions reveal a deep nostalgia for developer produced materialities—for the (perhaps less obvious) transactions they enabled.<sup>80</sup> While some companies are tuning into this nostalgia (the classically themed dungeon crawler HADES, released in 2020,

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76 See Lane, Gavin: “Talking Point: Do You Miss Instruction Manuals?” in: *Nintendolife*, 27 April, 2021; [https://www.nintendolife.com/news/2021/04/talking\\_point\\_do\\_you\\_miss\\_instruction\\_manuals](https://www.nintendolife.com/news/2021/04/talking_point_do_you_miss_instruction_manuals)

77 See the comments section on [https://www.nintendolife.com/news/2021/04/talking\\_point\\_do\\_you\\_miss\\_instruction\\_manuals](https://www.nintendolife.com/news/2021/04/talking_point_do_you_miss_instruction_manuals)

78 See [https://www.reddit.com/r/PS4/comments/3jmn8e/why\\_did\\_video\\_games\\_stopped\\_including\\_instruction/](https://www.reddit.com/r/PS4/comments/3jmn8e/why_did_video_games_stopped_including_instruction/) and [https://www.reddit.com/r/ps2/comments/hil072/game\\_manuals\\_were\\_so\\_much\\_better\\_back\\_in\\_the\\_day](https://www.reddit.com/r/ps2/comments/hil072/game_manuals_were_so_much_better_back_in_the_day)

79 G. Lane: “Talking Point.”

80 For a discussion of the dynamics and origins of ‘gaming capital’, see M. Consalvo: *Cheating*, pp. 2-5.

came with an art book as well as a download code for its soundtrack), these physical releases are the exception rather than the norm.<sup>81</sup>

Traditional gaming paratexts gave players the chance to pause play and consider the game from a different perspective. This type of slow, offline, materially-informed play continues to be advocated for on forums for historical strategy games, even when such games come complete with in-game manuals and encyclopaedias.<sup>82</sup> Consalvo has argued that “whether we admit it or not, we have learned how to play games, how to judge games, and how to think about games and ourselves as gamers in part through [paratexts].”<sup>83</sup> We can see this on the AGE OF EMPIRES forums, where fans of the Definitive Editions have demonstrated how important the technology tree is to learning the game, but also how digital availability does not always offer strategic benefit because access, at least in an unmodded game, is limited to certain menus.<sup>84</sup> As one fan wryly notes, “back in the day, you could consult the paper manual that came with the game.”<sup>85</sup> That same fan created a separate thread devoted to the question of whether the developers should include within the game a digital scan of the original box, technology tree, and manual in the form of an immersive archive that captured the experience of consulting these paratexts. This, it is suggested, “would help honor the original game and ground it to the original game in a way that bridges that divide or gap in a much more tangible/palpable way than, say, reusing sounds.”<sup>86</sup> Tom

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81 Gray, Kate: “Hades Gets Physical Release, Plus Soundtrack Download and Art Book, Available to Pre-Order Now,” in: *Nintendolife*, 23 February, 2021; [https://www.nintendolife.com/news/2021/02/hades\\_gets\\_physical\\_release\\_plus\\_soundtrack\\_download\\_and\\_art\\_book\\_availble\\_to\\_preorder\\_now](https://www.nintendolife.com/news/2021/02/hades_gets_physical_release_plus_soundtrack_download_and_art_book_availble_to_preorder_now); see also the comments section on [https://www.nintendolife.com/news/2021/04/talking\\_point\\_do\\_you\\_miss\\_instruction\\_manuals](https://www.nintendolife.com/news/2021/04/talking_point_do_you_miss_instruction_manuals) where one user expressly states that they bought HADES (2020) “immediately” after finding out it had an art book.

82 See <https://forums.totalwar.com/discussion/89461/total-war-encyclopedia-offline-version> for a discussion where fans ask for an offline version of the ROME TOTAL WAR encyclopaedia.

83 M. Consalvo: *Cheating*, p. 8.

84 See <https://forums.ageofempires.com/t/tech-tree-availability-in-menu/67029/7>

85 Ibid.

86 See <https://forums.ageofempires.com/t/suggestion-digital-scans-of-original-box-manual-viewable-in-game/67112>

Apperley has shown how user-generated content can help to establish a “a better perspective on the player’s experience of the game.”<sup>87</sup> In our case, this extends to the paratextual experience of *AGE OF EMPIRES*, which is now as much about the history of the game as it is the history within the game.

The paratexts for the 1997 edition of *AGE OF EMPIRES* reveal how such artifacts carry over experience. Their effects extend well beyond initial framings for the player, and demonstrate the utility of thinking about multimedia paratexts, as Gray suggested, in terms of “overflow” and “convergence,” as opposed to the more limited “airlock” image proposed by Genette.<sup>88</sup> Indeed, these paratexts speak to the rapid and seemingly unstoppable march towards the virtual. “By this point, we seem so far away from the original game, both in time and in the evolution of the game. That’s not a bad thing; it’s just the way it is.”<sup>89</sup> This comment, which develops the thread on creating a digital archive of the *AGE OF EMPIRES* paratexts, draws attention to the seismic events that have taken place since its release. The LGR review similarly comments on how much has changed, demonstrating this visually through recourse to the game’s paratexts, including its box, manual, and technology tree. Hosted on YouTube, which now accounts for a sizable portion of user-generated framings, this review reflects on how “*AGE OF EMPIRES* is still a landmark game, both personally and in terms of RTS titles at large, and as such it has my utmost respect.”<sup>90</sup> In concluding the video, the reviewer offers an apt parting metaphor for the game’s impact: “even if it is somewhat cracked and broken like so many pieces of Greek pottery [...] I can’t help but love the crap out of it.”<sup>91</sup>

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87 Apperley, Tom: “Counterfactual Communities: Strategy Games, Paratexts and the Player’s Experience of History,” in: *Open Library of Humanities* 4, no. 1 (2018), pp. 1-22, here p. 3.

88 J. Gray: *Show Sold Separately*, pp. 40-41 and p. 118.

89 See <https://forums.ageofempires.com/t/suggestion-digital-scans-of-original-box-manual-viewable-in-game/67112>

90 LGR: “LGR—Age of Empires.”

91 Ibid.

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# Making Mario

## Shaping Franchise History Through Paratextual Play

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RENÉ GLAS

### INTRODUCTION

A gameplay video shows Nintendo's company mascot and cultural icon Mario running and jumping through one of his iconic side-scrolling levels. While doing so, the characters, blocks, and backgrounds transform from the old '8-bit' look to contemporary graphics, showing the various iterations the SUPER MARIO BROS. (1983-) series of games went through over time. More so, while Mario runs from left to right, the level itself appears to spell "30<sup>th</sup> Anniversary" written in the air, the lettering created out of the various block-based platforming elements of the series. The gameplay video, presented during a Nintendo Direct broadcast on April 1, 2015, by the company's late CEO Satoru Iwata, commemorated the 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the first SUPER MARIO BROS. game.<sup>1</sup> It formed the start of a months-long anniversary celebration in which Nintendo would organize special events like concerts, and release tie-in merchandise like a Super Mario Encyclopedia, playing cards, and even a limited edition luxury watch retailing at close to \$20 000.<sup>2</sup> The apotheosis of the festivities would, it turned out, be the release of SUPER MARIO MAKER

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- 1 Nintendo Direct 4.1, April 1<sup>st</sup>, 2015; <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IMedqo8mLaQ&feature=youtu.be&t=9m>
  - 2 For an overview of all SUPER MARIO BROS. 30<sup>th</sup> Anniversary celebrations activities and merchandise, see: [https://www.mariowiki.com/Super\\_Mario\\_Bros.\\_30th\\_Anniversary](https://www.mariowiki.com/Super_Mario_Bros._30th_Anniversary)



(2015), a game which allows you to actually create the type of levels the video showed. Here, you do not simply play a Mario game, you are allowed to create one using the elements of old Mario games as building blocks.

The release of SUPER MARIO MAKER and its eventual 2019 sequel SUPER MARIO MAKER 2 (from here on SMM and SMM2), then, do not just present new titles in the long-running series. By looking back at their roots, they are closely bound up with Nintendo's celebration of the Mario brand. It was this brand which, as part of Nintendo's new line of home consoles, formed a key factor in the creation of an international 'Nintendo generation,' a new market of players following the infamous 'great video game crash' of the early 1980s which ended the medium's initial golden age.<sup>3</sup> The first SUPER MARIO BROS. games set the company apart from the competition in form and style. As Kline, Dyer-Whiteford, and De Peuter explain,

"while many earlier and later games—from SPACEWAR! (1962) to DOOM (1993)—obviously display their deep affiliation with military-industrial culture, Mario appears to be made of different stuff, a stuff of purer playfulness, wit, and humour."<sup>4</sup>

The SMM games both actively return to these roots as a form of retrogaming but do so by allowing the player what it meant to—and means to—actually *make* a piece of this "different stuff," a homemade Mario experience.

This chapter will engage with the SMM games' simultaneous function of commemorating the old and presenting tools to create the new. It does so by seeing the engagement with the games as a form of paratextual play. In earlier work, I have discussed making-of material of games (like behind-the-scenes documentaries, concept art, audio commentaries) in their paratextual capacity.<sup>5</sup> Paratext here is borrowed from Genette, who defines them as any textual production accompanying or surrounding a particular narrative object "in order to present it, in the usual sense of this verb but also in the strongest

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3 Kline, Steven/Dyer-Whiteford, Nick/de Peuter, Greg: *Digital Play: The Interaction of Technology, Culture, and Marketing*, Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press 2013, pp. 109-111.

4 Ibid., p. 118.

5 Glas, René: "Paratextual Play: Unlocking the Nature of Making-of Material of Games," in: *DiGRA/FDG '16—Proceedings of the First International Joint Conference of DiGRA and FDG*, DiGRA 2016, pp. 1-13.

sense: to make present, to ensure the text's presence in the world, its 'reception' and consumption."<sup>6</sup> Making-of material, especially when originating from the same source as the main text (like the design team, publisher, or marketing department), is often created to shape our interpretation of the core text within games. It is meant to promote the main text, either before its release (to sell it commercially) or after (to sell it artistically), and in a predominantly positive matter highlighting creative and commercial successes rather than failures.<sup>7</sup> With games, it is no different. Such material has, however, found its way into games themselves, for instance, as non-diegetic inserts into game worlds or as achievement objects to be collected, influencing play directly and collapsing text and paratext into integrated experiences. With such paratextual play forms, I argued, paratextual material does not just shape interpretation but also play itself.<sup>8</sup>

While the SMM games have received critical attention from the perspectives of participatory culture, co-creation, and the political economy of the gaming industry,<sup>9</sup> my primary focus here is how the games fare from the perspective of historiography, being games that allow playing with the history of the franchise. As I have noted before, "[s]eeing the paratextual qualities of making-of material merely as uninteresting marketing material would underplay their role and function as part of the contemporary gaming experience."<sup>10</sup> The often-uncritical tales and trivia found in making-of material serve a purpose beyond shaping the interpretation of a core text and that text

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6 Genette, Gerard: *Paratexts: Thresholds of Interpretation*, London: Cambridge University Press 1997, pp. 1.

7 Cf. work on DVD extra's: Gray, Jonathan: *Show Sold Separately: Promos, Spoilers, and Other Media Practices*, New York: New York University Press 2010; Hight, Craig. "Making-Of Documentaries on DVD: The Lord of The Rings Trilogy and Special Editions," in: *The Velvet Light Trap*, No. 56 (2005), pp. 4-17.

8 R. Glas: "Paratextual Play," p. 11.

9 Cf. Lefebvre, Isabelle. "Creating with (Un)Limited Possibilities: Normative Interfaces and Discourses in Super Mario Maker," in: *Loading... The Journal of the Canadian Game Studies Association*, Vol. 10, No. 16 (2017), pp. 196-213; Witkowski, Emma/Manning, James: "Playing With(out) Power: Negotiated Conventions of High Performance Networked Play Practices," in: *DiGRA '17—Proceedings of the 2017 DiGRA International Conference*, DiGRA 2017, pp. 1-18.

10 R. Glas: "Paratextual Play," p. 11.

within a larger franchise history. More so, they also shape the fandom of such a franchise. As film scholar points out in relation to DVD extra's, their appeal to fans suggests that "one of the major foundations of fandom—the accumulation and dissemination of the smallest details involved in the production of media objects—is substantially informed (though not wholly determined) by industry discourse."<sup>11</sup> Fans thrive on such content, and it is offered to them in abundance—especially in games like SMM, which celebrate Nintendo's heritage. Within games, the accumulation of dissemination of knowledge is often associated with gaining and having proficient literacy and cultural capital among gamers.<sup>12</sup> Playable making-of material then has the potential to shape the core gameplay experience, but also its ideal fan-player.

My previous effort on the topic of paratextual play actually concluded using SMM as an example deviating from other games using making-of material. It suggested that if making-of material aims to convey how the creative process of a game took form, SMM actually presents a situation where one could try out the process oneself. It can be considered, *as a whole*, a making-of of Mario.<sup>13</sup> This chapter, then, follows up on that consideration. It approaches the SMM games through paratextual analysis first and foremost, seeing how they fit within the larger SUPER MARIO BROS. franchise as new additions, at the same time shaping the interpretation of it as a whole. The approach is to see the games as texts with their own paratextual surround, where I have looked at promotional material, related merchandise, interviews, and other paratextual material released prior to and after the games' release. As much of the material initially 'selling' the concept of SUPER MARIO MAKER in relation to the franchise's history is linked to the first SMM, the primary focus lies here. The second SUPER MARIO MAKER is similar in setup but further expands upon some of the first' SMM's core concepts. I will also see the games as paratextual in their own right to see if and

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11 Klinger, Barbara. *Beyond the Multiplex: Cinema, New Technologies, and the Home*, Berkeley: University of California Press 2006, p. 73, referenced in: R. Glas: "Paratextual Play."

12 Cf. Walsh, Christopher/Apperley, Thomas: "Gaming Capital: Rethinking Literacy," in: *Changing Climates: Education for Sustainable Futures, Proceedings of the AARE 2008 International Education Research Conference*, Brisbane: Queensland University of Technology 2009, pp. 1-12.

13 R. Glas: "Paratextual Play," p. 11.

how they function as playable making-of material of the larger Mario franchise. Approaching the SMM games through the perspective of paratextual play conveys the ways in which Nintendo has pulled the ‘Nintendo generation’ experience of yesteryear into the present in a playable format.

## MAKING FRANCHISE HISTORY

Before looking into the case of the SMM games themselves, broader insight into the political economy of game history is needed. Since its early days, the gaming industry has always been a heavily technology-driven one, with an economy of perpetual innovation which primarily looks forwards.<sup>14</sup> In his work on dealing with the history of games, Newman points out that due to this constant focus on moving forward, looking back at old generations of games mostly is primarily a means by which to assess the present: “what was once cutting edge and new is recast as a benchmark by which subsequent development may be measured.”<sup>15</sup> At the same time, however, the industry also needs its past as it offers familiar brands, genres, and proven strategies through which consumers engage with the medium. Even though constant innovation remains a fundamental characteristic of the gaming industry, “the reality of the situation is a balancing act that simultaneously invokes the revolution of innovation and reassuring familiarity of continuity of form and function.”<sup>16</sup> With its long-running and established history, Nintendo has been engaged in this balancing act for decades. Nintendo celebrated the 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Super Mario, but as a company, it has a much older history.<sup>17</sup> It has been in existence as a successful producer of hanafuda playing cards

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14 S. Kline/N. Dyer-Whitford/G. de Peuter: *Digital Play*, pp. 66-67.

15 Newman, James A.: *Best Before: Videogames, Supersession and Obsolescence*, London: Routledge 2012, p. 52.

16 Ibid.

17 SUPER MARIO BROS. marked the first game in the main series in the larger Mario franchise but Mario as a character has appeared in even earlier games. Mario’s earlier outings included the DONKEY KONG-series of arcade games which started in 1981, the MARIO BROS. arcade game from 1983 which also featured his green-colored brother Luigi, and a host of portable GAME & WATCH games featuring Mario from 1982 onwards.

since 1889, and from the 1960s onwards became a proliferate creator of toys, many of which were electromechanical or electronic.<sup>18</sup> Throughout its history, but especially in the decades it has been active as a digital games and electronics company, Nintendo has tried to give shape to its aforementioned family-friendly image. Mario plays a key part here as company mascot. Through up and downs, Nintendo has shown it can be successful in, as Suominen puts it, “raising new Nintendo and Mario player generations by combining old game characters with new innovations and playabilities.”<sup>19</sup> Suominen wrote this sometime before the announcement and subsequent release of the SMM games, but they serve as prime examples of this trend. The first SMM was released on the Wii U and, later, portable Nintendo 3DS consoles and made active use of their touch screen/stylus option for easy use of the game’s toolbox, as well as the consoles’ integrated social networking service to create and share levels. While the Wii U turned out to be a relative failure in terms of consumer adoption, its approach to offering a portable touch-screen and social networking made it a blueprint for the much more successful Nintendo Switch console on which SUPER MARIO MAKER 2 was released. The SMM games were not the only Mario games on the consoles mentioned, though. These platforms were already marketed to the consumer through new Mario games such as SUPER MARIO 3D WORLD (2013), MARIO KART 8 (2014), and SUPER MARIO ODYSSEY (2017), all titles which have become bestsellers. Like other long-running franchises strongly associated with Nintendo, for example, THE LEGEND OF ZELDA (1986-) and POKÉMON (1996-), the pervasive presence of Mario shows the importance of balancing the old and the new for the company.

Nintendo then has a long history of successes with key brands, which it actively re-visits time and time again. Doing so, it also shapes its history to its own ends. As Suominen has pointed out in his work on retrogaming and the digital retro economy:

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18 Cf. Voskuil, Erik: *Before Mario: The Fantastic Toys from The Video Game Giant’s Early Days*, Châtillon: Omaké Books 2014.

19 Suominen, Jaakko: “Mario’s Legacy and Sonic’s Heritage: Replays and Refunds of Console Gaming History,” in: *Proceedings of DiGRA Nordic 2012 Conference: Local and Global—Games in Culture and Society*, DiGRA 2012, pp. 1-18, here p. 13.

“When a game company utilizes its older products to make a new application, when the same company mentions the year it was established in a job advertisement or when it celebrates a game figure’s 20-year anniversary, the company *uses history*.”<sup>20</sup>

This is not just a creative strategy but also a discursive one. As Suominen points out elsewhere, nostalgia in the form of recollection is part of a broader cultural adaptation of technology, with “the repetition and simulation of earlier experiences being the aim of nostalgic product-making.”<sup>21</sup> Nostalgia is baked into Nintendo’s products, both in terms of hardware (new consoles and controllers featuring recognizable features of previous ones) and, as this chapter discusses, its software. Since the early 2000s, for instance, the company has been actively utilizing its own past through the release of older games on their new consoles as retrogaming products.<sup>22</sup> More recently, it even released “Nintendo Classic Mini” versions of their first two original consoles, with both the design and name tailored to the original region of release. Nintendo released them as dedicated consoles, meaning the games on them are integrated rather than sold separately. The consoles have 30 (for the NES/Famicom Mini) and 21 games (for the SNES/Super Famicom Mini), all emulations playable in contemporary high-definition widescreen graphics or through 4:3 aspect ratio and a CRT filter: “like an old TV, scan lines and all.”<sup>23</sup> Roughly a third of these games are region-specific, allowing Nintendo to specifically cater to the nostalgic needs of different international audiences. More so, however, as the original platforms featured far more titles, the inclusion and exclusion of titles to fit on these “Classic” editions of the original hardware can be seen as part of the politics of canonization.<sup>24</sup>

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20 Ibid., p. 1, emphasis in original.

21 Suominen, Jaakko: “The Past as the Future? Nostalgia and Retrogaming in Digital Culture,” in: *The Fiberculture Journal*, Issue 11 (2008); <http://eleven.fibreculturejournal.org/fcj-075-the-past-as-the-future-nostalgia-and-retrogaming-in-digital-culture/>

22 J. Suominen: “Mario’s Legacy,” p. 8.

23 From the official “NES Classic Edition” website; <https://www.nintendo.com/nnes-classic/>

24 Cf. Glas, René/van Vught, Jasper: “The Politics of Game Canonization: Tales from the Frontlines of Creating a National History of Games,” in *DiGRA '19—*

In the same way, Nintendo decides which of their older titles are available again on new consoles for purchase or, in the case of the Switch console's online service, as an extra of a subscription service, the selection of games present on the Mini consoles expresses a specific activation of its Nintendo's own past. It is first and foremost a history of winners, the games presented being primarily big hits and cult favorites. This relegates telling the history of off-beat, controversial, or merely not so successful games to collectors and other retrogaming enthusiasts, which also maintain an underground market for emulations of games for those who still want to play them but lack the original hard- and software. Not surprisingly, successful legal action by Nintendo to shut down two major sites offering ROM-files of such old games was met with fierce criticism.<sup>25</sup>

Apart from Nintendo fans and other gaming enthusiasts wanting to play old Nintendo games as part of retrogaming culture, there is also a long history of playing *with* these games as part of what we could call metagaming culture. Super Mario has been amongst the most appropriated game characters out there for mash-ups, art games, custom speedrunning games, borderline abusively difficult games, and other creative experiments.<sup>26</sup> As part of Nintendo's efforts to combine managing their own legacy while at the same time tapping into contemporary participatory gaming culture, in 2013, they released NES REMIX on the Wii U console's eShop. The game and its inevitable sequels compiled a host of games from the original NES console, offering new challenges and variations of the original gameplay. As Altice points out,

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*Proceedings of the 2019 DiGRA International Conference: Game, Play and the Emerging Ludo-Mix*, DiGRA 2019, pp. 1-15.

- 25 Cf. Onanuga, Tola: "All That's Wrong with Nintendo's Heavy-handed ROM Crackdown," in: *Wired*, August 18, 2018; <https://www.wired.co.uk/article/nintendo-roms-emulator-loveroms-loveretro-lawsuit>
- 26 Cf. Newman, James: "Kaizo Mario Maker: ROM Hacking, Abusive Game Design and Nintendo's Super Mario Maker," in: *Convergence*, Vol. 24, Issue 4 (2016), pp. 339-356; Boluk, Stephanie/Lemieux, Patrick: *Metagaming: Playing, Competing, Spectating, Cheating, Trading, Making, and Breaking Videogames*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press 2017 Boluk, Stephanie/Lemieux, Patrick: *Metagaming: Playing, Competing, Spectating, Cheating, Trading, Making, and Breaking Videogames*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press 2017, pp. 181-202.

these games were aimed at introducing a new generation to Nintendo's legacy in bite-size, whimsical chunks.<sup>27</sup> But more poignantly, he points out that "Nintendo is not simply re-presenting their own legacy, but directly competing with the emulation ecosystem that has thrived for decades, generating their own Famicom hacks and remixes," adding that "Nintendo is redefining its platform in its own emulated image."<sup>28</sup> From this perspective, the release of the first SMM game in 2015 formed the next logical step. Rather than having Nintendo's own developers play around with the company's old games, here players *themselves* would be invited to do so—only then, specifically using Mario franchise games. Rather than letting players run free with their games, player creativity can, in SMM, be contained within the limits of the game itself. For Sotamaa, who signaled similar processes at hand within the content creation-heavy game *LITTLEBIGPLANET*, launched in 2008, the release of such editor games shows a shift in console manufacturers' stance on player productivity to a more inclusive but nonetheless controlled one.<sup>29</sup> While certainly not ignoring the political-economic concerns one can have about these new forms of corporate control, Sotamaa is reserved about the negative implications they might have. For him, certain creative limitations are certainly in place, yielding a lot of control to the developer. The freedom to play with the creative tools within these games nonetheless leads to new ways to repurpose a console for creative production and social interaction.<sup>30</sup> For Boluk and Lemieux, the implications run deeper due to the existing participatory culture SMM taps into. For them, "Nintendo has begun to recapture and capitalize on those games occurring in, on, around, and through Super Mario," signaling that it is "the company's attempt to incorpo-

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27 Altice, Nathan: *I Am Error: The Nintendo Family Computer / Entertainment System Platform*, Cambridge, Mass.: The MIT Press 2015, p. 326.

28 Ibid., p. 330.

29 Sotamaa, Olli: "Play, Create, Share? Console Gaming, Player Production and Agency," in: *The Fiberculture Journal*, Issue 16: Counterplay (2010); <http://sixteen.fiberculturejournal.org/play-create-share-console-gaming-player-production-and-agency/>; Abend, Pablo/Beil, Benjamin: "Editors of Play: The Scripts and Practices of Co-creativity in Minecraft and LittleBigPlanet," in: *Diversity of Play: Games – Cultures – Identities*, ToDiGRA 2016, Vol. 2, No. 3 (2016), pp. 5-30.

30 Ibid.



rate the metagame.”<sup>31</sup> This also meant that players could and indeed did see their levels removed and their progress within the game reset if Nintendo deemed the content in violation with (often vague) terms of use.<sup>32</sup>

The political economy behind these types of games remains a relevant topic in relation to the ever-developing notion of “playbour,” the commodification of productive forms of play as free labor.<sup>33</sup> This chapter, however, focuses primarily on the historical dimensions of a franchise. From this perspective, the difference between *LITTLEBIGPLANET* and the SMM games is the latter’s long and established franchise history. As Newman points out, SMM, on the one hand, seems to celebrate this history and the design philosophy behind it, while on the other hand foregrounds the type of extreme and even unfair level designs Mario’s metagame culture is known for.<sup>34</sup> For him, the celebratory perspective comes from “the paratextual presence of Nintendo’s designers;” they add a mythical sheen to the original design processes.<sup>35</sup> While Newman situates this presence primarily epitextually—that is outside of the game on the official website, on YouTube, or through interviews—my main interest here is how the game *itself* is paratextual and how playing, creating, and sharing content within this controlled environment can be seen as a form of paratextual play. It is Genette’s notion of paratexts as ‘threshold of interpretation’ through which the following sections will look at Nintendo’s “make it your way, play it your way” claim, to quote the tagline of the second game. The next sections will discuss three different readings of the SMM games in relation to the notion of paratext. First, I will discuss the paratexts around SMM to see if and how they present the game as a making-of Mario. I will then continue discussing the game as paratextual itself. Finally, I will point out how design choices also shape the Nintendo fan and his/her outlook of the franchise from a paratextual play perspective.

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31 S. Boluk/P. Lemieux: *Metagaming*, pp. 197, 199.

32 See for instance the example of player GrandPOOBear in: E. Witkowski/J. Manning: “Playing With(out) Power.”

33 Kücklich, Julian: “Precarious Playbour: Modders and the Digital Games Industry,” in: *The Fibreculture Journal*, Issue 5: Precarious Labour (2005); <http://five.fibreculturejournal.org/fcj-025-precocious-playbour-modders-and-the-digital-games-industry/>

34 J. Newman: “Kaizo Mario Maker,” p. 339.

35 *Ibid.*, p. 351.

## THE PARATEXTS OF SUPER MARIO MAKER

While the link between the SMM games and the franchise history it plays is an obvious one, the fact that the game might also provide insight into the creative processes which made the franchise what it is remains less overt. This starts with the announcement of the first game, the primary focus of this section. Even though SMM was specifically tied to the 30<sup>th</sup>-anniversary celebration of its main hero in the 2015 video mentioned in the introduction, the game itself was, in fact, already announced a year earlier during the E3 trade event in June 2014 as part of Nintendo's digital event.<sup>36</sup> In the announcement, which features no voice-over or additional introduction, it is shown how the gameplay and the creative tools function. It ends with the title, year of release, and the tagline: "Create your own custom Mario Courses!" No references are made to the creative process which underpinned the original games these custom courses shown aim to mimic.<sup>37</sup> A year later, as part of the E3 trade event of 2015, the game was indeed pro-actively linked to the 30<sup>th</sup>-anniversary celebration. In promotional material the original game's designers Shigeru Miyamoto and Takashi Tezuka talk about this connection in a vivid manner. In the video presentation, both designers are seen sporting "30<sup>th</sup> Anniversary" T-shirts while sitting at a table filled with original graph paper and artwork of the first game in the series. It is here that Miyamoto and Tezuka point out that the original game and its offshoots in the franchise were first designed through a form of paper-prototyping where levels were entirely sketched out on graph paper before being translated into software. As Tezuka points out, they took the graph paper phase of design "very seriously because programmers put a lot of time inserting this data manually," which meant it actually reduced the amount of experimentation possible within level designs. He subsequently points out that the process of pre-visualization of levels through paper was still being used in contemporary (side-scrolling) Mario platformers. To improve this creative process, Nintendo's tool development team was asked to design a tool to construct sidescrolling

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36 "Nintendo Digital Event—E3 2014," Nintendo, YouTube, June 10 2014; [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=caS\\_eSIKlj0](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=caS_eSIKlj0)

37 I should be noted here that Nintendo often uses "course" and "level" interchangeably in their communication, as do many players. They mean the same in the context of the SSM games and within this chapter.

courses, “creating the basics of what would become SUPER MARIO MAKER.”<sup>38</sup> After this moment, both designers explain how SMM offers a far more streamlined and fun experience than the original tools they used as it is more geared towards usability. It also highlights entirely new options, like the option to not just build but also share levels online as well as the addition of amiibo support to include characters from other Nintendo franchises.<sup>39</sup> As a promotional paratext, it helps to mythologize the creation process of the original game and add artistic and aesthetic value to the main text it aims to sell, in this case, SMM.<sup>40</sup> With a video like this being epitextual—that is ‘outside’ of the main text rather than bundled with it—and this chapter’s aim to look at instances where text and paratext overlap, a next step is looking at how such historical connections and associated values are actually made within the final product itself.

While epitextual material remains ‘outside’ of the main text, peritextual material is released alongside it. When it comes to making-of material, this is the material often bundled with games at retail, both within the physical retail package or as extra’s on the game’s carrier itself.<sup>41</sup> We can start with the first category. As mentioned, the release of the first SMM on the Wii U platform marked the endpoint of Mario’s 30<sup>th</sup> Anniversary celebration. This connection is, however, not directly made—at least not in the regular retail version of the game. Two special edition packages were released, though, both including a “30th Anniversary Collection Classic Color” amiibo of Mario (a 3D-rendition of his original 1980s 8-bit look).<sup>42</sup> Using this amiibo

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38 “Super Mario Bros. 30th Anniversary—Special Interview,” 2015.

39 Amiibo’s are so-called toys-to-life figurines exclusive to Nintendo platforms. An amiibo can be wirelessly connected to every Nintendo console released since 2014, offering bonus functionalities in selected games. Using selected amiibo’s in conjunction with Super Mario Maker would unlock unique avatar costumes in the style of the original SUPER MARIO BROS. This allows players to play with characters designed to look like 8-bit versions of characters which, in some cases, were created decades after the original Mario game (like SPLATOON’s (2015) Inklings or WII FIT’s (2007) trainer character).

40 J. Gray: *Show Sold Separately*, pp. 81-82.

41 R. Glas: “Paratextual Play,” p. 3.

42 One special edition only featured the amiibo figure, the other was a bundle which included the Wii U console itself, a T-shirt featuring Mario and a soft toy.

in-game would increase Mario's sprite and allows him to run through obstacles due to increased strength. No links to the original game's design are made except the look and name of the amiibo. All retail versions of the game, including the less costly and more readily available regular retail version, did include a little hard-cover art book dedicated to the game. This booklet primarily presents artwork of SMM and the various games it was based upon, and mostly without any written context. There are, however, several pages that enticingly present scans of the original games' design work, including characters and their animations, levels, and game mechanics. All the way in the back of the booklet, a few pages are dedicated to a "SUPER MARIO BROS. Course Flashback." Here, we see the opening screen of the original 1985 game as well as several well-known levels presented on the graph paper planning sheets also visible in the video with Miyamoto and Tezuka mentioned earlier.<sup>43</sup> Without having seen the video where the significance of the graph paper is explained, such images provide hints about the original design process but few meaningful insights. The fact that the original graph paper planning sheet was also made available outside of the video or booklet as a free downloadable pdf document on the game's 'bonus extra's' page of the Nintendo website also remains hidden.<sup>44</sup>

Moving to the presence of making-of material inside of the actual game, references to the creation process of the game and its franchise are also more covert than overt. For peritextual making-of material to function as a means to influence interpretation, "paratextual location and visibility [...] is key."<sup>45</sup> Other than the clear audiovisual references to the SUPER MARIO titles it bases its core level design on (discussed below), SMM, however, does not feature a clearly marked making-of section that is visible within its menu structure or presented as a potential unlockable reward. As such, while it is clear the game is based on older games in the franchise, it does present itself explicitly

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43 *Super Mario Maker Premium Pack Artbook*, Nintendo, 2015. pp. 82-91.

44 The original graph paper planning sheet can be found here: [http://www.nintendo.co.uk/games/oms/mario-maker-3ds/\\_downloads/super\\_mario\\_bros\\_sheets.pdf](http://www.nintendo.co.uk/games/oms/mario-maker-3ds/_downloads/super_mario_bros_sheets.pdf) Interestingly enough, for SUPER MARIO MAKER 2, a set of themed course planning sheets can be downloaded for the price of ten "platinum points," a Nintendo-specific currency earned by using some of the company's services, see <https://my.nintendo.com/rewards/bbd412f881e529fc?lang=en-US>

45 R. Glas: "Paratextual Play," p. 6.

as a making-of. When players look for help during the creating of a level, they can go to the in-game manual. This document presents players with step-by-step guides to every part of the game supposedly presented by the “Super Mario Maker Makers;” a pigeon called Yamamura (called after Nintendo level designer Yasuhisa Yamamura) and female human hostess Mary O. Scrolling down in the various sections of the manual, at some point the player will reach a “Developer Talk.” As these sub-sections are presented in a different color and are situated underneath a green pipe, a well-known level element in the franchise signaling the player has reached a hidden location, the Developer Talk subsections feel deliberately set apart from the rest of the manual. It is here that references to the design process of both the original games as well as SMM itself are made. The very first Developer Talk starts with: “When creating courses in Super Mario Maker, we start off in exactly the same way we used to when making courses for the original SUPER MARIO BROS.: by picturing the course in our heads.” It then continues to explain this mental picture was translated onto graph paper and, finally, into its final software form. Who the “we” behind the Developer Talk is remains unclear—supposedly, it is Yamamura and Mary O. talking as they present the manual as a whole? As the two characters also present a series of tips to create levels under the header of “Mastering the Craft,” it is clear that they are supposed to be stand-ins for the game’s design team, or more broadly speaking, the designers of the franchise. For Newman, the way these two fictional characters present these core design values is significant:

“[A]lthough they appear under the auspices of providing sagely game design guidance, the paratextual presence of Nintendo’s designers serves less to shape or frame SMM making but rather has the effect of venerating and mythologizing the creation of the canonical SUPER MARIO levels and games which remain other, elsewhere and unattainable through replication or improvement.”<sup>46</sup>

To come to these conclusions, Newman took a critical look at the type of levels the platform actually affords to create, as well as the types of levels which became popular on its sharing platform. I will do so too in the next sections, during which I will also highlight some of these affordances. Newman, however, situates “Miyamoto et al. [as] firmly located in the peripheral

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46 J. Newman: “Kaizo Mario Maker,” p. 351.

media and paratextuality of the SMM release.”<sup>47</sup> And indeed, the videos and SMM’s manual discussed remain on the outside of the game, forming the Genetteian thresholds of interpretation through which the main textual experience can be interpreted. My aim is to approach the game as paratextual *itself* to see how Nintendo frames and shapes its history through play.

## PLAYING WITH THE FRANCHISE

When first starting SMM, the player is put in a level feeling similar to World 1-1, the iconic first level of the original SUPER MARIO BROS. The only difference seems to be a wooden arrow pointing towards the right. This particular level being one of the most famous ones in gaming, pointing players in the right direction seems superfluous. The goal, however, is to signal that this time, the experience will be different. This is soon established as a gap appears in the floor too large for Mario to jump over. When a player attempts to do so anyway, the game is halted, and a pop-up appears saying that “someone’s left this course unfinished” and that it is up to the player to finish it for them. After clicking on the “Create” button fashioned to look like a typical Hollywood clapperboard, the level turns into the level creation tool. It is only after learning the basics of this tool in this tutorial level that the player gets a new opening screen to the game with the option to “Play” or “Create.” And even then, both options are presented as clapper boards, indicating that whatever the choice, the player is allowed to be in the director’s chair. Many of the pre-existing levels accessible through the “Play” options are, after all, created by other players. Or they are created by the design team to introduce players to the wide variety of options of SMMs design tool, showing that players could, in fact, have been the creator of the level themselves.

According to Lefebvre, “pushing the player to familiarize herself with the level editing tool before she can have the option to play or create by herself, the game insists on its particularity: the *making* of Mario levels by the player.”<sup>48</sup> Lefebvre emphasizes “making” here as an alternative to merely “playing”—she rightly so argues that “Nintendo has made creating the clear,

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47 Ibid., p. 348, emphasis in original.

48 I. Lefebvre: “Creating With (Un)Limited Possibilities,” p. 198.

dominant strategy” to unlock all the game’s options.<sup>49</sup> For Miyamoto, SMM is “like game design training software: try it if you want to get into game design.”<sup>50</sup> As mentioned before, the original series’ design began with putting an idea onto graph paper. The core of the SMM games’ creation platform is a representation of this graph paper, with the interface allowing for the easy placement of objects like blocks, pipes, and goombas. Players can scroll left to right through the entire level they are creating. It provides a feel of what is involved in the planning of levels as a whole rather than the way it is presented in the final product (a side-scrolling game that always only presents the part of a level the character is currently active in). During the play-testing of a level, Mario also leaves ghost images of himself after moving, allowing players to trace movement and re-arrange objects accordingly. It is a detailed and flexible tool and helps players understand what it means—and therefore what it might have meant—to create a proper Mario level.

The SMM tool should not be confused with the strenuous process the designers had to go through with the original game, though. As the in-game manual’s Developer Talk puts it, it used to be “just a course-creation tool” in need of “element of surprise” in order to release it as a game with “weird and wonderful things that had never been seen in the Mario series before.” This included removing the original hardware restrictions the old games had to allow for experimentation, by, for instance, adding endless amounts of objects in the levels or using amiibo’s to add characters from other franchises into a Mario level. The tools available to undo, erase, save/reload are also playful; there is an “Undo Dog” and a “Reset Rocket” and so on. These tools-as-characters are references to earlier player-creativity Nintendo titles going all the way back to MARIO PAINT in 1992. All these elements make a SMM game easy to use and intuitive while adding a large number of options for experimentation. On top of this, the SMM games make sharing not simply an option but a prominent feature. Players can upload and download each other’s work and can reward stars if they like particular levels making players rise on the leaderboards. As Newman points out, SMM “gamifies game design.”<sup>51</sup>

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49 Ibid.

50 “Super Mario Bros. 30<sup>th</sup> Anniversary—Special Interview,” 2015.

51 J. Newman: “Kaizo Mario Maker,” p. 341.

While the SMM games clearly focus on ‘making’ above all, the question is how this also ties up to the ‘making of’ Mario. The graph paper connection is an obvious one already discussed above; it is here where the design process of the original game was translated into a tool and, subsequently, a game using this tool at its core. Using this gamified design tool does provide an experience mimicking ‘how it was made’. Here too, however, affordances and limitations give shape to understanding the making of the original Mario games.

If one looks at the very first core design principles laid down in the handwritten test specifications noted down by Miyamoto for the original SUPER MARIO BROS., one can see strong resemblances with what SMM still has on offer. In these specifications, Mario’s move mechanics in relation to the game space are introduced; Mario runs from left to right, jumping over platforms and avoiding obstacles, with the background scrolling past at the same speed as Mario’s movement. Mario can only move in the left part of the screen; when reaching the middle of the screen, the background starts to scroll to the right (keeping Mario in the middle of the screen). When moving to the left, Mario can only go as far as the edge of the screen.<sup>52</sup> Not being able to move back beyond the left edge of the screen was related to the limitation of the hardware (the cartridge ROM to be precise); in the many sequels, multidirectional movement did become possible.<sup>53</sup> SMM and its sequel also did remove the limitation to run backwards from the creation tool, meaning that even if one would like to recreate World 1-1 as faithful as possible, Mario would now suddenly be able to turn around and return to the start of the level. The point here is that SMM does not recreate the hard- and software preconditions of the individual Mario titles it is based on. Rather it presents one universal creation tool which uses the old games as visual reference styles. This means that it makes use of both the original pixel graphics look of 1985’s SUPER MARIO BROS. and 1988’s SUPER MARIO BROS. 3 (both released on the NES console) and the cartoony-looking style of 1990’s SUPER MARIO WORLD (for the SNES console) and 2012’s NEW SUPER MARIO BROS. U (for the Wii U console, also the host of SMM itself). As Gandolfi and

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52 From a translated scan of the handwritten test specifications for SUPER MARIO BROS.; Nintendo: *Super Mario Bros. Encyclopedia*, Milwaukie, OR: Dark Horse Books 2018, p. 3.

53 N. Altice: *I Am Error*, pp. 141-142.



Semprebene point out, these representational reference styles provide “a square based visual that appears immediate to replicate (e.g., on a blank page) following spatial and geometric coordinates.”<sup>54</sup> These coordinates, of course, mimic Miyazaki and Tezuka’s original graph paper planning sheets. As long as the reference style changes accordingly, this means players can use objects from the oldest game in the newest one and vice-versa. This increases the previously mentioned “element of surprise” but also smooths over the differences into what the experiences of designing the individual titles would have felt like. While the SMM games never explicitly claim to be about recreating this process, the fact that its promotional material, as well as the manual, do forefront the connection with the original design process does push this feeling.

To make this reduction of the original games into one-size-fits-all visual reference styles work, it becomes clear Nintendo has made choices which, from the perspective of paratextually playing with history, are not without their impact. The second SMM game, for instance, added a new theme based on 2013’s *SUPER MARIO 3D WORLD* (for the Wii U), a game which itself was never even released as a side-scrolling platformer. In fact, *SUPER MARIO 3D WORLD* is representative of a split between 2D and 3D games within the central Mario series. In 1996, *SUPER MARIO 64* was the first title to allow the player to move Mario through all three axes in space in a far more open-world setup. Since then, these types of games have become the flagship titles for Nintendo’s new consoles as the more demanding open-world environments fit well with showing off the capabilities of new hardware. The less-demanding 2D side-scrolling games in the series have since found their primary home on Nintendo’s handheld devices. In its now flattened form, only the backgrounds of the levels using the *SUPER MARIO 3D WORLD* reference style remind us of its origins. In these backgrounds, we can see traces of the original 3D levels, unreachable for the player.

The re-envisioning of *SUPER MARIO 3D WORLD* into a side-scrolling platformer style is part of the common visuals and platforming gameplay which, according to Gandolfi and Semprebene, makes the SMM games “auto-

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54 Gandolfi, Enrico/Semprebene, Roberto: “The Imaginative Embrayage Through Gaming Deconstructions,” in: *Im@go: A Journal of the Social Imaginary*, No. 7, Year V (2016), pp. 56-71, here p. 67.

referential in its mechanics and generative outcomes.”<sup>55</sup> The target domain of its referential system here would be the “entire brand of Super Mario and its evolution across time and platforms.”<sup>56</sup> They continue to argue that this makes the SMM an homage that “ask to deconstruct the target domain (the franchise) through its own rules.”<sup>57</sup> This, of course, depends on what one considers to be the rules here. For Gandolfi and Semprebene, the main interest is which game elements within the franchise are iconic in terms of representation and agency. They argue that SMM reproduces the original game’s patterns and aesthetics.<sup>58</sup> If one looks at rules more from the perspective of possible actions and limits, the rules through which SMM deconstructs the franchise are not the rules of the individual games’ but rather those of the underlying and supposedly unifying creation tool. It is an homage, then, which also slightly changes the rules of the franchise. The removal of the limitation to walk left from the original SUPER MARIO BROS. or the reduction of the free movement through all three axes to a side-scrolling environment alone in SUPER MARIO 3D WORLD are examples of this process of tinkering with franchise history. Another example is related to leaving out parts of franchise history entirely as they do not fit well within the more generic one-size-fits-all tool approach. As with the retrogaming mini consoles discussed earlier, which games are part of the SMM games and which are not is part of a politics of canonization, where inclusion and exclusion play a key role. Here, some titles are “moved to the centre of attention; others, to the margins” of a history.<sup>59</sup> Missing, for instance, is 1988’s SUPER MARIO BROS. 2, a game initially only released outside of Japan. The initial Japanese sequel to the first game had already been released in 1986 but was found too similar to the original and too difficult for international audiences.<sup>60</sup> Instead,

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55 Ibid.

56 Ibid.

57 Ibid.

58 Ibid.

59 Staiger, Janet: “The Politics of Film Canons,” *Cinema Journal*, 24 (3), pp. 4-23, here p. 8.; referenced in: R. Glas/J. van Vught: “The Politics of Game Canonization.”

60 The Japanese SUPER MARIO BROS. 2 game was ultimately released as SUPER MARIO BROS.: THE LOST LEVELS as part of the 1993 SUPER MARIO ALL-STAR compilation on the SNES outside of Japan.

Nintendo modified an advergame they had in production for Fuji Television, titled YUME KŌJŌ: DOKI DOKI PANIC (1987), into a MARIO game. This new international version of SUPER MARIO BROS. 2 had a noticeably different gameplay style, with players asked to pick up items to throw at enemies rather than jumping on them. Levels could also be vertical rather than horizontal, asking players to also move up rather than only to the right. While very different from the previous—and following—Mario games, the international SUPER MARIO BROS. 2 was a big hit, selling millions of copies.<sup>61</sup> Nintendo does not make a secret of the existence of the game at all: it has a prominent place in its officially licensed *Super Mario Bros. Encyclopedia*, for instance,<sup>62</sup> and has been available as a download in Nintendo various retrogaming platforms like the Switch's Nintendo Online service. The exclusion of SUPER MARIO BROS. 2 within the SMM games, therefore, is not necessarily related to a deliberate choice to exclude it from its franchise history but the indirect result of the affordances and limitations of SSM's design. The game's divergence from the core gameplay mechanics of the series (picking up items to throw, vertical levels) simply makes it an ill fit within a creation tool based on what the franchise has in common.<sup>63</sup>

From the perspective of paratextual play, this means the SMM games reduce the franchise to commonalities of one particular part of the series: the side-scrolling platformer. Games that do not line up well to the core gameplay mechanics presented in the level design tool either need to be retro-fitted (as with SUPER MARIO 3D WORLD) or are simply left out (as with SUPER MARIO BROS. 2). The SMM games might celebrate the quirky diversity of the Mario franchise through the play with visual reference styles, but at the same time they offer a specific interpretation of the Mario franchise as a uniform experience. This leaves less attention to what makes the individual Mario titles it references, or the specifics of their individual creation, unique. From the perspective of seeing the SMM games as paratextual to the

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61 N. Altice: *I Am Error*, pp. 111-112.

62 *Super Mario Bros. Encyclopedia*. pp. 32-39.

63 It should be noted that while writing this chapter, in April 2020, Nintendo released Patch 3.0 for SMM2. In it, they finally added an overt reference to SUPER MARIO BROS. 2 in the form of the "SMB2 Mushroom" object. This power-up item lets players change into a Mario which now can pick-up and throw items, just like in the original game it references.

franchise, we can see Nintendo using its history to suggest the franchise's development was a smooth and coherent one, with only the visual style becoming increasingly more detailed over time. A next step is to see how the player is positioned to be part of this particular history in the SMM games.

## BEING A MARIO MAKER/PLAYER

It was mentioned above that the SMM games are only based on four and, eventually, five reference style games. As the MARIO PAINT connection, as well as the inclusion of amiibo's from other games, already indicated, though, is that the SMM do not shy away from referencing many more games. Many of the more than 200 games which exist within the larger Mario franchise are, for instance referenced but not implemented as part of the core gameplay. They might, for instance, belong to entirely different game genres, like 1990's DR. MARIO (a puzzle game) or 2000's PAPER MARIO (a role-playing game).<sup>64</sup> In many cases, these references appear in the form of easter eggs, reachable through experimentation with the creation tools or unlockable through reaching certain pre-set in-game achievements. Some of these references are subtle, like the re-use of a particular level theme from SUPER MARIO SUNSHINE (2002) as a sound effect that players can add to their level creation. Others are more obvious, like costumes players can have their avatar wear, including ones from the aforementioned DR. MARIO and PAPER MARIO. In the first SMM, such costumes can be used in levels specifically created with the SUPER MARIO BROS. reference style. In SMM2, costumes no longer exist, but players can unlock outfits for their Mii digital avatar. Ever since the release of the Wii console in 2006, players have been able to create customizable avatars to represent them on the system and within certain games. In SMM2, the Mii's function as the player's representation in the Course World sharing platform. Here, players can dress up their Mii's with unlocked outfit items such as Dr. Mario's headgear or a Superball Mario suit, a reference to the 1989 Game Boy title SUPER MARIO LAND. As these outfits can be seen by other players, they, even more so than the costumes, form franchise references linked to the skill necessary to attain them. The Dr.

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<sup>64</sup> For a full overview of all games within the larger Mario franchise, cf. the fan-created *Super Mario Wiki*, [https://www.mariowiki.com/List\\_of\\_games](https://www.mariowiki.com/List_of_games)

Mario headgear item, for instance, is only unlocked when reaching a certain rank in multiplayer games. Another hat, shaped like a Cheep Cheep fish, is unlocked when more than 500 players play a course you've created. Such outfits signal prowess in playing and making SMM levels. Paratextual play here, therefore, leads to being "both a knowledgeable 'insider' (in the creative process) but also acknowledged 'expert' (in terms of gaming capital) in a measurable and communicable form."<sup>65</sup> Knowing all the references, collecting them, and showing them off to other players within level designs or through their avatar's outfits help shape a player into a franchise fan.

The SMM games' designs also shape players in different ways, which, ultimately, reflect back on the way the franchise, and the games within them, are perceived but also the way they are supposed to be played. Both Lefebvre and Newman point to the way the level creation tool is structured to push certain types of design over others, not just discursively but also in terms of actual options. As Lefebvre argues, SMM "acts as a frame for creative possibilities: constraining and enabling players' agency,"<sup>66</sup> with Newman going as far as to say that this makes "designing the kinds of levels that would sit within the Mario canon not just difficult, but positively unlikely."<sup>67</sup> The reason for this is that while the manual might provide sagely advice on Nintendo's core design values, the sample levels players are presented within promotional videos and within the game itself present far more excessive level design, often focusing on chaotic and borderline abusive level design in terms of difficulty. It is here where the SMM games tie into the Mario franchise's metagame. It affords and actively encourages players to use the level design tool to create the type of almost impossible level designs which for a long time we only saw in the franchise's subcultural fringes. It is here that we see the aforementioned attempts to incorporate the metagame.<sup>68</sup> For Newman, this process leads to a paradox where SMM, on the one hand, seems to celebrate its own design history and philosophy behind it, while on the other hand foregrounding the type of extreme and even unfair level designs Mario's metagame culture is known for.<sup>69</sup> More so, as being able to

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65 R. Glas: "Paratextual Play," p. 11.

66 I. Lefebvre: "Creating with (Un)Limited Possibilities," p. 210.

67 J. Newman: "Kaizo Mario Maker," p. 348.

68 S. Boluk/P. Lemieux: *Metagaming*, pp. 197, 199.

69 J. Newman: "Kaizo Mario Maker," p. 339.

create such levels also means having the skill to beat them, players being able to do both have, as Lefebvre points out, become stars within the SMM social platform.<sup>70</sup>

I wanted to direct attention, however, to another popular part of SMM's subculture which is speedrunning. I do not aim to discuss the subculture of speedrunning itself, nor the way Nintendo positions itself vis-à-vis this subculture. Rather, I want to look at the SMM designs afford and actually encourage such forms of play to its player and how this, subsequently, can be read from a paratextual perspective.

Speedrunning as a practice means trying to advance through a level or entire game as fast as possible while recording the proof. As a form of high-performance play, it has been around since the 1990s.<sup>71</sup> It found a much larger audience with the rise of video and especially livestreaming platforms in the past decade. Here, it has also become much more performative and competitive.<sup>72</sup> With speedruns of classic SUPER MARIO BROS. games having always been part of the subculture and Nintendo being eager to tap into the franchise's metagame, the SMM games have built the practice of speedrunning into their system as a core feature. We can see this through their focus on records, their reward structure, and, in SMM2, the inclusion of a dedicated play mode called "Ninji Speedruns." I'll discuss all three below and how these subsequently can be read from a paratextual play perspective.

When players upload a new level, they have created to the Course World sharing platform, and other players start to play them, several types of metadata are automatically provided. These include the number of people who played the course; the number of people having been able to clear the course; the subsequent clear rate (where lower usually means a course is more difficult); which player first cleared the course; and which player holds the "World Record" for that particular course in terms of the time it took them to clear it.<sup>73</sup> The world record holder and their time score are featured

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70 I, Lefebvre: "Creating with (Un)Limited Possibilities," p. 207.

71 Lowood, Henry. "High-performance Play: The Making of Machinima," in: Andy Clarke, Mitchell Grethe (eds.), *Videogames and Art*, Chicago: Intellect Books/The University of Chicago Press 2007, pp. 59-79.

72 E. Witkowski/J. Manning: "Playing With(out) Power," p. 4.

73 The "First Clear" and "World Record" titles were added for each course in patch 1.30 of SMM in December 2015, a few months after release.

prominently next to the course information when browsing through the Course World database. It does not matter what type of level it actually is. Here we find the more forgiving, explorative ones, the almost impossibly difficult ones, but also levels trying to deviate as much as possible from the traditional Mario experience through clever use of game objects. There are, for instance, music levels (using objects as instruments) and automatic levels which require hardly any input from the player (the player's avatar is bounced around by various objects). Independent of course type, the time to clear it is measured and communicated to players, and a world record is assigned to the fastest of them all. The way the record and its current holder is subsequently positioned within the user interface of the Course World emphasizes that speedrunning as a type of play as not just optional but as a key element of the Mario experience. Top speedrunners are also celebrated within the system. The "Super Mario Maker Bookmark" page, which Nintendo launched as a portal to look at all course information, has, for example, a specific tab called "Maker Rankings" where one can look up players with the most world records (which at the time of writing is an SMM player called "Tyrex," with close to 34,000 records to their name).<sup>74</sup> In SMM2, several in-game rewards are directly tied to world records. Players can, for instance, receive a "Super Star Barrette" outfit for their Mii avatar when holding the world time record in more than 500 courses. Patch 2.0 for SMM2, which came out just a few months after the initial release, further cemented speedrunning into the core experience through the Ninji Speedruns mode, which features a course created by Nintendo's design team specifically for speedrunning.<sup>75</sup> While playing a course in this mode for the first time, the game indicates it is "recon time!" After a first clear, players can then race the ghosts of other players attempting the same level, either a random sample or the fastest ones. The game, here, indicates that courses are meant to be replayed in ever-faster times and does so by also emphasizing the competitive and performative nature of the contemporary speedrunning subculture. Additionally, speedrunning challenges change periodically, and top players can

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74 For the "Super Mario Maker Bookmark" portal, see: <https://supermariomakerbookmark.nintendo.net/>

75 Incidentally, the Ninji character after which this mode is named is a reference to a character originating from SUPER MARIO BROS. 2's original design source YUME KŌJŌ: DOKI DOKI PANIC.

earn outfit rewards that stick with them till the end of such period. These outfits can be used to display speedrunning prowess on the SMM2 Course World platform, but players also need to stay on top if they want to continue showing off.

If we relate this emphasis on speedrunning to the paratextual play angle, where we consider the SMM games a making-of material for the franchise, we can consider the role and function of time for the Mario experience. One can, for instance, argue that time has always been a core part of the SUPER MARIO BROS. franchise experience. Even the first SUPER MARIO BROS. featured a timer with each level. The famous World 1-1 level had a 400 seconds time limit, for instance. Not meeting the time limit would mean failure and a restart. The time limit in most cases was a generous one, though, leaving time for a more explorative approach. The core experience, then, was a different one than games featuring time limitations as a primary way to test player skill.

In the mid-1990s, Fuller and Jenkins discussed the central feature of Nintendo's franchises as the "constant presentation of spectacular spaces."<sup>76</sup> They argued that:

"Once immersed in playing, we don't really care whether we rescue Princess Toadstool or not; all that matters is staying alive long enough to move between levels, to see what spectacle awaits us on the next screen."<sup>77</sup>

When Fuller and Jenkins wrote this in the mid-90s, these levels were still designed by Nintendo's design team. The Mario metagame was present but still relatively small and not very widespread, while speedrunning has now become core rather than fringe through social media and livestreaming platforms. The "pleasure of spatial spectacle," as Fuller and Jenkins call it, remains in the SMM games.<sup>78</sup> In his work on speedrunning, Scully-Blaker argues that a successful speedrun does not just involve many hours of training,

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76 Jenkins makes these remarks in a dialogue with Mary Fuller; Fuller, Mary/Jenkins, Henry: "Nintendo and New World Travel Writing: A Dialogue," in: Steven G. Jones (ed.), *Cybersociety: Computer-mediated Communication and Community*, Thousand Oaks: SAGE 1995, pp. 57-92, here p. 61.

77 Ibid.

78 Ibid., p. 62.



but also that the “approach to the spatial practice of playing through the game is so efficiently streamlined that it becomes a new practice unto itself.”<sup>79</sup> This practice adds far more emphasis on temporal spectacle. With speedrunning, time is not the limit to experience spatial pleasure but the starting point.

With the speedrunning play-style offering a new practice of play based on the temporal as much as spatial spectacle, and with speedrunning being a fully integrated and prominent feature of the SMM games, we can say that Nintendo presents a take on its game which until recently belonged to the franchise metagame. From a paratextual play perspective, however, such a perspective on playing Mario in a game that is set up and feels like a making-of of the original games means a potentially different outlook on these original texts—the classic games in the franchise. For younger players for whom the SMM games are part of their core experience of the Mario franchise, for whom the metagame, therefore, *is* the game, speedrunning might just be the way to approach the old games as well. Playing the original SUPER MARIO BROS. then becomes not a matter of moving between levels “to see what spectacle awaits us on the next screen” as Fuller and Jenkins put, or to save the princess in another castle, but a retrogaming experience made for speedrunning opportunities even if that means sticking to just a few levels and playing them again and again to improve the time to beat them.

## CONCLUSION

The video, which features Miyamoto and Tezuka discussing the origin of SMM, starting with graph paper, begins with vintage footage from the early 1980s. Here, we see a young Miyamoto introducing the very first SUPER MARIO BROS. while it was in production behind him. He explains that “for the earliest video games, one programmer could develop an entire game by themselves,” but “as technology advanced, sound and music specialists and graphic designers have also played a part in development.” In stark contrast with SMM the now older Miyamoto will introduce only a minute later in the same video, a game where individual players can make their own Mario

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79 Scully-Blaker, Rainforest: “A Practiced Practice: Speedrunning Through Space with de Certeau and Virilio,” in: *Game Studies*, Vol.14 (2014), Issue 1; <http://gamestudies.org/1401/articles/scullyblaker>

experience, it becomes clear that the original game was not the product of one lone but brilliant developer but the result of a group endeavor. The video shows some of this group at work on the game in their offices while Miyamoto in voice-over explains the game was furthermore “born in a meeting” where it was discussed whether the at that time innovative design of the relatively large character of Mario and scrolling world would “appeal to the current market.”<sup>80</sup>

This video material, part of SMM’s paratextual shell, shows that early on, Nintendo did not leave the release of a new product to chance. The SMM games, too, are the result of careful planning and close attention to market concerns and possibilities, from understanding the potential of new hardware to tapping into the burgeoning participatory culture already ‘at play’ with experimental Mario level designs and playing practices. Before the first SMM were announced, Suominen wondered if Nintendo could keep up fortifying an iconic franchise like Mario by “raising new Nintendo and Mario player generations by combining old game characters with new innovations and playabilities” or whether the “legacy of Mario” could be a burden for the company to branch out to new applications like online gaming.<sup>81</sup> With the SMM games, they have managed both: it’s a retrogaming experience of the old, with appeal to a new generation of players.

As I have shown in this chapter, by tying the first SMM games directly to the 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Mario and by designing the game around the notion that this tool not just mimics but actually originates from the original design approach of some of the biggest games in the franchise’s history, the SMM games have a dual function of being making-ofs of the old, and a way to present a new direction for the franchise as more user-creation driven. The design choices made, however, do impact the way the original franchise can be perceived—and played. By designing the level creator tool around what the original games have in common, attention to what makes them unique takes a step back. Games within the franchise deviating from this mold are in many cases relegated to referential easter-eggs to recognize and, in some cases, to collect as unlockables. They help shape the Nintendo fan, which can express and share their franchise knowledge in-game. The SMM games’

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80 “Super Mario Bros. 30th Anniversary—Special Interview,” Nintendo, YouTube, Nov. 18, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bKhAOe96T8c>

81 J. Suominen: “Mario’s Legacy,” p. 13.

active engagement with metagaming play-practices also shapes the Nintendo player in different ways. Through the speedrunning example, I have shown how a contemporary playstyle is introduced as a new norm which, the SMM's being essentially retrogames, potentially also reflects on one's reading and playing of the original games.

From a paratextual play perspective, this chapter's aim was to show how Nintendo frames its own history through the SMM games. These titles present the closest we have of a playable making-of of games, even though the games offer a very specific reading of what making-of means here. They look back—through a recreation of the graph paper design process and iconic reference styles—while at the same time looking forward—blending with Nintendo's metagame and channeling the games and their players in new directions. In doing so, they make Mario—even the now more than 30-year-old one—anew.

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 LITTLEBIGPLANET (Sony Computer Entertainment 2008, O: Media Molecule)  
 MARIO BROS. (Nintendo 1983, O: Nintendo R&D1)  
 MARIO KART 8 (Nintendo 2014, O: Nintendo EAD)  
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# Performances





# Player Agency in *Audience Gaming*

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RÜDIGER BRANDIS/CAN MERT BOZKURT

## INTRODUCTION

With the advent of broadband network infrastructures, video streaming services such as YouTube and Twitch have become the dominant source of multimedia consumption. As these platforms have matured, the community and its ensuing culture gave birth to a new generation of providers, initially as commercial live feeds, then as adult entertainment and game streams. These live video streams allow the audience to interact directly with the performer and talk among themselves through chat widgets. We call the live playing of a game in front of an interacting audience *Audience Gaming*.

Present research focuses mainly on why people watch others play, their socio-cultural characteristics, how they form communities, and the performers' motivations and approaches.<sup>1</sup> However, newly developing affordances of interactivity on streaming platforms such as straw polls, donation messages, and stream integrated games are not well researched. *Audience Gaming* is a result of the newly formed streaming culture. It has influenced the production of games such as DEAD CELLS (2018), where the audience can vote on what will come out of an in-game chest, or HEARTHSTONE (2014), where Twitch viewers can get in-depth information on an ongoing game:

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1 Gandolfi, Enrico: "To Watch or to Play, It Is in the Game: The Game Culture on Twitch.tv Among Performers, Plays and Audiences," in: *Journal of Gaming & Virtual Worlds*, Volume 8 Number 1 (2016), pp. 63-82.

Similar to the theatre in modern times, the spectators have become participants.<sup>2</sup>

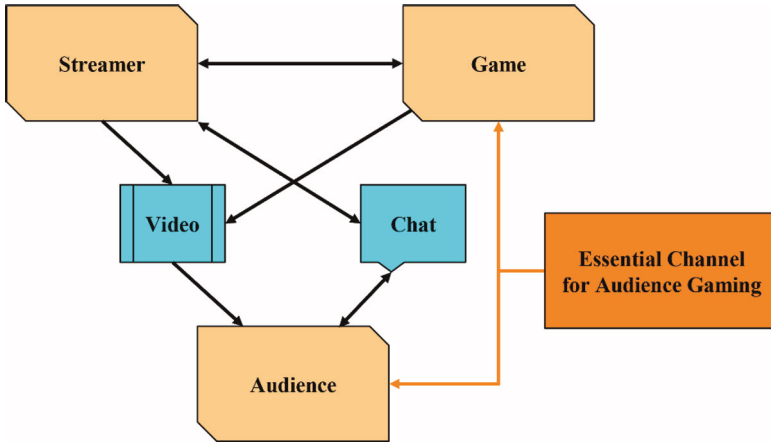
In comparison to classical multiplayer experiences focusing on a fair and balanced gaming experience, an *Audience Gaming* setting is infused with a more complex power dynamic between the streamer or performer and audience. While streamers are forced to accommodate their viewers or face their reactions, they also hold ultimate control over the game and chat. In the following, we will analyse and define these new affordances and the change in player agency by analysing the performative processes arising from *Audience Gaming* streams with games that offer direct audience participation like the aforementioned DEAD CELLS.

## DEFINING AUDIENCE GAMING

For *Audience Gaming* to occur, three essential agents must be present: a game, a player that broadcasts their gameplay through a digital channel, e.g., a streamer, and an audience watching the streamer play. The streamer plays the game and records their gameplay and optionally themselves through video. The video is streamed to the audience via a streaming service, and in most cases, the audience can react to the video stream via a chat. Vice versa, the streamer can respond to the audience either through the video directly or use the chat themselves. So far, this process describes the basis out of which *Audience Gaming* emerges in digital game culture. Gerald Schenke calls this “Live Stream Gaming,”<sup>3</sup> and it describes the core functionalities of streaming platforms like Twitch. In opposition to classic television broadcasts, the chat enables the audience to directly discuss the performance among themselves and react to the streamer.

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- 2 Cf. Scully-Blaker, Rainforest et al.: “Playing Along and Playing for on Twitch: Livestreaming From Tandem Play to Performance,” in: Bui, Tung (ed.), *Proceedings of the 50th Hawaii International Conference on System Sciences*, ScholSpace/AIS Electronic Library 2017, pp. 2026-2035.
  - 3 Schenke, Gerald: *The Design Space of Interactive Live Stream Gaming. A Theoretical and Practical Investigation*, unpublished Master Thesis, Cologne 2018, p. 24.

Figure 1: Communication channels in Audience Gaming (based on Schenke's definition of "Live Stream Gaming")



Source: Graphic by Brandis/Bozkurt

However, in this model, the audience can only communicate with each other and the streamer. Only the streamer can interact with the game. *Audience Gaming* requires an additional channel, which enables the audience (or at least some members of the audience) to also interact with the game. If this channel is active, "Live Stream Gaming" becomes *Audience Gaming*. This form of interaction is directly related to telephone polls in classic television, which enables and engages the audience to take part in the events on the screen.

## THE RISE OF STREAMING SERVICES

Live video streaming, especially within the sphere of video games, has been a steadily expanding business since the mid-2000s.<sup>4</sup> It is part of a larger

4 Live video streaming is closely related to Esport events. In 2005, events organized by the Electronic Sports League (now called ESL) ran for the first time on public television, GIGA in Germany ("20 Years of Esports," *ESLgaming*; <https://about.eslgaming.com/20-years/>). More recent developments show bigger companies

online gaming culture along with discussion boards, wikis, and the rich gaming content of YouTube ranging from Let's Plays to compilations. When streaming websites started becoming popular, professional gaming tournaments were already looking to reach larger audiences through video-on-demand on YouTube, and live streaming was the next step in production value. Similarly, video game performers such as speedrunners, who try to beat games in the shortest possible time, are drawn to streaming websites to share their craft and get recognized for their feats much more easily. In general, the sharing culture that came with social media platforms and smartphones and the growing broadband networks meant many gamers had the means to share their experiences with others online.<sup>5</sup>

There are many live streaming websites such as Google's YouTube Live and Facebook Gaming. Among them, the most popular one, at least currently, is Twitch. It is a platform where anyone can stream video content live

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investing heavily into the live streaming business: Amazon buying Twitch.tv in 2014 (MacMillan, Douglas/Bensinger, Greg: "Amazon to Buy Video Site Twitch for \$970 Million," *The Wall Street Journal*, August 26, 2014; <https://online.wsj.com/articles/amazon-to-buy-video-site-twitch-for-more-than-1-billion-1408988885>), Twitter acquiring the streaming service startup Periscope in 2015 (Koh, Yoree/Rusli, Evelyn M.: "Twitter Acquires Live-Video Streaming Startup Periscope," *The Wall Street Journal*, March 9, 2015; <https://www.wsj.com/articles/twitter-acquires-live-video-streaming-startup-periscope-1425938498>), and Google launching YouTube Gaming in 2015 (Dredge, Stuart: "Google Launches YouTube Gaming to Challenge Amazon-owned Twitch," *The Guardian*, August 26, 2015; <https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2015/aug/26/youtube-gaming-live-website-apps>). In general, the viewers of live streaming have been steadily increasing, reaching enormous heights during popular events (Handrahan, Matthew: "The International 2017 Reached 5m Peak Concurrent Viewers," *gamesindustry.biz*, August 14, 2017; <https://www.gamesindustry.biz/articles/2017-08-14-the-international-2017-reached-5m-peak-concurrent-viewers>; Fanelli, Jason: "Overwatch League Claims Record Viewer Numbers in 2019 Season," *Twin Galaxies*, October 3, 2019; [https://www.twingalaxies.com/feed\\_details.php/5903/overwatch-league-claims-record-viewer-numbers-in-2019-season/](https://www.twingalaxies.com/feed_details.php/5903/overwatch-league-claims-record-viewer-numbers-in-2019-season/)).

- 5 Cf. Smith, Thomas P. B./Obrist, Marianna/Wright, Peter: "Live-streaming Changes the (Video) Game," in: *Proceedings of the 11<sup>th</sup> European Conference on Interactive TV and Video – EuroITV '13* (2013), pp. 131-138.

and it is mainly focused on gaming-related content. It is by far the most popular service with a steady increase of concurrent viewers per month from around 80 thousand on average in September 2012 to 2.9 million in January 2021, with the highest peak being nearly 6.5 Million viewers in the same month.<sup>6</sup>

Besides the video, Twitch features a chat box where the audience members can send text messages to the streamer and each other. Devoted community members developed automated bots that listen to the chat to gauge audience reactions, put out polls and many other features. As the website grew, Twitch opened its API (application programming interface) and thus provided developers with more tools to enable advanced interactions for both streamers and the audience.<sup>7</sup>

## STREAMER TYPES

Streamers and their content can take on very different forms. In the context of *Audience Gaming*, it is essential what size the audience is. Consider, for example, a football stadium versus a small reading in an open mic poetry slam. Both feature a stage and a performance, but the possible modes of interaction for the audience are entirely different. While the stadium does not allow an individual voice of the audience to be heard, it is the combined cheering, booing or singing of the thousands of fans that form the message. In the bar however, individual voices can rise out of the audience from time to time and a more direct form of conversation between the performer and the audience is possible. Streams have similar modes of interaction.

Flores-Saviaga et al. analysed the different sizes of English-speaking Twitch streams for one month in 2017 with the help of the Twitch API and identified the following five categories of streamers:

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- 6 Cf. "Twitch Viewers Statistics," *TwitchTracker*; <https://twitchtracker.com/statistics/viewers>
  - 7 Cf. Astromoff, Kathy: "Twitch Extensions and Twitch API – Now Live!," *blog.twitch.tv*, September 12, 2017; <https://blog.twitch.tv/en/2017/09/12/twitch-extensions-and-twitch-api-now-live-768d304162d9>

Figure 2: Streamer types based on viewers

<u>Clique Streamers</u>	<u>Rising Streamers</u>	<u>ChaterBoxes</u>	<u>Spotlight Streamers</u>	<u>Celebrities and Tournaments</u>
0-6 viewers	6-1,879 viewers	1,879-7,703 viewers	7,703-21,678 viewers	more than 21,678 viewers
relationship-driven	small communities	local slang, emoticons & bots	largest audience	professionals and tournaments
low retention	shares identity/ experience	better retention	audience engagement and play time often strictly separated	stadium-like audience

Source: Graphic by Brandis/Bozkurt

**Clique Streamers** are new to streaming or have a very narrow focus that targets the smallest audiences. They rely on personal relationships between the streamer and the audience. Often, they are not (yet) well organized and do not have a strict streaming schedule. Therefore, they can have a difficult time holding onto new viewers.

**Rising Streamers** built small communities around specific shared identities or experiences. They have successfully expanded beyond their own social sphere. If they keep a regular streaming schedule, they can apply to Twitch's affiliate program and start making money.

**ChatterBoxes** are regular streamers with established communities. Twitch allows affiliates to have their own set of emoticons, which results in these communities developing a local slang or a certain way they respond to what happens on the stream.

**Spotlight Streamers** host the largest portion of the participatory audiences and are heavily promoted by Twitch. At this point, streamers start to become public performers, and it becomes more difficult to play and engage with the audience at the same time due to the number of messages written in the chat.

**Celebrities and Tournaments Channels** draw the biggest audiences, but there are only a few of them. Some of these are games' official channels, which broadcast big events with high production values and professional hosts. Others are famous full-time streaming professionals with set schedules, good equipment, and corporate sponsors. The audiences for these

channels resemble those of a stadium and generally do not participate in the stream's content.<sup>8</sup>

## THE AUDIENCE AS PLAYERS

One of the first big audience participation events on Twitch was called "Twitch Plays Pokémon." It was a social experiment by an anonymous developer, and it quickly became a viral hit. According to Twitch, it drew 1.16 million people to the site.<sup>9</sup> The streamer had set up a game of POKÉMON RED VERSION (1996) on an emulator and used the Twitch API to enable the stream audience to send commands such as "up" and "down" directly to the game via the Twitch chat thus simulating the input of a game controller. All inputs in a certain time frame were analysed and channeled into a concrete command for the game which executed it. Effectively thousands of players had to coordinate their actions to navigate the single main character of the game. After nearly 17 days of continuous play, the audience successfully finished the game despite mischievous participants intending to derail the collective effort.<sup>10</sup> The success of this experiment prompted Twitch to develop more tools and open their platform for more ways to increase interactivity.

Since then, developers took the opportunity to add streaming enhancements to their games. One such example is ULTIMATE CHICKEN HORSE (2016). It is a competitive 2D platformer game in which the players build the level as they go along in trying to reach the end goal before their opponents. When played on a stream, the audience can give players resources by typing the resource names in the chat. In contrast to the collective playing experience of "Twitch Plays Pokémon," this form of integration aims to involve the audience in a streamer's play session.

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8 Cf. Flores-Saviaga, Claudia et. al: "Audience and Streamer Participation at Scale on Twitch," in: Atzenbeck, Claus/Rubart, Jessica (eds.), *HT '19: Proceedings of the 30th ACM Conference on Hypertext and Social Media*, New York: The Association for Computing Machinery 2019, pp. 277-278.

9 Cf. "TPP Victory! The Thundershock Heard Around the World," *blog.twitch.tv*, March 1, 2014; <https://blog.twitch.tv/en/2014/03/01/tpp-victory-the-thundershock-heard-around-the-world-3128a5b1cdf5>

10 Cf. Ibid.



Figure 3: Twitch Plays Pokémon on its eighth day. On the left side is the original game view, while on the right side, the collective inputs are displayed. Anarchy and Democracy are features that were installed after the launch of the project to make sure that the game could also continue in difficult sections. While for Anarchy, a simple majority of inputs is enough to trigger the next event, Democracy requires a supermajority. Depending on which mode is voted for the game proceeds.



Source: [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Twitch\\_plays\\_pokemon\\_animated.gif#/media/File:Twitch\\_plays\\_pokemon\\_animated.gif](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Twitch_plays_pokemon_animated.gif#/media/File:Twitch_plays_pokemon_animated.gif)

Another such example is the Battle Royale game DARWIN PROJECT (2020). The Battle Royale formula was made popular by games like PLAYER-UNKNOWN'S BATTLEGROUNDS (2017) and FORTNITE (2017). These games are multiplayer shooters in which all players have a single life per round and do not respawn. They also feature a level map, which shrinks over time and forces the players closer and closer together. DARWIN PROJECT differs from other Battle Royale games by casting one player in the role of the game session's director. The director does not participate in the fight but gets to watch and steer the game as it progresses. They can talk to the players on voice chat, give information, health or ammo packs to aid or grief them. Some streamers use this feature to run the game like a TV show host, commenting on the game and creating an interesting show. When the game is run in streamer mode, the audience members can vote on players at different phases of the game, act like a decision board and can change the course of the session.

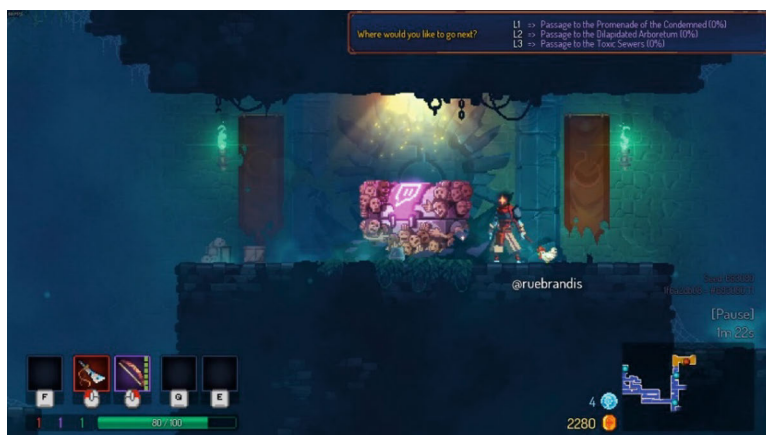
Figure 4: *THE DARWIN PROJECT* running a poll for the audience about which inmate (active player in the game) should receive healing



Source: <https://blog.twitch.tv/assets/uploads/6ca7d444c8608ac4718aece43e65b36.jpeg>

The game most prominently featuring Twitch's interest in the concept of *Audience Gaming*, however, is *DEAD CELLS*. It is a hack 'n' slash game where the player runs through dungeons and crypts fighting numerous enemies. This game was one of the flagship titles promoted by Twitch for its extensive use of the Twitch development tools. It is a single-player game but can be played on a stream, which completely changes the playing experience for the main player through the audience's involvement. Like *ULTIMATE CHICKEN HORSE*, the audience can vote on certain events within the game. This can be the decision of what skills the player should get or which path will open when the level design branches. Additionally, the player encounters Twitch chests from time to time, which can be recognized by the Twitch logo on them. The player then must fight waves of enemies while the audience chooses if the contents of this chest will be helpful or harmful to the player. However, the most extensive audience participation feature is the "Captain Chicken" mascot. *DEAD CELLS* features a small chicken that follows the player around. Audience members can become the chicken by typing "pickme" in the chat and one member is randomly chosen from the pool of applicants. The audience member's name is then portrayed in-game next to the chicken and they gain the possibility to heal the player from time to time.

Figure 5: *DEAD CELLS* showing the Twitch chest right next to the player and the “Captain Chicken” character with the audience member’s user name displayed



Source: Screenshot by Brandis/Bozkurt

DEAD CELLS is offering several different forms of audience involvement and thus aims to cater to different audience player types simultaneously. While some might enjoy getting involved directly in the stream by being featured as the sidekick character, which also comes with the expectation of more prominent participation in the chat’s communication, others might rather silently participate by voting on different occasions while not committing to any form of responsibility. DEAD CELLS streamer mode is still a casual experience for the audience, which has very limited possibilities of interaction. Nevertheless, it hints at the possibilities that can be achieved through the usage of the Twitch API.

## AFFORDANCES

Game design traditionally focuses on the player when trying to create engaging systems which are enjoyable to play. If a designer tries to create a game aimed at streaming, they have to additionally think of how the broadcasting of a game is enjoyable for an audience that does not directly influence the gameplay itself. The audience is also aware of each other and can interact

and react even outside of the game's scope, i.e., in the chat. In the case of *Audience Gaming*, these two elements of design collide because the audience can be player and spectator at the same time or switch between these roles seamlessly. This results in three core affordances of *Audience Gaming*:

**Performable Gameplay:** For *Audience Gaming* to occur, a digital game must support streaming. In general, this applies to any game that can be recorded and broadcasted. More specifically, it means that a game's systems can be used to create an interesting performance. This especially applies to games that allow open play and multiple forms of interaction, which makes observation interesting, because it cannot be easily predicted. A good example would be multiplayer games like *LEAGUE OF LEGENDS* (2009) or sandbox games like *MINECRAFT* (2011).

**Audience Impact:** The Audience must be able to directly communicate with the game's system without the streamer being able to interfere with this communication. The streamer still has control over the situation, but cannot validate the audience interaction with the game at all time. This also means that *Audience Gaming* always affords a multiplayer setting.

**Asymmetrical Gameplay:** In an *Audience Gaming* setting, streamers and audiences both act as players of the game. However, the modes of engagement with the game result in different agencies based on their roles. Streamers are always in control of the game as they host the game session and control the stream itself. The audience always acts on this ground and can only influence what the streamer and the game allow in the first place. This is called "asymmetrical gameplay." Jesse Schell differentiates between "symmetrical" and "asymmetrical games" by looking at the player's possibilities to act within a game. In symmetrical games, the balancing distributes possibilities to act equally between the different agents capable of acting within the game's system. In an asymmetrical game, different agents are provided with different possibilities to act, which creates more complex and diverse gameplay.<sup>11</sup>

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11 Cf. Schell, Jesse: *The Art of Game Design. A Book of Lenses*, Boca Raton/London/New York: CRC Press 2015, p. 203.

## INDIVIDUALS AND SOCIAL GROUPS

For *Audience Gaming*, it is crucial to distinguish between enabling the individual as a player and a social group as a group of players. This means two types of agency are inherent to this form of interaction described by Seering et al. as “individual agency” and “social agency.”<sup>12</sup>

“Individual agency” is important for every single individual player, who must believe that they can influence the game systems and thus the outcome of a game through their inputs. For game designers, this can mean providing a series of interesting decisions, a way Sid Meier likes to think about game design.<sup>13</sup> However, “individual agency” is not only linked to the simple act of having a choice. Tannenbaum and Tannenbaum expand on this idea by describing agency in games by focusing on the player’s process of creating meaning:

“Agency is not about selecting between options in this case but is instead about expressing intent and receiving a satisfying response to that intent. Commitment in this sense might be a purely cognitive process, or it might involve player actions.”<sup>14</sup>

“Social agency” describes the process of a group creating a common identity and acting out within specified social rules. In contrast to the “individual agency” in games, “social agency” revolves around the role an individual takes on in a larger social group and the subsequent influence a group can have because of their size. For *Audience Gaming*, it is integral that a streamer can create an identity for and together with their audience to create engagement and active participation. “Designers may consider granting participants

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12 Seering, Joseph et al.: “Audience Participation Games: Blurring the Line Between Player and Spectator,” in: Mival, Oli (ed.), *DIS 2017: Proceedings of the 2017 Conference on Designing Interactive Systems*, New York: The Association for Computing Machinery, pp. 429-440, here pp. 436-437.

13 Cf. Meier, Sid: “Interesting Decisions,” *GDCVault*, March 2012; <https://www.gdcvault.com/play/1015756/Interesting>

14 Tanenbaum, Karen/Tanenbaum, Theresa: “Commitment to Meaning: A Reframing of Agency in Games,” in: Penny, Simon (ed.), *DAC 09: Proceedings of the Digital Arts and Culture Conference*, Irvine, CA: University of California 2009; <https://escholarship.org/uc/item/6f49r74n>

social agency as an alternative or supplementary form of engagement, where collaboration leads to collective power and collective rewards.”<sup>15</sup>

Thus, “social agency” connects all of *Audience Gaming*’s affordances. Asymmetrical gameplay and a need for audience impact make it necessary for game designers and streamers to enable the formation of social groups to enhance their sense of identity, in short: belonging to a group that has an impact. *Audience Gaming* extends upon the previously existing formation of groups based solely on chat interaction and the collective following of a streamer (fandom) by infusing gaming with a more complex power dynamic between streamer, game, and audience. This can especially be seen in comparison to classical multiplayer experiences, which focus on a fair and balanced gaming experience. Instead, the different possibilities and modes of interaction streamer and audience have at their disposal to influence a game’s system are suited perfectly to explore the possibilities of asymmetrical gameplay.

As described before, various streamer types exist. We have focused on separating them by the number of audience members watching to highlight the different scope audience games can target. A game like the DARWIN PROJECT lends itself more to a stadium atmosphere with many anonymous viewers participating. DEAD CELLS, on the other hand, offers single audience members direct influence by playing as a minor side character in the game in addition to the possibility for the whole audience to vote on events. These options make this game interesting for small and large audiences alike.

## CONCLUSION

Twitch and other streaming services offer game designers, streamers, and players new forms of playful expression through the exploration of new communication channels, which enable the audience to have an impact on gameplay in different ways. These forms range from simple votes about certain events in the game to the audience being an integral part of the game’s progress.

The possibilities and success of *Audience Gaming* revolve around its three core affordances: performable gameplay, audience impact, and

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15 J. Seering et al.: *Audience Participation Games*, p. 436.

asymmetrical gameplay. The latter, with its potential for complex multiplayer situations, especially broadens the experience of playing a game into the social spheres surrounding them by giving all involved agents (game, streamer, and audience) a direct channel to communicate with each other. This expands not only on classic multiplayer games with their individual players but also on the broadcasting and discussion of gameplay through streaming services.

The power distribution between streamer and audience is always unbalanced in *Audience Gaming*, with streamers having total technical control over their stream and chat. They can kick and ban audience members at will and generally hold authority over the stream. However, they are also dependent on their audience members and their goodwill. If streamers do not treat their audience with respect, they may leave and in the case of professional streamers even endanger their source of income by doing so. Other forms of disobedience are also possible.

In *Audience Gaming*, the two spheres of “individual agency” and “social agency” collide and must be catered to simultaneously. The structure and systems of a game must support an individual streamer playing the game and an audience interacting with it and the streamer themselves. For the design of the game, this means that a broader spectrum of interactions must be considered and explored. For now, these interactions are still determined by the Twitch API and are limited to simple forms of audience engagement like voting or simple assistant roles like the chicken in DEAD CELLS. The inherent unequal power distribution between streamer and audience promises to be fertile ground for more complex experiments in the future.

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- HEARTHSTONE (Blizzard Entertainment 2014, O: Blizzard Entertainment)
- LEAGUE OF LEGENDS (Riot Games 2009, O: Riot Games)
- MINECRAFT (Mojang 2011, O: Mojang)
- PLAYERUNKNOWN’S BATTLEGROUNDS (PUBG Corporation 2017, O: PUBG Corporation)
- POKÉMON RED VERSION (Nintendo 1996, O: Game Freak)
- ULTIMATE CHICKEN HORSE (Clever Endeavour Games 2016, O: Clever Endeavour Games)

# Material Culture on Twitch

## Live-Streaming Cosplay, Gender, and Beauty

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NICOLLE LAMERICHs

### INTRODUCTION

As a business model, the monetization of streams and ephemeral live content is a key trend on YouTube and Instagram. A particular favorite among content creators is Twitch, a unique and fan-driven platform where streamers upload content and audiences participate through chat. Millions of streamers upload hours of content each day and create interactive and engaging spaces for narrow-casting. According to the analytics of Twitchtracker, 660 billion minutes of content were watched on Twitch in 2019, produced by an average of 3.6 million streamers monthly.<sup>1</sup> In January 2020 alone, 3,935,308 streamers were active on Twitch with an average of 1,357,375 viewers.

Twitch offers an accessible interface for streamers but also stands out in its options for micro-donations and crowdfunding. One of the most successful streams on Twitch in 2019 was a Donkey Kong 64 livestream held by Hbomberguy for Mermaid, a charity for transgender children. Samantha Riedel reports: “Over the course of the 57-hour stream, viewers donated a total of more than \$347,000, blowing past all of Brewis’s donation goals and staggering even Mermaids chair Susie Green.”<sup>2</sup> American politician

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1 <https://twitchtracker.com/statistics>

2 Riedel, Samantha: “What a Viral Twitch Stream for Trans Charity Says About Modern Activism,” in: *them* (2019); <https://www.them.us/story/hbomberguy-twitch-stream-trans-charity>

Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez joined the stream for ten minutes to discuss transgender oppression and its connection to economic marginalization.

While Twitch started as a platform to stream video games, by now, its content has become very diverse and one of its most popular categories is “just chatting,” which simply features streamers discussing their interests and having Q&As with their viewers. Streamers engage in cooking, weightlifting, table-top role-playing games, and many different practices to create their unique personal brand. The secret of the platform’s success are these millions of heterogeneous streamers, who contribute unique live content. Twitch’s instructions for new streamers urge them to build their own personal brand and create a stream that fits their personality: “Take a minute to think about what makes you or your stream unique and run with that. Do you live and breathe the color orange? Stream from an ice fishing shack? Have a weird catchphrase? Whatever it is that makes you, ‘you’, can be a jump off for your personal branding.”<sup>3</sup> Still, Twitch is not only the domain of user-generated content, it can also be an interactive broadcasting tool. Increasingly Twitch also broadcasts official content that audiences group around. In collaboration with BBC, Twitch hosted a marathon of the classic DOCTOR WHO episodes from 17 February 2019 onwards. For many viewers, this was the first time watching the classic episodes. Old and new fans grouped together around the episodes, formed memes, and acted as mentors who introduced each other into the lore of DOCTOR WHO. In other words, Twitch can also function as an archive and a space for fan literacy.

Formerly known as Justin.tv, Twitch was founded in 2007 as a service for social television that gave users the capacity to broadcast their own video streams.<sup>4</sup> With the rise of competitive eSports, the platform has rapidly become one of the most popular live-streaming channels on the Internet. The platform has been criticized, though, particularly as a gendered platform. In 2017, Twitch advertising reported that 81.5 % of its users are male.<sup>5</sup> Throughout the years, Twitch took notice of its gendered community and

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3 <https://www.twitch.tv/creatorcamp/en/level-up/personal-branding/>

4 Rose, Mike: “Twitch Parent Company Rebrands as Twitch Interactive,” in: *Gammasutra*, January 10, 2014; [https://www.gamatra.com/view/news/210384/Twitch\\_parent\\_com-pany\\_rebrands\\_as\\_Twitch\\_Interactive.php](https://www.gamatra.com/view/news/210384/Twitch_parent_com-pany_rebrands_as_Twitch_Interactive.php)

5 <https://www.twitchadvertising.tv/audience/>

particular problems and adjusted its guidelines to make the platform more inclusive.

Throughout the years, Twitch became a prominent streaming platform, shifting its focus from games to a wide range of content. Audiences turn to it for live-cooking shows, fitness videos, board game evenings, casual conversations, and to watch technical tutorials. Twitch is best understood as a platform where different micro-communities meet. This study is specifically interested in the communities on Twitch that meet beyond gaming to offer insights into how the platform might otherwise be used. Specifically, I focus on streams that pertain to cosplay and how different practices (e.g., costume creation, chatting about costumes) are framed on Twitch.

While live-streaming on different platforms is increasingly researched, there has been little work on how they build their content on existing games and media and enrich them. Moreover, live-streaming can create a secondary order of play, which is what this chapter specifically focuses on. Cosplay and table-top role-playing on Twitch, for instance, are games in and of themselves, but may also have transmedia qualities in them by referring to particular source texts. Finally, the audience can have a role on Twitch by participating in the chat, creating another layer of gameplay and textuality. This play may be augmented even further, as in the case of “Twitch Plays Pokémon,” where the original game was turned into a large social experiment through the chat function.<sup>6</sup>

Doing a study on Twitch means entangling these different modes. The interface of Twitch is a potpourri of different texts in and of itself and thereby lends itself to different forms of play, performances. In this chapter, I pay specific attention to the practices on Twitch as forms of communication and text. How do Twitch streamers build on existing content, such as video games, in their fan practices? Moreover, how do they use existing brands to build a brand on their own?

Specifically, I am interested in how fans operate on platforms such as Twitch. Through a case study of cosplay streams, I offer insights into how performances and discussions involving the cosplay community are framed on Twitch. Beyond analyzing the content itself, I aim to explore how fans strategically use the platform for monetization purposes and storytelling. In

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6 Ramirez, Dennis/Saucerman, Jenny/Dietmeier, Jeremy: “Twitch Plays Pokemon: A Case Study in Big G Games,” *Proceedings of DiGRA*, DiGra 2014, pp.1-10.

this chapter, I argue that cosplay streamers on Twitch use the platform in innovative ways to make costuming and everyday creativity more visible and meaningful. The streamers that were examined for the purpose of this research clearly sustain small communities of dedicated viewers. The attraction of Twitch, then, lies in its possibility to create public spheres that feel intimate and private. Hobbies and lifestyles, such as cosplay, can be opened up fully to outsiders, and become spectacles in their own right.

## PLATFORMS AND TWITCH

Like YouTube, Periscope, and other services, Twitch stands out in their purposeful construction of the streamers as a content creators, who potentially become themselves brands or influencers. Twitch endorses this business model, encouraging its streamers to develop a personal brand and monetize their practices. Ideally, a Twitch streamer becomes a user who generates income, an Affiliate, which is the first step to becoming a full-on Twitch Partner, who has even more perks. Affiliates can generate revenue through subscription options ranging from \$4.99, \$9.99 and \$24.99, but also through “Bits,” virtual tokens that the audiences can use to support streamers in the chat, which also translate into revenue.

Becoming an Affiliate requires substantial activity on the channel, and Twitch formulates the requirements as follows: “We’re looking for streamers who aren’t yet Partners, but who have at least 50 followers and over the last 30 days have [had] at least 500 total minutes broadcast, 7 unique broadcast days, and an average of 3 or more concurrent viewers.”<sup>7</sup> In her discussion of Twitch, its relationship to partner company Amazon, Emma Knight is critical of the business model: “While the Twitch Affiliate Program model may look like a harmless peer-to-peer exchange, Twitch (and thereby Amazon) is the ultimate winner: they take a 50 percent cut of each monthly subscription fee.”<sup>8</sup>

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7 <https://affiliate.twitch.tv/>

8 Knight, Emma: “Twitch.Tv: A Socially Valuable Platform, or Just Another Amazon Revenue Stream?” in: *Masters of Media*, 24 October, 2018; <https://mastersofmedia.hum.uva.nl/blog/2018/10/24/monetization-on-twitch-investigating-the-relationship-between-audience-creator-and-content/>

Culturally, Twitch cannot be read in isolation from influencer culture and the rise of the online micro-celebrity. This shapes the aesthetics and content of the videos and their production context. In *Internet Celebrity*, Abidin writes: “The aesthetic of calibrated amateurism has a leveling effect because Influencers appear less constructed, less filtered, more spontaneous, and more real, thus fostering feelings of relatability and authenticity.”<sup>9</sup> In this sense, Twitch is paradigmatic of a larger change towards new textualities and ephemeral content.

This shift, which can also be described as a change from archival to ephemeral content, has implications for the text and influencer culture, as Abidin notes:

“Influencers are shifting from a culture of archived semi-permanent content to one of streaming always-transient content. More specifically, the aesthetic of Influencer content is expanding from the feels of pristine, high-quality images that were dominantly ‘repository format’ social media, to include simultaneously haphazard, spontaneous, raw footage on ‘transient format’ social media.”<sup>10</sup>

When understood as a textual performance, the live, raw footage of Twitch stands out. However, because of its many features built into the streaming software, including options for side-bars and live background music, Twitch streams do not necessarily look raw, but also remediate aspects of mass broadcasting.

If we theorize further about what kind of content Twitch offers, several concepts stand out and can serve as productive, analytical lenses. First, Twitch can be understood as a unique form of paratextuality.<sup>11</sup> This form of textuality traditionally refers less to a productive audience and more to other material that surrounds a text, such as covers, flavor texts, or comments by an author. In the case of games, this understanding of paratexts becomes more complicated as the publication model of games evolves. Games are increasingly published and promoted on different platforms, such as Steam,

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9 Abidin, Crystal: *Internet Celebrity: Understanding Fame Online*, Bingley: Emerald Publishing Limited 2018, p. 92.

10 Ibid., pp. 90-91.

11 Genette, Gérard: *Paratexts: Thresholds of Interpretation*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1997.

that have different texts embedded in them by developers and gamers alike. Streaming is iconic of the trend that games are not only played but watched in different venues, including the competitive eSport scene.<sup>12</sup>

In this sense, Twitch is most frequently a commentary of a source-text, such as a video game, creating something that Genette would have called “metatextuality:” “The [...] type of textual transcendence [which] unites a given text to another, of which it speaks without necessarily citing it (without summoning it) [...]. This is the critical relationship par excellence.”<sup>13</sup> However, Twitch streams are not only a meta-textual phenomenon that comments on another textual artifact (such as games) but still very much and clearly a paratext in the literal sense, as the comments are visibly and literally attached *next* (‘para’) to the game’s stream, as I will point out in more detail in the following section. As more content is streamed, tighter communities are formed and users keep returning to certain streams.

Streaming constructs a certain kind of paratextuality, exactly because of its narrowcasting. Like podcasters, streamers often build a formula that consists of unique comments, storylines, references, running gags. Streams, in this sense, can be understood as paratexts or commentary, as well as a tool of inclusion, to sustain an audience base that is ‘in the know.’ By repurposing older content, such as classic DOCTOR WHO episodes, Twitch also engages in another mode of textuality that has been described as “paratextual memory,” by Hills and Garde-Hansen, which constructs a sense of “having been there” at key moments of broadcasting, even when a fan was historically not present.<sup>14</sup> In other words, Twitch includes different types of paratextual practices: (1) the paratexts of the games, stories and experiences that are being streamed, (2) the streamed commentary of the platform, Twitch itself, and (3) the cultural memory of fans and gamers.

Furthermore, Twitch has different modalities that create a unique interface with different modes (see table 1), generating a paratextual layer next to

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12 Taylor, T.L: *Raising the Stakes: E-Sports and the Professionalization of Computer Gaming*, Massachusetts: MIT Press 2012.

13 Genette, Gérard: *Palimpsests. Literature in the Second Degree*, Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press 1997, p.4.

14 Hills, Matt/Garde-Hansen, Joanne: “Fandom’s Paratextual Memory: Remembering, Reconstructing, and Repatriating ‘Lost’ Doctor Who,” in: *Critical Studies in Media Communication* 34 (2) (2017), p. 1.

the video stream. A Twitch stream can have multiple prompts and screens embedded in it, prompting viewers to follow, subscribe (for free or against a price), or sign up to Instagram or Patreon as well. Finally, the audience itself interacts through chat in the sidebar and their texts, including emojis, feed into the live-streaming experience as well. Twitch experiences often mix modes, such as visuals, voice chat, background music, chatting, and different bars for information. A streamer can for instance use a plug-in to show how many donations were raised during a fundraising stream, or integrate a bar that shows who was their latest subscriber.

This multi-modality can be challenging. A large quantitative study of Twitch even describes it as the chat and its potential for cacophony, defining it as an “overload regime” that streamers may want to avoid.<sup>15</sup> For unfamiliar audiences, Twitch is certainly a platform that is heavy on interaction and different types of input, and that is part of its formula and beauty for dedicated users. Each stream is perhaps best read as a community or experience, rather than a content or story. It is in the interaction that Twitch becomes interesting, and in the ways in which audiences actively tune in and out of different streams.

*Table 1: The interface of Twitch, where textuality becomes a business model*

<b>Text</b>	<b>Function</b>	<b>Input</b>
Primary stream	Footage game or experience	Streamer
Secondary streams	Presentation of self, character or games	Streamer
Bars	Donations, prompts	Sources Twitch
Chat	Interaction	Audience

Source: N. Lamerichs

15 Nematzadeh, Azadeh et al: “Information Overload in Group Communication: From Conversation to Cacophony in the Twitch Chat,” in: *Royal Society Open Science* 6 (10) (2019).



Finally, the content uploaded on Twitch is live, and this liveness is a key quality of the texts. Live media have the power to build unique content and communities, from micro to macro, and combine this with intimacy and a sense of presence. Improvisation is key in streams, and one of the reasons why audiences enjoy it. This is most clearly demonstrated in successful tabletop role-playing games on Twitch, such as *Highrollers*, where different players engage in unscripted in-character performances together. The content is not just real-time but actively constructed around a fear of missing out. Through liveness and improvisation, audiences can enjoy seemingly authentic, and highly performative media. These viewers tune in for live content, in other words, that engages them and that they do not want to miss out on.

Thousands of channels compete on Twitch every hour, each of them a tiny pocket of the internet that viewers ideally return to. In *Watch Me Play: Twitch and the Rise of Game Live Streaming*, T.L. Taylor describes the aesthetics of Twitch as a “tone of authenticity, affective engagement, and connection to the audience,” but also remarks that streamers are not “open books.”<sup>16</sup> Through interaction and intimacy, audiences feel that they know the streamers. At best, Twitch can function as a co-creative platform, where streamers and audiences build on each other’s remarks. Being a welcoming host that facilitates quality discussions is perhaps the most essential trait that successful Twitch streamers possess. Co-creation on Twitch, however, does not have to stop there. Different role-playing channels, such as HyperRPG, use the chat function also to let the audience weigh in on narrative decisions.

In other words, Twitch content is highly immediate, transient, and interactive. It is no wonder that Twitch has become a sphere of different communities, which each can be understood as potential bubbles and silos. Twitch is the space where cosplayers have friendly chats with each other, but also a medium where communities play shooters or watch other gamers casually chat about their lives. During the COVID-19 pandemic, some educators even used the streaming service for hosting lectures or seminars.

In this chapter, I will reveal that the diversity of content can also be the strength of Twitch. In these pockets of the internet, young female streamers speak up and share their hobbies enthusiastically, which is not possible in the monoculture of broadcasting.

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16 T.L. Taylor: *Watch Me Play: Twitch and the Rise of Game Live Streaming*, Princeton: Princeton University Press 2018, p. 99.

## COSPLAY AND CONTROVERSY

Twitch is an example of what I describe as platform fandom, a complex ecosystem that functions as an interface on the one hand, but is also a fan-driven business model that companies, like Amazon, profit from on the other hand. In this chapter, I show how platform fandom gives space to audiences to express creativity and play in particular and enables them to become “fantrepreneurs.”<sup>17</sup> The case study of this chapter consists of a variety of streams that connect to cosplay and costuming. Cosplay is one way in which fans express their feelings for fictional characters in a creative way. Fans on Twitch who create costumes do not only create new texts in a metaphorical way, but also in the original sense of the word which refers to textile fabric. Cosplay is a material, embodied expression, based on existing story worlds, and a form of intermediality.<sup>18</sup> It can be read as a form of sartorial fandom, in which dress-up, embodiment and fashion are crucial.

As a performance, cosplay can be understood as a form of imaginative play and re-enactment, through which fans form social communities and ties.<sup>19</sup> However, the process of cosplay is much wider, and scholars such as Crawford and Hancock have drawn attention to cosplay creation as a creative, critical making process.<sup>20</sup> While the process of cosplay starts with creation, private fittings, and photoshoots beforehand, the primary stages for cosplay are fan conventions, where cosplayers wear their outfits and might participate in contests. The beauty of social media like Twitch, Instagram and YouTube is that they make the private public. As I shall show in this chapter, this border between the private and public is very noticeable in cosplay streams, where trying out new make-up, sewing techniques, and

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17 Scott, Suzanne. *Fake Geek Girls: Fandom, Gender, and the Convergence Culture Industry*, New York: NYU Press 2019, pp. 169-172.

18 Lamerichs, Nicolle. *Productive Fandom: Intermediality and Affective Reception in Fan Cultures*, Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press 2018.

19 Mountfort, Paul/Peirson-Smith, Anne/Geczy, Adam: *Planet Cosplay: Costume Play, Identity and Global Fandom*, Bristol: Intellect Books Limited 2018; Winge, Theresa: *Costuming Cosplay: Dressing the Imagination*. Bloomsbury: Bloomsbury Academic 2018.

20 Crawford, Gary/Hancock, David: *Cosplay and the Art of Play: Exploring Sub-Culture through Art*, Berlin: Springer International Publishing 2019.

donning on parts of outfits are publically broadcasted. In their streams, fans make private processes, such as costume creation and photoshoots, public. This creates a lively scene around cosplay beyond the convention and allows cosplayers to share their excitement about a performance beforehand. It also allows audiences to peek into the hidden processes of cosplay as a form of labor.

Through their practices, cosplayers comment and build upon narrative and engage in what might be called *embodied paratextuality*. They create a paratext (e.g., a costume) which becomes a unique text and has a life of its own. This text again can be mediated, for instance, by streaming the design process on Twitch or wearing the costume during a let's play. In other words, while cosplay performances take place offline, they are remediated into photography and different genres of film, including streams and cosplay music videos. As paratexts, cosplays are deeply meaningful. These costumes allow audiences to experiment with their identity, body and gender (e.g., cross-play). In this sense, fans construct their identity actively, for instance, in terms of gender,<sup>21</sup> sexuality,<sup>22</sup> or age.<sup>23</sup> In other words, cosplayers experiment with new roles, forms of belonging as well as materiality and "stuff."<sup>24</sup>

While cosplay can be empowering, it can also become the terrain of controversy, trolling, and harassment, which is well-captured by the "cosplay is not consent" movement and related hashtags. Like in other paratextual practices and fandom in general, this can involve gate-keeping and exclusion that must not be overlooked. The sexism and racism in these communities have

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- 21 Lamerichs, Nicolle: "Stranger Than Fiction: Fan Identity in Cosplaying," in: *Transformative Works and Cultures*, 7 (2011).
- 22 Gn, Joel: "Queer Simulation: The Practise, Performance and Pleasure of Cosplay," in: *Continuum: Journal of Media & Cultural Studies* 25 (4) (2019), pp. 583-593.
- 23 Skentelbery, Daniel. "I Feel Twenty Years Younger. Age-Bending Cosplay," in: *FNORD* (2019); <https://readfnord.wordpress.com/2019/07/02/i-feel-twenty-year-s-younger-age-bending-cosplay/>
- 24 Jenkins, Henry/Lamerichs, Nicolle: "Fan Materiality and Affect: Interview with Nicolle Lamerichs," in: *Confessions of an Aca-Fan*, September 12, 2019; <http://henryjenkins.org/blog/2019/9/8/interview-with-nicholle-lamerichs-part-3-9d928>

been well-documented in recent fan studies by Suzanne Scott<sup>25</sup> and Rukmini Pande.<sup>26</sup> The research of Kishonna L. Gray shows how Twitch can become a hotbed for these issues, and how the marginalization and harassment of black streamers are common in digital spaces, which are often framed and constructed as white.<sup>27</sup>

Twitch itself has also been criticized for offering a platform to problematic users, and for how it moderated its content, which I will discuss in detail below. In a quantitative study on Twitch and their comments, Nakandala and colleagues found evidence of sexism on the platform, noting that female streamers were objectified more than their male counterparts: “the messages posted by users who comment only in female channels tend to have semantic similarity with objectifying cues while those who comment only in male channels tend to have semantic similarity with more game-related terms.”<sup>28</sup> While this study largely confirms the gendered views of Twitch, the study itself only differentiates between popular male and female streamers and does not include any non-binary or trans-streamers.

Twitch has adjusted its guidelines often to make it a safer and more inclusive space, for instance by introducing clauses on hateful content. Twitch defines “hateful content” in their recent guidelines from October 24, 2019, as:

“Hateful conduct is any content or activity that promotes, encourages, or facilitates discrimination, denigration, objectification, harassment, or violence based on race, ethnicity, national origin, religion, sex, gender, gender identity, sexual orientation,

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25 Scott, Suzanne: *Fake Geek Girls: Fandom, Gender, and the Convergence Culture Industry*, New York: NYU Press 2019.

26 Pande, Rukmini: *Squee from the Margins: Fandom and Race*, Iowa: University of Iowa Press 2018.

27 Gray, Kishonna: “They’re too urban: Black gamers streaming on Twitch,” in: Daniels, Jessie/Gregory, Karen/McMillan Cotton, Tressie (eds.), *Digital Sociologies*, Policy Press 2016, pp. 355-368.

28 Nakandala, Supun et al: “Gendered Conversation in a Social Game-Streaming Platform,” in: *Eleventh International AAAI Conference on Web and Social Media* (2017), pp. 169.

age, disability, medical condition, physical characteristics, or veteran status, and is prohibited. Any hateful conduct is considered a zero-tolerance violation.”<sup>29</sup>

In line with their policies on hateful content, Twitch has banned streamers who communicate transphobic expressions, such as Greekgodx who mocked the different gender options on Spotify<sup>30</sup> or streamer HelenaLive who stated there are only two genders.<sup>31</sup>

While platforms can amplify problematic and hateful content, the framing of these issues is always cultural. When a streamer on Twitch engaged in a problematic blackface cosplay, she was immediately banned for posting racist content. In *Kotaku*, Cecilia D’Anastasio contextualizes the incident:

“While aesthetic fidelity can be a primary concern for cosplayers, altering racial appearance easily devolves into stereotyping and recalls the history of the practice. On top of that, black cosplayers have faced numerous barriers getting into the cosplay scene because, traditionally, there are comparatively few characters [...] who appear black or dark-skinned.”<sup>32</sup>

This Twitch controversy does not stand in isolation. In the cosplay community, blackface is commonly a no-go, but the debate is still ongoing. When a nominee for the EuroCosplay competition was banned in 2019 for engaging in blackface, her cancellation led to a backlash.<sup>33</sup> This was sparked by the

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29 <https://www.twitch.tv/p/legal/community-guidelines>

30 Jackson, Lara: “Twitch Streamer Banned for Mocking Alternative Gender Options,” in: *Gamebyte*, September 19, 2019; <https://www.gamebyte.com/twitch-streamer-banned-for-mocking-alternative-gender-options>

31 Asarch, Steven: “Streamer Helenalive Speaks out after Being Banned from Twitch for Saying There Are Only Two Genders,” in: *Newsweek*, December 2, 2019; <https://www.newsweek.com/helenalive-twitch-ban-there-are-only-two-genders-1329214>

32 D’Anastasio, Cecilia: “Twitch Punishes White Apex Legends Cosplayer Who Painted Her Face Black,” in: *Kotaku*, April 15, 2019; <https://kotaku.com/twitch-punishes-white-apex-legends-cosplayer-who-painte-1834055934>

33 Lemieux, Melissa: “French Cosplay Champ Removed from Eurocosplay Finals over Blackface Accusation,” in: *Newsweek*, October 11, 2019; <https://www.newsweek.com/french-cosplay-champ-removed-eurocosplay-finals-over-blackface-accusation-1454444>

cosplayer in question and her followers, who argued that she only did it because she loved the character, and wanted to be faithful to his appearance. Naturally, this reasoning around authenticity is deeply problematic, especially because it ignores the cultural context of blackface, and how it hurts persons of color. Still, because of these incidents, the discussion is still a topical one. While the debate on blackface goes beyond the scope of this chapter, cosplay researcher Karen Heinrich has unpacked blackface in the community carefully in relation to whiteness and privilege.<sup>34</sup> What this debate tells us is that cosplay on Twitch cannot be read in isolation, but is part of larger discussions around media culture and representation.<sup>35</sup>

Incidents of moderation reveal a lot about the politics of Twitch. The guidelines formulated to protect users, and create a safe space, are also weaponized against them. This is not a neutral platform, but a set of different communities with different values that might clash. Twitch is a complicated platform to research. Therefore, the follow-up questions should be: Exactly what types of content are posted, and how do they represent embodiment, including race and gender? And what can a research design look like that can be used to answer these questions?

## METHODS AND APPROACH TO TWITCH

The liveness of Twitch is compelling, and its interface multifold. However, the many voices and interactions can also pose challenges to researchers, since it is almost impossible to make general claims about the platform. For a large part, the Twitch experience consists of micro-casting to a relatively small group of users, and this is what makes it so compelling. However, to

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[week.com/french-cosplay-champ-removed-eurocosplay-finals-over-blackface-accusation-1464756](https://www.twitch.tv/week.com/french-cosplay-champ-removed-eurocosplay-finals-over-blackface-accusation-1464756)

34 Heinrich, Karen: “All Black and White? Racism and Blackface in Cosplay,” in: *Wigs 101*, October 20, 2019; <https://wigs101.com/all-black-and-white-racism-and-blackface-in-cosplay>

35 Likewise, expressions of sexuality and nudity in cosplay are also subjected to moderation on Twitch and have cultural connotations. The question with controversies around ‘sexually suggestive content’ is not least whether women are not also subjected to policing of their body.

mimic and document these dynamics requires an experimental approach and mindset from scholars.

This study combines content analysis with the close-reading of various channels but is also inspired by platform studies<sup>36</sup> and observational stances in netnography.<sup>37</sup> The study was conducted by systematically viewing Twitch live-streams in January and February 2020 by searching the category Beauty and Fashion, Crafts and Making, as well as filtering by the “cosplay” tag. From the results, only relevant expressions of streamers in cosplay, chatting about cosplay, or working on costumes, were sampled. There were also many unrelated results, which were tagged as “cosplay” but had no relation to it. My selection was based on channels that were live though I could not always watch the whole live streams.

During my viewings, I maintained a log that combined field notes, screenshots, and relevant quotes from the streamer and chat, as well as remarks about the paratextual combination of Twitch’s interface. To keep track of the content, I also did a content analysis in the form of a table that I could draw from at any point (see table 2). After sampling, I frequently went back to the videos and their chats after a stream was finished. My stance was primarily observatory and I only engaged with the chat option on rare occasions.

In terms of coding, I met several challenges during this project. First, several streamers had different live streams over the course of this project, working on the same outfit. I briefly tuned in with these new streaming sessions but did not extensively watch or code them a second or third time. Second, most streams were several hours long, and I usually watched them for ten to thirty minutes before going to the next channel. While I did go back to browse the streams, my analysis is indicative of the kind of content but does not provide a full overview of each stream. Third, certain streams on the tags were adjacent to cosplay but not sampled and coded. The ASMR videos in colored anime wigs by Roxy\_Rose, for instance, involved costumes, but were not about cosplay or feature existing fictional characters, and were excluded from the corpus.

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36 Gillespie, Tarleton: *Custodians of the Internet: Platforms, Content Moderation, and the Hidden Decisions That Shape Social Media*, New Haven, London: Yale University Press 2018.

37 Kozinets, Robert: *Netnography: Doing Ethnographic Research Online*, Los Angeles, London: SAGE 2010.

*Table 2: Fragment content analysis (full analysis below)*

Streamer	Date & Start	Live	Total	Content	Lang
Andyraecospay	18-1-2020, 15:40	433	964	Bodypaint: Attack on Titan	E
Maulcosplay	18-1-2020, 15:15	66	18,690	Props: Making gun	G
KayPikeFashion	18-1-2020, 19:30	178	7,159,624	Bodypaint: Lara Croft (TR)	E
evelliecosplay	18-1-2020, 19:30	7	128,440	Creation: Ysera (WoW)	E
Maid4uCafe	18-1-2020, 19:30	75	245,573	Commercial: Maid café stream	E/J
lilsproutstudios	18-1-2020, 19:50	5	232	Props: Hearthstone	E
Lowbudgetcos	22-1-2020, 18:09	3	1,121	Creation: Kalluko (HxH)	G
Gunaretta	22-1-2020, 18:36	79	36,053	Creation: Shamir (Fire Emblem)	G
SarahnadeMakes	22-1-2020, 18:43	7	5,440	Creation: Sans (Undertale)	E
AcriterLupus	22-1-2020, 18:47	7	335	Creation: Angewoman (Digimon)	E
KimonthRocks	26-1-2020, 19:23	19	461	Home: Reorganizing costumes	G

Source: N. Lamerichs

Finally, Twitch is a global platform, with many different language communities present. Though I found cosplay streams in many languages, my sample focused on the streams that I could understand (English, German, French and Dutch language). While I am a native Dutch speaker, I found barely any videos in my own language. It is also important to be wary of the time zones. I logged in from The Netherlands in the evening, during the week. While I occasionally found videos from the United States, Japan or Australia, streamed in the mornings or afternoons, most videos were European. This sample contains many German streams, which tells us a lot about the popularity of this practice in Germany. As this analysis shows, 22 channels (18 costumes and 4 props) are related to creation, and provide insights in the maker culture behind cosplay performances. In general, these videos cannot be understood simply as tutorials, though cosplayers sometimes go deeper into the creation process, as I will explain in the analysis. Rather cosplayers discuss different matters with their audiences while they work on their outfits and props. Out of the 38 videos, 5 are bodypaint streams, and a few are related to make-up or just chatting in costumes.

In other words, these streams are very diverse. However, in terms of style, they are similar and not what I expected when I went into this research. Since I had studied many creative cosplay expressions on YouTube before, I anticipated that the streams themselves would be creative and might function as sites of in-character play. Since it is increasingly common for conventions to stream competitions on Twitch, I expected more performances at conventions, in hotels and elsewhere. Although the study coincided with several small conventions in Europe, there was little evidence of this being documented.



However, most streams were awfully mundane and showed the cosplayers (usually from the waist up) chatting and/or working in private spaces. This privacy seems purposely decorated in some cases, where the items in view and backgrounds are clearly arranged as a small set. These spaces are largely domestic, and never in public or outdoors, perhaps because of the elaborate set-up Twitch streaming requires. Most streamers sit down, and audiences hardly ever see their full body or attire. The streams give insights into how cosplay is constructed and made, how make-up is done, and in the cosplay community. However, there is not that much discussion of characters and stories, as I will highlight below.

## CREATIVITY AND MAKING

The content on Twitch that involves costumes and dressing up is highly diverse. In general, costumes on Twitch can have different functions—they can add flavor to a stream, like in table-top role-playing or in a let's play. In these cases, costumes symbolize geek culture or create a deeper connection to a game. In the sampled streams, however, these narrative connections are slightly different, since most streams that are tagged as “cosplay” are not about adding to an existing narrative or transforming it. For instance, streamers are usually not in character, or only momentarily, but rather act as experts and fellow fans that audiences like to hang out with and get tips from. The selected streams are highly interactive, in the sense that the audience often steers the discussion through commentary on the chat. In this sense, the input and comments of the audience act as a paratext within a paratext (a commentary on commentary), thus creating a layered textual experience.

Maker culture is a key theme in many of the selected videos. Streamers discuss cosplaying deeply, and videos become a highly visual way of documenting the craft and costumes. These videos reveal more about the dimensions of the hobby that fans do not normally see—how costumes and props are created, how bodies are transformed and dressed up. In other words, Twitch reveals the material, creative culture behind cosplay—a system where different (non-human) actors come together, from sewing machines, buttons, and fabrics to the Twitch interface, its channels, and the viewers.

In terms of cosplay creation, most streamers either create parts of outfits or props. There are no videos about wig styling or other activities related to

cosplay creation in this corpus. One example is MaulCosplay, a male German creative, who works on a fake gun.<sup>38</sup> He explains what he does and interacts with his audience. Unlike many of the female streamers, he is not dressed up for the occasion. He just wears a casual sweater and is mostly busy crafting in his garage. The background features his tools. The streamer provides tips on different materials and also comments on the tools he uses or picks up. The users comment on his techniques regularly and approve of him putting on safety glasses, or make remarks about using a laser near certain fabrics. Overall, the chat is lively and seems to be a tight-knitted group of people from the German cosplay community, many of whom seem to be cosplayers themselves. They spontaneously initiate plans to get together for an upcoming convention (“EC”) with a cyberpunk group.

By using different screens within Twitch, cosplayers often provide a holistic overview of the creation process. Within one channel or window, many cosplayers use at least three screens so that they can zoom in on their work, show themselves, and also show the character or product that they are working on. Of these different screens, usually, two are camera feeds. For instance, eveillecosplay has three screens that show her working on her *World of Warcraft* armor.<sup>39</sup> One is a picture of the character, the other is a webcam that films her from a distance, the other is a zoom on the table where she does her crafting (see figure 1a/b). Eveille is excited to share her work, and often shows details on her work area. While showing her horns from different angles to the camera, she states: “I did some more painting on my horns!”

The different bars used in her stream also show her newest follower, newest subscriber, how much she raised for charity, as well as her name and the cosplay that she is working on. Most cosplay streams use these different options and also play vivid background music while they are creating their outfits. In some streams, the audience can also select the music as well. However, a few streams stand out in their minimalism. Yuzupyon works on her Motoko (*Ghost in the Shell*) cosplay with one screen. Her stream is beautifully staged with soft pink and blue props, fairy lights in the back, and

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38 MaulCosplay: “Ich geh kaputt! Ich bin schon wieder da! (Teilweise),” January 18, 2020; <https://www.twitch.tv/videos/537891851>

39 eveillecosplay: “Armor Making—Ysera—WoW—Design by SunsetDragon—Any Donations Going to AUS Wildfire Aid !social,” January 18, 2020; <https://www.twitch.tv/videos/538029471>

different guns that she most likely created herself.<sup>40</sup> It draws more average viewers (varied between 80-98 during the hour I watched the stream) than most channels that I watched (see table 2). Overall, most streams that drew high numbers and a broader audience were bodypaint videos rather than the creation videos. The fact that Yuzu's stream stands out might be related to her presence, her status as a cosplayer, but I would not be surprised if the staging of her stream also has something to do with her viewership.

While Yuzu is clearly often concentrating on creating her patterns, she often looks up at the stream briefly. She is an honest cosplayer who also admits that she is sometimes experimenting. Sometimes, it is the audience teaching the cosplayer rather than the other way around. When Yuzu uses a soft silk that sticks to the machine and nearly ruins her fabric, the audience helps her in this crisis. They provide tips, like sharpening the needle, covering the base with a different fabric, or using tissue paper below the fabric. Literacy has a different role in these streams than in tutorials. The streamer does not always act as the authority and has conversations with the audience on techniques and practices. They are in this together.

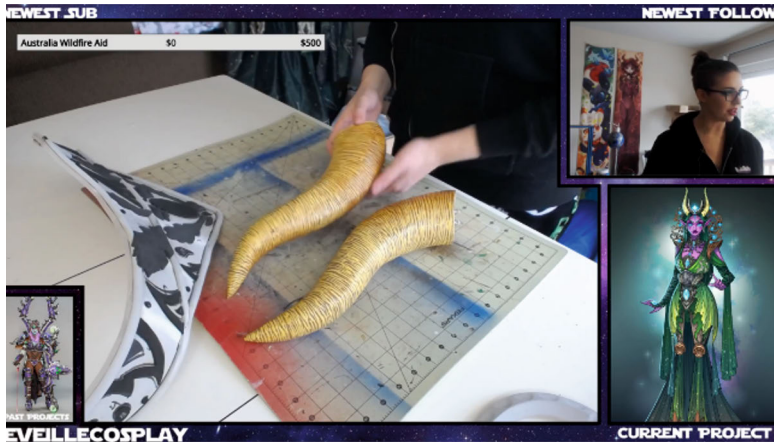
None of the streamers that I analyzed truly presents themselves as an authority who consistently explains things. Some provide commentary on their practices, but they are more focused on showing their results and ways of working. In so far as these streams present an affinity space and knowledge community, it is always in the context of streamers and audiences having a productive discussion together, at least in the streams that were analyzed for this study.

This struck me as particularly unique to Twitch, compared to other online cosplay practices. It seems that audiences turn to Twitch less for help, and more for insights, inspiration, ideas, and a sense of community. Many viewers also discuss their own current projects and showcasing their experience in the cosplay community.

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40 Yuzupyon: "Motoko cosplay making !discord to chat after streams Ich geh kaputt! February 20, 2020; <https://www.twitch.tv/videos/555042500>

Figure 1a/b: Comparison of streaming set-up of eveillecosplay & yuzupyron



Source: eveillecosplay: “Armor Making—Ysera—WoW—Design by SunsetDragon —Any Donations Going to AUS Wildfire Aid !social,” January 18, 2020; <https://www.twitch.tv/videos/538029471>; Screenshot by N. Lamerichs



Source: Stream by Yuzupyron: “Motoko cosplay making !discord to chat after streams,” February 20, 2020; <https://www.twitch.tv/yuzupyron/videos>; Screenshot by N. Lamerichs

## AFFECTIVE PERFORMANCES AND GENDER

Streaming offers viewers an intimate look into a person's life and hobbies. Through the chat, connections are formed with the streamer, which gives an idea of closeness. In cosplay, this aspect of streaming is amplified, because costuming is always connected to the body of the streamer, who tries on the outfit, or sews their outfit or commission actively while just chatting away. The streams that I analyzed support this idea of intimacy, and evoke it in their shots and mise-en-scène. The videos in this corpus are seemingly shot from offices, living rooms, bedrooms, or garages. Even when these videos are shot in a make-shift studio, they tend to convey the streamer's personality.

With a few exceptions, most of the streams that were sampled for this research were by female streamers with different national backgrounds and sexualities, one important finding already is that men stream cosplay far less on Twitch, or do not make use of the hashtags as much as women. However, when browsing different role-playing tags, it is common to find men dressing up as well to represent different characters, particularly in table-top sessions. Men are also well-represented in the Making & Crafting category, but their practices are diverse. One exploratory search of category (4 March 2020, 11:30) shows 34 streams in which men are well-represented, painting *Dungeons & Dragons* figurines, glass blowing, and 3-D printing different objects, such as a Baby Yoda figurine.

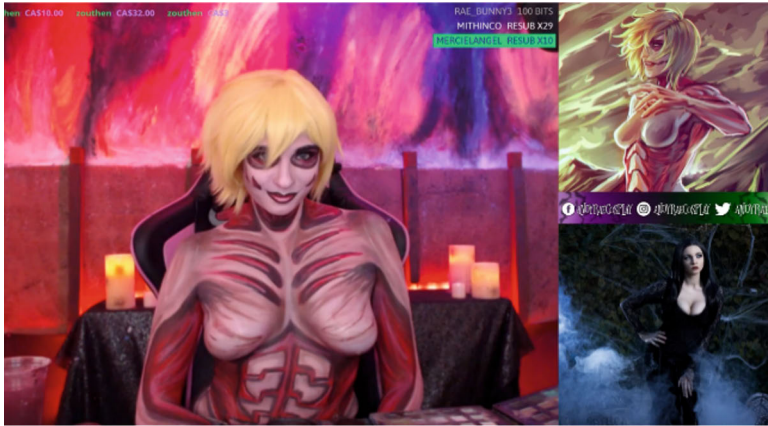
The cosplay performances on Twitch are not neutral but characterized by friendly conversation and even intimacy. A good example of these intimate performances is Andy Rae's (Andyraecosplay) *Attack on Titan* bodypaint.<sup>41</sup> In this 9+ hours stream, the female streamer paints herself as the character Anne in front of the camera slowly, by drawing different muscles and flesh. The background is carefully arranged to fit the cosplay. There are candles arranged on a table in the background, and viewers see a backdrop of the famous walls from the anime and manga. As Andy Rae mindfully puts on the grime and accentuates the colors, she discusses everything from cosplay to her life with her audience. She is attentive of the camera and friendly with the people in the chat. Many of her jokes revolve around her being Canadian,

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41 Andyraecosplay: "Attack on Titan Female Titan Body Paint!!! First time doing organic paint blehhhh," January 18, 2020; <https://www.twitch.tv/videos/537256239>

and she sometimes exaggerates her accent. Seeing her put the paint on her skin is a delicate, intimate experience. When people make remarks about nudity and the Twitch guidelines, she laughs and comments jokingly that her muscles are indeed not paint: “Haha, yeah, I just ripped my skin off tonight!”

*Figure 2: Andryraecosplay in bodypaint as Anne from Attack on Titan*



Source: Stream by Andryraecosplay: “Attack on Titan Female Titan Body Paint!!! First time doing organic paint blehhhh,” January 18, 2020; <https://www.twitch.tv/videos/537256239>; Screenshot by N. Lamerichs

While Andy Rae puts on her grime, the audience compliments her often with her body and appearance. She is positive and takes their compliments in good spirit. Some of the viewers express their own doubts about doing bodypaints. User EleeMoon for instance worries about her own body and skin tone: “Bodypainting cosplays always look so good, i wish my body was toned enough for that <3” Andy Rae responds: “No honey, my body is not toned at all! I drew on it! It’s an illusion!” Once the bodypaint is done (see figure 2), the audience is highly supportive of the cosplayer. One user (Ty\_theBlockbuster\_Guy) remarks: “u broke twitch by your awesomeness.” Many state how amazing Andy Rae looks, and how happy they are to see the final product. To all their hearts and compliments, Rae remarks: “Aw thank you, wish I could come eat your family!” Andy Rae is expressive in her gestures and playful towards the camera, showing her appreciation to the audience but also throwing in some in-character jokes.

For the most part, the sessions on Twitch are an intimate back and forth between the streamer and audience, that is often tagged under the category Just Chatting. Conversations were mostly friendly and playful, which argues against the idea that Twitch is a platform where toxic masculinity is normalized. When viewers acted out of line, they were banned, but I only saw a streamer call out a viewer once in my hours of viewing. In general, these cosplay streams are watched by low numbers of viewers, who seem to know each other and often discuss topics unrelated to the stream. In terms of content, many streamers focus on the creation of outfits and props. Cosplay is portrayed as a critical making process, whereas there are only a few streams that focus on other aspects of the hobby, such as photography or convention life. The women that focus on bodypaint and make-up are treated differently than the makers. They receive compliments on beauty, looks and techniques. Even though these female streamers are often told how cute and beautiful they are, they take each compliment with a smile and self-consciously.

While most streams are about creativity and bodypaint, one was also concerned with make-up and photoshoots, namely the German stream by izzy\_clary.<sup>42</sup> She quietly paints herself as Poison Ivy while users in the chat talk about new Marvel shows, music, work-life, and their own cosplay projects. One user, BigTunaNeal, discusses her own experience with painting: “I’ve been working in a lot of delicate low-pressure stuff, like painting in veins and fine skin details.” Izzy chats away in German while arranging her wig and doing her make-up for her Poison Ivy cosplay. There is soft piano music in the background—renditions of popular songs like *Country Roads*. This adds to the atmosphere of beauty and cuteness which is so prominent during this stream.

Appearance is discussed elaborately as well. Even though Izzy has orange hair herself, she still wears a wig for her Ivy cosplay. Users approve. Rokua states: “Perücken sind immer besser für Cosplays als eigenes Haar.” (Wigs are always better for cosplays than your own hair.) Most interesting about this stream is that once Izzy is dressed up, she also provides insights into how she does her photoshoots for Instagram. She takes a break, rearranges the camera, and shows herself posing in front of a customized forest backdrop as Poison Ivy. As she mentions, the results will be uploaded on her

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42 izzy\_clary: “Poison Ivy Rock (GER/ENG),” February 5, 2020, [https://m.twitch.tv/izzy\\_clary/profile](https://m.twitch.tv/izzy_clary/profile)



Instagram. One of the users, unnamed\_One, recognizes the set, and says: “Das sind doch die Backdrops von Kate Backdrops, oder?” (Those are the backdrops of Kate Backdrops, right?) Izzy’s performance of her cosplay, and femininity, stand out during the photoshoot and before. It shows that cosplay is firmly embedded in an intertextual web, but also in a culture of self-authorship and curation, and part of a wide social media landscape where young women perform characters and, through those characters, explore their own body, appearance and desires.

*Figure 3: Channel of Izzy\_Clary posing for her Instagram account*



Source: Stream by izzy\_clary: “Poison Ivy Rock (GER/ENG),” February 5, 2020; [https://m.twitch.tv/izzy\\_clary/profile](https://m.twitch.tv/izzy_clary/profile); Screenshot by N. Lamerichs

Seeing this stream of a woman alone in her bedroom, staging the best selfies, is an intimate experience. Usually, audiences only see the product and assume that these selfies are taken naturally and without too much effort. However, the careful staging by Izzy shows us that channels like Instagram and Twitch are heavily curated and that looking good requires a lot of effort. The discussions on this stream, from hairdo and make-up, show us that cosplay can be very similar to the beauty vlogs on YouTube and other online performances where young women support each other in Western culture. The many compliments on how good Izzy looks, and how cute she is, confirm



that Twitch is part of a larger cultural paradigm, one where appearance is still an important and gendered norm, and where performance on online channels is an important, deliberate and time-consuming activity for many users. These aesthetics may seem natural and unfiltered, but they are staged through much effort. A Twitch stream, in that sense, may seem more raw but is also carefully constructed.

## FEMALE FANTREPRENEURS

Twitch can be read as affective labor, as the previous section clearly frames. Woodcock and Johnson describe this immaterial, emotional form of investment by streamers as “affective dimensions of video game streaming labor, which involves being compelling to watch and friendly to viewers, soliciting donations, building parasocial intimacy with spectators, and engaging audiences through humor.”<sup>43</sup> Still, Twitch’s business model encourages actual monetization through the affiliate/partner roles. By broadcasting their creative labor and photoshoots, streamers earn revenue, which is portrayed as a coveted position, a holy grail of sorts, on Twitch. Though streamers engage in what is de facto their hobby (e.g., cosplay, gaming), they combine this with actual material and immaterial labor. Julian Kücklich describes such practices as “playbor,” the integration of play with often invisible, precarious labor.<sup>44</sup> On Twitch, material labor and monetization come in different forms and do not only relate to the affiliate/partner scheme.

For starters, Twitch is often part of a larger identity of cosplayers as “fantrepreneurs.” In this model, fan activities such as cosplay become an opportunity to sell to other fans and create revenue. During this research, I watched different streams of Lilsproutstudios, who shows her work on different items from THE LEGEND OF ZELDA franchise and WORLD OF WARCRAFT. She uses

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43 Woodcock, Jamie/Johnson, Mark: “The Affective Labor and Performance of Live Streaming on Twitch.tv,” in: *Television & New Media*, 20(8) (2019), pp. 813-823.

44 Kücklich, Julian: “Precarious Playbour: Modders and the Digital Games Industry,” *The Fibreculture Journal* 5 (2005); <http://five.fibreculturejournal.org/fcj-025-precarious-playbour>

the channel to draw attention to the Etsy store where she sells her products.<sup>45</sup> In her stream, for instance, she talks elaborately about her new inventory, and how many of her hand-made items were sold out as holiday gifts during Christmas. Her hand-made items are sold on Etsy, where the hearthstone replica is for instance sold for \$41,90 (March 6, 2020). A quick search also tells me that this vendor actively promotes her sculptures and replicas on Twitter and elsewhere. This cross-channel approach is crucial for fantrepeneurs in terms of marketing and promotion.

Other streamers particularly specialize in cosplay commissions as freelancers, such as lowbudgetcos.<sup>46</sup> This German cosplayer uses her stream to show commissions that she is working on, such as a Kalluto cosplay. She thanks the user in question for commissioning the outfit with her, and for allowing her to stream the creative process. She remarks: “Wenn du Zeit hast, kannst Du gucken,” and adds with a laugh: “Ich lass dich sehen, wie das funktioniert, der ganze Kram!” (If you have time, you can watch, I’ll show you how it works, all the things!) It seems that users in the chat are on friendly terms and probably acquaintances. When they comment on the cosplay creation, it is usually to complement the fabrics and design choices or other details, like: “Der Knopf hat eine schöne Farbe” (The button has a beautiful color.)

While certain streamers can earn revenues through the before-mentioned affiliate/partner schemes, it is also possible to set up donations and tips within the stream for viewers. Donation or tip buttons were very common in the cosplay streams that I watched. It seems that most streamers currently use Streamlabs for this purpose, which utilizes both credit cards and PayPal. Embedded in the streams, most show the most recent donations, their top donation/donator, the overall donations that they gathered and/or the goals that they strive for. Often, donations have a certain purpose, such as gathering enough money for a certain cosplay or gathering money to go to a specific event (e.g., Twitchcon).

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45 lilsproutstudios: “More Kokiri’s Emerald sculpting!! {LoZ - Ocarina of Time.” January 27, 2020; <https://www.twitch.tv/lilsproutstudios/clip/HappyLongAlfalfaBudBlast>

46 lowbudgetcos: “(GER) Es wird...ein Oberteil | !wip !links.” January 22, 2020; <https://m.twitch.tv/lowbudgetcos/profile>

Figure 4: *ThatsStrange* collects donations with her bodypaint to go to Twitchcon EU



Source: Screenshot from a stream by ThatsStrange: “LYSSA DRAK GREEN LANTERN BODYPAINT, [Goals! Prints],” January 27, 2020; <https://www.twitch.tv/videos/542599198>; Screenshot by N. Lamerichs

Finally, donations on Twitch need not necessarily go to the streamer but can also go to a cause. Charity is an important aspect of many streams. During the time of this research in early 2020, Australia was subjected to massive forest fires that were a cause of concern. From the streams that I sampled, eveillecosplay actively gathered donations for the AUS Wildfire Aid with a stream of her WORLD OF WARCRAFT armor.<sup>47</sup>

## CONCLUSION

Twitch is a platform where paratexts become texts, spawning new paratexts along the way. When analyzing these streams, we can observe how fan identity is explored, performed, documented, and experienced in many ways. In this chapter, I shed light on the particularities of one tag on Twitch (cosplay) and the types of content that circulated in this category. This case study provided insights into the broader culture of streaming on the Twitch platform,

<sup>47</sup> eveillecosplay: “Armor Making.”

specifically the creative processes, transparency into fandom, but also the emotional and gendered labor of being engaging.

These paratexts are by no means neutral but are firmly embedded in the culture of the platform and media culture at large. Cosplay streams are exemplary of the complex communication and parasocial relationships that take place on Twitch as a system. As a network, Twitch thrives on different actors, including aspects of the technology itself. It can be understood as a complex system with actors that range from the streamer, the game, and the audience to the affordances of Twitch and specific streaming software utilized by users. That software, from Twitch Studio to OBS, again has different options and plug-ins to embed donations, extra windows, and banners that, in turn, shape the video content. Twitch is a potpourri of texts, most of which are ephemeral in nature, which also poses challenges for researchers.

In the case of cosplay, a specific transformative and embodied fan identity is staged and amplified on Twitch. The streams provide insights into the creative processes around cosplay, its maker culture, as well as its beauty culture. Most of the streamers in this corpus are female, and engaged with their community in intimate ways, staging affective parasocial relationships that sometimes cut across language and cultural differences (e.g., some streams were bilingual). However, for the most part, their audiences seemed homogenous groups of friends and acquaintances that had other forms of relationships as well, those of vendors and buyers, seamstress and commissioner, artist and patron. Many of the users had fandom relationships that extended to conventions and other spaces. Twitch, in this sense, extrapolates certain fan identities and gives a platform to extend them. In most cases, Twitch contributes to the larger personal brand that cosplayers also communicate, perform, and possibly monetize on other channels, such as Instagram, Twitter and Etsy.

Theorizing these different expressions is crucial in fan and game studies today. The concepts that we use to close-read these expressions, such as paratextuality, need to be adapted and examined anew to understand the complex interfaces, texts, and commentaries that circulate in digital culture. The theory of paratext needs to be revised to fully understand contemporary digital culture, user-generated content and automation processes. To capture platform fandom, we need to look beyond individual texts and signs, and consider these texts as a system.

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# Benefits of Including Let's Play Recordings in Close Readings of Digital Game Texts

## Discussing Multiple Player Competences in Selected Game Texts

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KATARZYNA MARAK

### LET'S PLAYS AS PARATEXTUAL FORMS

This paper is devoted to the unique ways Let's Play recordings contribute to generating academic knowledge about digital game texts and how they can aid analyses of particular game texts. The academic interest in Let's Plays as paratexts and their potential has been on the increase for some time.<sup>1</sup> Let's Plays as paratexts are usually recognized for their potential to be a source of insight into how a game can be played in terms of skill, strategy, and interpretation of content.<sup>2</sup> This article, however, focuses on the valuable informa-

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- 1 Mukherjee, Souvik: *Video Games and Storytelling: Reading Games and Playing Books*, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan 2015; Burwell, Catherine/Thomas Miller: "Let's Play: Exploring Literacy Practices in an Emerging Videogame Paratext," in: *E-Learning and Digital Media* 13, no. 3-4 (2016), pp. 109-125; Enevold, Jessica/Esther, Stewart: *Game Love: Essays on Play and Affection*, Jefferson, North Carolina: McFarland & Company, Inc. 2015.
  - 2 Newman, James: *Videogames*, London, New York: Routledge 2013; Radde-Antweiler, Kerstin/Xenia Zeiler: "Methods for Analyzing Let's Plays: Context Analysis for Gaming Videos on YouTube," in: *Gamevironments*, 2 (2016), pp. 100-139.

tion a scholar can obtain from Let's Play recordings, which are inaccessible if the scholar relies only on the process of playing the game critically. Since Let's Plays are a peculiar type of paratexts concentrating specifically on the player experience,<sup>3</sup> they can supply the scholar with extensive data which might not be apparent to them during their own critical playthrough,<sup>4</sup> thus reducing the likelihood of potential blind spots in the subsequent analysis. The scope of this text will extend to three main cognitive player competences required by contemporary digital games and the way they can be studied through Let's Play recordings: cultural competence, linguistic competence, and metagame competence.

The common view of Let's Plays is, as Emily Flynn-Jones explains, that they tend to be in some way associated with "exhibitions of optimal play strategy and demonstration of extreme skill and knowledge of a particular game."<sup>5</sup> However, such a way of looking at Let's Play recordings is extremely reductive, as they are, in fact, so much more than a simple public flexing of gaming muscles. Let's Play videos are a very specific paratextual form that primarily creates "archive[s] of the experience of interacting with a text."<sup>6</sup> This means that apart from sharing different, subjective perspectives on game texts, Let's Plays can also be regarded as a way of distributing game texts cross-platform and for vast audiences, including those for whom the Let's Play is the only way to experience the given game text at all.<sup>7</sup> Let's

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3 Marak, Katarzyna/Miłosz Markocki: *Aspekty funkcjonowania gier cyfrowych we współczesnej kulturze: studia przypadków*, Toruń: Nicolaus Copernicus University Press 2016.

4 Fernández-Vara, Clara: *Introduction to Game Analysis*, Routledge 2015; Biz-zocchi, Jim/Joshua Tanenbaum: "Well Read: Applying Close Reading Techniques to Gameplay Experiences," in: Drew Davidson (ed.), *Well Played 3.0: Video Games, Value and Meaning*, Pittsburgh: ETC Press 2011, pp. 289-316.

5 Flynn-Jones, Emily: "Bad Romance: For the Love of 'Bad' Video Games," in: Enevold, Jessica/Stewart, Esther (eds.), *Game Love: Essays on Play and Affection*, Jefferson, North Carolina: McFarland & Company, Inc. 2015, pp. 253-264; here p. 260.

6 S. Mukherjee: *Video Games and Storytelling*, p. 114.

7 De Vivo, Jamie. "The Power of Voyeurism and Let's Plays;" <https://thesynergi.sts.co.uk/media/jamie-de-vivo/the-power-of-voyeurism-and-lets-plays/>

Plays, as Catherine Burwell and Thomas Miller argue, “highlight the very process of meaning-making itself.”

“[Let’s Plays] reveal just how gamers create meaning from games. Through their oral commentary (which may be humorous, critical or instructional and may include questions, exclamations, profanity, sarcasm, feigned and real emotion, laughs, shouts, whispers and grunts) we come to understand how a player plays a game and simultaneously, what they think, know and feel about the game.”<sup>8</sup>

In this way, the demeanor of the given content creator allows the audience—and the scholar—to develop both awareness and appreciation for an experience of the text that is, in simplest terms, not their own.

This aspect of Let’s Play videos is particularly useful to scholars, whose task of analyzing a given game is extraordinarily difficult—just like with any other culture text, game texts can be experienced for the first time only once. However, because in their very design, games are not fixed as texts, they must be played multiple times—otherwise, a scholar would be incapable of deducing and studying how the given game works. In other words, not only must the scholar play the game in a specific manner, but also repeatedly. As Clara Fernández-Vara aptly notes, “playing a game for fun is different from playing it critically,” since critical approach makes every action and choice significant, as they will generate different data.<sup>9</sup> Therefore, she elaborates, “we have to be methodical and aware of what we do while we play.”<sup>10</sup> In this way, the sheer fact of conducting research informs the experience of the game text; a scholar conscious of their every action and decision is less likely to enjoy the game through spontaneous gameplay.

Furthermore, repeated playthroughs of one game, which are necessary when one attempts a close reading of a game, create a distance between the scholar and “the pleasures of the game,” as noted by Jim Bizzocchi and Joshua Tannebaum.<sup>11</sup> This distance separates the direct gameplay experience from the game text, which now becomes merely a sum of software,

8 C. Burwell/T. Miller: “Let’s Play,” p. 113.

9 C. Fernández-Vara: *Introduction to Game Analysis*, Routledge 2015, p. 26.

10 Ibid.

11 J. Bizzocchi/J. Tanenbaum: “Well Read: Applying Close Reading Techniques to Gameplay Experiences,” p. 301.

mechanics, and world elements. Bizzocchi and Tannebaum suggest that scholars “learn to oscillate between a position of critical distance and one of immediate pleasure,”<sup>12</sup> thus somehow retaining both their subjectivity and their objectivity. They must be open to the raw experience of the game without assumptions formed beforehand, while at the same time being aware of that experience and keeping track of the particulars of the game’s actualization:

“On one level, the scholar enacts the play of a naïve gamer—one who is encountering the game as a fresh participant. This perspective is open to all nuances of the experience and ready to absorb the game without preconceptions. In Bolter and Grusin’s terms, she must commit to a complete state of immediacy—unconditional surrender to the experience (Bolter & Grusin, 1999). At the same time, the scholar is—and must be—distanced from the experience. She must bring an objectivity to the observation of her own experience and faithfully remember and record a wide range of critical details. From this perspective, she plays the game in a state of hypermediation—an awareness of the fact of mediation.”<sup>13</sup>

However, even this performance, if it were to be achieved by the scholar, still offers little insight into how an average player might feel about the game. The hypermediation interferes with experiencing the game insofar that it distorts the perspective on the actual course of gameplay and inherently differentiates game scholars from the majority of players, as Fernández-Vara notes:

“It is also easy to use oneself as reference for an ‘ideal player,’ even though we may not be. Ideal does not mean optimal player; rather, we look for an everyman of sorts, an abstract figure outside of cultural context and without preconceived ideas. This abstraction, although commonly used in literary studies or film criticism, is difficult to achieve. The sheer fact that we are tackling games systematically and critically sets us aside from most other players, so it is hard to consider ourselves average. Additionally, the better we get at playing a game, the more rare a player we become, since

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12 Ibid.

13 Ibid. p. 302.

expert players are a minority. By being good at a game, we tackle it from a privileged point of view.”<sup>14</sup>

And yet it is exactly that elusive normality—the quality of the common, the typical, the expected—that the game scholars pursue, even if it at times it might seem paradoxical. For instance, Bizzocchi and Tanenbaum point out that close reading traditionally “relies on the highly idiosyncratic insights of the individual theorist in order to explicate nuances of the work that might not be apparent to the average reader,” and then go on to elaborate upon the necessity of basing the analysis on the experience of gameplay. However, they also propose that the scholar should engage the game text “in an authentic manner, while still generating close observations and insights,” clarifying that “authentic manner” involves the scholar facing the game “as a player or a ‘gamer’ playing the game on its own terms.”<sup>15</sup>

And therein lies the problem: Who would this average gamer, or player, be? Is there some specific limit of skill or knowledge beyond which that “everyman” no longer serves the purpose of an academic analysis? How can a scholar emulate so unspecified a figure? And how useful would that figure be in a reality of digital game texts played by real, flesh-and-blood players who always have *some* preconceived ideas of some sort or another. What would it, then, mean for the scholar to engage the game in an “authentic manner” and to play the game “on its own terms”? Maybe the answer lies in defining and pursuing authenticity from a different perspective—not through narrowing down the required conditions, but by multiplying contexts and viewpoints. A single scholar can generate numerous actualizations of the game text, but they cannot possibly map out all the potential actualizations, not to mention more than a single-blind playthrough experience. Combining one’s own personal critical playthrough with multiple Let’s Plays of one game benefits any close reading of a digital game text by providing multiple additional perspectives.

Naturally, a given Let’s Play is, needless to say, not enough to form an opinion on the levels of cultural, linguistic, and metagame competence required by a game; for that, scholars need to familiarize themselves, at least

14 C. Fernández-Vara: *Introduction to Game Analysis*, p. 28.

15 J. Bizzocchi/J. Tanenbaum: “Well Read: Applying Close Reading Techniques to Gameplay Experiences,” p. 301.

to a degree, with the persona of the given Let's Player in order to compensate for the potential bias. After all, the point of using Let's Plays is not to accumulate personal biases but to help distinguish biases from the elements that are contingent more on the game text than on the scholar's personal, authentic engagement with the game. As far as Let's Players who work primarily on YouTube are concerned—since they are the ones this paper is based on—there is a plethora of content creators with distinct styles and online identities. This leads some game scholars to caution bordering on cynical distrust of the credibility of the data obtained from such recordings due to obvious doubts—how can we be sure that Let's Players are sharing their real thoughts, and are not simply acting? This problem is, of course, impossible to eliminate, but it can be reduced. Choosing smaller channels (between hundreds and tens of thousands of subscribers) or channels whose upload schedule is not as strict (e.g., twice a week or even more rarely) usually results in finding more spontaneous, unscripted performance recordings. Let's Players who consistently focus on one genre, regardless of whether that genre is thematic (horror, fantasy or crime) or gameplay-related (point-and-click, first-person shooter, etc.), also tend to yield good results. Let's Players in charge of such channels seem to be more likely to follow their own authentic preferences and behavior patterns than trends or expected reactions.

## PLAYER COMPETENCES

To discuss in more detail how Let's Plays can aid a scholar in their endeavor to analyze a digital game text, a brief characterization of the player competences is necessary. While there are manifold types of player competences that can be enumerated, including physical ones (such as hand-eye coordination in action games or VR games) or social ones (apparent mainly in massive multiplayer online games or in cooperation modes), this paper will focus on three cognitive types—the cultural competence, the linguistic competence, and the metagame competence. Out of the three, the significance of linguistic and cultural competence is easier to define and recognize. They can be, naturally, most easily observed in the case of games that rely on elements of language and culture to convey some feature essential to their setup.

The first competence, linguistic, involves the comprehension of all the game elements related to language. While many games, both AAA and small

independent titles, are localized or available at least in English, the localization might be limited to subtitling the spoken dialogue, omitting other elements of the depicted world such as posters, notes or writing in the background. Therefore, even if the game offers the player subtitles, linguistic competence still plays a role in the gameplay experience. An example of this can be the 2019 remake of a free independent game *MERMAID SWAMP* (2013), in which a group of four friends gets lost in the mountains and is offered a place to stay by a strange old man, whose house later reveals to hold a dark secret. Both the original game and the remake feature a character named Rin Yamazaki, who is repeatedly described as being bad-mouthed, tomboyish (in a pejorative sense), and is frequently name-called as “Yama-monkey” (Yamazaru) or “Apewoman” (*yamazaru* translates both as “a wild monkey” or as “a country bumpkin”). The reason for which she is teased for her supposed rudeness does not translate readily into English in subtitles, as can be observed in particular in the scene where she first encounters Yukio Tsuchida—the old man who invites her group to stay at his place—in the forest. According to the English translation, she says the following upon meeting Tsuchida:

1. “Just an old coot... Dammit, don’t freak me out! We were on a trip, but our car went kaput, so I guess we’re stuck.”<sup>16</sup>
2. “Whew, just an old coot! ...freaked me the hell out. Right, I was on a trip with my college pals, but our car went kaput, so we’re kinda stuck.”<sup>17</sup>

In both games, her original Japanese lines are exactly the same: “*Nanda, jijī ka yo... Odorokase-yagatte. Ryokōchū-dattanda-sedo, kuruma ga ugokanaku nacchimatte sa, tachi-ōjō shitenda.*”<sup>18</sup> The two English versions attempt to convey the issue with her demeanor, but since the impression she makes in Japanese results primarily from a very specific combination of intonation and casual verb forms, the English subtitles make her sound odd instead. The case of the remake is a little more complex since it includes voice acting, and therefore even the players who do not speak Japanese can at least form an opinion about her tone of voice. However, the Let’s Plays make it clear that

16 *MERMAID SWAMP* (Uri 2013).

17 *MERMAID SWAMP* (Remake) (Uri 2019).

18 *MERMAID SWAMP* (Uri 2013) and *MERMAID SWAMP* (Remake) (Uri 2019).



to the players familiar with the Japanese language and culture her utterance comes across as much more impolite; as soon as she says “*Nanda, jijī ka yo*” (which can be translated as “huh, an old codger”), the Japanese players are either much amused or taken aback by Rin’s way of addressing the elderly man. They usually comment, even if briefly, on the fact that “this is [their] first meeting,”<sup>19</sup> and as such, Rin’s attitude is inappropriate or imply that her way of speaking is disrespectful.<sup>20</sup> This kind of information would normally be inaccessible to a scholar with no knowledge of Japanese culture or language.

Cultural competence, on the other hand, concerns the player’s familiarity with the given cultural framework and the ability to apply that knowledge to the gameplay process. A striking example of the significance of cultural competence in the context of the gameplay experience is the case of *DETENTION* (2017), a Taiwanese 2D horror side-scrolling adventure game. *DETENTION* follows the soul of Ray, a young girl trapped in a purgatory cycle of nightmarish shards of her former life as she is forced to face the guilt over her actions. What is of crucial importance is the fact that the game’s narrative is firmly embedded in the history and culture of that specific period in Taiwan, whereas numerous features of the gameplay, such as puzzles and action sequences, revolve around elements of the local religion and mythology. As some players and reviewers noted, while it is feasible to complete the game in its entirety with neither detailed nor even superficial knowledge concerning the aforementioned aspects, there are many moments where “international players might feel out of touch with the game.”<sup>21</sup> According to some of the reviewers, “it is unlikely that players outside of Asia will know who the Black and White Impermanence are. Even practices of significance such as food offerings, holding your breath in the presence of a ghost, and incense burning are likely to be lost in the greater audience.”<sup>22</sup> However, in contrast to the puzzles and monster fights, where the player can simply learn how to go through the motions by trial and error or repetition, there is also the

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19 [ホラー] 人魚沼 #1 ; [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6\\_SXpzPe0hM](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6_SXpzPe0hM)

20 [人魚の呪い!?] 人魚沼 実況プレイ Part1; <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GaIrTvAayvk>

21 *GAME REVIEW: DETENTION (SWITCH)*; <https://nintendosoup.com/game-review-detention-switch/>

22 Ibid.

narrative dimension of the game, the effectiveness of which is markedly diminished if the players become too confused about key story points:<sup>23</sup>

“LordZagry: I’m not very sure about Ray’s motivation for giving the list of books, if anyone can enlighten me, that would be appreciated.

Kiwimaster: It seems what when Ray overheard their conversation, she mistakenly thought the two teachers are in a relationship (while they’re actually both part of the bookclub), and assumed that to be the reason why Mr. Chang had distanced himself from her. In order to get rid of her “rival”, Ray ended up reporting the bookclub, hoping that with Yin out of the picture, Mr. Chang will return to her.

Fire.sakura: The relationship between the male teacher Chung and miss Yin is just they are secret left wing politics members or they are communist. In 1960’s Taiwan, this actions need to be secret or you will be caught by some Taiwanese style ‘GESTAPO’ and tortured to death.”<sup>24</sup>

This exchange adequately demonstrates the relevance of the cultural competence in the context of the gameplay experience of a player engaging with the text of *DETENTION*. Poor knowledge of the historical and cultural circumstances of 1960s Taiwan will hinder the enjoyment of the story due to confusion—the better the grasp of the actual nature of the book club and the significance of Ray delivering the reading list to a military officer, the greater the emotional impact of the narrative.

The last discussed type of competence—metagame competence—is the competence resulting from the accumulated metagame knowledge and the player’s ability to make good use of that knowledge. Since there are numerous definitions of the terms metagame, metagaming, and metagame knowledge, ranging from simply “knowledge found outside the game”<sup>25</sup> to

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23 Spelling and grammar as in the original posts.

24 *Ending Discussion Questions (Spoiler Alert)*; [https://steamcommunity.com/app/55220/discussions/0/14451367\\_0977846637/](https://steamcommunity.com/app/55220/discussions/0/14451367_0977846637/)

25 Stricker, Andrew et al. (eds.): *Integrating an Awareness of Selfhood and Society into Virtual Learning*, IGI Global 2017.

“any strategy, action or method used in a game,”<sup>26</sup> for the purpose of this paper, let us consider metagame knowledge as a complete body of knowledge concerning game texts gathered by an individual through play experience. This experience, distilled into abstract comprehension of how game texts function, goes beyond a single game and both completes and adds to the gameplay experience even if the player is not aware of it. Such understanding of metagame knowledge is, in fact, very similar to Gary Alan Fine’s concept of “frames of fantasy gaming,”<sup>27</sup> which Mia Consalvo also discusses in her deconstruction of the validity of the notion of the magic circle in regards to digital games<sup>28</sup>. In this sense, metagame knowledge can be described as the resultant product of the commonsense knowledge the player brings into the gameplay experience, their varying familiarity with the “game rules grounded in the game structure,” and their knowledge of the depicted world listed by Fine.<sup>29</sup>

Metagame knowledge not only affects the way players play the game but also encompasses their personal preferences, associations and nostalgia concerning genres, mechanics, and aesthetics. At this point, a very simple and brief example of how the nostalgic aspect of this particular competence is reflected in the attitudes and reactions of players is the case of the game FAITH (2017), a retro MS-DOS-style game. When one looks at the feedback, it becomes clear that the reception of the game’s peculiar aesthetics is fundamentally related to the given player’s metagame knowledge. Familiarity with the period in which that graphic style predominated is essential for recognizing and appreciating the nostalgic homage to that era. For the players who have no emotional connection with that period, neither the game’s distinct graphics style nor audio has any obvious appeal:

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26 Kim, Sungwook (ed.): *Game Theory Applications in Network Design*, IGI Global 2014.

27 Fine, Gary Alan: *Shared Fantasy: Role Playing Games as Social Worlds*, University of Chicago Press 2002, p. 194.

28 Consalvo, Mia: “There Is No Magic Circle,” in: *Games and Culture* 4, no. 4 (2009), pp. 408-417.

29 G. A. Fine: *Shared Fantasy*, p. 194.

selmiak: “the animations inbetween are cool, but the normal game graphics look very basic, reduced and ugly to me. Even on the C64 there has been a better use of color to make sweeter gfx.”

Crimson Wizard: “I actually like the visuals, this is the kind of gfx style, with lack of detail, that made old games so captivating IMO. ... Now, sounds is a different thing... [F]rankly, while visuals may be a good choice, the choice to replicate old-computer speaker producing voice is terrible, IMO. Very annoying and immersion breaking.”<sup>30</sup>

On the other hand, for those players who can relate to that specific era in digital game history, the aesthetics of FAITH hold an enjoyable nostalgic value and even increase gameplay efficiency:

MicroHorrorArcade : “The graphics and movement were super nostalgic. I love the retro feel that a lot of games have been having recently, but this one just blows me away. The color scheme with important objects being different colors is a really nice touch.”<sup>31</sup>

## BENEFITS OF LET’S PLAYS: PRACTICAL EXAMPLES

To further illustrate the importance of the data obtainable from Let’s Plays for a scholar attempting to analyze a specific game text, let us turn to two disparate yet distinct digital game texts: DR. LANGESKOV, THE TIGER, AND THE TERRIBLY CURSED EMERALD: A WHIRLWIND HEIST (2015), and PAMALI: INDONESIAN FOLKLORE HORROR (2019). To provide a better context for how those games challenge any of the three discussed competences, a few specific gameplay points, which usually re-focus or change the direction of the emergent actualization, will be mentioned and briefly explained. In this text, they will be referred to as refraction points, insofar that they tend to constitute gameplay points that re-focus or change the direction of the emergent

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30 FAITH (C-64 style horror game); <https://www.adventuregamestudio.co.uk/forums/index.php?topic=55985.0>

31 “FAITH—Itch.io Edition—Comments;” <https://airdorf.itch.io/faith/comments?before=76>

actualization; upon reaching such a point, the gameplay changes due to the player adjusting either pace or approach.

### **DR. LANGESKOV, THE TIGER, AND THE TERRIBLY CURSED EMERALD: A WHIRLWIND HEIST**

DR. LANGESKOV, THE TIGER, AND THE TERRIBLY CURSED EMERALD is a short, humorous computer game with a fourth-wall-breaking premise. At the very beginning, the player is addressed by an unseen person called the Stage Manager and informed that they couldn't play the eponymous game because another player is already playing it—but the player can help along by carrying out various tasks “backstage.” The player progresses by following the Stage Manager's instructions, who guides the avatar through a sequence of rooms such as Wildlife Preparation, Weather Control, or High Concept Miscellaneous Interactions, prompting the player to pull levers and press buttons in order to turn on lights, release the tiger so that it can chase the character of the other player, or operate the elevator. The game ends with the player finally entering the eponymous game only to be mauled by the tiger, prematurely released by the next player's character.

Despite the fact that DR. LANGESKOV, THE TIGER, AND THE TERRIBLY CURSED EMERALD is a rather linear game, there are still many prominent refraction points that showcase the ways in which the game challenges the player's metagame and linguistic competences. The three such points selected for this paper include:

#### **1. The Stage Manager's Explanations**

They are delivered through subtitled dialogue, so all players (English-speaking, Japanese-speaking, and German-speaking, as well as French, Italian, and six other supported languages) can understand the basic premise of the game. At the beginning, the Stage Manager addresses the avatar—and the player—directly, saying:

STAGE MANAGER: “The thing is, the game you've just downloaded? Somebody is playing it right now so you can't, you can't, you can't. You can't play it. I'm really sorry. Yeah, this is... yeah, this is really inconvenient. I don't know—I don't know why this keeps happening. So, we're generally quite organized. You should come inside [the Publicity and Liaisons office]. I'll explain. ... Here's the thing. The game is

live, which makes it impossible to insert you... and also so it, it's just quite difficult now for you to leave."<sup>32</sup>

The Stage Manager's explanation and the instructions he gives allow the player to proceed with the gameplay and appreciate some of the direct humor. At this point, almost all players realize that they have been tricked by the game's trailer and the Steam store page and speculate about the development of subsequent gameplay.

## 2. Staff Letters and Signs

The first room the player enters, Publicity and Liaisons, is full of banners such as "WE HAVE HAD ENOUGH" or "STRIKE STRIKE STRIKE."<sup>33</sup> In contrast to the Stage Manager's instructions, *none* of these are subtitled despite being an essential part of the premise and environment (and, therefore, the story, as they lend meaning to the indexical storytelling). The indices make sense only in the context of the depicted world of the game. For example, on one of the desks, the player can find the following letter:

"Management,

Earlier today, I received a note on my desk that read as follows:

*In the event of a fire in or around your office, please try and ignore it and continue as though it wasn't there.*

I'm afraid I am unable to follow these instructions, or continue to work in this environment. I quit.

Also, Logistics Office 17 is on fire.

Juliet Busque

Logistics"<sup>34</sup>

If the players cannot read English, they will be unable to understand the letter's content, and they will miss the fact that the Stage Manager repeatedly downplays the importance of the strike for comedic effect. Understanding

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32 DR. LANGESKOV, THE TIGER, AND THE TERRIBLY CURSED EMERALD: A WHIRLWIND HEIST (Crows Crows Crows 2015, O: Crows Crows Crows).

33 Ibid.

34 Ibid.

such indices' significance allows the players to comprehend the humorous background story accompanying the game premise; furthermore, it facilitates forming expectations and strategies. Those familiar with the English language tended to pause and examine such assets carefully and comment on them, trying to understand the details of the situation they found in the depicted world.

### 3. The "LASERS" Button

This asset makes an appearance during the player's first proper task, turning on the lights for the character playing the eponymous game. Although in the location there is a lever which the Stage Manager clearly indicates verbally as the one which "sets the sunset off,"<sup>35</sup> the player can also find a large switch labeled "LASERS," clearly set up as a temptation. Usually, at this point, the players fully understand that the situation leans towards cooperation or spite. If they do press the button, the Stage Manager reacts immediately, groaning: "Oh Christ, who walks up to a switch marked 'LASERS' and thinks 'This. This is the one for me'?"<sup>36</sup> Perhaps not surprisingly, the majority of players who noticed the switch either purposefully chose it instead of the appropriate lever or deliberately returned to press it after setting off the sunset.

### Evaluation

A significant point that needs to be emphasized in the context of Let's Play recordings of *DR. LANGESKOV, THE TIGER, AND THE TERRIBLY CURSED EMERALD* is the fact that the game was developed by the same artist who created *THE STANLEY PARABLE* (2011/2013). In its first version, the game was a free, independent walking simulator that quickly gained popularity among many players, including Let's Players, due to its simple yet creative premise and an optimum balance between immersion and fourth-wall-breaking. The Let's Plays reveal that the Let's Players who are aware of the developer's identity tend to enter *DR. LANGESKOV, THE TIGER, AND THE TERRIBLY CURSED EMERALD* with an entirely different set of (usually quite high) expectations. Furthermore, their experience with *THE STANLEY PARABLE* motivates them to either ignore or resist the Stage Manager's instructions intentionally and almost completely miss the game's underlying story, which

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35 Ibid.

36 Ibid.

concerns the staff's labor strike. In such cases, the developers' elaborate environmental storytelling is reduced to a see-through location the players want to traverse quickly.

Information obtained from Let's Play recordings reveals to the scholars attempting a close reading of *DR. LANGESKOV, THE TIGER, AND THE TERRIBLY CURSED EMERALD* that metagame competence seems to be the most crucial enjoyment of the game. The linguistic competence did play a role in the experience as well, making it possible for the players to fully comprehend the back story staged by the environmental storytelling and enhancing the gratification elicited from the gameplay experience. In fact, linguistic competence is necessary to fully engage the player in the game world of *DR. LANGESKOV, THE TIGER, AND THE TERRIBLY CURSED EMERALD* and allow for thorough immersion. It did very little, however, to affect their strategy or decision-making throughout gameplay, even if it was indispensable to understanding the entirety of the humorous, *playful content* prepared by the creators. Metagame competence, on the other hand, was what allowed the players to put in a humorous, *playful performance*—the intimate knowledge of game form and convention (i.e., loading screens, NPC dialog, level design, enemy spawning mechanism, or glitches) was critical for the recognition of how the game invites such performance.

## PAMALI: INDONESIAN FOLKLORE HORROR

The next game, whose intricate structure requires multiple player competences, is *PAMALI: INDONESIAN FOLKLORE HORROR* (2018), a horror anthology game revolving around selected entities in Javanese folklore. The base game *PAMALI: INDONESIAN FOLKLORE HORROR* features protagonist Jaka, a young man whose whole family has passed away, leaving behind a house he now wants to sell. The gameplay is divided into three nights during which the player is supposed to tidy up the house as much as possible, with the ability to examine and clean the environment, as well as examine objects, throw them away, and—most importantly—comment on them out loud.

That wide range of possible interactions with the elements of the virtual environment is the game's most characteristic trait. The depicted world is centered around Indonesian folklore, customs, and superstitions, which the player is not introduced to in any way but instead learns about through trial and error. The first chapter (also referred to as "Folklore") of the game



proper, *The White Lady* (of which the third-night gameplay section was released as a demo), begins with the following ambiguous, almost generic introduction:

“Somewhere in Java, Indonesia.

A man decided to go back home to sell his family house for the money he desperately needs. The house was empty—abandoned for a year. It all looks the same, except for something he doesn’t want to believe.”<sup>37</sup>

Although the game does point to the supernatural nature of the threat in the house, nothing about the introductory text hints at the significance of respecting customs or unseen entities. Due to this beginning, the narrative design of the game, which stresses the story of the protagonist’s sister, Nenden, becoming a *kuntilanak*<sup>38</sup>, and a variety of signs of haunting in the gameplay location, PAMALI: INDONESIAN FOLKLORE HORROR is usually approached by the players like any other supernatural horror game text.

There are multiple noteworthy gameplay refraction points that challenge the player’s cultural and metagame competences and allow for the observation of the player’s reactions and attitudes, but in this paper only three will be taken into consideration:

## 1. The Wedding Dress

Once Jaka enters the house and starts looking at different items, Nenden’s wedding dress is one of the first objects to discover. It can be found in a chest by a standing mirror next to the storage room, along with other wedding memorabilia. Upon inspecting it, players can prompt Jaka to comment out loud with one of the three following options: “She was happy”; “Why don’t

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37 Spelling and grammar as in the original game text. It is worth noting that despite the imperfect translation into English, the game actually provides a translation of all almost the materials and assets, including diaries, documents, notes, book covers and pamphlets. PAMALI: INDONESIAN FOLKLORE HORROR. Demo (StoryTale Studios 2018, O: StoryTale Studios)

38 According to the information provided for the players in the game, *kuntilanak* is a spirit of a woman who committed suicide, was unable to enter the heavenly realm and “haunts people due to their loneliness.” PAMALI: INDONESIAN FOLKLORE HORROR. Demo.

someone throw this away?"; "Who'd wear this? Ghost?"<sup>39</sup> If, by that time, they do not realize that their actions inevitably fall into those two categories—respectful or disrespectful—they are unlikely to make informed decisions concerning their ensuing course of action. Naturally, if players choose to talk about a ghost, they commit a violation of taboo against the mystical and magical—*pamali*<sup>40</sup>—and trigger more haunting from the *kuntilanak*. Notably, the majority of players on their first playthrough tend to lean towards the option that provokes the supernatural entity ("Who'd wear this? Ghost?").

## 2. The Jenglot

The *jenglot* is an item that is undeniably and conspicuously culturally charged and, more importantly, immediately recognizable as such. It can be defined as anything ranging from a small fetish doll<sup>41</sup> to a non-human creature.<sup>42</sup> Even if the players are unaware of the function or significance of the *jenglot*, identifying it as a noteworthy item is well within their metagame competence due to its visually striking nature alone. The game does not allow the player to make Jaka comment on the *jenglot*, only to inspect it. Most players on their first playthrough examine the item carefully, wondering about its nature and purpose.

## 3. The Baby Doll

The doll catches the players' attention very quickly once they enter Nenden's room, and they tend to realize that this particular item is especially important.

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39 Ibid.

40 Handayani, Dwimi/Lufti, M. Lutfi: "Maintaining Expressions of Prohibition (pamali) as Signaling the Existence of Tengger Community's Culture," in: *Urban Studies: Border and Mobility: Proceedings of the 4th International Conference on Urban Studies (ICUS 2017)* (December 8-9, 2017), Universitas Airlangga, Surabaya, Indonesia: Routledge 2018, p. 266.

41 J. Maberry/D. F. Kramer: *They Bite: Endless Cravings of Supernatural Predators*, New York: Citadel Press 2009, p.76.

42 Long, Nicholas J.: "Haunting Malayness: The Multicultural Uncanny in a New Indonesian Province," in: *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 16(4) (2010), p. 874.

This realization again tends to stem from their metagame competence, as the doll is revealed in the gameplay's final stage, i.e., once the previously inaccessible room of Nenden is unlocked. This time also, the player can say something obviously disrespectful. However, in the demo, the only options available were descriptive—"Look" and "Mock,"<sup>43</sup> whereas the full game offered more information: "This doll to replace her baby? Crazy!"; "She took my doll? Really?"; "Tsk, she's gone mad for her baby."<sup>44</sup> Some players try to avoid offending the spirit on their first playthrough, but when this action does not drive the gameplay forward, they return to mock the toy. Eventually, due to the nature of this sequence, the player must speak disrespectfully of the doll, but the majority of players are clearly aware of the fact that the consequences of that action will be adverse.

## Evaluation

Let's Play recordings of *PAMALI: INDONESIAN FOLKLORE HORROR* point to the fact that as far as that particular game is concerned, the linguistic competence seems to be of secondary importance as long as the player is fluent either in Indonesian or English. Cultural competence and metagame competence, on the other hand, are highly significant. *PAMALI: INDONESIAN FOLKLORE HORROR* is a quite exceptional case because the game is constructed in a manner that subverts the regular approach of an experienced player; the players who play *PAMALI: INDONESIAN FOLKLORE HORROR* for the first time naturally tend to want to inspect and interact with any and every object that catches their eye, unaware (at least initially) that exploring freely in the way they normally would—i.e., examining items, looking outside when near the window, etc.—is already interpreted by the game as a part of their strategy, since this is the very premise of the game. In this sense, *Pamali* is a remarkably non-linear game. Additionally, the Let's Plays demonstrate that both linguistic competence and metagame competence can make up for certain shortcomings in terms of cultural competence—it is clear that those players who are not fluent in English or Indonesian struggle much more with comprehension and performance. However, linguistic competence cannot make up for metagame competence—players who could understand every

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43 *PAMALI: INDONESIAN FOLKLORE HORROR. DEMO* (StoryTale Studios 2018, O: StoryTale Studios)

44 *Ibid.*

word but were not familiar with the genre in a broad sense (i.e., horror fiction irrespective of medium) seemed to have a harder time following the course of events on screen. Not only did such players tend to make little effort to understand the story or situation providing structure to the gameplay, but also—as a result—they reacted more frantically to startle effects<sup>45</sup> (jump scares) embedded in the context of that situation. Consequently, their ability to predict the possible unfolding of the sequence of events was extremely limited, which in turn affected the process and efficiency of their decision-making.

## CONCLUSION: WHAT CAN BE LEARNED?

Speaking as a scholar, I would like to draw attention to a certain interesting fact concerning the close reading of those two particular titles. In contrast to the Let's Plays of DR. LANGESKOV, THE TIGER, AND THE TERRIBLY CURSED EMERALD, which allowed me to focus on the overall experience of the players and the impact the game premise had on that experience, I found myself much more judgmental of the players' actions in the case of the PAMALI: INDONESIAN FOLKLORE HORROR Let's Plays. My original research interests concerned horror fiction in various media, and my focus was primarily on the cultural and social context of horror themes and motifs. My PhD dissertation—which became the basis of my first published book—constituted a comparative analysis of Japanese and American horror fiction, with particular emphasis on the differences stemming from the cultural frameworks of scary narratives.<sup>46</sup> And while my knowledge of other Eastern Asian horror fiction is much more limited than that of Japanese, I still could not help but be critical of the players' performance as I watched numerous Let's Plays of PAMALI: INDONESIAN FOLKLORE HORROR. When the players moved objects or performed actions that quite frankly were natural actions to perform (such as drumming on a bucket simply because there was an option to do so or

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45 Perron, Bernard: *The World of Scary Video Games: A Study in Videoludic Horror*, Bloomsbury Publishing 2018, p. 115.

46 Marak, Katarzyna: *Japanese and American Horror: A Comparative Study of Film, Fiction, Graphic Novels and Video Games*, Jefferson, North Carolina: McFarland & Company, Inc. 2014.

inspecting items because they looked mysterious or dangerous), I felt mildly annoyed with what I perceived to be their lack of basic caution and foresight. I found myself unable to un-learn what I knew about Asian horror narratives and their conventional traits or to empathize with the players who lacked such knowledge. From my perspective, the game (even its short demo) clearly signaled its premise—to the point of defining the term “taboo” for its purpose, hinting that it referred to actions or words that “should be avoided for social reasons, usually cultural ones,”<sup>47</sup> in English—and therefore it was difficult to justify the rashness of the players.

As far as my own gameplay experience was concerned, once it became clear that the game did not involve any chase sequences or perma-death mechanics and featured numerous non-zero-sum endings contingent upon actions of the players, I assessed the game as affording the player impressive agency, both local (since they could navigate and explore freely, and interact with almost any object inside and outside the house) and global (as every action affected the outcome of the game),<sup>48</sup> allowing for numerous, diverse playthroughs. To me, PAMALI: INDONESIAN FOLKLORE HORROR was a game that invited tentative but thorough exploring, careful weighing of any and every action, and repeated replaying. The fact that some Let’s Players tended to just click away at the available options without even comparing them first, and—even more surprisingly, at least to me—seemed fine getting whichever ending on their first try,<sup>49</sup> showing little to no curiosity in the what-if scenarios, perplexed me. They were, after all, players who primarily played horror games, including independent game texts. Eventually, having watched a variety of different Let’s Plays, I observed that in the case of this particular game, it was the metagame competence that allowed the players to enjoy the experience to the fullest, as they tried to achieve different narrative results and comprehend the underlying story and circumstances better; as soon as they realized what the game was *not* (e.g., a simple puzzle-exploration or an

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47 PAMALI: INDONESIAN FOLKLORE HORROR.

48 Harrell, D. Fox: *Phantasmal Media: An Approach to Imagination, Computation, and Expression*, The MIT Press 2013, p. 273.

49 This behaviour could be observed mostly with Polish, British and German Let’s Players of any age and gender; the Japanese Let’s Players appeared to proceed a touch more slowly and seemed more suspicious of their surroundings as they explored the environment.

escape-the-monster game), they strived to grasp what it actually was. The Let's Plays also highlighted how the particular premise of *PAMALI: INDONESIAN FOLKLORE HORROR* differs from other Asian horror games relying on folklore or spiritual beliefs, such as the Indonesian *DREADOUT* (2014), Thai *HOME SWEET HOME* (2017), or Taiwanese *DEVOTION* (2019). In the case of *PAMALI: INDONESIAN FOLKLORE HORROR*, the knowledge of other game texts' structures and styles allowed the players with greater metagame competence to realize that they were dealing with something other than a puzzle-chase text or a walking simulator; on the other hand, the players with fragmentary or only rudimentary metagame competence appeared to be incapable of formulating any coherent strategy, which, in turn, as the Let's Plays demonstrated, resulted in disjointed, confused experiences.

Playing a game is, first and foremost, an individual experience. A researcher playing a game critically will always be defined by their own linguistic competence, cultural competence, and metagame competence. When analyzing the experience, the given game text can deliver, the way those competences affect that experience must be also taken into consideration. Due to the length of this paper, it uses only a handful of examples of game Let's Plays and discusses only a number of aspects in which those Let's Plays can aid a scholar in analyzing the given game texts. However, hopefully, even this brief overview can draw attention to the relevance of these particular paratextual forms to the game text proper in the context of academic analysis. By including Let's Plays of the analyzed game in their research, scholars can not only explore elements of the personal gameplay experience of other players but also learn about relevant cultural and linguistic limitations of the game. This information greatly enriches the process of close reading, highlighting the way a given game challenges various player competencies in order to structure the full gameplay experience and consequently results in a much more comprehensive analysis. As such, Let's Plays, as a peculiar type of paratexts that convey the player experience, can provide scholars with extensive data which might not otherwise be apparent to them during their own critical playthrough.

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# Fame or Infamy: The Influence of Let's Plays on Independent Game Developers

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MIŁOSZ MARKOCKI

## INTRODUCTION

The use of Let's Plays as paratexts in the context of academic research has been on the rise for quite some time.<sup>1</sup> Let's Plays are a peculiar type of paratexts that can be used not only in the research regarding the player reception but also in the study of the mechanisms of offering feedback to game creators,<sup>2</sup> as well as in the research concerning the relationship between the developers of independent games and the community of players<sup>3</sup>—and, by extension, with the community of the Let's Players. Let's Plays as paratexts can be treated as an opportunity for the researcher to observe how different

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- 1 Burwell, Catherine/Miller, Thomas: "Let's Play: Exploring Literacy Practices in an Emerging Videogame Paratext," in: *E-Learning and Digital Media* 13, no. 3-4 (2016), pp. 109-125; Mukherjee, Souvik: *Video Games and Storytelling: Reading Games and Playing Books*, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan 2015; Enevold, Jessica/MacCallum-Stewart, Esther (eds.): *Game Love: Essays on Play and Affection*, Jefferson, North Carolina: McFarland & Company, Inc. 2015.
  - 2 Marak, Katarzyna/Markocki, Miłosz: *Aspekty funkcjonowania gier cyfrowych we współczesnej kulturze: studia przypadków*, Toruń: Nicolaus Copernicus University Press 2016.
  - 3 Adams, Tyrone L./Smith, Stephen A.: *Electronic Tribes: The Virtual Worlds of Geeks, Gamers, Shamans, and Scammers*, Austin: University of Texas Press 2008.

people play the game and what skills, strategies, and interpretations of content the players choose.<sup>4</sup> This article focuses on the fairly underacknowledged function that Let's Plays can perform in the interaction between the players and game developers, specifically indie games developers. The goal of the text is to demonstrate a peculiar interaction sometimes occurring between independent game developers and players, which scholars can observe by analyzing the distinct paratexts that are Let's Plays. The text will, in closer detail, highlight this phenomenon through case studies: two examples of communication between one particular Let's Player and two indie game developers—with two different results. Many people view Let's Plays not only as recordings of game sessions but also as “exhibitions of optimal play strategy and demonstration of extreme skill and knowledge of a particular game.”<sup>5</sup>

## A FEW WORDS ABOUT LET'S PLAYS AND INDEPENDENT GAMES

Let's Play videos are a particular example of paratextual texts<sup>6</sup> as they can serve many more different functions than purely archival ones.<sup>7</sup> Their affordances stem primarily from the characteristics of digital games as a medium. In comparison to literary texts, games, specifically independent titles, are not fixed in their nature—which means that they can permanently be changed by their developers, even after their publication. This characteristic feature of independent digital games allows for a more critical approach of their audience during the process of consuming (playing) them than in the case of other independent media (e.g., film or music). For this reason, the

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4 Newman, James: *Videogames*, London/New York: Routledge 2013; Radde-Antweiler, Kerstin/Zeiler, Xenia: “Methods for Analyzing Let's Plays: Context Analysis for Gaming Videos on YouTube,” in: *Gamevironments*, 2 (2016), pp. 100-139.

5 Flynn-Jones, E.: “Bad Romance: For the Love of ‘Bad’ Videogame”, In: Enevold, Jessica/MacCallum-Stewart, Esther (eds.), *Game Love: Essays on play and affection*, Jefferson, North Carolina: McFarland & Company, Inc. 2015, p. 260.

6 S. Mukherjee: *Video Games and Storytelling*, p. 113.

7 Ibid., p. 114.

nature, and sometimes also the goal, of a Let's Play can be more critical—focusing on interesting and exciting or distracting and irritating aspects of the game mechanics or the gameplay instead of on what the game is about and how one can play it. In this context, it is also worth noting that digital games scholars already highlighted the difference in playstyle when people play the game “just for fun” and when they play it critically.<sup>8</sup> These differences can naturally apply to Let's Plays, as they are recordings of people playing games. In consequence, the nature and style of the video might reflect a critical playstyle and the goal of making the video. That way, the videos of people focusing just on experiencing the game as it is will differ, sometimes dramatically, from the recordings made by people who try to make their Let's Plays more about ‘testing’ the game or even pushing the limits of a specific title.<sup>9</sup>

The creation of Let's Plays that are critical playthroughs of games is naturally more prominent in the scene of independent games as there is a real possibility of communication with game developers. It is more probable that game creators may actually watch the Let's Play video than in the case of AAA titles. However, the use and analysis of Let's Plays in academic research touch upon one more specific problem. Gathering knowledge and data by watching how other people play a game is a mediated method of research that raises questions of authenticity and normality—whether Let's Play videos can be treated as authentic experiences representative of typical or ‘regular’ players.

The games discussed in this paper are independent digital games that continue to generate widespread interest among both players and academic scholars. Some researchers will compare independent games to independent movies in the context of mainstream culture.<sup>10</sup> However, more than the ‘radical other,’ independent games tend to represent a certain kind of expansion of the developers’ (who are, after all, players) imagination and creativity. Oftentimes, the more famous or influential independent games such as *HELLBLADE: SENNA'S SACRIFICE* (2017), *CONTROL* (2019), or *OBSERVER*

8 Fernández-Vara, Clara: *Introduction to Game Analysis*, Routledge 2015, p. 26.

9 K. Radde-Antweiler, X. Zeiler: “Methods for Analyzing Let's Plays,” p. 100-139.

10 Jahn-Sudmann, Andreas: “Innovation NOT Opposition: The Logic of Distinction of Independent Games,” in: *Eludamos. Journal for Computer Game Culture*, 2 (2008), p. 5-10.

(2017) are placed in opposition to other titles of the mainstream game industry concerning inventiveness or creativity.<sup>11</sup> Yet, the more pressing issue is to focus on what constitutes actual ‘independence.’

In the context of digital games, the term ‘independent’ has been defined differently by various scholars. Many of those definitions refer to at least three aspects of ‘independence’ in developing a digital game. According to Maria Garda and Paweł Grabarczyk, the first aspect is financial independence:<sup>12</sup> In the case of independent games, the developer is also the investor, so there are no potential outside financial constraints on the creative process. The second aspect Garda and Grabarczyk list is creative independence, which is most visible in the relationship between the developer and the audience<sup>13</sup>—by not having to live up to specific expectations, the independent developer does not experience the same pressure to fulfill the hopes of the audience. The third discussed aspect is publishing<sup>14</sup>—independent game developers are also publishers of their game, so they do not have to negotiate what type of game a publishing company would prefer to publish. In many cases, independent game developers have all three types of independence or a combination of them<sup>15</sup>—e.g., they may have the creative and publishing independence but not the financial one if they finance their project by a Kickstarter campaign.

Various scholars have debated the issue of individual authorship, co-authorship, and multiplicity of authorship with regard to digital games.<sup>16</sup> However, this is not the primary focus of this text. There are numerous ways in which the players can create new content or share existing content with other

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11 Ibid.

12 Garda, Maria B./Grabarczyk, Paweł: “Is Every Indie Game Independent? Towards the Concept of Independent Game,” in: *Game Studies*, 16 (2016), <http://gamestudies.org/1601/articles/gardagrabarczyk>

13 Ibid.

14 Ibid.

15 Ibid.

16 Jennings, Stephanie C.: “Co-Creation and the Distributed Authorship of Video Games,” in: Valentine, Keri D./Jensen, Lucas J. (eds.), *Examining the Evolution of Gaming and Its Impact on Social, Cultural, and Political Perspectives*, Hershey, Pennsylvania: IGI Global, 2016, pp. 125-127.

players. Player-generated mods are the most popular way to achieve this.<sup>17</sup> With mods, players communicate very directly to developers what they want from their games and what the games might lack.

The characteristics of independent games discussed before illustrate how Let's Plays of independent games can be treated as a proper communication channel between players and game developers. While the game modifications (mods) can be treated as instances of meta-interactivity where "the communication between players and the developers is clear,"<sup>18</sup> Let's Plays offer the players a simple way to address the game developers directly and express their opinions, problems, and grievances with the game.

## SELECTED CASE STUDIES

This paper focuses on how Let's Play videos can shape the status of certain independent developers in the indie game community, specifically on the Steam platform. The aim is to demonstrate how Let's Play videos can—or cannot—influence the craft and work of developers of independent games as well as their status in the community of players. These points will be explored through the analysis of Let's Play videos. The selected games were created by two independent game developers working under the names of Vidas Salavejus and GDNomad. I chose these two specifically because of their initial status among indie developers publishing on Steam. At the beginning of their careers, they were both infamous as authors of highly popular but low-quality independent games.

The Let's Player selected is John Wolfe, an adult American male. He has been active on YouTube since 2011. His channel was known as "HarshlyCritical" until 2017, when Wolfe rebranded the entirety of his social media persona with his given name—"John Wolfe." Since the beginning, he has specialized in horror games, especially independent horror games. What is particularly interesting and worth mentioning about John Wolfe is the fact that he managed to maintain a constant presence on YouTube even though his channel remained strictly a Let's Play channel devoted only to one genre of games—except for few rare videos concerning events from his real-life

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<sup>17</sup> Ibid, p. 128.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

that influenced his channel in some way, e.g., a vlog explaining why he decided to change the channel's name. The longevity of his channel and the fact that he has been mostly uploading Let's Plays of horror games instead of uploading Let's Plays of the most popular games at any particular time—a common practice of many Let's Play channels meant to increase the number of views and likes on the channel—results in his audience regarding his comments as honest and his critique of the games he plays as authentic.

John Wolfe has also created and uploaded numerous Let's Play videos of GDNomad's and Vidas Salavejus' games, among them all titles that will be discussed in this text. Furthermore, despite not being a game scholar, his videos show a high level of critical thinking. Games made by GDNomad and Vidas Salavejus were also played by numerous other Let's Players, such as MrKravin, Markiplier, or CJUGames—whose videos are available on YouTube. However, I wanted to focus on one Let's Player to preserve the cohesion of narration concerning both developers. I think that choosing one Let's Player will more aptly depict how paratexts (in this case, Let's Play videos) can influence authors of the original texts (in this case, independent game developers) in their later work. Wolfe seemed particularly suitable as he openly comments on various problems of the given game during his play-throughs but turns his observations into constructive criticism at the end of his videos, in the hopes of helping the developer (in this case GDNomad and Vidas Salavejus) to make better games in the future.

Within the scope of this text, it is impossible to analyze every game made by both developers, as well as every video made on them by John Wolfe. That is why I decided to concentrate on six games, three by each developer. The main reason for selecting those specific titles is linked to John Wolfe's feedback after playing them: I chose games that Wolfe played critically and for which he offered constructive criticism afterward. Thus, the selected examples should allow recognizing changes, or lack thereof, in the quality of the developer's subsequent games, as well as change, or lack thereof, in Wolfe's opinion about GDNomad and Vidas Salavejus as game developers.

I also chose these six games because Wolfe's critique of them, in the most accurate manner, emphasizes the differences between GDNomad and Vidas Salavejus as game developers, mainly in their approach to communicate with players and Let's Player's. To be more specific, the primary distinction between GDNomad and Vidas Salavejus discussed in this paper is their

(un)willingness to listen to and take into account any negative feedback or criticism made about their games.

## The Case of Vidas Salavejus

The independent game developer Vidas Salavejus is the creator of the TIMORE series, GENTLE MOON series, A DREAM FOR AARON, NECRO IMMORTALLIS, DIA, BALAVQUR, SOLUMCESS, and several other games. In this paper, I will analyze TIMORE, TIMORE INFERNO and DIA, because they clearly illustrate the evolution of Vidas Salavejus as a game creator and developer.

The first video made by John Wolfe was *TIMORE—Repetitive Jumpscare Simulator* (2014), a Let's Play of the game TIMORE (2014). The description of the game provided by its creator Vidas Salavejus reads:

“Horror game, made with Unity 4 engine. Game is finished, but i will add more level later. It is a game where you search for keys and open doors, run away from ‘enemies’, but sometimes you could choose the wrong way and you just got to face your fate.”<sup>19</sup>

In the game, the player basically walks around a single location, going from room to room searching for keys to open various doors that block the way to further rooms. A random mannequin will spawn from time to time—an event accompanied by a loud noise that is meant to startle the player. The game mechanics are extremely basic.

TIMORE relies primarily on one trick, which was very common in low-quality, short indie horror games from that period (ca. 2013-2015): the jump scare, which is meant to create the ‘horror.’<sup>20</sup> The startling effect induced by this trick is brought about in TIMORE by unpredictable visual and auditory cues in lieu of genuinely scary events.<sup>21</sup> The main problem of TIMORE is that

19 All the descriptions quoted in this paper are given with no changes regarding spelling or grammar. The description can also be seen in Wolfe’s video: John Wolfe: *TIMORE—Repetitive Jumpscare Simulator*, August 29, 2014; <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZPHKEF7I384>

20 K. Marak/M. Markocki: *Aspekty funkcjonowania gier cyfrowych we współczesnej kulturze: studia przypadków*, pp. 94-116.

21 Perron, Bernard: *The World of Scary Video Games: A Study In Videoludic Horror*, New York: Bloomsbury Academy 2018, p. 115.



the startle effect induced by the mannequins is virtually the only tool used in the game to scare the player. If the developer uses only one trick repeatedly, it quickly ceases to be scary and becomes redundant and boring, and players cannot be bored and scared at the same time. The problems of the game design based on only one type of jump scare are evident and are summarized aptly in a relatively short comment by John Wolfe at the end of his Let's Play of TIMORE:

“What did I just play? I can’t believe that. Ah. That was worse than I ever thought it could be. It’s gotta be intentional. Oh my god. I need to take my headphones off, for like a year, after playing that.”<sup>22</sup>

The comment about the headphones is a direct reference to the overuse of the auditory jump scare trick. Loud sounds accompanied both the spawning and the movement of the mannequins in TIMORE. The tremendous difference in volume between regular diegetic sounds in the game and the extradiegetic ‘scare sound’ is very uncomfortable to the player’s ears. This opinion reflects many of the players’ initial ideas about Vidas Salavejus’ games and his initial status as a designer of bad games. The most direct comment showing Wolfe’s thoughts about the game’s quality is the part concerning intentionality. It indicates that the Let’s Player is more inclined to assume that a game designer would make a game bad on purpose than believe that the best intentions and skills could result in such a low-quality product.

Nonetheless, John Wolfe continued to follow the career of Vidas Salavejus. The next Let’s Play recording that I will analyze is *TIMORE INFERNO—The Reddest Game of 2016*, a playthrough of TIMORE INFERNO (2016). On Steam, the game is advertised in the following way:

“TIMORE INFERNO is the 4<sup>th</sup> indie horror game in the TIMORE series. Strange visitors have come to a little girl’s house, robbing her home and killing everyone inside... Except her. With dolls holding the anger of her loss, everyone who tries to go there and investigate what happened wind up missing. TIMORE INFERNO is a horror

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22 The transcripts of Wolfe’s comments are left unedited in order to document his lack of words for some of the things he experienced: John Wolfe: *TIMORE—Repetitive Jumpscare Simulator*, August 29, 2014; <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZPHKEF7I384>

experience through the hell of a little girl's mind. The player meets a helper who gives advice on how to stay alive, but it is ultimately up to you to decide whether to take it or not."<sup>23</sup>

This game is primarily a walking simulator, in which the player explores various locations—supposedly parts of hell. The player can move to another location only by triggering scripted events, which can be achieved by performing specific actions or reaching a specific place. The game resembles the previous installments in the series in many ways—mainly the heavy use of jump scares—but also adds new mechanics. *TIMORE INFERNO* is the first game made by Vidas Salavejus in which he employed the fighting mechanic. This way, he considerably increased the possibilities of what players can do when confronted with an enemy—in the previous games, they could only run away, but in *TIMORE INFERNO* they can either run away or fight. Even if significant from the perspective of available game mechanics, this change does not influence the players' overall opinion of the game. As John Wolfe points out in his comment at the end of his Let's Play video:

"It was about twenty-five minutes long and was five bucks. Ok, uhm... I will say this—it's better than the other three. We're talking like a difference between two out of ten and four out of ten. (...) Yeah, eh, I mean, at least it has combat in it, I guess, but not worth five dollars at all. So, I guess at this point, we can probably assume that there will be a *TIMORE 5*, and I'm guessing that they really liked the five-dollars-at-Itch.io model compared to the free-on-GameJolt model. And it's going to set a precedence for the future, unfortunately. I just want to say these games are terribly below average. Like just, I already said my piece about *TIMORE*, *NOX TIMORE*, and *TIMORE AVARITIA*. But just, there is very minimal, marginal improvement in them, I would say. I think this is the best one, as I said. But there's just so much better stuff out there, guys."<sup>24</sup>

Apart from Wolfe's general opinion about the game, this comment highlights two important aspects regarding Vidas Salavejus as an independent game

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23 Salavejus, Vidas: *TIMORE INFERNO* (June 1, 2016); [https://store.steampowered.com/app/486360/Timore\\_Inferno/?l=english](https://store.steampowered.com/app/486360/Timore_Inferno/?l=english)

24 John Wolfe: *TIMORE INFERNO—The Reddest Game of 2016*, May 30, 2016; [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=L\\_ryc-5Pt9I](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=L_ryc-5Pt9I)

designer and publisher. The first is Wolfe's acknowledgment that Vidas Salavejus' games are becoming better—even if only slightly—and he improves as a game designer. The second aspect concerns the fact that Vidas Salavejus decided to publish *TIMORE INFERNO* on a commercial platform: "There is some improvement in Vidas Salavejus' work, and *Timore Inferno* is better than any of the previous games, but the improvement is too small to justify making it a paid product."

The last game by Vidas Salavejus that I will analyze is *DIA* (2019). The game is at its core a walking simulator, but what is most interesting about this game in the context of this text is its description on Vidas Salavejus homepage:

"DIA is a short free indie horror game. There is nothing scary ahead. No sudden noises. No flashing images. No one will follow you. Welcome to DIA. #horror."<sup>25</sup>

This short description is proof that Vidas listens to the comments of players and Let's Players about his games, as in it, he addresses the elements most criticized—particularly the overuse of jump scares. It is also a clever, slightly ironic description of a horror game. The game itself is a very short walking simulator in which players walk around an empty town, equipped with a walkie-talkie. A female voice guides them to the town's center, where they can allegedly hide from some kind of monster roaming the streets. Once players reach the final location, they discover that they have been tricked.

The most striking proof of the influence that the Let's Player John Wolfe had on the indie developer Vidas Salavejus is at the end of the game *DIA*, where players can see a message saying: "I'm not done with you yet... John Wolfe," repeated nine times.<sup>26</sup> This reference evidently took Wolfe by surprise, considering his reaction and his comments at the end of the first segment from the Let's Play video *7 RANDOM HORROR GAMES*, which is devoted to *DIA*:

"How does it know my name? No, actually, because... Normally for this type of thing, they would be like: 'I'm done with you, WolfPC or John.' 'cause it is associated with

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25 Salavejus, Vidas: *DIA*; <https://vidas-salavejus.itch.io/dia>

26 John Wolfe: *7 RANDOM HORROR GAMES*, May 30, 2016; <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kltmhI7Dvfo>

my computer, right. Interesting. Well, that was enjoyable, cool little free game, liked it a lot. Did you like it? Did you think it was a cool interesting concept for a free game? Well, guess what! It was made by the TIMORE developer! Ooooooh, you did not see that coming. HA! Not that I don't think you should. I think you should. But it is just some of you guys in the comments are really hung up on certain things. So hopefully, that opened your mind a little bit, is what I'm saying. Cool. I enjoyed it. (...) Alright, guys. Well, cool game."<sup>27</sup>

It is clear in this comment that John Wolfe has a much higher opinion of this game than any previous games developed by Vidas Salavejus. His reaction also demonstrates that Wolfe believed—maybe not at the beginning in 2014, but at least for some time—that Vidas has the potential to make good games, or at least much better games than TIMORE. Notably, when he starts playing the game, he does not introduce it as one of the Vidas Salavejus' games—he decides to reveal it only at the end of the segment.

The message at the end of the game—customized for John Wolfe (and a few other Let's Players)—is also proof that Vidas Salavejus not only watched Wolfe's Let's Plays of his games but also, as a game developer, took Wolfe's (and other Let's Players) constructive criticism to improve his work. There is no way to determine the degree to which John Wolfe's Let's Plays influenced Vidas Salavejus. The only thing that can be said for sure is that Vidas Salavejus seems to respect Wolfe's opinions about his games enough to signal to John that he can design and create better games. The message at the end of the game can also be interpreted as a sign that Vidas Salavejus treats Let's Players' critique, including John Wolfe's, as a valid reference point for the quality of his games.

In summary, the case of Vidas Salavejus' games and John Wolfe's Let's Play videos about them can be regarded as an example of paratexts influencing the creator of the original text. The fact that the latest games made by Vidas Salavejus are considered by many players and Let's Players as good quality games and that they welcome the release of his new games (such as BALAVQUR and SOLUMCESS), can serve as a testimony to the potential power of Let's Plays to influence game developers. It can also serve as an example of independent game developers transforming their initial infamy into real

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27 Ibid.

fame through hard work and improvements, thereby becoming more recognizable within the indie horror games scene.

### The Case of GDNomad

The next case I want to discuss is the independent game developer GDNomad, who made games such as *MY BONES*, *VERGE: LOST CHAPTER*, *WHITE MIRROR*, *THE LOST SOULS*, *WOODEN HOUSE*, *AUTUMN DREAM*, *DARK EGYPT*, and *ONE WISH*—all available on Steam to buy. In this paper, only *MY BONES*, *WHITE MIRROR* and *AUTUMN DREAM* will be analyzed. GDNomad—just like Vidas Salavejus—initially gained infamy as someone who creates only low-quality indie games. The first game he published on Steam was *MY BONES* (2015)—a walking simulator type of game. Its description already forebodes one of its most serious problems and one of the most criticized aspects:

“It is a short but very interesting horror, about a man who woke up in his own grave, next to his family. In the past, he was a very bad man, he is confused and cannot make a choice between good and evil. Our goal is to help the protagonist to make a choice between good and evil. Only you will be able to choose good or evil, and only you can decide his fate. The game have multiple endings, or rather two, good and bad. The ending in the game will depend on your actions.”<sup>28</sup>

The evident linguistic errors in the description are only the proverbial tip of the iceberg concerning the quality of the English translation in the notes and assets that players encounter in the game. When John Wolfe made a Let’s Play video of *MY BONES*, the problems with unintelligible English constituted the center of his criticism. At the end of the *MY BONES—Both Endings, Like Comment Subscribe* video, he has the following to say:

“Just a bad game. Like, there are lot of really obvious quality assurance issues. I mean, everything... I mean, if you are going—I assume this game was translated because if not, it’s just egregious grammar failure. But if it is, you know, if you are getting your games translated into a language you cannot speak or write well, then you should have

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28 GDNomad: *MY BONES* (August 3, 2015); [https://store.steampowered.com/app/389700/My\\_Bones/](https://store.steampowered.com/app/389700/My_Bones/)

someone do it for you. Especially if you are going to have your game for sale on Steam for two dollars. Even if it is only for two dollars. It's on sale. Like, it is a product; it should be polished and professionally made. You should pay attention to basic quality assurance. I mean, I feel like I have been saying that phrase a lot, but I mean... Just everything from the uncapitalized I's, to the misspelled words, to the typeface choices—I mean, it's all about quality assurance, and that's where the game fails. Not even to mention the fact that it is basically a key hunt with little to no story behind it. It's another thing that it would really benefit from some proofreading or proper translation or whatever the problem is with communication issues in this game. It's an incoherent story. I'm not even sure what just happened. And even if I do understand it, it might not be that compelling. You know, I mean, it's not just enough to have a well-polished game. You have to have something that's compelling, that's—you know—that's interesting. And I feel like this is kind of same, you know, type of game that we've seen over and over again. Where, you know, 'I've sinned, and now I have to suffer through my purgatorial guilt, until I can be redeemed in the end.' It's a story of redemption we have seen time and time again anyway."<sup>29</sup>

This comment clearly shows the numerous issues Wolfe sees in this game. But one prominent—that differentiates GDNomad's games from Vidas Salavejus' games—concerns the game's English. Regarding the linguistic problems, the only factual information that can be found on GDNomad is that his native language is Russian and that his English is not on a high level. Considering this, together with the evident lack of proofreading, it is no wonder that his game is challenging to play, as it is not easy to progress through the game if the players cannot follow the narrative design. The issue of language, or rather the lack of comprehensive English in the game, is the main point of Wolfe's critique of *MY BONES*. Apart from that, he also comments about the game mechanics, visual design, and narrative. In this way, his review is similar to the one about Vidas Salavejus' first game. Worthy of note is that all of Wolfe's *Let's Plays* of GDNomad's games, as well as Vidas Salavejus' games, have been created and uploaded within a few weeks or months of their release dates, which means Wolfe's perspective on aesthetics and design was accurate and up to date.

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29 John Wolfe: *MY BONES—Both Endings, Like Comment Subscribe*, August 5, 2015; <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZPEQtIIYHM>

GDNomad published quite an impressive number of games on Steam. However, some of the problems pointed out in Wolfe's Let's Play of the first game re-appeared in other games by GDNomad. The most striking of the issues—the linguistic shortcomings—can be clearly seen in the description of a game made by him in 2016, called *WHITE MIRROR*:

“The main character is a hunter who looks for ancient relics. One day he set off to find a legendary mirror which concluded the great force and so great evil, keeping secrets of a magic artifact. You have a chance to know were is a mirror, but be careful the evil waits for you continually.”<sup>30</sup>

The game is another simple walking simulator in which the player explores various locations and once again collects notes written in incomprehensible English. Wolfe's comments at the end of the Let's Play video *WHITE MIRROR—Full Playthrough—No Sequel, Please* illustrate the most problematic aspects of GDNomad's games aptly:

“No! No, don't make a *WHITE MIRROR 2*, please. Oh, God! So, yeah, awful, but, as usual, the notes were kind of funny. But nothing will beat *MY BONES* ‘I love it all smooth.’ That is the GOAT among these three games that he made. Alright, well, the, ehm, link to download it is in the description if you are brave. Cause it is a scary game, obviously. I don't really know what to say. It's just, you know, not a good game. Like in any capacity. Not worth four dollars at all. It was like half an hour gameplay max, maximum. Anyway, yup, just depressing. Thoroughly depressing. I'm not sure if I'm gonna include this in the video when I edit it, but when I started a new story to get to that point, the game crashed on loading screens two or three different times, and I had to start all over. So, I'm not really sure why that happened, but, uhm, just, it's a buggy game. It's not that fun, even without the bugs, or well-made at all. Just really nothing good to say about it. Uhm, get a freaking proofreader if you're gonna sell your game for real money on Steam. At all—if you're gonna sell your game, the least you can do is to get a proofreader to make sure that it is not incoherent mess. Because as of right now, I have no idea what the story was about. No clue. And, you know, with all the knife switches, you know, all that stuff, it's clear it was like botched Google Translate job, at best. I don't know; I'm just sick of seeing it. It should be bare minimum for the

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30 GDNomad: *WHITE MIRROR* (January 27, 2016); [https://store.steampowered.com/app/428630/White\\_Mirror/](https://store.steampowered.com/app/428630/White_Mirror/)

game, you know, if it's going to be released in English, to have fluent English. Just, bare minimum, like bottom line.”<sup>31</sup>

In this monologue, Wolfe directly states that any text in GDNomad's games feels like it was translated by software. Wolfe's comment also highlights a very important aspect of playing digital games: for many players, understanding the game's story, the environment, and the goal of the game is a crucial part of the gaming experience. So much, so that linguistic problems overwhelmingly overshadowed Wolfe's experience of playing *WHITE MIRROR*.

The final game in this analysis is *AUTUMN DREAM* (2016). John Wolfe created and published a Let's Play video in 2016, titled “AUTUMN DREAM —“I Know That I Will Dead Soon,” which once again included a rather long commentary. Unsurprisingly, this game is also a walking simulator, in which the player traverses a few locations, solves simplistic puzzles, and gathers notes, yet again written in incomprehensible English. This Let's Play video is also the last about GDNomad's games that Wolfe produced to date. The following comment, which takes the form of uninterrupted, frustrated monologue at the end of the video, thoroughly explains why:

“My thoughts about this installment in the GDNomad saga? It's exactly like all the other games. It's exactly the same. You go to some random house for some reason; something happens, and you wake up in something that's entirely different from that house. And whether it's another dimension—like in *WHITE MIRROR*, or secret underground lab—like in this one, or weird prison-hospital—like in *VERGE LAST CHAPTER*, and I think also in *WOODEN HOUSE*, I can't remember. It's the same pattern every time. And then you escape. It's an anticlimactic conclusion, and you solve really rudimentary keyboard puzzles along the way, which usually involve you pressing ‘h,’ ‘j’ and ‘k’ or ‘j,’ ‘k,’ and ‘l,’ I believe. And finding keys and reading poorly written notes. It's, it's... it's the most mind-numbingly repetitive series of work I think I have ever seen. And I don't understand why there is no improvement? It's, it's... It must just be that this dev doesn't listen to any negative feedback at all. They don't care about improving. They just want to make the same game over and over again. They are just content to make the same product. I don't even know what to say anymore. I

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31 John Wolfe: *WHITE MIRROR—Full Playthrough—No Sequel, Please*, January 30, 2016; <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QnrhDhy1e14>



feel like I'm just repeating myself. You might... I know there are some people out there like: 'Why do you keep playing his games?' Because you guys want me to, and because it's just kind of a meme at this point. It's like a 'John meme' to play the 'My Bones guy's' new game that he pops out every three months.”<sup>32</sup>

John Wolfe addresses multiple serious failings of GDNomad's games. Not only are the games objectively low-quality, but they are also similar to each other. In other words, just as Wolfe puts it, each subsequent GDNomad product is actually “the same game over and over again.”<sup>33</sup> However, there is one more issue that seems to bother Wolfe. He openly expresses his disbelief in GDNomad's lack of ability to improve as an independent game developer, considering the number of games he has published on Steam. In this way, the case of GDNomad constitutes an excellent example of a developer who gained the reputation of making 'bad' games and appears to have decided that such infamy is better than no fame at all—and whose games continue to be infamous for their low quality.

### **The Significance of the Discussed Cases**

The two cases clearly show that Vidas Salavejus is listening to players' feedback proposing corrections and adjustments to his games, which means that his games become better with time. He is an example of a developer who grows and improves his skills and quality of work. In contrast, GDNomad is not listening to feedback, continues to make the same mistakes, and produces low-quality games. He is an example of a developer who does not improve.

Both developers can be regarded as two opposite ends of a spectrum of communication between independent game developers and their players. The case of Vidas Salavejus shows how a developer, when confronted with valid and constructive criticism—even if it is a bit harsh—can improve. By listening to the players' expectations and disappointments, game designers can identify the aspects of their games they should prioritize, as far as improvement is concerned. On the other hand, the case of GDNomad shows that some developers, even when offered insights into players' expectations and

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32 John Wolfe: *AUTUMN DREAM*—“*I Know That I Will Dead Soon*,” November 11, 2016; <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=t9xXSPHjaks>

33 Ibid.

disappointments, will still ignore them. John Wolfe's supposition: "It must just be that this dev doesn't listen to any negative feedback at all,"<sup>34</sup> points to the fact that Let's Players who take the time to comment on the games they play and offer constructive criticism offer their critique as an opportunity for game developers to learn and correct specific problems of their games. However, as the case of GDNomad demonstrates, sometimes this feedback can fall on deaf ears, and developers will make the same errors in their games over and over again.

## CONCLUSION

The two cases of Vidas Salavejus and GDNomad demonstrate the potential of Let's Play videos to influence—to a degree—the development of independent games. They also represent the two extremes of how independent game developers can react to paratextual feedback—in this case, Let's Play videos. As the examples show, the reactions depend significantly on the individual developer and their openness to constructive criticism. Moreover, the form of the critique matters as well. A commented playthrough video allows for a direct and transparent way to validate the opinion of the Let's Player. Both the prospective audience—the other players who may be interested in the game—and the game developers have undeniable proof that and how the Let's Player played the game. The recording lets the player comment on a specific problem in the game right at the moment of its occurrence. Live recording—if we exclude the apparent possibility of editing before posting the video on YouTube or some other platform—lends the impression that the critique is honest and unfiltered, as it is improvised during the play session.

Analyzing only two examples of independent game developers and their interactions with one Let's Player is an immensely narrow perspective on the whole issue of potential relations between game developers and players. Therefore, this text is intended as a starting point of a more in-depth discussion on this issue and an invitation for other scholars to further investigate this matter in their research.

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- TIMORE INFERNO (Vidas Salavejus 2016, O: Vidas Salavejus)
- WHITE MIRROR (GDNomad 2016, O: GDNomad)



## “Here Comes a New Challenger”

### Will Video Game Essays be the New Champion of Game Criticism?

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RUDOLF IDERST

In the recent past, various authors have examined the change of tone within games journalism.<sup>1</sup> There seems to be not only a broader portfolio of topics which is covered by representatives of an elder, sometimes described as ‘classic’ games press (meant here: former and current print game magazines and their online outlets), but the medium itself is getting more and more attention beyond the circles of a tech-savvy and service-oriented trade as well as specialized press: Especially editors of literary and arts sections in more general news outlets started to treat digital games as objects/artifacts of cultural and public interest. Video games have become newsworthy—not only as a billion-dollar industry that brings in more revenue than other areas of the entertainment market or because of the moral debates triggered by

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- 1 Cf. Inderst, R.: “Spannungsfeld Spielejournalismus: Von Testern und Träumern,” in: Koubeck, Jochen/Mosel, Michael/Werning, Stefan (eds.), *Spielkulturen: Funktionen und Bedeutungen des Phänomens Spiel in der Gegenwartskultur und im Alltagsdiskurs*. Glückstadt: vvh Verlag, 2013, pp. 173-185; cf. Görgen, Arno et al.: *Von der verbotenen Liebe des Spielejournalismus und der Game Studies*, June 23, 2016; <https://spielkult.hypotheses.org/1018>; cf. *Dossier Spiele & Journalismus*; <https://www.grimme-game.de/category/spiele-journalismus/>

depictions of violence or the supposed addictive potential in video games.<sup>2</sup> Digital games are getting more editorial space because journalists increasingly understand them as complex, cultural products that bring forth contrasts, tensions, and paradox situations that can be read as self-reflexive and political commentary.

In the following sections, I will talk about one of the younger forms of public reflection about video and computer games: the video essay. The starting point will be an introduction of the concept focusing upon video essays as a tool of film criticism, followed by a segment about prototypical challenges faced by artists and content creators. A closer look at three different video game essayists will then exemplify the diverse and differentiated portfolio of today's video game essays, including a critical glance at the market and essay production situation in Germany. The main part will close with elaborations on putting video game essays within a broader playfield of something that is often described as an ongoing online culture war, before concluding with possible profits for the field of game studies by implementing video game essays in their toolset.

## VIDEO ESSAYS—HERE TO STAY?

In his introduction to video essays, media researcher Erlend Lavik explains this shape of criticism:

“Film criticism is a sweeping concept, ranging from amateur blogs to newspaper reviews to dense scholarly studies. [...] The burgeoning genre of the video essay commonly employs edited footage from the films under analysis in order to enrich and expand the function of criticism: to shed light on individual films, groups of films, or the cinema as an art form.”<sup>3</sup>

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- 2 Cf. Fisher, Sue: “Identifying Video Game Addiction in Children and Adolescents”, in: *Addictive Behaviors* 19/5 (1994), pp. 545-553; cf. Griffiths, Mark: “Violent Video Games and Aggression: A Review of the Literature”, in: *Aggression and Violent Behavior* 4/2 (1999), pp. 203-212.
  - 3 Lavik, Erlend: “The Video Essay: The Future of Academic Film and Television Criticism?” in: *Frames Cinema Journal*, July 2, 2012; <http://framescinemajournal.com/article/the-video-essay-the-future/>

Now, obviously, Lavik is talking about film and television criticism—but let us exchange and replace some of the key words in this quote:

“[Digital game] criticism is a sweeping concept, ranging from amateur blogs to newspaper reviews to dense scholarly studies. [...] The burgeoning genre of the video essay commonly employs edited footage from the [games] under analysis in order to enrich and expand the function of criticism: to shed light on individual [games], groups of [games], or [gaming] as an art form.”

At this early stage of this essay, this rhetorical sleight of hand is a useful tool to introduce the format. Video game essays have been influenced by video essays about films in their form and language: “This newer form of criticism emerged in around 2007 and was largely influenced by the work of director Kevin B. Lee, who published annotated parts of his films on the internet.”<sup>4</sup>

## CHALLENGES TO OVERCOME: PRODUCTION, DISTRIBUTION, AND LEGAL MATTERS

The video essay can be understood as a structural enabler, as media researcher Matt Zoller Seitz explains:

“[W]ritten reviews of print media always had a huge advantage over all other reviews in terms of their ability to quote bits and pieces of the thing being written about. [...] In contrast, a film reviewer trying to describe the style of Martin Scorsese would have to rely on approximations [...]. But the one thing they couldn’t do was quote—really quote—the object of criticism [...].”<sup>5</sup>

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- 4 van den Berg, Thomas/Kiss, Miklos: “Film Studies in Motion: From Audiovisual Essay to Academic Research Video,” in: *The Alliance for Networking Visual Culture*, July, 2016; <http://scalar.usc.edu/works/film-studies-in-motion/index>
  - 5 Seitz, Matt Z.: “The Video Essay,” in: *Kunst der Vermittlung*; <https://www.kunst-der-vermittlung.de/dossiers/internet-weblogs/matt-zoller-seitz-video-essay/>



These “audiovisual forms of film criticism made by new kinds of filmmaker-critics”<sup>6</sup> are part of a technological transformation that took place on two levels: production and distribution. Being short videos themselves, video essays presenting viewpoints and arguments about movies/TV series by using source footage (sequences or still shots), voice-over commentaries, and sub- or intertitles got off the ground with the development of high-performance hardware as well as powerful video editing software and their arrival at end-user-friendly costs. Being able to edit digital source material and reconfigure it into a new narrative chronology about possible interplays of aesthetic, cultural, and economic aspects has opened up a new way to express and form opinions “with an opportunity to augment and perhaps even decentre the dominance of text-based criticism.”<sup>7</sup> Having finalized their final cut, practitioners, curators, scholars, and teachers alike who want to present their recent videographic work have to think about the next step—this is where the question of distribution comes into play. Without the online video platforms such as YouTube, Vimeo, or Fandor on the one hand and the cost-effective as well as fast data access infrastructure—especially on mobile phones—it would be barely possible “for visual storytellers to explore new forms, new audiences and build new careers.”<sup>8</sup>

Now, when it comes to the specifics of the content, creators want to show to their online audience, there is a third keyword—after production and distribution—that is relevant in the process of manufacturing video essays: copyright. This term involves a legal challenge that is relevant to video essay makers on two levels—‘getting’ as well as editing their source material and distributing it to a public audience. This essay cannot measure out all the different legal implications that are interconnected to the circumstances. I would point to the term ‘fair use’ though, in order to establish a basic understanding.

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6 Grant, Catherine: “The Video Essay as Liquid Criticism: Short Films on Film,” in: *Uppsala Short Film Festival 2020*; <http://www.shortfilmfestival.com/en/programs/special-programme/video-essays/>

7 McWhirter, Andrew: “Film Criticism, Film Scholarship and the Video Essay”, in: *Screen* 56/3 (2015), pp. 369-377.

8 Warren, Matt: “Exploring the Video Essay Form with Polyphonic’s Noah Lefevre,” in: *Film Independent*, April 19, 2018; <https://www.filmindependent.org/blog/exploring-video-essay-form-polyphonics-noah-lefevre/>

In his introduction to this challenging topic, *The Ultimate Guide to Fair Use and Copyrights for Filmmakers*, video producer and author Ron Dawson describes fair use as “a legal doctrine that promotes freedom of expression by permitting the unlicensed use of copyright-protected works in certain circumstances.” He further states that certain types of use—“such as criticism, comment, news reporting, teaching, scholarship, and research”<sup>9</sup>—may be considered as examples for fair use. Dawson then elaborates:

“[V]ideo essays are the quintessential example of fair use in terms of both education and critical commentary. [...] Based on the transformative use, the amount of the copyrighted material used, and the fact that this use is not hurting the commercial viability of the copyright holders, they are protected.”<sup>10</sup>

But he also adds that these rules are not clear cut but “relatively open to interpretation, and unless you’re actually sued or challenged, you may never know 100% whether your use adheres to the law or not.”<sup>11</sup> It is, therefore, an acceptable conclusion at this point to summarize the legal *mélange* for video essay makers and producers as a greyish area between the willingness to express oneself and possible copyright strikes of certain stakeholders and third parties involved.

Now, let us circle back to video game essays. I have established them as a form of filmic examination with video and computer games involving the game’s ongoing screen action as the initial situation/position for a visual orientated mode of representation and topic development.<sup>12</sup> Whether you understand game studies as a mere research field or an emergent discipline—video game essays have the potential to be many things at the same time: They can become a new approach in hybrid academic teaching, a new form of scientific publication taken into consideration the late dawn of a digital

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9 Dawson, Ron: “The Ultimate Guide to Fair Use and Copyrights for Filmmakers,” in: *Frame.io Insider*, August 30, 2017; <https://blog.frame.io/2017/08/30/copyrights-and-fair-use-for-filmmakers/>

10 Ibid.

11 Ibid.

12 Cf. Biermann, Ralf: “Video Game (Film-) Essays: Der (etwas andere) Einsatz von Computerspielen zur Unterstützung von Lernprozessen,” in: *MedienPädagogik. Zeitschrift für Theorie und Praxis der Medienbildung* 15-16 (2009) pp. 1-14.

age, as well as a new research apparatus. The project *Video Essay: Futures of Audiovisual Research and Teaching* underlines the possibilities of video essays, including—in my understanding—video games:

“Video essays turn sound and images [and gameplay] into critical devices which reflect upon their own function, production, and implications. In doing so video essays combine the analytical with the aesthetic, scientific methods with artistic practice.”<sup>13</sup>

There is also another argument to be made here—one that is overlooked easily within the daily doings of research: its communication to a broader public. I would argue that video game essays could be a solid bridge from casual viewers to the field of game studies. This new type of game criticism could open the road to a growth of interest of questions and issues that are integral parts of game research agendas worldwide. Therefore, video game essays are possible door-openers fostering media and game literacy and could even be labeled as entities of an unbudgeted science communications campaign.

In the following section, I will take a close look at three selected video game essays from different makers in order to show the broad range of topics discussed.<sup>14</sup> It will also be of interest to narrow down and examine the individual style of the creators. According to Matt Zoller Seitz, “[i]t is already possible (already!) to see a snippet of one of Kevin B. Lee’s videos from the other side of the room with the sound off and say, ‘That’s got to be Kevin.’”<sup>15</sup> The three channels to be examined are: *Games as Literature*, *Ahoy*, and *Red Angel*.

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13 Cf. <https://blog.hslu.ch/videoessay/about/>

14 Referring to film critic Girish Shambu one may ask, whether some form of new *ludophilia* is manifesting itself in these essays about digital games—a *ludophilia* which “wants to multiply a diversity of voices and subjectivities, and a plethora of narratives [...]” Shambu, Girish: “For a New Cinephilia,” in: *Film Quarterly* 72/3, February 27, 2019, <https://filmquarterly.org/2019/02/27/manifesto-eleven-calls-to-action/#newcinephilia>

15 Seitz, M. Zoller: *The Video Essay*. Kevin B. Lee is a filmmaker, media artist, critic and teacher and has created over 360 video essays for online video channels, festivals and crossmedia platforms.

## TAKING A CLOSER LOOK AT THREE VIDEO CHANNELS

*Games as Literature* is a US-based YouTube channel with almost 35k subscribers and 180 videos online that started broadcasting five years ago.<sup>16</sup> The channel’s protagonist introduces himself as the Game Professor. Following the stereotypical depiction of academia, his visual set-up is placing him in a huge chair in front of a large blackboard full of chalk notes. His clothing style can be described as rather conservative with a twist: The Game Professor is wearing a dark unspectacular jacket with a striking colorful tie which resembles an 8-bit-pixel aesthetic. The Game Professor’s main intention can be looked up on his crowdfunding website—he wants

“to create an actual curriculum, a real way for schools to teach kids how to appreciate and interpret video games. In the meantime, I’m contributing what I can to the discourse of interactive narrative study through this webseries. In short, I want to play a part in improving the understanding and presence of video games in the academic space.”<sup>17</sup>

In terms of content, the Game Professor is claiming to offer several perspectives and approaches:

“WHAT IS GAMES AS LIT.101? It’s a variety of different things! Sometimes it’s a game review series, with brief discussions about whatever games I’ve been playing lately. Sometimes it’s a look into a specific topic, like how a certain video game tells its story or what’s going on in video game culture. But most importantly, it’s occasional in-depth examination of a particular video game, what it means, and how it uses its interactive properties to tell its story [my emphasis].”<sup>18</sup>

As the name of channel already suggests, the Game Professor’s understanding of digital games is that of a ‘text,’ implying hereby that video and computer games—when understood as complex, pop-cultural products—bring forth contrasts, tensions, and paradox situations that can be *read* as self-

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16 Games as Literature; <https://www.youtube.com/user/gamesasliterature/>

17 <https://www.patreon.com/gamesaslit101>

18 Ibid.

reflexive meta-medial comments.<sup>19</sup> The Game Professor is very active on Twitter, where he not only promotes his channel but also appears as an outspoken-political discourse participant showing a strong anti-Trump mindset; he also frequently is discussing topics such as the interlinks between religion and sexuality. It can be assumed that the creator behind the persona “the Game Professor” is deepening his political swathes as a spill-over: On this channel, he also deep dives into topics such as ‘female agency’ and is deconstructing the right-wing slogan ‘Keep Politics Out of Games!’

The UK-based YouTube channel *Ahoy* joined the platform back in 2009 and has a huge subscriber base: Almost 1.4 million viewers do follow *Ahoy*’s “insightful gaming videos” and have watched his 283 videos.<sup>20</sup> Like *Games as Literature*, Stuart Brown—the maker behind *Ahoy*—is taking advantage of crowdfunding. His Patreon account shall secure a steady flow of income, making it possible for him to work full-time on his project. In his self-description, his targeted supporters learn:

“I produce documentary-style video content about video games and their impact on culture: history, influence and artefacts of design. As a one man team, I’m responsible for all aspects of production: script-writing, graphics, voiceover, gameplay recording, editing and music.”<sup>21</sup>

One of *Ahoy*’s most successful playlists is called *Iconic Arms*. It has gained the attention of over 2,2 million views and includes 21 videos so far—the concept behind this playlist is the visual interesting and informative presentation of “[l]egendary weapons of FPS history” following their historical roots in the actual armaments industry. Given that Brown has been an active video creator for over ten years now, it is not too surprising that his works have drawn the attention of writers and producers who are interested in video essays; Jeremy Kaye from the video platform *Series of the Week* describes Brown’s works as follows: “His video essays are presented with a distinct visual style, and go beyond typical gaming content to showcase a historical perspective that draws interest from gamers and non-gamers alike” and

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19 Cf. Inderst, Rudolf: *Die Darstellung von Wissenschaft im digitalen Spiel*, Glückstadt: vwh Verlag 2018, pp. 63-94.

20 Ahoy; <https://www.youtube.com/user/XboxAhoy>

21 <https://www.patreon.com/ahoy>

therefore labels him as one of several "filmmakers that have mastered the art of the Video Essay."<sup>22</sup> *Ahoy*'s contribution is also discussed by other YouTubers as well—*BluShades*, a channel with almost 45k subscribers, has produced a *laudatio* clip with the title *The Visual Nuances of Ahoy* seen by nearly 84k viewers.<sup>23</sup> *Ahoy* not only is a topic in English-speaking countries, German game researcher Christian Huberts also recommends Brown's clip *The First Video Game* as "throughout [...] entertaining."<sup>24</sup>

The third channel I will be discussing here is *Red Angel*—the US-based YouTube channel is the smallest one in regard to the number of subscribers—almost 2,5k viewers do follow the creator; her self-description reads as follows:

"I make academic essay[s] or editorial-style videos about video games and other forms of media. Here you'll see me discuss a variety of subjects relating to literature, philosophy, history, film, and television, over a backdrop of video games."<sup>25</sup>

Just like *Games as Literature* and *Ahoy*, *Red Angel* is using the crowdfunding platform in order to get financial support for her work: here, she also explains that one of her goals is to "critically analyze a piece of work, using research and sources from academic journals or something along those lines, and develop a large scale video essay format based around it."<sup>26</sup> One of her most popular (not a single downvote) videos centers around the connection between death and photography in the critically acclaimed video game *LIFE IS*

22 Kaye, Jeremy: "5 Filmmakers That Have Mastered the Art of the Video Essay," in: *Medium*, January 17, 2016; <https://medium.com/seriesoftheweek/5-filmmakers-that-have-mastered-the-art-of-the-video-essay-9667f7b2ee9c>

23 *BluShades*: *The Visual Nuances of Ahoy*, September 22, 2017, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3BFvX\\_rzWV0](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3BFvX_rzWV0)

24 Huberts, Christian: "Was war das erste Videospiel? (Nein, nicht PONG)," in: *piqd*, October 7, 2019; <https://www.piqd.de/pop-kultur/was-war-das-erste-videospiel-nein-nicht-pong>

25 *Red Angel*; <https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCikpgADQdxYm6OH11Bhmmw/about>

26 <https://www.patreon.com/redangel>

STRANGE (2015).<sup>27</sup> *Red Angel* also is part of the now seemingly defunct YouTube roundtable *The Gaming Symposium*. There, she not only joined forces with the Game Professor, but also with another better-known US-based producer called *EmceeProphIt* (with 22,7k followers) who features a playlist called *Video Game Analysis* with 76 videos: “Games are a growing artistic medium, and they’ve been used to create some amazing satire, commentary and emotional epics.”<sup>28</sup>

*Red Angel* was the only female member within the cast of *The Gaming Symposium*, and I think one should not dismiss this very circumstance as some sort of anecdotal evidence—au contraire, writer Meg Shields points out:

“I watch a lot of video essays. [...] [T]hey’re engaging, informative, thought-provoking, and tend to make their viewers more critical and appreciative cinema-goers. The gender disparity present in video essays is nothing new. It reflects a wider cultural disparity in film culture [...]”<sup>29</sup>

She continues: “Written essays have been a ‘feminine’ medium for ages, from Joan Didion, to Susan Sontag, to Zadie Smith, to Roxane Gay. But video essays seem to take after the film industry’s gender bias.”<sup>30</sup> Although Shields is focusing on video essays reflecting movies and TV shows, the situation does not vary considerably when it comes to essays about video and computer games: game press articles or online forum threads that feature best-of lists regularly come up with the well-known male ‘usual suspects’ such as *Super Bunnyhop*, *Errant Signal*, *Gaming Historian* or Noah Caldwell-Gervais.<sup>31</sup> In this regard, it can be assumed that right now, to the

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27 Red Angel: *Death and Photography in Life is Strange*, May 8, 2016; [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-uduox3e\\_](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-uduox3e_)

28 EmceeProphIt: *Video Game Analysis [Playlist]*, June 9, 20212, <https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PL259F47D4B6FA8555>

29 Shields, Meg: “Fantastic Video Essays by Women and Where to Find Them,” in: *Film School Rejects* (2018); <https://filmschoolrejects.com/fantastic-video-essays-women-find/>

30 Ibid.

31 TotalDimwitTheCynicalTwit: “The Best Video Game Critics On YouTube,” in: *Gaming Central* (2017); <https://gamingcentral.in/best-video-game-critics-youtub>

majority of the public, the domain of video essays might be “reflexive, subjective, autobiographic, poetic, interdisciplinary”<sup>32</sup>—but it is also dominated by men.

## PLAYING THE CULTURE WARS GAME

In the following section, I will discuss the aforementioned complex of problems as part of a larger whole. This complex can be read and labeled as a subset of a new form of culture war. Following Irene Taviss Thomson, this to be understood as “an outgrowth of characteristically American culture patterns. [...] Like earlier cultural politics, the contemporary culture wars take place within the parameters of some enduring cultural patterns.”<sup>33</sup> Thomson continues: “If the contemporary culture wars differ from those of the past, it is only because we have become increasingly aware of such contention and increasingly conscious of the tenuousness with which all cultural ideas are held.”<sup>34</sup> Her argument and derivation were published in 2010, and I will argue that now—a decade later—the awareness Thomson is talking about has to be recontextualized within the current ecosystem of social media. The reason is obvious—social media and online community platforms have become a ubiquitous and time-consuming constant in our lives:

“Since its inception in 1996, social media [...] platforms almost tripled their total user base in the last decade, from 970 million in 2010 to the number passing 3.81 billion

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e/; “Best YouTube channels for gaming analysis/in depth discussion,” in: *Neogaf* (2016); <https://www.neogaf.com/threads/best-youtube-channels-for-gaming-analysis-in-depth-discussion.1188455/>

32 Freeman, Marilyn: “On the Form of the Video Essay,” in: *TriQuarterly*; January 16, 2012; <https://www.triquarterly.org/essay/on-the-form-of-video-essay>

33 Thomson, Irene Taviss: “Culture Wars and Enduring American Dilemmas,” in: *University of Michigan*, 2010; <https://www.press.umich.edu/pdf/9780472070886-ch1.pdf>

34 Ibid.



users in 2020. [...] The average person has 8.6 social media accounts in 2020 [and] the average time a person spends on social media a day is 2 hours 24 minutes.”<sup>35</sup>

Since most of the video game essayists can be found on YouTube, the platform can serve as a point of reference, putting the thought of a social marketplace of ideas into question. Already in 2010, YouTube stated, “that the number of videos watched daily at the website has broken the two-billion mark [...]”.<sup>36</sup> Nine years later, though, YouTube has 2 billion users worldwide, 79 percent of internet users claim to have a YouTube account, they can browse YouTube in 80 different languages (which covers roughly 95 percent of the internet population), and every single day people watch one billion hours of videos on the platform hereby generating billions of views—“it would take you close to 82 years to watch the amount of videos uploaded to YouTube in only an hour.”<sup>37</sup>

It is this specific discourse area in which video game essay creators who highlight cultural and political implications quickly will find themselves right in the middle of accusations, allegations, and aggressions from viewers /users as well as other video makers. To elaborate this challenge a bit further, one can turn to political scientist and editor for *Dissent* Nick Serpe, as he explains: “In the earlier days of the internet, content moderation was often driven by the whims of webmasters and volunteers deputized to decide what (and who) got banned.”<sup>38</sup> But nowadays, Serpe continues, their role has become much more significant: “They have been cast as central players in the fight for democracy, whether as its antagonists or its delinquent guardians.”<sup>39</sup>

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35 Dean, Brian: “Social Network Usage & Growth Statistics: How Many People Use Social Media in 2021?” in: *Backlinko*, April 02, 2021; <https://backlinko.com/social-media-users>

36 Chapmann, Glenn: “YouTube Serving up Two Billion Videos Daily,” in: *The Sydney Morning Herald*, May 18, 2010; <https://www.smh.com.au/technology/youtube-serving-up-two-billion-videos-daily-20100517-v8sf.html>

37 Mohsin, Maryam: “10 Youtube Stats Every Marketer Should Know in 2020,” in: *Oberlo*, November 11, 2019; <https://www.oberlo.com/blog/youtube-statistics>

38 Serpe, Nick: “The New Tech Culture Wars,” in: *Dissent* (2019); <https://www.dissentmagazine.org/article/the-new-tech-culture-wars>

39 Ibid.

The most prominent example is Anita Sarkeesian and her highly successful video game essay series *Tropes vs. Women in Video Games*, in which Sarkeesian aimed "to examine the plot devices and patterns most often associated with female characters in gaming from a systemic, big picture perspective."<sup>40</sup> After her fundraising campaign to raise money in order to produce her web series, she began to receive "death threats, comments on her gender and race, and on Wikipedia, someone replaced her picture with a pornographic one. Then [...] rape threats were made against her."<sup>41</sup> Her case was a vivid and sudden reminder that "participatory culture [...] can as easily serve non-democratic as democratic purposes. [Her] harassment utilized the same platforms that encourage the sharing of remixes, videos, games, memes, tweets, blog posts, and so on."<sup>42</sup>

Another example of a video essayist to be mentioned in this context is Harry Brewis and his channel *hbomborguy* (522k subscribers).<sup>43</sup> He was described by *The Guardian* as "a blow against online toxicity" and "an antidote to the worst of gaming culture", aiming to provide "well-sourced and reasoned responses to the arguments of the far right [including] flat earthers, pick-up artists, advocates of the theory that soy makes men feminine."<sup>44</sup> By not only covering games such as *BRAID* (2008), *FALLOUT 3* (2008), and *BLOODBORNE* (2015) or more typical game culture topics like speedrunning and gamergate, Brewis is opening up his channel to a broader audience interested in rather progressive and liberal positions within the current (social) media discourse. One could argue that this aforementioned conflict also can

40 [https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLn4ob\\_5\\_ttEaA\\_vc8F3fjzE62esf9yP61](https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLn4ob_5_ttEaA_vc8F3fjzE62esf9yP61)

41 Burke, Ronald J.: "Individual, Organizational, and Societal Backlash Against Women," in: Burke, Ronald J./Major, Debra A. (eds.), *Gender in Organisations. Are Men Allies or Adversaries to Women's Career Advancement?*, Cheltenham: Edward Elgar Publishing 2014, pp. 335-365, here p. 335.

42 Massanari, Adrienne L.: "'Damseling for Dollars'. Toxic Technoculture and Geek Masculinity," in: Lind, Rebecca Ann (ed.): *Race, Gender in Electronic Media: Content, Context, Culture*. New York: Routledge 2016, p. 327.

43 <https://www.youtube.com/user/hbomborguy>

44 Hawking, Tom: "How a 57-hour Donkey Kong Game Struck a Blow Against Online Toxicity," in: *The Guardian*, January 22, 2019; <https://www.theguardian.com/games/2019/jan/22/how-a-57-hour-donkey-kong-twitch-stream-struck-a-blow-against-gamergate>

be described as a clash of different *game capital* formats. I follow game researcher Mia Consalvo in my understanding of the term as providing “a key way to understand how individuals interact with games, information about games and the game industry, and other game players.”<sup>45</sup> Gaming capital, referring to French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu and his understanding of capital sorts, can be understood as a form of *cultural capital*, which, in our case, describes theoretical and practical knowledge about gaming itself, but also the ecosystem around it. One could argue that the actual re-emergence of a culture war in the YouTube and Twitch comment sections and on the different timelines of social media platforms is to be understood as a clash of gaming capital holders within a competitive playfield for meaning and significance.

In order to exemplify this, the question comes to mind whether the knowledge about the state of representation of ethnicity, class, or gender in video games does hold the same relevance as the knowledge about every magical crystal and its effect in a massive fantasy game world. In the case of what has been described as classical game criticism and game fan circles alike, the second type of knowledge has been rated as more significant to the ecosystem of gaming, whereas the first complex has been looked upon as some form of suspicious left-wing-media and scholarship politicization—being of only remote interest for the ludic sociotope. Even worse: The critical inquiring, frequently put forward by humanities research, has been read as a hostile attempt to manifest a climate of cancel culture, killing off the enjoyment, fun, and excitement of ‘just playing a game.’ This positional rivalry has turned, as shown above with gamergate, for instance, into brutish online maneuvers where both encampments do not hesitate to act and counteract via their social media appearances.

## THE GERMAN-SPEAKING SITUATION OF VIDEO GAME ESSAYS

It is interesting for me—as a German-speaking game researcher—to see that there are high-quality German language podcasts available that deal with

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45 Consalvo, Mia: *Cheating: Gaining Advantage in Video Games*, Cambridge, MA: MIT Press 2007, p. 4.

questions and perspectives of game studies: In *Poor Player*<sup>46</sup> game researchers Christian Huberts and Eric Jannot examine the role of poverty in digital games, in *Behind the Screens* podcast<sup>47</sup> game researchers Benjamin Strobel, Nicolas Hoberg as well as Jessica Kathmann focus upon the interconnection of psychology and video games, and there are already more than 200 episodes of *Pixeldiskurs*<sup>48</sup>—a weekly format that seeks to interconnect game studies and culture journalism.<sup>49</sup>

When it comes to video game essays in Germany, Austria and Switzerland, though, the overall situation can be described as developable. On the basis of three examples, light shall be shed on current circumstances. Alice Wolf, with her channel *Alice Wolf* (6,1k subscribers)<sup>50</sup>, for example, is working at a German video game media outlet full-time and also takes care of her channel where she examines titles such as *HOLLOW KNIGHT* (2017), *RESIDENT EVIL 2* (2019) or *GRIS* (2018). In the earlier days, she also covered topics like the narratology versus ludology debate. Christian Eichler, a journalist, started a channel called *ah ok* (188 subscribers) in July 2019 after co-hosting a podcast called *Rush* (2017-2019) that had the following key questions: What's the societal relevance of digital games, and how can they be analyzed?<sup>51</sup> Michael Schulze von Glaßer is an outspoken peace activist, public speaker, and book author. He created his channel *Games 'n' Politics* in 2013 (8,6k subscribers)<sup>52</sup>—his last upload was back in 2015. On his Patreon page, von Glaßer explains that his game reviews do not focus on questions

46 Huberts, Christian/Jannot, Eric: *Poor Player*; <https://poorplayerpodcast.de>

47 Hoberg, Nicolas/Kathmann, Jessica/ Strobel, Benjamin: *Behind the Screens*; <https://behind-the-screens.de/category/podcast/>

48 Simond, Stefan Heinrich: *Pixeldiskurs*; <http://pixeldiskurs.de>

49 There is also *Game Studies Audiofied* with a strong focus on science communication putting a spotlight on the life courses and careers of ten game researchers: Inderst, Rudolf: *Game Studies Audified*; <https://soundcloud.com/gamestudiesaudiofied>

50 Woelfer, Alice; <https://www.youtube.com/user/AliceWoelfer>

51 Eichler, Christian: *ah ok*; <https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCbRy4RwUaHUSDy4lhHhZIDw>; cf. <https://podcasts.apple.com/de/podcast/rush-der-gaming-podcast-detektor-fm/id1316889089?mt=2>

52 Schulze von Glaßer, Michael: *Games and Politics*; <https://www.youtube.com/user/gamesandpolitics/>

regarding graphics and sounds, he rather deep dives into enemy images in military shooters or the absence of cruelty to animals in keeping livestock in farm simulators.<sup>53</sup> It remains to be seen whether in the near future there will be a leap forward in regard to German-speaking video game essay creators.<sup>54</sup> A possible foundation for an expansion is already there: German game influencers are highly popular and reach millions of viewers.<sup>55</sup> If they decide to change or broaden their programmatic portfolio, this could be the literal ‘game changer’ for the German video game essay, turning displays of impressive gaming and video editing skills in let’s plays into “a bastard genre, the unlawful love (or perhaps more honestly: love/hate) child of academia and the arts.”<sup>56</sup>

## CONCLUSION—INSERT COIN AND CONTINUE

The epilogue starts with a semantic trick from the beginning:

“In the past decade video [game] essays have taken on several roles of traditional, written [game] criticism, from advocating for certain [games] or [game]makers and expressing enthusiasm for recent [games] to what counted as ‘long-form’ criticism

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53 Cf. <https://www.patreon.com/gamesandpolitics>

54 In 2015 German journalist Patrick Wellinski concluded that there is no German video game essay equivalent to creators such as Kevin Lee oder Tony Zhou. Wellinski surmises that this is based on the language barrier.

55 Every German subscriber-based top-10 let’s player has a viewership over 1,8 million followers. Cf. Behner, Franziska: “YouTube—Top 10 der größten Let’s Player in Deutschland, Oktober 2019,” in: *Play Central*, October 19.10.2019; <https://www.playcentral.de/articles/id37617/1/youtube-top-10-groessten-lets-player-deutschland-oktober-2019.html>

56 Roes, Remco/Pit, Kris: “The Visual Essay and the Place of Artistic Research in the Humanities,” in: *Nature*, October 31, 2017; <https://www.nature.com/articles/s41599-017-0004-5>

like discussing genre or the role of sound. There is now an audiovisual take to be found on most (if not all) [ludo]phile topics and buzzwords.”<sup>57</sup>

In summary, this paper argued that video game essays today are a part of media criticism. Broadly translated, the findings indicate that these essays are a heterogeneous expression and manifestation of artistic ambition, journalistic curiosity as well as academic receptiveness. The present findings suggest that video game essayists who provide clips with a higher production value use the mechanisms of crowdfunding platforms as well as revenue income from display, overlay and video ads in order to support their channel. Future research on aesthetic, formal, and rhetorical strategies for communicating in the medium of video might bring new insights in regard to this mode of examining critical and analytical ideas within the discourse field of digital games. In conclusion, video game essay creators—it would appear—have understood that it is not

“any easier to write effectively with video than it is to compose an essay with pen and paper. Similar types of expository and argumentative planning are involved in both forms, while the new technology introduces its own characteristic challenges and choices, including decisions about the spatial and temporal organization and transformation of audiovisual materials, the addition of onscreen text, voiceover commentary, and visual effects.”<sup>58</sup>

Altogether, the field of game studies can profit from these thoughts, concepts, and practices: Certain systemic and technical processes which build the foundation of an audio-visual medium such as video games can be described and examined in a more nuanced way by a *sui generis* show-do-not-tell approach of video essays. It is also possible to understand video game essays as a powerful tool of science communication: As a format, they have

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57 Verdeure, David/Trocan, Irina: “The Best Video Essays of 2018,” in: *Sight & Sound*, January 10, 2020; <https://www.bfi.org.uk/news-opinion/sight-sound-magazine/polls-surveys/best-video-essays-2018>

58 Denson, Shane: “The Video Essay: Writing with Video about Film and Media,” *Stanford University*, 2018; <https://art.stanford.edu/courses/2018-2019-filmstud-50q>

a strong force of attraction at their disposal to raise interest in the issues and problems of game research.

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# Peripherals



# The Impending Demise of Video Game Packaging: An Eulogy

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MARK J. P. WOLF

Last year, when I was going to buy Cyan World's new adventure game *OBDOCTION* (2016), I was sad to learn that it was only being sold as a download; there would be no case to store on a shelf, no booklet, no physical packaging of any kind. I still don't like the idea that I don't own something I can look at and hold in my hand; I'm the same way when it comes to buying music on compact discs, and movies on Blu-ray discs, rather than as downloads. Perhaps it's a generational thing; I grew up during the days of video game cartridges, computer disks (even the big black square kind), and vinyl records, when album cover art was something you could hang on a wall. Packaging attracted you in the store, enticed you into buying something (or at least consider buying it), and exuded an attitude about what game was contained, usually hyping it up and exaggerating the action and excitement that you would supposedly experience; but back then everyone knew the graphics wouldn't live up to the box claims, you'd have to use your imagination to come anywhere even close to them.

Sure, buying online is much quicker and more convenient, but there was a sense of anticipation in waiting to buy a game, going to a store (maybe more than once, if you were still deciding or had to save up), shopping, getting it new and wrapped in plastic, and opening it up when the moment finally came. After that, you might see what it came packaged with, and even read the game manual (it is somewhat ironic that we read the game manuals in the days when the games were simpler, and not today when they are more complex; but of course, that has to do with the abstraction found in early

games, and the lack of established conventions, which nowadays allow one to pick up a game and start playing it without much trouble). There was anticipation at every stage of the experience.

Anticipation has changed, of course, but it still exists; due to the Internet and its ability to spread news about upcoming games, there is more advance notice and hype than ever before; you might find out an upcoming game a couple of years in advance of its actual release. So, in some ways, there is more anticipation these days, perhaps to even greater levels than before, considering the anticipation that fans had waiting for releases such as *GRAND THEFT AUTO V* (2013), *NO MAN'S SKY* (2016), and *OBDUCTION* itself; but it is also a different kind of anticipation (and you also anticipated and waited for games in the 1970s, whenever games were announced in advance). Most of all, though, I like owning a copy of the game, and not having to rely on the Cloud, or verification codes, or a reliable Internet connection; I can play it with or without an Internet connection, and no one can take it away or cancel my access to it. If Adobe software is any indication of the future, video games could one day be rented instead of purchased, or require a subscription like a streaming service. Or even function in a pay-per-play model, just like it was in the arcade, only you'd be charged at home on your own machine.

Of course, as anyone venturing into GameStop knows, there are still many games that come packaged; the shelves there are full of them. But how long will it last? Blockbuster Video survived thirteen years into the existence of Netflix, but they're gone today, despite a near-monopoly in the video rental industry. It depends partly on demand; if enough players are also video game collectors, physical, packaged copies of games will continue to be sold. And there's still peripherals and other game-related gear and merchandise that stores can sell, though that's no guarantee, either, that such stores will continue to flourish. Whatever may be the case, though, it seems likely that certain kinds of video game packaging, at least, are in their decline, and that packaging in general is unlikely to again serve some of the other purposes it once had.

## THE GOLDEN AGE OF VIDEO GAME PACKAGING

In the early days of video games, packaging had an important role, not just in the selling of games as physical products, but also in the promotion and advertising of video games in retail stores. Packaging attempted to draw the consumer's attention and entice potential players to purchase the game, promising excitement and experiences that were highly abstracted from what was depicted in the box art. Since graphics were still relatively crude, images on video game packaging, and even right on the cartridges themselves, tried to convince players of the exciting content the games supposedly contained, and included artistic conceptions of the game content to remind them what the blocky, pixelated figures were supposed to represent.

*Figure 1: Box claims versus actual screen graphics: packaging helped players interpret and imagine what the often sparse screen graphics were supposed to represent*



Source: SPIDER-MAN (1982), SUPER BREAKOUT (1978), COMBAT (1977)

Probably the best example of this are the cartridges made for the Atari VCS 2600, especially Atari's own cartridges, for the lavish art that graced boxes and the cartridges themselves. The box and cartridge art included with the games for the Atari VCS 2600 were particularly good at providing contexts that strove to give greater meaning to clusters of colored pixels, no matter

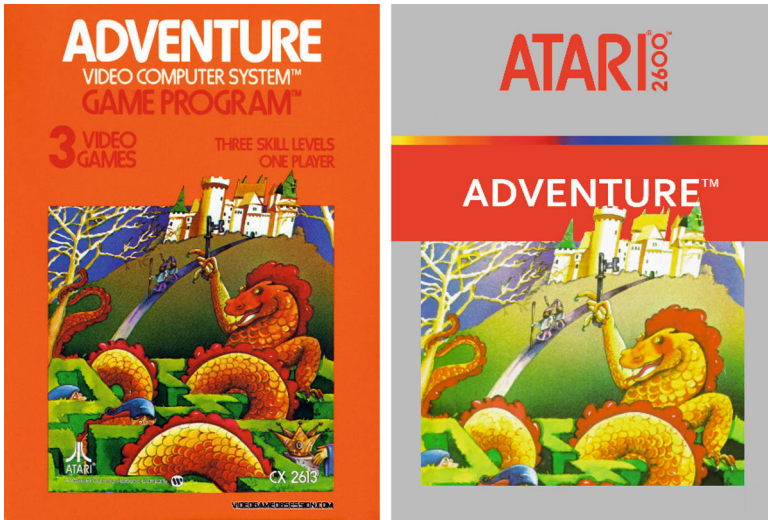


how outrageous a stretch was needed to do so (see Figure 1). Game manuals included with the games went even farther, giving narrative contexts to games even as abstract as *SUPER BREAKOUT* (1978).<sup>1</sup> Usually the images depicted people concentrating while engaged in physical activities; wielding weapons or sports equipment, using technology, driving vehicles, and more often than not, encountering challenges or even danger; quite the opposite, anyway, from sitting on the couch and manipulating a paddle or joystick (or, for a few games, a keypad), which was about the only physical activity that was expected of the player.

Cartridges for the Atari VCS 2600 originally had no images on them, only text on a black background; but soon they were given stickers which matched the box art. Often the box that the cartridge came in also contained an Atari catalog, where more box art was featured, along with additional catalog art tying it all together. Atari changed styles now and then; the original boxes were bright, solid colors, with the same familiar fonts like Harry Fat and Bauhaus Bold. The silver (with a strip of rainbow) Atari boxes and labels came in the 1980s (see Figure 2), after the solid-color designs that looked more 1970s (in retrospect). If you bought games and played Atari during those days, seeing both styles of the box art can give you almost visceral memories of what it was like to get new cartridges and play them at the time. This nostalgic feeling for the old designs, and the desire to know more about them, has led Tim Lapetino to produce the coffee-table book *The Art of Atari*, which features not only life-size reproductions of the box art, but the original artwork used, concept drawings, unused versions, and other art used in catalogs, advertisements, and arcade cabinets, with credit for each of the artists whose work was all done anonymously when the cartridges first appeared.<sup>2</sup> Other companies followed suit; Activision's cartridge boxes a look and feel that was very similar to the solid-color Atari box designs, and Imagic's packaging was silver with a series of stripes of rainbow colors, similar to Atari's later design scheme. Likewise, their box cover art was also more playful and detailed than the actual screen graphics would turn out to be.

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- 1 Wolf, Mark J. P.: "Narrative in the Video Game," in: Wolf, Mark J. P. (ed.), *The Medium of the Video Game*, Austin, Texas: University of Texas Press 2001, pp. 93-112, here pp. 101-103.
  - 2 Lapetino, Tim: *The Art of Atari*, Mount Laurel, NJ: Dynamite Entertainment 2016.

Figure 2: Two different box designs for *Adventure* (1980) for the Atari VCS 2600



Source: ADVENTURE (1980)

I have most of the packaging for most of the Atari cartridges I bought in the 1980s, and I even still have the box for the Atari 2600 console itself. We tended to keep the boxes for things; my mother collected Depression Glass and variety of other collectibles, including collector plates, which were popular in the 1970s and 1980s. A collectible plate was always worth more with the original box, and so my mother kept all the boxes in the basement, while the plates were on display on plate rails in the kitchen. This may have encouraged me to keep boxes as well, or perhaps I just liked them; either way, I still have them. When it comes to collectibles, many are often worth more with their original packaging, simply because the packaging is often rarer than the collectible itself; people tend to throw away packaging, and so preserved packaging can raise the value of a collectible. This seems to be the case for video games as well. One the highest prices paid for a copy of a video game occurred in 2017, when a sealed, unopened copy of Bandai's *STADIUM EVENTS* (1987) for the NES sold for \$41,977. According to an article in Kotaku, a loose cartridge of the game is worth nearly \$10,000, whereas a copy with its original box and manual can sell for more than

\$20,000.<sup>3</sup> And even the packaging alone, and empty box without the cartridge, can still fetch over \$10,000.<sup>4</sup> On auction websites like eBay, one can find games sold in their original packaging, and occasionally packaging is sold by itself as well. Anything that is really old and rare and still unopened is likely to remain unopened, as the unopened copy is perhaps the rarest kind of game. (And what kind of person would buy it and not open, over it all these years? That would seem to be an interesting story in and of itself...)

Packaging, then, also can attest to the authenticity of a product or game, especially when sealed in its original packaging which has never been opened, leaving the wrapped item in its pristine, untouched form, left as it was since it left the production line. For collectors, this condition is called “mint condition,” referring to newly minted coins which have zero wear-and-tear from usage, and is the most desirably form that a collectible object can have. In such a case, the packaging becomes a part of the object. This relates, of course, to the game itself as an object. The earliest games were objects; hardwired into arcade cabinets or the consoles of home systems. In 1976, with the appearance of third-generation console technology which was cartridge-based, the game became a physical object on its own, apart from the system that played it (and, interestingly, movies also became available to consumers that same year, with the release of the video cassette recorder (VCR) and the tapes that it read).

But during the late 1970s and 1980s, the game-as-object began to be undermined by games stored on computer media like floppy disks, diskettes, and later CD-ROMs, and especially by on-line games, which could be downloaded and stored, without the user ever receiving anything physical to represent it. The game was now seen as the game code, not the plastic and metal containers that held the magnetic or solid-state materials in which the game code was stored. Interestingly, game-makers tried to make up for this loss of physicality through advancements in game packaging. The 1980s was the era of “feelies,” the physical objects with which some computer games came

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3 Kohler, Chris: “Rare NES Game Stadium Events Sells For Nearly \$42,000,” in: *Kotaku*, July 19, 2017; <https://kotaku.com/rare-nes-game-stadium-events-sells-for-nearly-42-000-1797061312>

4 According to Lammle, Rob: “8 Very Rare (and Very Expensive) Video Games,” in: *Mental Floss*, January 3, 2011; <https://www.cnn.com/2010/LIVING/03/20/mf.rich.off.video.games/index.html>

packaged. Some adventure games, like *ULTIMA IV: QUEST OF THE AVATAR* (1985), came with a cloth map, and other games included such trinkets as small, metal figurines, runestones, hint booklets, and other items. Infocom was known for their “feelies” packaged with their text adventures; *THE HITCHHIKER’S GUIDE TO THE GALAXY* (1983), for example, came with a bag of pocket fluff, a “Don’t Panic” button, Peril-sensitive sunglasses, and a little bag said to contain a microscopic space fleet too small to be seen by the naked eye.<sup>5</sup> Feelies, as they came to be called, were not merely included as a novelty to try to help games sales; they were also a means of combatting piracy, which was one of the consequences of games losing their objecthood and becoming too easy to copy. A cloth map included with an adventure game might contain a crucial clue that was not available within the game itself, meaning that a pirated copy of the game that did not feature the feelies was incomplete and could not be solved without the additional information.

In the 1990s, most games still came with game manuals, but some games made them into books, like Rusel DeMaria’s novellas that came with *STAR WARS: X-WING* (1993) and *STAR WARS: TIE FIGHTER* (1994), or the 224-page book included with Lucasfilm’s *SECRET WEAPONS OF THE LUFTWAFFE* (1991).<sup>6</sup> Even today, there are plenty of “collectors’ editions” in oversize boxes which include metal figurines, game guides, soundtrack CDs, and other items, sometimes in a deluxe box as well (sometimes even a metal case), and always at a higher price than the other versions of the game. But only a relatively small number of games have such optional forms of packaging, while many do not, and an increasing number are available only as digital downloads.

## COLLECTING VIDEO GAMES

The idea of the video game as collectible goes beyond just the collecting of an object, of course. In the early days, kids could lend, borrow, or even trade cartridges, and eventually even sell them to secondhand stores, just as one

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5 See Chalk, Andy: “Boxes, Feelies, and the Good Old Days of PC Gaming,” in: *PC Gamer*, December 15, 2015, <https://www.pcgamer.com/boxes-feelies-and-the-good-old-days-of-pc-gaming/>

6 Ibid.

can buy and sell them at rummage sales or on auction sites like eBay. Even little pleasures, like lining up a stack of cartridges in a carrying case or arranging Atari's colored boxes on a shelf to form a spectrum of color, are things that are for the most part gone today. But, again, maybe this is all a generational thing; with well-established video game conventions and in-game tutorials, players learn a new game mainly by playing, and many games do not even have game manuals any more (except for third-party guides sold separately; but even then, YouTube videos or walkthroughs can likely be found, if help is needed). With digital music, movies, and games streaming into devices and everything stored in the Cloud, one's media collections are completely portable, and possibly even ever-changing, as renting replaces buying, and streaming services offer temporary usage that comes and goes as their offerings change. Unlike old books, music, and movies, older games (and by *old* I mean more than only a decade or so) often become unplayable on newer systems, and require old hardware, which may in turn require other old equipment (like CRTs with the right connections). Some are ported to newer systems, but only their blockbuster status warrants it, and even then, they are sometimes "updated" and no longer their original selves.

Of course, some will suggest that packaging was wasteful, and not ecologically sound, and it is true that the majority of it from past years probably ended up in the garbage. Video games have always been about giving players experiences, and packaging was only a part of that experience, one that many players perhaps even took, and continue to take, for granted. Like other obsolete technologies, video game packaging will never see the kind of heyday it once had at its peak, but neither will it ever disappear completely, so long as there are enough collectors to buy collectors' editions; maybe packaging will only be available as a collectible item, in a limited edition, which has to remain limited in order to remain collectible. Some collectors' editions can be quite elaborate; *RESIDENT EVIL 7: BIOHAZARD COLLECTOR'S EDITION* (2016) came with a small, detailed model house from the game, while the *BIOSHOCK 10TH ANNIVERSARY COLLECTOR'S EDITION* (2017) included an 11-inch statuette with lights, sound, and a motorized drill. Some of these special editions can cost hundreds of dollars, new, and once discontinued they may rise even higher in price. Whatever the case, video game packaging has been a part of the video game experience for a few generations of players, and has been something that they will not easily forget nor something that they would want to. And in a broader sense of term, "packaging" is still with

us, albeit in new forms that show off games and raise player's hope and anticipation, piquing their curiosity and giving them a peek at the game; like game trailers, which one can find so easily on-line. Patterned after movie trailers, with glimpses of action, enigmatic scenes and scenery, and emotional music designed to build the hype surrounding a game's release, game trailers are an effective way to advertise a game and spread the word about it.

*Figure 3: Virtual packaging for a variation of Doom Eternal (2020) depicting the new "Doomicorn" skin*



Source: DOOM ETERNAL (2020)

Some layer of marketing and hype will always necessarily exist between a game and its potential players, but the nature of that layer—whether a physical package, on-line images and trailers, cardboard stands for stores, or a marketing and advertising campaign that combines all of these—will remain something which can be enjoyed for itself, as a prelude to enjoying the game it promotes, beyond its importance to sales. Likewise, game-related collectibles will continue to take advantage of players' love for their games, regardless of the ever-changing forms they may take as well; and there are even forms of virtual packaging, like the fictitious box for *DOOM ETERNAL* (2020), which depicts the “Doomicorn” skin (see Figure 3). And those collectibles still around from decades ago will continue to rise in value, as they grow scarcer; they can only get older.

So, yes, it is true that some kinds of video game packaging are on the decline; but in the end, this slow disappearance is no doubt necessary for nostalgia to arise, just as rarity is needed for valuations to rise. But it also means that the nature of nostalgia itself is changing, as each new generation has different experiences that are equally certain to change as time passes. But hopefully, the experience of nostalgia will be something that we will always have with us, no matter how much the subject of that nostalgia changes.

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BIOSHOCK 10TH ANNIVERSARY COLLECTOR’S EDITION (2K Games, 2017 (2007), O: 2K Boston/2K Australia)

COMBAT (Atari 1977, O: Atari)

DOOM ETERNAL (Bethesda Softworks 2020, O: id Software)

GRAND THEFT AUTO V (Rockstar Games 2013, O: Rockstar North)

NO MAN’S SKY (Hello Games 2016, O: Hello Games)

OBDUCTION (Cyan Worlds 2016, O: Cyan Worlds)

RESIDENT EVIL 7: BIOHAZARD COLLECTOR’S EDITION (Capcom 2016, O: Capcom)

SECRET WEAPONS OF THE LUFTWAFFE (Lucasfilm Games 1991, O: Lucasfilm Games)

SPIDER-MAN (Parker Brothers 1982, O: Laura Nikolich)

STADIUM EVENTS (Bandai 1987, O: Human Entertainment)

STAR WARS: X-WING (LucasArts 1993, O: LucasArts)

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ULTIMA IV: QUEST OF THE AVATAR (Origin Systems 1985, O: Origin Systems)





# The Ludic Nature of Paratexts

## Playful Material in and Beyond Video Games

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REGINA SEIWALD

The very essence of playfulness is an openness to anything that may happen. The feeling that whatever happens, it's ok. So you cannot be playful if you're frightened that moving in some direction will be "wrong" —something you "shouldn't have done."

JOHN CLEESE<sup>1</sup>

## INTRODUCTION: PLAYFUL GAME PARATEXTS

Video games, as cultural artifacts and as pastimes, play a key part in the lives of most people. The digital age has brought about a full-fledged *homo ludens* more than 80 years after the term has been promoted by Johan Huizinga, making playfulness a conscious effort and not just a natural instinct.<sup>2</sup> A possible explanation for the popularity of games is that unlike most other media, such as literature in its printed book form, films, or paintings, video games allow us to experience their worlds by actively engaging with them, creating

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- 1 John Cleese cited in Sandberg, Berit/Frick-Islitzer, Dagmar: *Die Künstlerbrille. Was und wie Führungskräfte von Künstlern lernen können*, Wiesbaden: Springer Gabler 2018, p. 230.
  - 2 Huizinga, Johan: *Homo Ludens. A Study of Play Element in Culture*, Boston, MA: Beacon Press 1955 (\*1938), p. 10.

personalized stories in and through them, and executing (or consciously breaking) the rules they afford. In a sense, a game, as an experience, only exists through being played and is uniquely realized in response to the player's engagement with it. The character we embody in a narrative video game fulfills actions we make them do while we, through them, establish relationships with other in-game characters. At the same time, a game possesses a notion of artifactuality, which is marked by less ephemeral characteristics due to the physical materiality associated with this denotation of game, such as a disc or a cartridge.

The experience we have of a game, however, is not only generated by playing it but also influenced by material surrounding the game, which closely relates to it and connects the game world and the player's reality. This means that while playing a game, the player occupies two spaces simultaneously, namely the fictive game world and the reality from where they access the game. The elements linking these two worlds are akin to what Gérard Genette has termed 'paratexts,' namely "a threshold" or "an 'undefined zone' between the inside and the outside."<sup>3</sup> This supporting, transitional material frames the game and makes it visible as a cultural artifact to the public.<sup>4</sup> Video game paratexts can take on diverse forms and functions, such as those pertaining to gameplay (e.g., setting the difficulty level or creating the avatar), those resembling Genette's "factual paratexts"<sup>5</sup> (e.g., opening and closing credits, copyright information, or PG ratings), narrative paratexts (e.g., unplayable prologues or cutscenes), marketing paratexts (e.g., the disc cover, the publisher's or developer's logo, merchandising products or trailers), technological paratexts (e.g., devices on which the game is played, which establish a relationship between the game and its players), critical material (e.g., industry media outputs or game reviews published in newspapers) as well as fan-created paratexts (e.g., mods, Let's Play videos, forum discussions, wikis or archives).

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3 Genette, Gérard: *Paratexts. Thresholds of Interpretation*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1997 (\*1987), p. 2.

4 Cf. Uricchio, William: "Interactivity and the Modalities of Textual-Hacking. From the Bible to Algorithmically Generated Stories," in: Pesce, Sara/Noto, Paolo (eds.), *The Politics of Ephemeral Digital Media*, New York: Routledge 2016, pp. 155-169, here p. 155.

5 G. Genette: *Paratexts*, p. 7.

While these and other paratexts relating to and surrounding video games follow defined functions, they themselves can possess playful characteristics. Although this appears to be a very straightforward statement, the problem with this argument is that ‘playfulness,’ as the baseline characteristic of and attitude encouraged by games, has never been explicitly defined in Game Studies but is assumed to be the underlying feature all games possess. Brian Sutton-Smith has outlined this paradoxical situation as follows: “We all play occasionally, and we all know what playing feels like. But when it comes to making theoretical statements about what play is, we fall into silliness. There is little agreement among us, and much ambiguity.”<sup>6</sup> We, therefore, need to take a look at concepts related to ‘playfulness’ within Game Studies and other fields in order to understand what it implies and to be able to define it for the purposes of the present study. Playfulness underpins the aspects that make up play as defined by Roger Callois, namely that it is free, separate, uncertain, unproductive, governed by rules, and accompanied by make-believe.<sup>7</sup> His taxonomic division of play into *paidia*—the unstructured “primal power of improvisation and joy”<sup>8</sup>—and *ludus*—structured, rule-based play “to which [...] a civilizing quality can be attributed”<sup>9</sup>—led to the appreciation of the *ludic* (yet not *paidic*) as the underlying core characteristic of all games in studies that followed, and eventually resulted in the critical field of *ludology*, which has its origins in Espen Aarseth’s discussion of “ergodic” texts in *Cybertext*.<sup>10</sup> Despite the liberal use of Callois’ terminology for subsequent

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6 Sutton-Smith, Brian: *The Ambiguity of Play*, Cambridge, MA/London: Harvard University Press 2001, p. 1.

7 Cf. Callois, Roger: *Man, Play and Games*, trans. Meyer Barash, Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press 2001 (\*1958 Fr., \*1961 Engl.), pp. 9-10.

8 *Ibid.*, p. 27.

9 *Ibid.*

10 Cf. Aarseth, Espen J.: *Cybertext. Perspectives on Ergodic Literature*. Baltimore/London: The Johns Hopkins University Press 1997. Cf. Wardrip-Fuini, Noah/Harrigan, Pat: “Ludology,” in: Wardrip-Fuini, Noah/Harrigan, Pat (eds.), *First Person. New Media as Story, Performance, and Game*, Cambridge, MA/London: MIT Press 2004, p. 35.

research, such as works by Gonzalo Frasca,<sup>11</sup> Graham H. Jensen,<sup>12</sup> and Gerald Voorhees,<sup>13</sup> the unalterable essence of playfulness all games possess remains ambiguous. It evokes ideas of Huizinga's "magic circle,"<sup>14</sup> whose existence has been challenged by some, notably by Mia Consalvo,<sup>15</sup> but defended by others, such as Jaakko Stenros.<sup>16</sup> These discussions have collectively made clear that games and our playful engagement with them are somehow different from other experiences. The magic circle resembles a possibility space in which we can move freely (to some extent, at least). In relation to games, playfulness thus denotes their characteristic of toying with alternatives to circumstances present in reality without being assigned notions of coercion, while still being regulated by rules.

An alternative to transfixing ideas of playfulness to games is to look at the players themselves and the attitudes they have towards ludic concepts. J. Nina Lieberman assigned the characteristic of playfulness to the agent playing the game rather than the game itself to the result that it can be seen as a character trait.<sup>17</sup> Without a person's willingness to act playfully in response

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- 11 Cf. Frasca, Gonzalo: "Simulation Versus Narrative. Introduction to Ludology," in: Wolf, Mark J.P./Perron, Bernard (eds.), *The Video Game Theory Reader*, New York: Routledge 2003, pp. 221-236.
  - 12 Cf. Jensen Graham H.: "Making Sense of Play in Video Games. Ludus, Paidia, and Possibility Spaces," in: *Eludamos. Journal for Computer Game Culture* 7.1 (2013), pp. 69-80.
  - 13 Cf. Voorhees, Gerald: "Genre Troubles in Game Studies. Ludology, Agonism, and Social Action," in: *Kinephanos: Journal of Media Studies and Popular Culture*, Special Issue (May 2019), <https://www.kinephanos.ca/2019/genre-troubles-in-game-studies-ludology-agonism-and-social-action/>
  - 14 J. Huizinga: *Homo Ludens*, p. 10.
  - 15 Cf. Consalvo, Mia: "There Is No Magic Circle," in: *Games and Culture* 4.4 (October 2009), pp. 408-417.
  - 16 Cf. Stenros, Jaakko: "In Defence of a Magic Circle. The Social, Mental and Cultural Boundaries of Play," in: *DiGRA—Transactions of the Digital Games Research Association* 1.2 (2014); <http://todigra.org/index.php/todigra/article/view/10/26>
  - 17 Cf. Lieberman, J. Nina: "Playfulness and Divergent Thinking. An Investigation of their Relationship at the Kindergarten Level," in: *The Journal of Genetic Psychology* 107 (1965), pp. 219-224; Lieberman, J. Nina: "Playfulness. An Attempt

to a game, it becomes doubtful whether we can even talk about the existence of the game as a game. That is, we need someone to enter the magic circle in order for play (and game) to be realized due to it being a process and an action. Humans are intuitively playful, and hence many of our daily encounters are also playful without being in response to games. For example, the way young children explore and engage with their environment is marked by a large degree of playfulness that allows them to test their own reactions to specific situations and probe the consequences of their actions, whereby they learn important life skills.<sup>18</sup>

While games are thus inherently playful and our engagement with them is marked by playfulness, the discussion that follows focuses on the area lying between the game and the player, namely on paratextual elements surrounding the game that are equally ludic. By taking this perspective, it will be possible to negotiate between the playfulness of the game and that of the player's engagement with it, which takes place in the transitional spaces of paratexts linking them. I will be looking at two kinds of ludic paratexts, namely games incorporated within other games and playful marketing elements. My discussion begins with looking at paratextual relationships formed by intertextual links embedded within the game, which create a second in-game level of playfulness to the effect that this embeddedness strongly emphasizes the ludic characteristic of games and gaming in general. I will then move to the margins of the game and explore how the game is constituted as a cultural artifact and thus presented to its players (and the public) by means of marketing materials such as trailers or games made to promote other games. By looking at these two kinds of playful paratexts, I will be able to explore how material surrounding the game can be playful and how, in turn, this influences the perception of the game, its 'gameness,' and the act of playing. The aim of this paper is, therefore, two-fold: On the one hand, I want to determine how hybrid materials lying beyond the playable part of the game support the game world presented therein, thus emphasizing the act of framing and hybridization paratextuality accomplishes. On the other hand, I will discuss various modes how this paratextual material can

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to Conceptualize a Quality of Play and of the Player," in: *Psychological Reports* 19.3 (1966), p. 1278.

- 18 Cf. Skard, Geva/Bundy, Anita C.: *Test of Playfulness (ToP)*. *Test zur Spielfähigkeit*, Idstein: Schulz-Kirchner Verlag 2011 (\*2008).

itself be playful, thus mirroring the act of playing and our engagement with the game they relate to. Through this, it will be possible to uncover the tight relationship between playful material within the game and that outside of it, which is often neglected and seen as simple addenda to the game.

## PLAYFUL GAMES WITHIN GAMES

Video games aim at creating coherent worlds that allow players to enter their universes and occupy a space that is different from reality. This is achieved by proposing playfulness as an integral part of this world to the effect that it is not emphasized but rather becomes an internalized mode associated with the actions committed by the player. If this enclosed zone becomes willingly or unwillingly disrupted by highlighting that the player is currently playing a game, this playfulness is emphasized, exposing the artifactuality of the game and its difference from reality. This can be caused by errors such as glitches, for example, the infamous “No Face Glitch”<sup>19</sup> found in some cutscenes of ASSASSIN’S CREED UNITY (2014) or the ‘demonic babies’<sup>20</sup> in THE SIMS 4 (2014). However, many game-makers consciously use devices that emphasize the status of a game as a game as a way to encourage a stronger sense of playfulness. While exposing the ludic nature of games and their difference from reality, it may seem that this challenges the player’s “willing suspension of disbelief”<sup>21</sup> and their engagement in a “make-believe”-setting<sup>22</sup> that are prerequisites for any fictional world, including that of games, to be entered as such. Although seemingly breaking the fourth wall and thus, in a sense, exposing the fictitiousness of the game, players still appear to be willing to stay within the fictional realm and the magic circle the

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19 Cf. N. N.: “Assassin’s Creed Unity No Face Glitch,” <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=T2zgtwLi15w&t=2s>

20 Cf. Hernandez, Patricia: “Oh Good, The Sims 4 has Demon Babies,” in: *Kotaku*, September 2, 2014; <https://kotaku.com/the-sims-4-demon-babies-are-a-glitchy-nightmare-1629680047>

21 Samuel Taylor Coleridge cited in Ferri, Anthony J.: *Willing Suspension of Disbelief. Poetic Faith in Film*, Lanham, MD: Lexington Books 2007, p. 1.

22 Cf. Walton, Kendall L.: *Mimesis as Make-Believe. On the Foundations of the Representational Arts*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press 1990.

games create. The reason for this is that a different process is instigated, namely one that closely resembles Niklas Luhmann's notion of *second-order observation*.<sup>23</sup> Players are able to observe the act of playing and a game's playfulness through playing and playfulness, thus exploring the object forming the center of the observation by means of engaging with its characteristics through the observation of this observation. This has the effect that the experience players have of a game (and its playfulness) is not limited by their own perspective but rather makes 'blind spots'<sup>24</sup> visible by conducting an observation of an observation.<sup>25</sup>

One way to generate a stance of second-order observation is by incorporating minigames within the main games, which the player(-avatar) can play.<sup>26</sup> Games-within-games generate two levels of playfulness and a tension between material associated with the fictive game-realm and the reality-

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23 Cf. Luhmann, Niklas: *Die Gesellschaft der Gesellschaft*, Frankfurt: Suhrkamp 1997; Luhmann, Niklas: *The Reality of the Mass Media*, Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press 2000, p. 97; Moeller, Hans-Georg: "On Second-Order Observation and Genuine Pretending: Coming to Terms with Society," in: *Thesis Eleven* 143.1 (2017), pp. 28-43.

24 Cf. Luhmann, Niklas: "Die Autopoiesis des Bewußtseins," in: *Soziale Welt* 36.4 (1985), pp. 402-446, here p. 440; N. Luhmann: *Die Gesellschaft der Gesellschaft*, p. 1095; Borch, Christian: *Niklas Luhmann*, Oxon: Routledge 2011, pp. 134-141. Blind spots are essential to second-order observation because they make differences visible, allowing the observer to determine that which needs to be observed. Cf. N. Luhmann: *Die Gesellschaft der Gesellschaft*, p. 1121.

25 Cf. *ibid.*, p. 281. Devices that double the fictional layer within games can also be seen as third-order observations because a second-order observation is inherent to all games in which players assume the role of an avatar and explore the fictional space through the perspective of this character. This simultaneously limits and expands their observational positionality: we can only see what the game allows us to see but we can also see things we cannot see in our reality.

26 The games considered here are not game collections or 'party games,' such as *SUPER MARIO PARTY* (2018) but games that constitute coherent main worlds interspersed with embedded games. Cf. Seiwald, Regina: "Games within Games. The Two (or More) Fictional Levels of Video Games," in: Zagalo, Nelson et al. (eds.), *Videogame Sciences and Arts*, Cham: Springer 2019, pp. 18-31.



realm of the player, thus creating self-reflexivity.<sup>27</sup> They, therefore, constitute paratextual relationships between the game and the player by situating the embedding game within a certain discourse of game genres or gaming history, particularly if the game exists outside of the fictional realm of the game it appears in. The relationship between the embedded and the embedding game, on the other hand, is intertextual. This emphasizes Genette's argument that his proposed categories of transtextuality should not be seen as isolated, static types but as overlapping classes of relationships, texts can have with other texts and their audiences.<sup>28</sup> This intertextuality emphasizes the playfulness of games and grants players a meta-perspective onto their act of playing, which is a characteristic shared with metaleptic devices, such as game worlds occurring within VR.<sup>29</sup> Intertextuality also encourages different ideas of playfulness through paratextually embedding other games to the effect that these embedded games tell us something about the playfulness of games in general and our engagement with them. Jesper Juul has noted that embedded games can only occur "in a game with a fictional world. You can play abstract games against characters in a fictional world, but you cannot play *EverQuest* (1999) inside *Tetris* (1984). It is graphically impossible to place *EverQuest* inside a game of *Tetris*."<sup>30</sup> This is also the reason why the analysis that follows only focuses on narrative games with coherent game worlds. The relationships games establish to their embedding games can be various, and the effects they have on the notion of 'gameness' as well as the kind of playfulness they encourage are manifold. Based on these

27 Cf. *ibid.*, pp. 22-23. Cf. Zhu, Feng: "The Freedom of Alienated Reflexive Subjectivity in *The Stanley Parable*," in: *Convergence* 26.1 (February 2020), pp. 116-134.

28 Cf. Genette, Gérard: *Palimpsests. Literature on the Second Degree*, Lincoln, NE/London: University of Nebraska Press 1997, pp. 1-7. Besides paratextuality and intertextuality, Genette proposes architextuality (the relationship between a text and its genre), metatextuality (a critical text about another text), and hypertextuality/hypotextuality (the relationship between a text and another preceding text or a textual transformation) as categories of transtextuality.

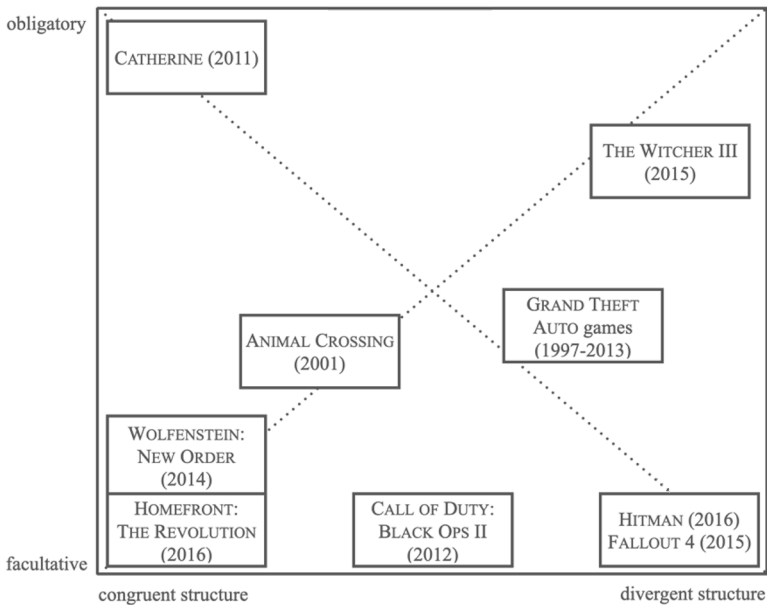
29 Cf. Backe, Hans-Joachim: "Metareferentiality Through In-game Images in Immersive Simulation Games," in: *Proceedings of Foundations of Digital Games*, Malmö (2018), pp. 1-10.

30 Juul, Jesper: *Half-Real. Video Games between Real Rules and Fictional Worlds*, Cambridge, MA: MIT Press 2005, p. 133.

relationships, I propose a two-vector spectral taxonomy that considers game-play mechanics and impact (see Fig. 1).

In the context of gameplay mechanics, the incorporated games can either resemble the play-structure of the game they occur in (e.g., by following similar rules or modes of engagement) or completely depart from it (e.g., by incorporating an entirely different genre in the game). The horizontal axis, therefore, ranges from congruent gameplay mechanics on the left to divergent structures on the right. Embedded games following the play-structure of the embedding game occur less frequently.

*Figure 1: The relationship between embedding and embedded games*



Source: Graphic by R. Seiwald

In a homage to itself, WOLFENSTEIN: NEW ORDER (2014) contains a playable version of WOLFENSTEIN 3D (1992). When B.J. Blazkowicz falls asleep in the resistance headquarters, he has a nightmare resembling the first level of WOLFENSTEIN 3D, which can be played as the beginning of the side mission “Escape from Castle Wolfenstein.” The gameplay mechanics of the embed-

ded game are akin to the one of the main game, while this paratextual-inter-textual reference to the game's origin also points toward the history of the WOLFENSTEIN-saga. The first-person shooter *HOMEFRONT: THE REVOLUTION* (2016) uses a similar mode of embeddedness, but this time the player must enter the second game-layer through an arcade machine located in the prison area to the effect that the playfulness of their engagement with this game-within-the-game is very apparent. The arcade machine contains the first two levels of the first-person shooter *TIMESPLITTERS 2* (2002), whose gameplay mechanics resemble those forming the core of *HOMEFRONT: THE REVOLUTION*, namely a combination of combat and tactics to defeat enemies. The two games are also linked on a publishing level: *TIMESPLITTER 2*'s developer Free Radical Design became first owned by Crytek UK and later by Deep Silver, which is *HOMEFRONT: THE REVOLUTION*'s publisher.<sup>31</sup> What we can witness here is, therefore, not just a link between two games but also an account of how their publication histories are connected. When situating the relationships these embedded games form with their embedding games on the horizontal axis of the model, they are placed on the left side of the spectrum because the gameplay mechanics of the incorporated games resemble those of the main games.

Moving towards the right-hand side of the horizontal axis, we can find embedded games that more and more depart from the gameplay structure of their embedding games. Some games contain other games within themselves that display noticeable resemblances between their gameplay mechanics, while they nonetheless depart from them, in most cases due to the temporal distance between the two games and the concomitant technical and generic developments of games and gaming. *CALL OF DUTY: BLACK OPS II* (2012) is a typical first-person shooter, being part of a series that is known for its development of and innovation in this genre. It contains minigames that were equally innovative when they came out. Players who own the Hardened Edition or the Care Package Edition of *CALL OF DUTY: BLACK OPS II* can access the Nuketown 2025 map. After shooting off all mannequins' heads within two minutes, the map displays an Activision logo, which gives access to four classic Atari 2600 games, namely *KABOOM!* (1981), *RIVER RAID* (1982),

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31 Cf. Phillips, Tom: "Watch. TimeSplitter 2's First Level in Homefront: The Revolution," in: *Eurogamer*, May 17, 2006; <https://www.eurogamer.net/articles/2016-05-17-heres-timesplitters-2-playable-in-homefront-the-revolution>

PITFALL II: LOST CAVERNS (1984), and H.E.R.O. (1984). Just like CALL OF DUTY: BLACK OPS II, these games are built around action and a fast playstyle. They also share with the main game that they were all published by Activision, and hence the link between the style of games is notably strong. In an allusion to the history of playfulness and playing, the CALL OF DUTY: BLACK OPS II's avatar's hands change into 2D, and they are holding an Atari 2600 controller. This very obviously emphasizes the act of playing and the mechanics associated with it.

On the right end of the spectrum, we find games that incorporate minigames whose gameplay structure is completely different. The action-adventure stealth game HITMAN (2016) goes back to the origins of games as pastimes. Once the player has blown up the windsock located at the helipad, they need to disguise themselves as the Chief Surgeon and enter the operating booth. The main computer in the theatre contains a game called "Hitman," which is essentially Microsoft's MINESWEEPER (1992).<sup>32</sup> The gameplay mechanics of the embedding and the embedded games could not be more different but playing "Hitman" nonetheless grants us an observing perspective onto games and gaming itself. That is, although the gameplay structure of the main game and the incorporated game differ significantly, the fact that they invite us to playfully engage with them reflects on the act of playing in general. Unlike games situated on the left side of the horizontal axis, which present a mirroring of (almost) exactly the same gameplay mechanics, the games found along the spectrum when moving towards the right address playfulness and playing more generally.

The vertical axis structures embedded games based on the impact they have on the embedding game. On the one hand, these incorporated games can have an effect on the main game, such as THE WITCHER III's card game "Gwent." In the "Collect 'Em All" sidequest, players need to go on a hunt over the whole in-game world to collect all of the 120 cards available for Gwent. If they want to gain all the achievements in the game, they need to

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32 Other examples of games that include other games with divergent gameplay mechanics are the games of the GRAND THEFT AUTO series (1997-2013), which contain various arcade games discussed below as well as FINAL FANTASY VIII (1999) and FINAL FANTASY XIV's (2013) card game "Triple Triad," which fulfils similar functions to "Gwent" in THE WITCHER III (2015) addressed below. Cf. Seiwald: *Games within Games*, p. 28.

complete this quest; hence it is, to some degree at least, essential for the game. An even stronger notion of connection between the embedded game and the embedding game is found in CATHERINE (2011), which consists of two worlds that mirror each other but whose gameplay is entirely different. One layer of the game focuses on the social encounters the protagonist, Vincent Brooks, has with other people in a bar during the daytime, resembling the gameplay structure of a social simulator. The other layer, occurring in the nighttime, is a puzzle-platform game in which the same protagonist needs to navigate deadly tower blocks. Interestingly, the bar Vincent is in has an arcade machine, on which he can play a game called “Rapunzel,” which mirrors the gameplay of the nighttime sequence. This means that while this embedded game is closely tied to the gameplay mechanics of one half of the game, it is entirely different from the other.

In other cases, these embedded games function as pastime activities in the game world. ANIMAL CROSSING (2001) includes minigames that were originally published as independent titles for the Nintendo Entertainment System (NES), such as DONKEY KONG (1981) or WARIO’S WOODS (1994). While these games can be obtained ‘legally’ within the game world, for example, by winning them in Tom Nooks’ lottery, others, such as MARIO BROS. (1983) or THE LEGEND OF ZELDA (1986), are obtained by means of external assistance. These NES games share some characteristics with the main game, namely a notion of personalized storytelling (in contrast to predefined narratives) and an open-world structure. While these minigames are not essential for the main game to be experienced, the fact that ANIMAL CROSSING in itself does not work towards a specific goal makes them an apt fit for the sense of leisure communicated in the main game. By playing these games, players shift their in-game identity from occupying their ANIMAL CROSSING avatar to taking on the position of the conceptualized or realized NES-game character. This changing role from one fictive form to another doubles the fictional plain within the game to the effect that the experience of the fictional world is carried out from within the main fictional world. A similar situation can be observed in FALLOUT 4 (2015), but unlike ANIMAL CROSSING, the embedded games are only loosely modeled on games that exist in reality. Through a Pip-Boy, which is a device the protagonist wears around his wrist, the player can access various games, such as “Red Menace” (modeled on DONKEY KONG), “Atomic Command” (modeled on MISSILE COMMAND, 1980), and “Zeta Invaders” (modeled on SPACE INVADERS, 1978). The games

FALLOUT 4 alludes to are canonical games, which each have a unique position in game history. In a sense, these allusions are apt considering the overall nostalgia and longing for the ‘good old days’ communicated in FALLOUT 4. The same situation occurs in games of the GRAND THEFT AUTO series, which allow players to play retro arcade games, such as “Duality” (modeled on ASTEROIDS, 1979), “Race and Chase: Crotch Rockets” (modeled on HANG-ON, 1985), and “QUB3D” (modeled on TETRIS, and PUYO PUYO, 1991).<sup>33</sup> These games each follow different gameplay mechanics, which link to aspects of their embedded game, but none of them fully mirrors the overall structure of the GRAND THEFT AUTO games since they consist of many different components.

The various relationships between embedding and embedded games are grounded on notions of playfulness and paratextuality. In their unique connections, which serve as links between the player’s reality and the game world as well as between individual layers within the game, these minigames allow us to observe our own act of playing. This is achieved through emphasizing the fact that they are games, which encourages the player to engage with them in a playful mode, yet one that is occupied by the avatar of the respective game and not by the players themselves. That way, the concept of playfulness as the core characteristic underpinning every game, as well as our engagement with them, can be observed.

## PLAYFUL MARKETING ELEMENTS

While the previous section focused on how in-game elements address notions of playfulness (albeit on a different fictional plain), the discussion in this part moves towards the fringes of the game and explores how it can be playfully presented as a cultural artifact to the player by means of paratextual elements. Marketing paratexts possess a distinct function because very often, players encounter them before they actually engage with the game. Official announcements on online forums and social media, trailers, and other forms of official and unofficial advertising give us a first taste of what we can expect from the game itself, its world, and its gameplay mechanics. These materials ultimately make the game visible as a cultural artifact and constitute a

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33 Cf. R. Seiwald: *Games within Games*, p. 25.

narrative around it (and sometimes a very hyperbolic one—after all, the aim of marketing is to sell the game). In some cases, these practices themselves are playful to the effect that they not only show the content of the game they market but also allow us to experience parts of it. As will become evident in the discussion below, some AAA games go for very bold playful marketing strategies in order to generate a sensationalist effect. This is connected to the budget allocated to marketing, which tends to be fairly big for AAA games in comparison to indie games and increasingly moves towards that of Hollywood blockbusters.<sup>34</sup> This should not mean, however, that non-AAA games do not use playful marketing strategies but simply that they do so on a different scale due to cost considerations.

The discussion that follows only considers official marketing elements for games and ignores unofficial (fan-made) endeavors. The reason for this is that my aim is to determine the kinds of playfulness found in the networks created between the game makers, their games, and the players. Furthermore, unofficial marketing material follows different purposes than official channels: The sellers of unofficial yet game world-related mugs, for example, do not aim at increasing the sales of the game but only of the specific product they sell. In this sense, unofficial merchandising products are not really marketing material for the game. In order to explore various forms of playfulness, I will look at games made to market other games in the form of playable trailers/teasers, accompanying websites, and playful analog marketing campaigns for digital games. The discussion of these playful sales strategies will allow me to determine how these paratexts can be realized in a playful mode as well as how this affects the playfulness of the game and the player.

The first marketing element addressed here, the trailer, plays a key role in marketing concepts focusing on the release of video games. Conventionally, game trailers do not ask players for active engagement, but they are solely watched, hence being akin to movie trailers.<sup>35</sup> Some video games,

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34 One reason for this is that “revenues from video games passed revenues from the Hollywood box office around 2004” (Zackarisson, Peter/Dymek, Mikolaj: *Video Game Marketing. A Student Textbook*, London/New York: Routledge 2017, p. 4). The more money is made from the sales of the current game, the more money can be invested in the next one (including its marketing).

35 Cf. Vollans, Ed: “So Just What is a Trailer anyway?” in: *Arts and the Market* 5.2 (2015), pp. 112-125, here p. 119.

however, were presented to the public by means of a playable trailer, which should give the potential player an idea of what to expect from the full game. P.T. (2014, short for ‘Playable Teaser’), a puzzle horror game, was originally intended for evoking interest in the forthcoming SILENT HILLS game.<sup>36</sup> The production history of this trailer is particularly interesting: It was designed and directed by Hideo Kojima in partnership with film director Guillermo del Toro.<sup>37</sup> To hide the fact that P.T. was SILENT HILLS’s teaser, it was published under the pseudonym 7780s Studio and not Kojima Productions.<sup>38</sup> P.T. picks up on the underlying horror and the cryptic information found in previous SILENT HILL (1999-2012) games to build up tension before giving away in its credits that it serves as an introduction to SILENT HILLS. However, the main game this paratext frames has been abandoned due to disputes between Kojima and publisher Konami.<sup>39</sup> While the game project was abandoned, the teaser lived on, becoming a playful material in its own right and ceased to be a framing device for another game. Due to its clever and innovative refor-

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- 36 Cf. Backe, Hans-Joachim: “The Aesthetics of Non-Euclidean Game Spaces. Multistability and Object Permanence in Antichamber and P.T.,” in: Bonner, Marc (ed.): *Game | World | Architectonics. Transdisciplinary Approaches on Structures and Mechanics, Levels and Spaces, Aesthetics and Perception*, Heidelberg: Heidelberg University Publishing 2021, pp. 153-167, here p. 156. Cf. Shaw, Luke: “Luto is a Brand New First-Person Horror Game Inspired by P.T.,” in: *NMW*, June 3, 2021; <https://www.nme.com/news/gaming-news/luto-is-a-brand-new-first-person-horror-game-inspired-by-p-t-2955112>
- 37 Cf. Klepek, Patrick: “Five Years Later, It’s Nearly Impossible to Play Horror Classic P.T.,” in: *Vice*, August 16, 2019; <https://www.vice.com/en/article/zmjv/w3/five-years-later-its-nearly-impossible-to-play-horror-classic-pt>
- 38 Cf. Miller, Ross: “Guillermo del Toro’s Silent Hills Teaser is the Scariest Thing You Can Play This Weekend,” in: *The Verge*, August 15, 2014; <https://web.archive.org/web/20150529082642/http://www.theverge.com/2014/8/15/6006477/p-t-silent-hills-ps4-guillermo-del-toro-hideo-kojima>. Cf. Bakalar, Jeff: “P.T. is Pure Video-Game Marketing Genius,” in: *CNET*, August 13, 2014; <https://www.cnet.com/news/p-t-is-pure-video-game-marketing-genius/>
- 39 Cf. Brown, Peter/Crossley, Rob: “Kojima Expected to Leave Konami After MGS5, Inside Source Confirms,” in: *Gamespot*, March 20, 2015; <https://www.gamespot.com/articles/kojima-expected-to-leave-konami-after-mgs5-inside-de-/1100-6426024/>



mation of the horror genre, P.T. has been praised by many critics for the immersive experience it creates and, as argued by David Houghton, “[b]y spreading out into the real world, by forcing solutions by way of hearsay, internet whispers, and desperate, rumored logic, it has become its own urban myth.”<sup>40</sup> In this sense, the artifact that has originally been conceptualized as a paratext has become a text with its own paratexts.

While a trailer is normally released before the actual game, it is also possible to establish playful marketing paratexts in temporal analogy to the game. HALO 2's (2004) trailer contained a link to the website *ilovebees.co*, and the inquisitive player who looked up this link ended up on a seemingly hacked page about beekeeping and honey sales. The link to the website has also been circulated by sending out jars of honey containing the letters that make up the URL to people who have participated in ARGs in the past. By solving puzzles on this website, players received more and more information about an artificial alien intelligence that crashed on earth and managed to upload itself on the website in an attempt to reassemble itself. One way this ARG would interact with its players is by sending out codes that reveal themselves to be coordinates to payphones, which would ring at specific times and ask the player to answer a set of questions. Another way to engage with the game was by means of solving riddles, rewarding successful players with snippets of a video detailing the AI's story. Although the ARG's narrative does not bear a strong connection to that of HALO 2, both were tied in by announcing the link to the website in the latter game's trailer. The sense of community and collaboration constituted by I LOVE BEES (2004) mirrors the advanced multiplayer function of HALO 2, which by far surpasses the functions and quality of experience offered by previous games due to the concept of 'matchmaking': “a system where players only got to choose the general type of match (e.g., Free for all, Big Team Battle, etc.) and then Bungie would choose the map, game type, and opponents.”<sup>41</sup> This innovative pairing mode does away with traditional multiplayer lobbies and has since then

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40 Houghton, David: “P.T. is Still the Purest Horror Game Around, and One of the Smartest on PS4,” in: *Gamesradar*, October 31, 2016; <https://www.gamesradar.com/why-pt-first-real-horror-game-years-and-best-game-ps4/>

41 Hopson, John: “The Time I tried to Ruin Halo 2,” in: *Polygon*, July 9, 2019; <https://www.polygon.com/features/2019/7/2/18651880/the-time-i-tried-to-ruin-halo-2-user-research>

become “the gold standard for online gameplay.”<sup>42</sup> What has to be emphasized, however, is that the ARG created in *I LOVE BEES* has gone beyond its paratextual status by becoming an experience in itself, while its link to *HALO 2*’s marketing strategy is still notably strong. This has the effect that *I LOVE BEES* is both a paratext and a text, which emphasizes that the textual status of a cultural object is not a static, unalterable characteristic but a fluid state dependent on the relationships a text forms with other texts.

Although *I LOVE BEES* exists on a website, it carries the ludic elements generated by the game into the reality realm, meaning that the website is solely the base from which the game takes off. Another game that shows a strong affinity with a website, namely *PORTAL*’s (2007) connection with [aperturescience.com](http://aperturescience.com), functions on a different level: The website exists (or existed) in the player’s reality, while it is also part of the game world. Its DOS-like interface resembles the one for Aperture Science workers within *PORTAL*’s game universe and is operated by the AI GLaDOS. The website accommodates information about Aperture Science and a video showing a room filled with elements from games published in *THE ORANGE BOX* (2007), namely *HALF-LIFE 2* (2004), *TEAM FORTRESS 2*, (2007), and *PORTAL*. The website further contains a log-in section, where the password is either “Portal” or “Portals,” while any username longer than two characters works. Within *PORTAL*, however, an Easter egg reveals a special access code. On one of the walls in the Enrichment Centre’s maintenance area, the username “CJohnson,” referring to Aperture Science’s CEO Cave Johnson, and the password “Tier 3” are scribbled. Using these credentials offers the player two options, namely either to read up on Aperture Science and Johnson himself by typing the command ‘NOTES’ or to run a test asking humorous questions (mainly about cake) when typing ‘APPLY.’ The player will inevitably fail the test and is asked to “remain at your workstation until a Computer-Aided-Enrichment Crisis Team arrives.” The website [aperturescience.com](http://aperturescience.com) makes many allusions to *PORTAL*, and its intrinsic link to the game cannot be denied. At the same time, however, it is possible that players only engage with the website without playing the main game, which still grants them a ludic experience. This raises the question whether the website is actually a playful paratext in relation to the main game or a playful text and thus a game in its

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42 Ibid.

own right when engaged without any knowledge of *PORTAL*, which points to the fluidity of the text–paratext–relationship.

The final playful marketing element discussed here are playful analog or mixed analog and digital marketing campaigns for digital games. Their purpose is to bind potential players to the game world through an active experience of and engagement with it before actually playing the game itself. Two days prior to the release of *RESIDENT EVIL 5* (2009) on Friday, March 13, 2009, publisher Capcom launched a marketing campaign in form of a treasure hunt for body parts on Trafalgar Square, London. Players could sign up to collect as many fake human remains as possible and return to Westminster Bridge at 11 am, whereupon the winner will receive a trip to Africa.<sup>43</sup> Things took a bad turn when some of the body parts, including a head, went missing.<sup>44</sup> Furthermore, members of the public not knowing of this event notified the police upon encountering some of the blood-covered human remains. Despite these unforeseen issues, this marketing campaign moved the spotlight to the release of *RESIDENT EVIL 5*, making it a highly successful game. This paratext, therefore, not only framed the text of the video game but brought its gory fictive universe closer to our reality.

A similar overspill of a game world into reality can be observed for *BIOSHOCK 2* (2010), albeit one that lasted for longer. In March 2009, a year before the game's release, publisher 2K Games started their massive marketing campaign. Posters appeared all over the US East coast, warning its readers of an undersea threat and directing them to the "Something in the Sea"<sup>45</sup> website. The website initially only displayed a map of the world, but over time, it got filled with newspaper clippings. The person adding them turns out to be Mark Metzler, who investigates girls gone missing around the Atlantic coast area in 1967, which ultimately results in the kidnapping of his daughter Cindy. The fictive world created on the website merged with reality when players were invited to write to Metzler and, in return, received cryptic

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43 Cf. Stuart, Keith: "Resident Evil 5 Marketing Fun—Hunt the Body Parts," in: *The Guardian*, March 10, 2009; <https://www.theguardian.com/technology/gamesblog/2009/mar/10/gameculture-xbox>

44 Ibid.

45 <https://www.somethinginthesea.com>. This website is now inactive and redirected to the designated *BIOSHOCK 2* website, <https://www.2k.com/en-US/game/bioshock-2/>

recordings about undersea creatures and mysterious cities. It also blurred reality and fiction when wine bottles containing posters of a city called Rapture, *BIO SHOCK*'s dystopian aquatic city, washed ashore on beaches around the world, whose locations were logged on the website. The online narrative ends with Metzler setting off on a boat from Baltimore in order to trace down Cindy overseas. All these elements making up Metzler's hunt ultimately led to the finding that the girls were abducted by the Big Sister and taken to Rapture, leading into the story of *BIO SHOCK 2*. This unprecedented, longitudinal marketing campaign has developed a fanbase for the text it frames long before the release of the video game. The playfulness of these marketing elements clearly illustrates that the threshold function of paratexts, linking a game and its (potential) players, has a vast impact on the perception of the game world, and in the case of *BIO SHOCK 2* and "Something in the Sea," the narrative development and the player's involvement go far beyond the possibilities available for conventional digital games.

The examples discussed in this section have shown that marketing elements can be playful, while it has also been emphasized that they can become texts in themselves, asserting independence from the artifact they frame through their unique characteristic of playfulness. The reason for this is that, on the one hand, utilizing play as a means to invite potential players into another context of play is highly effective, while on the other hand, the people engaging with these marketing paratexts do so in a highly playful attitude. This shows that the paratextual relationships established between the triumvirate consisting of the game, its makers, and its players either function as means to support the creation of the game world and making it visible as such or to form texts that can potentially exist independently of the player due to their unique ludic nature. In this sense, the act of play that is encouraged in these playful marketing paratexts can have the effect that the potential player is prepared for the narrative and gameplay mechanism found in the main game, but it could also mean that the paratext becomes the preferable playful text players engage with (and in the case of *P.T.* the only one).

## CONCLUSION

Video games are playful through and through, hence it only seems logical that paratexts surrounding them are also playful. However, the functions paratexts normally fulfill, i.e., presenting a game as a cultural artifact to the potential player, mostly do not call for playfulness. For this reason, they conventionally appear without any ludic characteristics, particularly if they resemble Genette's notion of factual paratexts. As has been shown, however, some game makers consciously make paratexts and paratextual relationships playful in order to support the overall playfulness of the games these elements frame. This argument has been explored with recourse to two kinds of paratexts, namely games incorporated within other games and playful marketing elements.

The first section, which discussed embedded games, explored a number of case studies that allowed me to propose a two-vector spectral taxonomy on which games can be ordered according to the distance between the main game and the embedded game. On the one hand, this distance concerns the similarity of individual gameplay mechanics, while on the other hand, it regards the necessity of the embedded game for the main game. Although it has been shown that the relationships between embedding and embedded game can be various, it has been made clear that these intertextual links form paratextual relationships of a ludic nature which, in a sense, exposes the playfulness of the main game. This has the effect that the player can take on a position akin to Luhmann's second-order observation to examine their own playfulness and that of games through playing a game within a game.

The second section discussed marketing campaigns that possess game-like characteristics or were themselves conceptualized as games. By looking at various examples of games being promoted through other game(-like) elements, it was possible to determine the potential effects this ludic framing can have on the player's relationship to the game. In all of the examples discussed here, the original paratext has emerged into a text in its own right, while for some, the game they were supposed to relate to became peripheral (and in the case of P.T., even non-existent). This does not mean, however, that their status as paratexts becomes defunct once they enter a textual status but rather that the labeling is problematic due to the fluidity of the text-paratext-relationship. The discussion of games within games as well as the one of playful marketing elements have shown how crucial a consideration

of the concept of playfulness is in paratextual study and, I would argue, in Game Studies in general, which ironically has not discussed in depth what playfulness is, how it relates to the player, and what it means for games.

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PORTAL (Valve 2007, O: Valve)  
P.T. (Konami 2014, O: 7780s Studio [Kojima Productions])  
PUYO PUYO (Compile/Sega 1991, O: Compile)  
RESIDENT EVIL 5 (Capcom 2009, O: Capcom)  
RIVER RAID (Activision 1982, O: Activision)  
SILENT HILL (Konami 1999, O: Konami Computer Entertainment Tokyo)  
THE SIMS 4 (Electronic Arts 2014, O: Maxis)  
SPACE INVADERS (Taito 1978, O: Taito)  
SUPER MARIO PARTY (Nintendo 2018, O: NDcube)  
TEAM FORTRESS 2 (Valve 2007, O: Valve)  
TETRIS (Alexey Pajintov/Vladimir Pokhilko 1984, O: Alexey Pajintov/Vladimir Pokhilko)  
TIMESPLITTERS 2 (Eidos Interactive 2002, O: Free Radical Design)  
WARIO'S WOODS (Nintendo 1994, O: Nintendo R&D1)  
THE WITCHER III (CD Projekt 2015, O: CD Projekt Red)  
WOLFENSTEIN: NEW ORDER (Bethesda Softworks 2014, O: MachineGames)  
WOLFENSTEIN 3D (Apogee Software/FormGen 1992, O: id Software)



# [Para]Textually Here: Paratexts and Presence in Games

## How Paratexts Extend the Game's Network

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ED VOLLANS

“It has also to be seen that a film must never end, that it must exist—and even before it begins, before we enter the cinema—in a kind of englobingly [*sic*] extensive prolongation. The commerce of film depends on this too, recognized in a whole host of epiphenomena from trailers to remakes, from weekly reviews to star magazines, from publicity stills to mementoes (rubber sharks, tee-shirts).”<sup>1</sup>

From the gentle hum of the hardware to studio logos appearing on-screen, for many, this signifies the start of a game, or at the very least the process towards a gaming experience. In many respects, this is a perfectly reasonable place to suggest as the ‘start’ of a game. Yet logically, our awareness of any game must span beyond the specific process or ritual surrounding the *intention* to play. In order to play a game, we must be aware of it, obtain it somehow, install or run it; in effect, we must negotiate many processes in order

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1 Heath, Stephen: “Screen Images, Film Memory,” in: *Cinetracts*, 1(1) (1977), pp. 27-37, here p. 28.

‘to play.’ This process is one of awareness, leading to desire, and then actuation but is not limited to the game itself; rather, the whole range of wider connected textual phenomenon draws our attention to it as an object of and for play. As Stephen Heath wrote of cinema, it must exist before it begins.<sup>2</sup> Expanding this further, I want to use this space to explore how we can see specific paratexts (trailers) as being both part of and separate from the game itself, outlining a kind of tension between presenting and representing the game itself.

Expanding Heath’s observation, we can easily see how such surrounding materials connected to, but seemingly separate from a game not only constitute an extension of the game experience in the broadest sense but also act as the basis for orienting our behavior and helping us form meanings. In effect, and as reiterated by Consalvo, games, gameplay, and gaming do not occur within a vacuum, and a wide range of contextual and *paratextual* materials shape and inform this experience.<sup>3</sup> Consider that our basis for understanding games and gaming comes directly and indirectly from a range of experiences, including but not limited to our collective knowledge of prior games, footage of gameplay, alongside broader shared cultural knowledge; that the shiny circular disc needs to be inserted, or a certain controller is used in a particular way. To remove this contextual element from what we could call the ‘central’ object is to implicitly argue for a deterministic understanding of the medium that marginalizes human cognition.

As Nick Couldry argues in his work *Inside Culture*,<sup>4</sup> rather than exploring the spatial-temporal dimensions of a text in terms of where it stops and starts, we need to focus on how meaning is created within that, throwing the onus of responsibility of defining the text onto the consumers. Championing this, Chin and Gray<sup>5</sup> have put forward the robust case that textual meaning-

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2 Ibid.

3 Consalvo, Mia: “When Paratexts Become Texts: De-centering the Game-as-text,” in: *Critical Studies in Media Communication*, 34(2) (2017), pp. 177-183, here p. 178.

4 Couldry, Nick: *Inside Culture Re-imagining the Methods of Cultural Studies*, London: Sage 2000.

5 Chin, Bertha/Gray, Johnathan: “‘One Ring to Rule Them All:’ Pre-viewers and Pre-Texts of the Lord of the Rings Films,” in: *Intensities*, (2) (2001); <https://intensities.org/2001/02/one-ring-to-rule-them-all-pre-viewers-and-pre-texts-of-the-lord-of-the-rings-films/>

making is done not through stopping and starting of each text, but through an accumulation of meaning and of shifting signifiers of engagement in an ever-changing “macro-text.”<sup>6</sup> If, as Chin and Gray suggest, consumers negotiate information as it comes to them, and this adds to cumulative knowledge that enables meaning and comprehension to be negotiated ad-hoc, we cannot then separate paratextual instances of representation and information from a macro-textual network.<sup>7</sup> It follows then that we cannot separate this macro-text from its industrial context; who is doing the ‘speaking,’ how it comes to the consumer, and other developments in the industry. Logically then, there exists a connected nexus of game-specific content on one vector, identifiable as such through branding and shared discussion of a central object within a broader parallel vector of wider industrial development and discussions. Ultimately, we have two discourses at work—that of the macro-text situated within an interconnected and often overlapping network of shifting developments, industrial political, social, technological, etc. Few would accept that the promotional surround of a game can constitute the game itself in its entirety, yet nor can a game exist in isolation from these paratexts (at a minimum, a title is required to identify it, and the absence of such becomes a paratextual signifier). Instead, what we have here is an assemblage of units that make up different forms of a textual network. In this instance, it makes sense to map this concept onto existing work within the study of games; we can see that our understanding of a text is one of an assemblage of units of

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itiescultmedia.files.wordpress.com/2012/12/chin-and-gray-one-ring-to-rule-them-all.pdf

- 6 Citing Bacon-Smith, Camille/Yarborough, Tyrone: “Batman: The Ethnography,” in: Pearson, Roberta E./Uricchio, William (eds.), *The Many Lives of Batman: Critical Approaches to a Super Hero and His Media*, London: BFI 1991, p. 112, in: Chin/Gray: “One Ring to Rule Them All.”
- 7 Attempting to map this shared and often complicated knowledge is beyond the scope of any single contribution to the field; though attempts have been made; work by Wright does map how paratextual framing situates concepts of authenticity within selected Rockstar branded games, but the methods used cannot account for all forms of remediation of such a huge franchise. Cf. Wright, Esther: “Marketing Authenticity: Rockstar Games and the Use of Cinema in Video Game Promotion,” in: *Kinephanos*, 7(1) (2017), pp. 131-164.

meaning regardless of our understanding of ontological or perceptual textuality.

Such is the assemblage of these interconnected units that we might draw on existing work in the field; T.L Taylor's work on the assemblage of games offers up the enticing possibility of a framework that enables us to not only take such paratexts as a key part of games but to integrate them within a framework rooted in game studies. Taylor's concept, after all, seeks to assess the possibility of creating "a framework to not only includes [*sic*] these parts but also makes way for others and their interrelations."<sup>8</sup> Indeed, we can see parallels between Taylor's attempt to make way for different interrelated systems and software and our own ontological and perceptual textual networks. The two elements are, in effect, addressing the same problem from different intellectual trajectories as Taylor notes, echoing Couldry:

"While looking at a game as it is presented as a boxed product may tell us something about the given structure of the artifact or its imagined player, understanding it as a lived object—as a playful artifact—comes via an attention to the assemblage that constructs our actual games and play."<sup>9</sup>

While Taylor's work is devoid of the term paratext (perhaps understandably given the debate that often rages with the term),<sup>10</sup> in offering up a framework that spreads the object of study between different agents and sites, Taylor is implicitly creating a parallel argument that connects with much of the wider work in cultural studies. Discussing the framing capacity of *WORLD OF WARCRAFT* (2004) modifications, Taylor explores the framing practices of a paratextual element, not the game itself, but the experience connected to and emerging from the relationship between the contextual gameplay and the direct object of study—the modded interface. This is not, however, to subsume Taylor's excellent game-studies centric work under the hyponym of paratexts. As Barker has eloquently written, the term paratext itself is contentious and loose in much the same way as the notion of assemblage. Here I

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8 Taylor, T. L.: "The Assemblage of Play," in: *Games and Culture*, 4(4) (2009), pp. 331-339, here p. 332.

9 Ibid.

10 Cf. Barker, Martin: "Speaking of 'Paratexts': A Theoretical Revisitation," in: *Journal of Fandom Studies*, (5)3 (2017), pp. 235-249.

wish to distance the application of the term paratext from fan and media studies and move it more towards Taylor's concept. Barker rightly points out the difficulty in applying Genette's strict paratextual taxonomy,<sup>11</sup> and here I want to suggest that such a taxonomy needs consideration in light of the work of Couldry's inversion of textual definition. That is to say, while paratexts are inherently connected to a central text (and one we can often claim as having ontological priority),<sup>12</sup> there is little to be gained from discussions of types of paratext if we do not take into account consumer reaction and consideration of these. While disc art, for example, is firmly a paratext, Genette's work sees differences between paratexts that freely circulate (interviews, posters, etc.) and those that are indelibly connected (disc art, book bindings, save screens, etc.); little work exists on the status of this within the gamer community. Exploring how and why certain paratexts, for example, frame our understanding of a particular cultural object<sup>13</sup> has formed a loosely organized broader sub-field of study, spanning studies of games, film, literature, audiences, and the media theory, to name but a few. Yet, there remains a disconnect between studies as they exist in the wider literature and those within game studies. These areas remain largely under-explored in their own right. There have been attempts to rectify this, of course, and using paratextual material to gain an understanding of cultural framing and the industry is gaining ground with the field<sup>14</sup>, and though that number is rising, there remains a comparative paucity of games-specific work on paratexts.

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11 Genette, Gérard: *Paratexts: Thresholds of Interpretation*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1997.

12 There are exceptions, of course, concept art, 'pitches': all have ontological priority as to texts until the commercial product is released—making yet another claim for considering the consumer's relation to the text at any given moment.

13 I use 'object' here rather than 'text' to acknowledge that all texts are paratexts until perceptual ontological priority is established.

14 Cf. Arsenault, Dominic: *Super Power, Spoony, Bards, and Silverware*, Cambridge, MA: MIT Press 2017; Booth, Paul: "Board, Game, and Media: Interactive Board Games as Multimedia Convergence," in: *Convergence*, (22)6 (2016), pp. 647-660; Vollans, Ed et al.: "'It's [not Just] in the Game': The Promotional Context of Video Games," in: *Kinephanos*, 7(1) (2017); <https://www.kinephanos.ca/2017/introduction-its-not-just-in-the-game/>; E. Wright: "Marketing Authentici-



Viewing a game as one element within a macro-network in this manner opens up the possibility of exploring any given text as a series of units of information, with the exact content or information imparted being unique to each individual consumer. All of this is occurring against a backdrop of a range of overlapping, and perhaps shared, knowledge adding to this context. Within the macro-network notion of a game, it follows logically that consumers can be aware of a specific game and even of gameplay without ever having played or experienced directly the central game object; only its paratextual surround. In effect, then, through promoting and discussing a central object, games can be remediated through the lenses of other media and other media forms, while themselves being a central text thanks to the emphasis we often place on them as part of economic exchange. These central objects are, after all, the products we purchase, and we only become aware that they *are* products thanks to the various remedial practices of promotion. Allowing for a shift from the micro to the macro paradoxically allows for greater focus on under-explored areas of study. Broadening the field to instances of interaction with varied content in different contexts allows us the chance to “to get into the nooks where fascinating work occurs.”<sup>15</sup>

Instead of revisiting this debate in its entirety, I simply wish to re-frame it. Here I suggest that we have a textual network that often (but not always) surrounds a central object (e.g., the game). Such a textual network is an assemblage of elements along different vectors that constitute the central object for an individual. As a result of the emerging field of paratextual game studies, it is tempting to take ‘as read’ a range of existing truths; to apply the conclusions or wisdom born of studies from other disciplines in order to advance the field. Indeed, it is perhaps common sense to suggest that gamers respond in a similar way to game box art as film audiences do to DVD cases, or that trailers for games elicit the same kinds of discussion as trailers for films do. As Švelch claims:

“Just by watching the notice the spectator gets information about the paratextual quality of the video which would influence their expectations and interpretation of the

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city,” Wright, Esther: “On the Promotional Context of Historical Video Games,” in: *Rethinking History*, 22(4) (2018), pp. 598-608.

15 T.L. Taylor: “The Assemblage of Play,” p. 332.

remainder of the video accordingly. Overall, the viewer knows that they are watching a promotional video for a video game or a movie.”<sup>16</sup>

This common-sense notion, however, risks removing the unique characteristics of the game medium and industry, its history, its products, and more and denies the field more broadly from making its own journey of self-discovery. The suggestion that the viewer ‘knows’ automatically assumes a homogenous viewer and implicitly overlooks that which makes game promotion unique to the industry. Doing so risks obscuring the lack of similar viewer studies within the discipline and subsuming the findings and discussion from wider film and media studies into games studies—with the result that assumptions based on one media are implicitly applied to another unproblematically. As a way of countering this ‘intellectual creep,’ the discussion here focuses on a paratext shared by numerous other media industries to outline a way of furthering the field alongside intervening within the field of game studies: the trailer.

## FOCUSING ON TRAILERS

Emerging from the film industry and appearing as a distinct category for games promotion only in the early 1990s, the game trailer has yet to be fully defined with any success. While trailers have been defined variously as “short films”<sup>17</sup> and “persuasive films,”<sup>18</sup> the definitions at work here are applied and emerging from work in the field of film studies. Increasing diversity in the kinds of the product promoted by trailers (such as games, books, theatre, etc.) challenges this in light of the macro-text discussion. The diversity is such that trailers have been considered a vernacular genre.<sup>19</sup> This

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16 Švelch, Jan: “‘Footage Not Representative’: Redefining Paratextuality for the Analysis of Official Communication in the Video Game Industry,” in: Duret, Christophe/Pons, Christian-Marie (eds.), *Contemporary Research on Intertextuality in Video Games*, Hershey, PA: IGI Global, 2016, pp. 297-315, here p. 303.

17 Johnston, Keith M.: *Coming Soon*, Jefferson, NC: Macfarlane 2009.

18 Kernan, Lisa: *Coming Attractions*, Austin: University of Texas Press 2004.

19 Vollans, Ed: “So Just What Is a Trailer, Anyway?” in: *Arts and the Market*, 5(2) (2015), pp. 112-125.

suggestion is open to accusations of nominative determinism but emerges as a direct result of the trailer existing in multiple forms unified by its nomenclature.

The lack of definition creates a significant problem when discussing the trailer in any context but particularly within games studies. As Vollans notes, the game trailer's aesthetic overall differs from other industrial forms of the trailer as it includes not only the content of the game—often in a montage and format similar to the film trailer, dubbed the “narrative aesthetic”—but also includes footage of people playing the games.<sup>20</sup> This inclusion in effect positions the act of play or game consumption within a promotional narrative to emphasize the ludic elements of play; dubbed the “advertising aesthetic.”

Regardless of aesthetics or definition, it can be said with some confidence that trailers contribute significantly to the macro-text, forming a key touchstone in a promotional campaign. Perhaps unlike any other promotional paratext, the trailer is capable of generating a vast amount of anticipatory discussion and represents an emerging ‘nook’ for study. Consider the number of anticipatory sites or features exploring and deconstructing promotional content or how key information is ‘teased’ in advance of a product’s release. Such discussion falls under that which has been called “anticipatory culture,”<sup>21</sup> or as Chin and Gray term it, “pre-viewing of pre-texts.”<sup>22</sup> In effect, both these are concerned with speculating on the kind of product that may or may not ultimately exist. While it can be said that the trailer as a visual medium for pre-release information and entertainment remains important, little explicit evidence exists to support this claim. Similarly, while discussions of their ability to represent have occurred in both the public sphere<sup>23</sup> and the

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20 Vollans, Ed: *Cross Media Promotion: Entertainment Industries and the Trailer*, Doctoral thesis, University of East Anglia 2015, <https://ueaeprints.uea.ac.uk/id/eprint/53382/>

21 Johnston, Keith M./Vollans, Ed./Greene, Fred L.: “Watching the Trailer: Researching the film trailer audience,” in: *Participations*, 13(2) (2016), pp. 56-85.

22 Bertha Chin/Jonathan Gray, “One Ring to Rule Them All.”

23 Hayward, Andrew: “The 10 Most Misleading Video Game Trailers,” in: *Complex.com*, January 5 (2012); <https://www.complex.com/pop-culture/2012/01/the-10-most-misleading-video-game-trailers/>; Kuchera, Ben: “Is It Illegal to Release Misleading Game Trailers or Screenshots?” in: *Polygon.com* (2016); <https://www.polygon.com/2016/10/14/13289128/bullshots-no-mans-sky-marketing>

academic sphere,<sup>24</sup> there has been little further discussion of the role of the game trailer as a textual assemblage in its own right.

Resultantly, we are obliged to draw from work in film studies critically. Such studies suggest that trailers remain of high importance in decision making, sharing this role with interpersonal recommendations. The majority of findings within film studies point to paratexts that best approximate the medium of the product and that are most influential in shaping expectations of film consumption; typically trailers.<sup>25</sup> Yet the game trailer here is fundamentally a short video. It maintains the same semiotic channels as its cinematic counterpart while still being in effect a hyposemiotic translation. This removes the ludic element of the game and potentially manifests this on-screen through aesthetics. Exploring how these aesthetics are manifest forms a key part of understanding both the trailer as an entity and tool of the games industry, but also how, as a paratext within a macro-text, it positions itself as part of, yet distinct, from the game itself.

Yet how to explore the aesthetics of a game trailer when there is no clear definition remains a key challenge in this area. Work on trailers has typically relied on an archive<sup>26</sup> or has chosen trailers at random.<sup>27</sup> The obscured nature of these compilation processes risks undermining what we can call a ‘trailer.’ Rather, for the purposes of this study, we can explore instead instances where

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24 Švelch, Jan: “Exploring the Myth of the Representative Video Game Trailer,” in: *Kinephanos*, 7(1) (2017), pp. 7-36.

25 Cf. Faber, Ronald J./O’Guinn, Thomas C.: “Effect of Media Advertising and Other Sources on Movie Selection,” in: *Journalism Quarterly*, 61 (Summer) (1984), pp. 371-377; Austin, Bruce. A.: “Film Attendance: Why College Students Chose to See Their Most Recent Film,” in: *Journal of Popular Film*, (9)1 (1981), pp. 43-49; Michelle, Carolyn et al.: *Fans, Blockbusterisation, and the Transformation of Cinematic Desire: Global Receptions of the Hobbit Film Trilogy*, London: Palgrave Macmillan 2017.

26 Cf. L. Kernan: *Coming Attractions*; K. M. Johnston: *Coming Soon*.

27 J. Švelch: “Exploring the Myth,” Maier, Carmen D.: “Structure and Function in the Generic Staging of Film Trailers a Multimodal Analysis,” in: Piazza, Roberta/Bednarek, Monika/ Ross, Fabio (eds.), *Telecinematic Discourse: Approaches to the Language of Films and Television Series*, Amsterdam: John Benjamins Publishing Company 2011, pp. 141-158.

trailers have been collated as part of a transparent study, and to date, only one instance of this has been found for games trailer in the work of Vollans.<sup>28</sup>

Using a blend of newspaper discourse to first identify objects circulating under the label of ‘trailer,’ and then triangulating this with hyperlinked YouTube videos sharing this nomenclature, Vollans builds a database of 446 games trailers from the broad period between 2004 and 2014.<sup>29</sup> The passage of time between the construction of this database and any socio-industrial developments potentially acting on the industry mean this database will not build a complete view of the kinds of trailers circulating for any given text, nor will it be indicative of trends or changes in the industry. Rather this database remains a snapshot of the games industry within the first decade of the new millennium. Indeed, here we must be cautious: while using such an existing database affords us the luxury of bypassing our own data collection and increased transparency, the fact that this specific database is in effect over a decade old will undoubtedly impact the responses gained. In this instance, the trailers comprising the data are itemized, which allows for repeated access and viewing, so by using an existing database, we can mine this area to build a framework of study that can be used regardless of the temporality of the dataset.

Vollans’ work on the dataset identifies an aesthetic spectrum at work within the corpus overall. At one end of the spectrum are those trailers that show the game in a narrative designed to show the product’s use. At the other end, a narrative that uses the product itself constitutes the promotion, akin to the montage of film trailers, with a third point between the two, whereby both the game-world and real-world consumption are given broadly equal status.

Exploring each end of this aesthetic spectrum in more detail, it is possible to unpack how texts within the macro-network position their respective products as being separate, while still constituting grounds for discussion themselves; a form of tension between being purely text or purely context. Both ends of the spectrum have shared features: studio logos and titles offer a key indicator of the industry in which the trailer belongs, and this serves in part

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28 E. Vollans: *Cross Media Promotion*; Vollans, Ed: “The Most Cinematic Game Yet,” *Kinephanos*, 7(1) (2017), pp. 106-130.

29 Vollans, Ed: *Appendices: Cross Media Promotion: Entertainment Industries and the Trailer*, Doctoral thesis, University of East Anglia 2015, <https://ueaeprints.uea.ac.uk/id/eprint/53382/>

to situate the trailer within a macro-network. The adoption of (film studio) logos has been fully explored in Grainge's excellent *Brand Hollywood*.<sup>30</sup> Indeed, Grainge discusses the use of logos to signify not only a particular kind of product experience but also notes that "logos [have become] the manifestation of a studio's 'corporate personality.'"<sup>31</sup> As Grainge discusses, the use of specific logos is deeply complex, and this space is in part a performance of a wider brand or stakeholder as much as it is a signifier of the kind of content to which it is appended; trailer, film, game, etc.<sup>32</sup> Indeed, despite being so briefly on our screens, they demonstrate the conflation of "capital and desire," the visual manifestation of a studio signifies its role within a capitalist economy while simultaneously signifying the kinds of pleasures associated with that studio.<sup>33</sup> Here we see a kind of spatial and temporal duality within the trailer that is echoed throughout its assemblage. It represents a kind of tension between the industrial considerations and the creative (like all forms of promotion to some extent). Similarly, the adoption of other overtly imposed elements of the trailer stands to illustrate this kind of tension. Pan European Game Information (PEGI) ratings similarly serve to signify the industrial context to which this text belongs, and in many cases may signify that this is a form of promotion within the games industry; consider that the PEGI rating often appears at the beginning of much promotional content announcing a 'game trailer.'

This kind of broader signification itself is separate from the gameplay experience and acts as a distinguishing barrier between promotion and product. Similarly, purchasing information such as release dates and the product's platform availability serves to indicate that the text immediately consumed

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30 Grainge, Paul: *Brand Hollywood*, London/New York: Routledge 2008.

31 Ibid., p. 72.

32 For a video game specific application of this work, using the example of the way the Rockstar Games logo undergoes certain aesthetic shifts when associated with different game franchises (GRAND THEFT AUTO, RED DEAD REDEMPTION, L.A. NOIRE), see Wright, Esther: *Rockstar Games and American History*, Doctoral Thesis, University of Warwick, 2019.

33 P. Grainge: *Brand Hollywood*, p. 79, citing Elsaesser, Thomas: "The Blockbuster: Everything Connects, But Not Everything Goes," in: Lewis, Jon (ed.), *The End of Cinema as We Know It: American Film in the 1990s*, London: Pluto Press 2002, p. 16.

is not the intended central product. Pointing towards a date and a platform for purchase highlights both the temporal and spatial ‘other.’ Platform availability is a key element of promotional rhetoric; directing attention to a platform that may not be the current platform on which the promotion is viewed. Similarly, pointing to a specific release date likewise creates a form of distancing between the promotional text and the object of purchase: ‘coming soon,’ ‘available on...,’ etc. all serve to ground the trailer as ‘not the central text,’ pointing to an object to be purchased. Such indicators may not be present in every trailer; different jurisdictions have different requirements for rating information and release information. Similarly, the aesthetics variations of the trailer may well play with this to garner ‘buzz’ and increase speculative consumption of the product itself. Each of these signifiers serves to perform elements of the product; ‘speaking’ to consumers in a manner that signifies both the kind of promotional content immediately present and the kind of absent product promoted. While such broad signifiers serve to perform the industry, and the promotional role of the trailer itself, they garner distance from the product within the promotion. The wider aesthetics, too, are particularly useful in this manner. Thus, using Vollans’ spectrum of aesthetic, we can further see that the two ends of the spectrum build this distance in different ways and to different effects.

## NARRATIVE AESTHETIC

The narrative aesthetic proposed in the core work stems from the movement towards what we could call the ‘traditional’ film trailer: a montage of product footage (or footage representative of such), a seemingly direct view into the game itself. Though there is very little that is ‘traditional’ about them. As Cassidy puts it, within the video game trailer idealized by the limited literature: “The product is presented not as a game that enthusiastic teens enjoy playing, but rather like a digital movie. Storyline is emphasized and characters speak lines of dialogue.”<sup>34</sup>

Here Cassidy is describing not only the conventions of the video game trailer when compared with the film trailer but implicitly suggests the lack

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34 Cassidy, Scott Brendan: “The Videogame as Narrative,” in: *Quarterly Review of Film and Video*, 28(4) (2011), pp. 292-306, here p. 298.

of a wider causal frame of narrative that we might see in more traditional advertising. Within this aesthetic, no explicit depictions of any form of player are found, though this tends to be implied through the depiction of gameplay interface—targets and game menus primarily. The gameplay is fundamentally constructed through a meta-narrative of footage. As Kernan writes of the film trailer, the act of taking sequences from the product (regardless of their fidelity to it) acts like a form of “window shopping,” the game’s footage (both gameplay and cutscene) here can be seen as “quoted” with the quotation marks taking the form of studio logo, product title and release information. This act of quotation can also be seen as showing while withholding a product.<sup>35</sup> Zanger refers to this as the double articulation of the (film) trailer, and we can see that such quotations, through following their own logic of promotion, may both tell one story (the trailer) while withholding another (the product).<sup>36</sup> The very act of elevating some aspect of the product as being worthy of use in promotion further suggests a withholding of other elements deemed less titillating. This act, however, serves in much the same way as all elements of promotion; providing access to a product before its release is a key element of the promotional context inviting consumers in while still maintaining the exclusivity of the forthcoming product.

Reviewing Vollans’ work, we can see that trailers in the narrative aesthetic format typically use perceived elements of the product to constitute the promotion with the additional inclusion of voiceover, studio logos, release date. While a rapidly edited montage structure is at work within the majority of these trailers, there are many instances where longer sequences are used to convey narrative action, and so it must be said that montage in the strictest sense is not a defining element alone but rather works within the micro-text to create that which Kernan calls a “narrative of discontinuity.”<sup>37</sup> Unlike Kernan’s initial discussion, however, we must be clear not to imply a deterministic understanding of montage; Kernan’s work has come under heavy criticism for suggesting that montage creates the desire for the product in the viewership. Rather, I want to suggest that these temporal and spatial rifts within the discontinuous promotion show a fragmented product and these

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35 L. Kernan: *Coming Attractions*, p. 6.

36 Zanger, Anat: “Next on Your Screen: The Double Identity of the Trailer,” in: *Semiotica*, 1/2 (1998), pp. 207-230.

37 L. Kernan: *Coming Attractions*, p. 10.



fragments serve to indicate that this promotional text is not the product itself. Playing with the temporal and spatial remediation of the product within the montage, however, relies on shared product knowledge, as well as the shared cultural knowledge of trailer aesthetics (in the broadest sense) to help consumers understand the form and purpose of the promotion. Indeed, this distancing is occasionally further aided by the layover “not game footage.”<sup>38</sup> This assemblage of key signifiers creates a network that themselves suggest this is not the product, and this window-shopping narrative is reinforced by such micro signification; we can consider these as banners, labels, or promotional stickers on the window, reminding us of the barrier between us and the product. As Švelch writes, “To sum up, the paratextual aspects of the trailer which are manifested by some of the individual parts of the trailer but also by the interplay of many other parts, inform viewers that they are watching a trailer.”<sup>39</sup> The issue within Švelch’s work, aside from a lack of definition for ‘trailer,’ is that it assumes a single form of aesthetic within trailers, similarly seeing them as a homogenous mass with standardized modes of address; directly at odds with the premise set out by Vollans. While the work overlaps within discussions of the trailer and narrative aesthetic, the description of the advertising aesthetic also functioning within games promotion necessitates further discussion.

## ADVERTISING AESTHETIC

In many ways, the advertising aesthetic put forward by Vollans is a broad category that could be said to exist merely to account for deviations in the trailer aesthetic within the database underpinning the work. Discussions of trailers elsewhere have largely focused on the role of montage within the work, and anecdotal evidence suggests that ‘trailers’ need to have a montage to be considered belonging to this category.<sup>40</sup> Yet, given the aesthetic

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38 Švelch has conducted a more direct study: J. Švelch: “Footage Not Representative.”

39 Ibid., p. 304.

40 L. Kernan: *Coming Attractions*; Haralovich, Mary-Beth/Klaprat, Cathy Root: “Marked Woman and Jezebel: The Spectator-in-the-trailer,” in: *Enclitic*, 2 (1981),

variation within the original term ('trailer' pertaining to all promotion on the shorts reel)<sup>41</sup> and the range of promotion within the film industry that uses a non-montage aesthetics,<sup>42</sup> we cannot entirely rely on montage as a defining characteristic. Indeed, the history of games promotion is such that, as Young has observed:

"Home videogames and videogame systems were once advertised in a manner quite similar to staple items such as clothing, food, or activities. Commercials for these products, like those for early videogames, focused on showing how much pleasure individuals derived from consuming the product and *typically showed the consumer actually enjoying the product.*"<sup>43</sup>

Similarly, as Bernadette Flynn notes, early promotion for games focused on family-oriented themes, and this necessitated showing not only the game but the family within a communal space, often within the home.<sup>44</sup> This is, in effect, the rise of what Chambers calls family-centered gaming and underpins the concept of the advertising aesthetic.<sup>45</sup> This aesthetic principally relies on some form of on-screen gamer space in order to show the product (the game and/or the console) in use.

This kind of aesthetic is typified by the JUST DANCE 3 (2011) promotional campaign. The promotional material here combines footage of on-screen

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pp. 66-74; Maier, Carmen D.: "Visual Evaluation in Film Trailers," in: *Visual Communication*, 8 (2009), pp. 159-180; J. Švelch: "Footage Not Representative."

41 Staiger, Janet: "Announcing Wares, Winning Patrons, Voicing Ideals: Thinking about the History and Theory of Film Advertising," in: *Cinema Journal*, 29(3) (1990), pp. 3-31, here p. 26.

42 Examples here include Alfred Hitchcock's direct address to the camera from the 'lot of my next movie' in which he describes the film *PSYCHO* (1962) without showing the film itself.

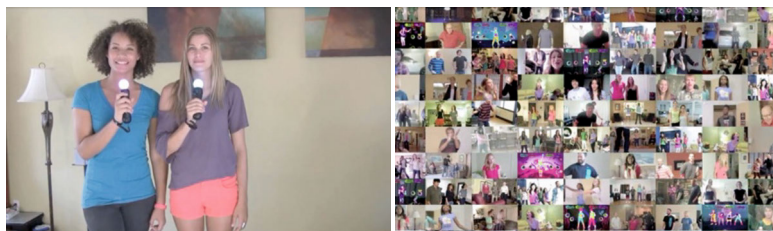
43 Young, Bryan Mitchell: "The Disappearance and Reappearance and Disappearance of the Player in Videogame Advertising," in: *Situated Play DiGRA 2007 Conference* (2007), pp. 235-242, p. 235, emphasis added.

44 Flynn, B.: "Geography of the Digital Hearth," in: *Information, Communication & Society*, 6(4) (2003), pp. 551-576.

45 Chambers, Deborah: "'Wii Play as a Family': The Rise in Family-centred Video Gaming," in: *Leisure Studies*, 31(1) (2012), pp. 69-82, here p. 78.

players dancing in their own homes, juxtaposed with images of gameplay, in this instance of players' avatars dancing. In using a real-world context (dancing on the sofa with friends) and in incorporating this with footage of corresponding gameplay, the trailer here shows not only the game within a fictionalized narrative but also serves to illustrate that viewers of the promotion are not engaging with the game in this manner. This kind of aesthetic places the game and its console not only within a 'real-world' context but places the game firmly within its socio-technical assemblage. Under this kind of aesthetic, the console becomes a key element of the game itself, occupying space in the home and importantly demonstrating the interaction between on-screen participants and the console itself. This aesthetic lacks the kind of continuous narrative of product placement typically found in advertising for tangible consumer goods; there is a comparative absence of the physical product, emphasizing the experiential aspects of consumption; gameplay, that presumably viewers of this promotion are not participating in.

*Figure 1: JUST DANCE 3 trailer: using participation as both promotion and gameplay*



Source: Ubisoft/Ubisoft Paris 2011; Screenshots by E. Vollans

Consider that the 2011 JUST DANCE 3 trailer is composed almost entirely of footage of on-screen gamers playing a predominantly unseen game. The trailer combines direct address to the camera with a montage of gamers and their avatars dancing through the use of a discontinuous narrative.<sup>46</sup> The dislocated space is given continuity through the use of overlapping dialogue to create a unified promotional message. This ties together the disparate locations, which reflects the rise of not just *family-centered* gaming that typified

46 L. Kernan: *Coming Attractions*, p. 10.

the launch of the Wii platform,<sup>47</sup> but rather gaming as a social communal space, both inside the home, and across domestic (and geographical boundaries). This fragmentation serves to reinforce the distancing between the promotion and the product by reflecting different social spaces designed to reflect our own.

The *JUST DANCE 3* trailer provides a spatial focal point from which to introduce the game and the domestic space needed to play it. This sits in contrast to the metanarrative of a trailer for any product composed entirely of diegetic world footage. Showing the interactive element of the game in action, the idealized player serves implicitly to underscore that this is not the game itself, that specific actions from players are required for the game to function as such. This, in effect, is drawing attention to the lack of gameplay for the viewers, which leads to a distancing between the advertisement and the product.

## CONCLUDING NOTES

Although somewhat reductionist here, exploring in the broadest sense the different aesthetic constructs at work within promotional trailers, we can see that their very construction as trailers necessitates the fragmentation of the game product. Their existence as a promotional paratext is signified by the ‘other,’ that this piece of promotion is not the product itself but a deeply fragmented version of it. The key signifiers of the trailer—logos, montage, gamers, ratings—all serve to act as an assemblage of both entertainment and economic considerations. This tension between entertaining promotion (that stands in for an entertaining product) and the economic purpose of the promotion—to not be more entertaining than the product—, echoes the tension between the micro-text (trailer representing the game) and macro-network (the game and its associated promotion). This tension is, in effect, a form of distancing that works not only to demarcates the trailer’s paratextual role and textual identity. Rather, we see a remediating performance that actively keeps viewers ‘out’ of the product, while simultaneously referencing this ‘other’ product and thus drawing them in.

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47 Cf. B.M. Young: “The Disappearance and Reappearance.”

This chapter earlier argued that we could see the nature of the game text as belonging intrinsically to a wider network. Within this network, we can see that the remediation of the game here is, in effect, a way of advancing the central text's presence while simultaneously keeping it at a distance. The game is paratextually here, often long before it is actually in our presence. The entire rhetorical stance and economy of the paratext depend upon this effect and, in doing so, offers a fascinating nook to further explore how we make sense of the macro-text overall. That the micro-texts too can be seen as an assemblage of elements suggests we could start to see games and gaming as existing within a wider spectrum of engagement, but at the moment, this runs the risk of textual determinism. Without fully exploring the viewer's response to this, we cannot be certain how these paratexts form part of the wider meaning-making structure. If we want to explore this further, we need to work towards a sustained study of the consumer's response and use of all such pre-figurative paratexts to understand the kinds of meaning and meaning-making role in wider consumption and thus to explore the game and its surround as it is seen by consumers; those who bring meaning to it.

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# Isekai: Tracing Interactive Control in Non-interactive Media

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GIOVANNI TAGLIAMONTE/YAOCHONG YANG

## I. ISEKAI, HOW, WHEN, WHY?

In Kon Hoshizaki's manga comic *Tenohira Kaitaku Mura de Isekai Kenkoku* (*Founding a Pioneering Village in Another World with a Single Hand*), the protagonist, Kai, is a reincarnation of a Japanese high schooler.<sup>1</sup> Frail and bedridden, Kai spent most of his life languishing in a hospital bed playing unnamed farming simulators. After he dies, Kai is reborn in another world, upon which he is presented with another opportunity for life by an unknown actor. Living in this fantasy world, Kai realizes he has another power: he can jump into another dimension of his own, whereupon he controls a plot of land similar to farming simulator games in his previous life. The catch, however, is that while this world carries all of the mechanical trappings of those games, this world is, ostensibly, real. The implication in the story undergoes a dramatic twist: the world he can shape is not just a game, but as real as any world he's experienced. More strikingly, the interfacial systems Kai uses to shape this new world are treated as real and as seriously as any other element in the diegesis of the story. Interfaces, inventory systems, and data have no longer become metaphorical representations of ongoing processes approximating real relations but are real in themselves.

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1 Hoshizaki, Kon: *Tenohira Kaitaku Mura de Isekai Kenkoku-ki*, Tokyo, Japan: Kadokawa, 2019.

*Tenohira* draws from a lineage of *kenkoku-ki* (nation-building), where the core story revolves around protagonists constructing nations. However, what separates *Tenohira* is that *kenkoku-ki* have, originally, not engaged with a systems-based look at the world. *Tenohira* represents, in many ways, a transition towards not only an interface-based representation of fiction and the settings in which fiction occurs but also, more dramatically, the direct implementation of interfaces to these fictions. More specifically, *Tenohira* represents a specific kind of systems-based integration with fiction: that of digital games.

*Tenohira* represents a growing trend in Japanese amateur-published portal fantasies, more broadly known as *isekai*. Translated as ‘other world’ stories, *isekai* usually refers to a collection of amateur-helmed publications with an incredibly strong (though not necessary) emphasis on game-like fantasy worlds. Though *isekai* are not the only stories that incorporate game-like elements in their worldbuilding, *isekai* are by far the largest and play important roles in popularizing a kind of fantasy fiction that is increasingly comfortable with game elements as a truthful, straightforward essence of worldbuilding.

This paper focuses on how *isekai* are at the heart of ongoing developments in Japanese amateur storytelling and how this storytelling folds back into gamic representations. We will concentrate on two things: one, on the history of contemporary *isekai*, their transition towards gamified non-interactive storytelling, and two, on how *isekai*, through the media mix, have begun to craft their own games. The case of *isekai* is not only one in which paratexts shape games but also one where these paratexts themselves reflect a particular game-like logic. This relation, arguably, reveals how messages of control and programmatic logic persist even in situations of non-interactivity. More pointedly, contemporary *isekai* often speak about a subject’s relation to control.

## What are Isekai?

Though broadly defined as ‘other world’ stories, the term *isekai* refers to a specific genre of storytelling in which people move from one world to another, usually through some sort of a portal such as a gate or a doorway. While the definition is largely nebulous, *isekai*, in all practical terms, can be understood differently from *ikai* (“other world”), which contains a homologic or cultural element, and *reikai* (“spiritual world”), which contains a

spiritual element. Rather, isekai usually refers to a specific set of qualities: amateur-publishing, fantasy worlds with varying levels of game-like qualities, and a self-reflexive commentary aided by platform publishing. Isekai can be split up more productively into several subcategories based on how characters are transferred to another world. In *tensei* (reincarnation) stories, characters have often reincarnated from miserable households, unfortunate accidents, or overworking (known as *karoshi*, or death by overwork). In *tenii* (transference) isekai, characters often bring goods and material back and forth, frequently leading to a transition of goods, cultural exchanges, and seek to establish interstate flows between the worlds. In *shoukan* (summoning), characters are ‘summoned’ by citizens from the other world and are often tasked with a largely insurmountable mission, such as “defeating the demon king.” Though *shoukan* isekai are undoubtedly the ones that adopt video game logics the most readily, all three aforementioned types have numerous texts which do so. Therefore, the commonality is less the nature of the jump over in isekai, but more the recurring game representation that arises from these stories. Though they often differ in terms of their transitions, messages, and plots, their general overall settings are similar: a fantasy world with some level of game-like logic baked into its setting. This is no coincidence.

## The Writing Cycle of Isekai

Isekai have been around for a very long time.<sup>2</sup> However, it’s only with the recent explosive popularity of online publishing platforms and an increased effort in media mix investment in these stories that they have they grown so numerous, proliferating on amateur publishing sites such as *Shousetsuka ni Narou*<sup>3</sup> and *Kakuyomu*,<sup>4</sup> though the former carries a much larger database of isekai stories. Translated as “Let’s Become a Novelist,” *Shousetsuka ni Narou* (*syosetu*) allows anyone to publish their chapters regularly, with readers providing feedback and ratings. As stories climb in the rankings, they generate larger audiences. Moreover, *Syosetu* organizes its stories into categories, genres, and sections, and thus the rankings of each individual component are

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2 Takachiho, Haruka: *Isekai no Yuushi*, Tokyo, Japan: Tokuma Bunko 1981.

3 [syosetu.com](https://syosetu.com)

4 [kakuyomu.jp](https://kakuyomu.jp)

displayed on its website (Figure 1). Most notably are Syosetu's two largest categories: *isekai* ("other world") and *genjitsu sekai* ("real world").

Figure 1: Front page of Syosetu



Source: syosetu.com, April 2020

Through this search, ranking, and genre system, Syosetu's charts funnel its viewers into areas where they are encouraged to keep reading. Viewers are further incentivized to keep reading by making and maintaining accounts, with authors given blogs and users given message boards. In this sense, Syosetu acts as not only a repository of amateur publishing but also a de-facto social media platform on its own, focused on keeping user retention as high as possible. Sites like Syosetu and Kakuyomu would go on to foster community-based writing contests, where winners can get potential book deals ("Dai

6-kai ōbārappu web shōsetsu taishō”<sup>5</sup>), be paired with an artist for a manga adaptation (“Shōsetsukaninarō × manga up! Dai 1-kai komikaraizu gensaku-shō”), and win cash prizes (“Dai 2-kai āsu sutānoberu shōsetsu taishō: Āsu sutānoberu”<sup>6</sup>). Authors, therefore, have an incentive to conform to these publisher’s requirements. However, while Syosetu’s system and ranking might explain how isekai are so popular, the site alone does not explain why isekai stories have game-centric logics, and Syosetu’s system does not explain why game-elements have become so ubiquitous in Japanese amateur publishing, even outside of isekai.

Writer and blogger Manyo argues that contemporary isekai have exploded primarily due to the influence of Reki Kawahara’s *Sword Art Online* (*SAO*), a 2009 light novel series that originally began as an amateur work from 2002 and then was adapted into multiple anime, manga, and video game offerings starting in the year 2012. Revolving around young people who try to escape from a virtual reality MMORPG, *Sword Art Online* is not directly isekai, but rather captures a similar sentiment in many modern day isekai, that of the need for young and disenfranchised people to transition to another place,<sup>7</sup> even if that place is uncertain and potentially hostile. *Sword Art Online*’s massive success was a concerted media mix effort, one from its top-ranking position on popular magazine *Kono raito noberu ga sugoi* (“This novel is outstanding”) alongside its quickly following anime adaptation.<sup>8</sup> A secondary cultural argument for *SAO*’s popularity exists: the desire for a transition to a different world is propelled, arguably, by an increasing

5 N.N.: “Dai 6-kai ōbārappu web shōsetsu taishō,” *Shousetsuka Ni Narou*; <https://over-lap.co.jp/narou/narou-award6/>

6 N.N.: “Dai 2-kai āsu sutānoberu shōsetsu taishō: Āsu sutānoberu,” *Earth Star Novel*; <https://www.es-novel.jp/esn-award02/>

7 Manyo. “Isekai tensei anime wa naze fueta? Sōdoāto onrain ikō no web shōsetsu būmu,” in: *Real-Sound*, February 2, 2017; <https://realsound.jp/movie/2017/02/post-4134.html>

8 Saito, Satomi: “Beyond the Horizon of the Possible Worlds: A Historical Overview of Japanese Media Franchises,” in: *Mechademia*, vol. 10, pp. 143-161, here p. 144.

disenfranchisement from Japanese youths in a post-Koizumi neoliberal Japan.<sup>9</sup> According to Ueno Tsunehiro, the early and mid-2000s in Japan faced a series of increasing aggravation between the rich and poor, leading to young people decrying an increasingly alienating Japanese economic system.<sup>10</sup> The end result is a proliferation of survival-type stories such as *Death Note* (2005) and *Kamen Rider Ryuuki* (2003), where young people are pitted against each other for survival. *SAO* slots into that lineage, and after its explosive popularity following its anime adaptation in 2012, Syosetu (and many other publishing platforms) would see an explosion in amateur publications.

Thus, the proliferation and game-logic of modern-day isekai are influenced by two major developments in Japan's amateur publishing community, one platform and the other sociocultural. Because amateur publishing sites— and Syosetu in particular—placed a heavy emphasis on ranking based upon major categories such as isekai and *genjitsu no sekai*, amateur authors seeking to find audiences are incentivized to write and publish stories that fit those slots. Compared to self-publishing platforms such as DeviantArt and Author of Our Own, sites like Syosetu and Kakuyomu not only implement immense measures to keep users and authors active on their sites but also interlock their systems with real, tangible benefits, particularly contests with prizes that lead to professional publications and media adaptations. These platform developments, however, can only be possible due to the explosive popularity of game-centric survival-type stories written by young authors. The successful adaptation of Kawahara's *SAO* signaled to amateur authors that such endeavors are not only possible but, for online platforms, potentially preferable. Working in tandem, these two developments give some insight as to how and why isekai exploded in popularity. But why do they maintain their video game logic, and what is that logic suggesting?

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9 Tanaka, Motoko: "Trends of Fiction in 2000s Japanese Pop Culture," in: *Journal of Japanese Studies*, Ejcs, July 29, 2014; [www.japanesestudies.org.uk/ejcs/vol14/iss2/tanaka.html](http://www.japanesestudies.org.uk/ejcs/vol14/iss2/tanaka.html)

10 Tsunehiro, Ueno: "Imagination after the Earthquake," in: *Verge: Studies in Global Asia*, vol. 1, no. 1 (2015), pp. 114-136.

## II. ISEKAI AND SYSTEMS

### Isekai and the Game Logic

Isekai is a genre dominated by a relatively young demographic, both in its audience and in its authors.<sup>11</sup> *SAO*'s narrative focuses on a group of MMO players being locked within the world's first "Full-Dive" virtual reality MMORPG (that is, an MMO utilizing helmets to create the illusion of direct experience through a neural connection). Throughout the original story, they live within this game world for months and are unable to leave before defeating the original creator of the game. They live and breathe the game-logic for their time within the game, with skills, HP bars, and many more MMORPG mechanics being ever-present both for the characters and in the narrative. The works of the isekai boom that followed from Kawahara's *SAO* will bring the aspect of game logic into their works consistently. The details and presence of specific mechanics are never set in stone, but the game influence can be traced back in many works, for example, *Re:Monster*,<sup>12</sup> *Otome Game no Hametsu Flag shika nai Akuyaku Reijou ni Tensei shite shimatta*.<sup>13</sup>

Hereon we will talk in more detail about a few examples that illustrate the different ways game systems are represented in isekai stories.

In Maruyama Kugane's *Overlord*, we have a concept fairly close to that of *SAO*; a veteran guild leader reminisces about his time in an MMO in the last minutes before the servers shut down.<sup>14</sup> However, instead of getting logged out, he realizes he is now living in the MMO as his character, an evil overlord. The pretense for the ludic systems remains the origin of the world as an MMO in this case. However, the world and characters around the protagonist have become life-like and transcended their original logic. The world is a hybrid between game and reality; the border between NPCs and real human actors becomes blurred. In *Overlord*, we can see an example of how the line between a game world and the real world is being challenged

11 N.N.: "Talking to Inori," in: *Pause and Select*, April 19, 2020; <https://www.pauseandselect.com/articles/talking-to-inori>

12 Kogitsune, Kanekiru: *Re:Monster*, n.p.: Shousetsuka Ni Narou 2011.

13 Yamaguchi, Satoru: *Otome Gēmu no Hametsu Furagu Shika Nai Akuyaku Reijō ni Tensei Shiteshimatta...*, n.p.: Shousetsuka Ni Narou 2014.

14 Kugane, Maruyama: *Overlord*, n.p.: Shousetsuka ni Narou 2010.



despite the insistence of mechanical game elements and its origin as an MMO.

Isekai are not only stories where game logics are popular among writers but also popular among readers. Manyo speaks of the disenfranchisement of young people with the world around them as an often-central element of the appeal of isekai.<sup>15</sup> The protagonists of isekai stories are often (though there are certainly exceptions) unhappy and unsuccessful with their everyday life before flourishing in the other world. Kamiya Yuu's *No Game No Life* opens with an account of its main characters that can well be viewed as a key description of this particular aspect: When asked by a god what they thought of their life, they reflect: "There was no way to tell the goal, read the stats, or even identify the genre. Even if you followed the rules that were laid out, you'd be punished—and worst of all: those who just ignored the rules stood at the top."<sup>16</sup> Later, they are brought into a world governed by play, where violence is forbidden, and any problem is solved through a game on mutually agreed terms. *No Game No Life* has been a popular series, spawning multiple media mix projects. Like *Overlord*, *No Game No Life* navigates a precarious distinction between the 'reality' of the world and the game(s) it represents. Both are drawing from a sentiment established in the early 2000s, a time which media theorist Ueno Tsunehiro argues where a game-like world is preferable, not to escape, but because play can be managed, understood, and interpreted in a way the subject deems fair.<sup>17</sup> Isekai like *Overlord* and *No Game No Life* collapse the boundary of reality and play, specifically because, based on their antecedents, "each character is established as a player in the game...however, those players that are sensitive to the nature of the game outmaneuver and rewrite its rules."<sup>18</sup>

That said, isekai need not directly reference games to carry game logics. Earlier, we mentioned that many isekai are influenced heavily by game logic, even if they do not put immediate focus on direct stats and skills. An excellent example here is Nagatsuki Tappei's immensely popular *Re:Zero Kara Hajimeru Isekai Seikatsu* (*Re:Zero*), wherein the main character, Natsuki

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15 "Isekai tensei anime wa naze fueta? Sōdōto onrain ikō no web shōsetsu būmu."

16 Kamiya, Yu: *No Game No Life*, Tokyo, Japan: Media Factory 2012.

17 Tsunehiro, Ueno: *Zeronendai no sōzōryoku*, Tokyo, Japan: Hayakawa Shobō 2011, p. 18.

18 Ibid.

Subaru, is transported into a fantasy world from one moment to the next.<sup>19</sup> While the novel is not strong on its direct video game elements, the main character does possess a mysterious power: Upon death, he is reset back to a specific point in time. At certain unclear intervals, after he successfully escapes tragedy for both him and his comrades, the point of reset is moved forward. This concept has a strong equivalent in digital games: auto-saves. Just like the player in any game with auto-saves, upon death, Subaru has his progress reset to the last auto-save and may try another approach to the problem. Once he overcomes the challenge, the game auto-saves in the background. *RE:ZERO* exemplifies the influence of game logic on isekai even when it is not readily made apparent through literal numbers-crunching and status screens. Of course, we cannot view these stories in a vacuum either.

Shoukan works often feature protagonists refusing the wishes of the one summoning them and deciding to do something counter to their intention. This trope can be read as a refusal of the classical game systems and hero narratives of RPGs.

Meanwhile, tenni stories' emphasis on bringing in objects and technology from our world into the fantasy world where they are usually viewed with amazement and wonder can be seen as a way to use the other world to establish a relationship of power. Ichirō Sakaki's *Outbreak Company* specifically reflects on this aspect of tenni when the character recognizes the government's intent of taking over the fantasy world's kingdom through the introduction of Japanese media, culture and language, reminiscent of the Cool Japan project, where Japan tried to export its media products to the rest of the world.<sup>20</sup>

Still, because isekai are clearly relating back to the real world and reflecting on games and game culture, we need to examine what and how they deal with these ideas. This investigation can be extended to pre-existing literature on games and culture. Roger Caillois argues that "the destinies of cultures can be read in their games."<sup>21</sup> Working off Caillois, if the type of game is a culture clue, then the type of game logic could be an extension of that cultural

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19 Nagatsuki, Tappei: *Re:Zero kara Hajimeru Isekai Seikatsu*, n.p.: Shousetsuka ni Narou 2012.

20 Sakaki, Ichiro: *Outbreak Company*, Tokyo, Japan: Kodansha 2011.

21 Caillois, Roger: *Man, Play and Games*, Champaign, IL: University of Illinois Press 2001 (1958), p. 35.

value set. If so, we ought to take these stories and their development seriously and examine them and how they paratextualize games and how these paratextualizations fold back onto games.

Drawing upon Alexander Galloway,<sup>22</sup> the representation of the game logic is no longer held back by material conditions; a game doesn't need to approximate some semblance of machinery logic upon which ideology exists (what Galloway calls the protocological control) but can suffice with pure representation because these stories are not necessarily interactive in the first place—they are representations of protocological control. And yet, they require the illusion of protocological control to function; the system has to be there and impacting the characters' choices, thus keeping up the faux-game throughout its protagonist's play-through. This paradoxical setting makes Galloway's idea of protocological control a particularly interesting lens for the examination of isekai.

Regardless of the methods employed, what matters is that isekai are at the heart of several testy negotiations between semiotics of interactive and non-interactive texts; the isekai story, representing a world, especially a game world, nevertheless attempts to map out some understanding of game logic, and therefore adopts an empty signifier in representing that logic—play is not just undertaken metaphorically but mapped out literally.

## The Protocological Nature of Isekai

Isekai are not only stories where characters go into another world. They also bring their understanding of how games work with them, making them a critique of what Mackenzie Wark refers to as *The Cave*<sup>TM</sup>.<sup>23</sup> Wark argues that because the world in which we live has adopted the logic of quantifiable competition, gamers are drawn to digital games.<sup>24</sup> The reason they give is that while the real world is deemed as unfair, a digital game can be understood, tinkered with, and repeated. To Wark, "The Game has not just

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22 Galloway, Alexander R.: *Gaming: Essays in Algorithmic Culture*, Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, p. 101.

23 Wark, Mackenzie: *Gamer Theory*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press 2007, Kindle Edition, loc. 53.

24 Ibid., loc. 67.

colonized reality, it is also the sole remaining ideal.”<sup>25</sup> Isekai thus are representations of that ideal. In one sense, they are equivalents to an individual’s mode of play, given that (as we will see with Aneko Yusagi and *Tate no Yuusha no Nariagari*<sup>26</sup>) some of these stories are influenced by how authors play or interpret their play experiences with digital games. Thus, isekai not only represent a player in the game but also efface the difference between gamespace and the game itself; the protagonist is in another, real world. However, that real world has not only been colonized by the game; the protagonists know it. This generates a potential critical space, where characters notice the game-like qualities of this other world yet realize the very real dangers that face them.

In a broader sense, isekai tend to grapple with systems as part of their narratives. They are not only non-interactive fictions that represent games but, more specifically, they are non-interactive fictions that grapple with games as interactive systems, in particular, systems as a cluster of rules carrying both affordances and limitations. In a game, these affordances and limitations craft an atmospheric zone of control that Galloway calls protocol.<sup>27</sup> Here, Galloway distends the implication of Deleuze’s decentralized control. While the term protocol is colloquially used to refer to “correct or proper behavior within a specific system of conventions,” Galloway more specifically frames the discussion through distinct, contextualized rulesets that underpin an agreed-upon technological operation.<sup>28</sup> An individual within this ruleset, in effect, is under the spell of a protocological control, a set of rules where an ideology may be expressed, but the means of expressing that ideology only extend as far as the rulesets allow.

Galloway’s description of protocological control is particularly important when asking how interactive systems deal with ideology. Traditionally, ideology within a system is an element that can be studied, but often a subject’s interaction with that system is secondary to understanding the

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25 Ibid., loc. 114.

26 Yusagi, Aneko, “Tate No Yūsha, Ichi-Shō No Owari to Kobanashi,” *Shousetsuka Ni Narou*; <https://mypage.syosetu.com/mypageblog/view/userid/172188/blogkey/589407/>

27 Galloway, Alexander R.: *Protocol: How Control Exists after Decentralization*, Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press 2006, Kindle Edition, loc. 463.

28 Ibid., loc. 483.

contours of the system itself. For instance, according to both Louis Althusser and Frederic Jameson, a system's ideology can be mapped via a network of immediate, linear causal mechanisms.<sup>29</sup> However, both Jameson and Althusser are focused on the non-interactivity of system ideology. In comparison, the interactivity of games means players can approach the text in many different ways, with each experience leading to different interpretations of that system. Players can also choose to veer from a system's intended path, either in-game (through acts such as trifling) or outside the game (such as modding). The game is no longer a system that engenders a subject, but by providing such affordances, the subject ends up becoming what Galloway refers to as "autonomous locales" of expression, small pockets of movement within an accepted set of overarching, unshakable rules.<sup>30</sup> In this situation, though a game may have an 'ideology,' in that it expresses a general set of political arguments, the way in which players interpret those arguments are underlined by a set of interactions only possible by a set of hierarchical operations limiting and providing players with opportunities of navigation and interaction.

In that sense, an analysis of the digital game demands an analysis of interactivity and how it is interpreted. In *Gaming: Essays on Algorithmic Culture*, Galloway argues that "video games are allegories for our contemporary life under protocological network of continuous informatic control," stressing that "the more emancipating games seem to be as a medium, substituting activity for passivity or a branching narrative for a linear one, the more they are in fact hiding the fundamental social transformation into informatics that has affected the globe."<sup>31</sup> In other words, though a game's visuals, sounds, and text may all be proposing arguments or ideas through their aesthetics, they are all dealing with hidden machinery of sorts, an undulating database of information and rules which allows the process of operation in which these aesthetics have meaning. Therefore, how a game is played is just as important as what is in the game, and together both are only possible if such a set of rules is possible. At the same time, these rules become a ground zero for

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29 Althusser, Louis et al.: *Reading Capital: The Complete Edition*, New York City, NY: Verso 2016, p. 189; Jameson, Frederic: *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act*, Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press 2015, loc. 200.

30 A.R. Galloway: *Protocol: How Control Exists after Decentralization*, loc. 495.

31 A.R. Galloway: *Gaming: Essays on Algorithmic Culture*, p. 106.

expression, giving insight into what emerges, politically, in the act of play—what can and cannot be done, how information and values are parsed into informatic data, what can and cannot be changed.

Isekai, because they are byproducts of amateurs writing game-like fantasy worlds, are an effigy of protological control given that they, as non-interactive fiction, cannot procedurally express it. Since isekai are not systems, they do not have limits and affordances in the sense that games have. Likewise, because they set down no rulesets, they lack Galloway's autonomous locales; readers are not 'players' in the sense that they can choose which chapters to read without being confused. In terms of its media form, isekai are, in effect, like any other non-interactive, serialized fiction.

However, in representing a game-like fantasy world, isekai often end up inadvertently revealing ways in which protocological control manifests. Because the game-like elements are treated naturally, isekai end up being sites of protocological critique. For example, in Aneko Yusagi's *Tate no Yuusha*, the main character Naofumi is falsely accused and thus exiled.<sup>32</sup> Unable to effectively wield anything other than a shield and without any allies, Naofumi must resort to enslaving a young girl (Raphtalia) to fight for him. On one level, Naofumi's distant, largely nonchalant attitude to slavery could be seen as a damning legitimization of slavery in some respects. However, as Galloway mentions with regards to the game *CIVILIZATION III*, "[details (and ideas)] of lived life are replaced by the synchronic homogeneity of code pure and simple. It is a new sort of fetish altogether."<sup>33</sup> A similar sublimation occurs here; while Naofumi is exiled and forced into slavery, his compatriots are upheld and supported by the monarchy. As part of the reason, Aneko Yusagi notes that Naofumi and his compatriots represent different play styles in Mass Multiplayer Online RPGs (MMORPGs), where Naofumi more closely reflects a decline in specialized builds due to a decline in online team-based MMORPGs.<sup>34</sup> Naofumi's enslavement can also extend to pre-existing arguments of control. Though Aneko Yusagi has never proposed any protocological basis for slavery, Naofumi and Raphtalia's relationship is scarcely

32 Aneko, Yusagi: *Tate no Yuusha no Nariagari*, n.p.: Shousetsuka ni Narou 2012.

33 Ibid., p. 103.

34 Yusagi, Aneko: "Tate No Yūsha, Ichi-Shō No Owari to Kobanashi," in: *Shousetsuka Ni Narou*, December 10, 2012; <https://mypage.syosetu.com/mypageblog/view/userid/172188/blogkey/589407/>

different from a player's relationship to a party member. Naofumi, as a player stand-in, represents not only a player lacking sufficient party members (as Aneko Yusagi implies) but whose purchase of a slave is similar to the purchase or acquisition of a team member in an RPG. In this instance, players, like Naofumi, are both determinants of their party members and their loyalty; it is only by the player (and Naofumi's) will that the party member can leave.

Some of this system critique can be incredibly blatant. In Atekichi's *Saikyou no Shokugyou wa Yuusha demo Kenja demo naku Kanteishi* (Kari) *Rashii desu yo*, the protagonist Manabe Hibiki accidentally jumps over into another world.<sup>35</sup> He quickly realizes he is an "Inspector," a class whose ability involves summoning user interfaces on objects and individuals in this new world. These interfaces take on the form of RPG-style status windows, providing limited insight into anything he focuses on.

Figure 2: *Saikyou no Shokugyou's* Interfaciality



Source: Atekichi and Takeda Atsushi, *Saikyou no Shokugyou wa Yuusha demo Kenja demo naku Kanteishi* (Kari) *Rashii desu yo*, pp. 9-10

35 Atekichi and Takeda Atsushi: *Saikyou no Shokugyou wa Yuusha demo Kenja demo naku Kanteishi* (Kari) *Rashii desu yo*, Tokyo, Japan: Alphapolis 2017, pp. 9-10.

However, after immediately running into a native of this other world, Manabe quickly realizes the power of the Inspector class: in breaking down the disparate elements of the world before him, Manabe can determine not only the status but also the relative strength, rarity, and overall condition of any given person or object. In this case, Manabe's class is obscenely valuable, and although he is woefully underpowered compared to the locals, his skills are instantly in high demand. Like *Tate no Yuusha, Shokugyou wa Yuusha*'s setting occurs in a scenario where the protagonist is not only aware of the game-like elements of this other world, but because the natives do not interpret the world as game-like, the protagonist carries a distinct advantage. This advantage translates into a discussion of system mechanics and gameplay—that how characters take control or advantage of these mechanics reveals how authors might think of how systems relate to players.

Additionally, due to the fiction's non-interactivity, elements that would be understood as ubiquitous game features (such as user interfaces) find themselves awkward in non-interactive, non-virtual settings. *Shokugyou wa Yuusha*, in pedestaling the user interface, also reaffirms the natural advantage players have when navigating informatic systems. In this case, Manabe's Inspector class fulfills a similar role to Naofumi's approach to slavery: both of them, attempting to consider the role of a playable system in a non-interactive narrative, end up not only adopting a representation of informatic control but also indirectly discussing how such informatic control situates, shapes, and affects the players and the world in which they are playing. Both examples, however, remain firmly non-interactive analyses of interactive systems. What happens when isekai, being non-interactive, become interactive?

## Why Games, and Why Isekai Games?

As previously mentioned, the popularity of stories on sites such as Syosetsu tends to result in major publishers licensing isekai stories and creating official light novel adaptations. These will often be adapted further into manga, anime, or even video games as part of the media mix phenomenon. With the interlocking of industries in the creation of the media mix adaptation, we can inspect how isekai stories translate between media. Furthermore, one central difference with regards to isekai games is that not only are they ludic



representations of fiction, but they are ludic representations of a genre of fiction whose very form is a reflexive analysis of a game's protocol logics.

Here we will focus particularly on the relationship of isekai and games. Isekai themselves aim to adapt games into a non-interactive medium. It is notable that isekai do not generally constitute an attempt to adapt a particular game into a linear narrative. Rather, they generally try to adapt a signified meta-game of sorts, a conglomerate of familiar tropes.

Game adaptations of isekai (hereon isekai games), on the other hand, are unique in their attempt to map a faux-game—a fundamentally non-interactive story that focuses on upholding interactivity, an empty signifier of protological play back—onto a real ludic system.

### **Isekai as Black Box Analysis**

Generally speaking, isekai authors are not professional game designers. Some authors have created video games as hobby projects, but the overwhelming majority does not have a game development background. So how do they go about designing these faux-games that are 'played' as part of the narrative? We can view the act of writing isekai as introspection on the games that defined it. Of course, the choice of games depends on the individual author, and as outlined earlier, it's not truly a one-to-one matching either. What we can see instead is a representation of the game design the authors have experienced.

It is an act similar to a relatively unstructured version of what Ian Bogost refers to as black box analysis,<sup>36</sup> that is, the act of analyzing the game without directly accessing its source code. The act of adaptation of these games will thus be prone to translating clearly distinguishable, easily recognizable elements of these games, such as status screen or levels. These concepts are almost ubiquitous to Japanese RPG games and, as such, can be seen recreated in many isekai stories, even those that do not take place in-game worlds. Similarly, we can see that well-known tropes are also transferred, be it the idea of Slimes as weak starter monsters (*Suraimu Taoshite Sanbyaku-nen; Shiranai Uchi ni Reberu Makkusu ni Nattemashita; Tensei Shitara Suraimu*

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36 Bogost, Ian: *Persuasive Games*, Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press 2010, p. 75.

*Datta Ken*)<sup>37</sup> from the DRAGON QUEST games (which has been replicated in other JRPGs such as, e.g., the ATELIER series)<sup>38</sup> or the concept of the “Demon Lord” as a central antagonist figure. These concepts are formed together into an empty cultural signifier, the faux-game, that evokes the gaminess of the games it was inspired by but does not recreate it.

The texture of the faux-game created lies within the specific games that formed the individual backdrop for the author’s design. These can be a more classical JRPG, an MMORPG, or take a turn away from the classical RPG space altogether. An example of the latter is the subgenre of Otome game isekai. Otome games (literally maiden games) are a genre of games primarily targeted at women, usually visual novel-style dating games with a female protagonist and multiple male love interests. The Otome game isekai typically feature a female character from our reality being reincarnated into a classical otome game, sometimes even as the villainess rather than the game’s main character. They are primarily written by women and are more often read by a female audience as well.<sup>39</sup> We can see that the culture of the games played reflects back onto the isekai made, and the isekai read, mirroring Caillois.

As mentioned early on, the myriad of stories hosted on Syosetu and the like form an often ironic, hyper-aware relationship of the work with its genre conventions and tropes. The reader is ‘in on the joke’ in that often the protagonists on these stories will comment on the similarities of the otherworld with a game they have played, take the idea that their own familiarity and knowledge of games is an accurate model for the workings of the world or even go as far as to have the character be aware of isekai fiction and react to becoming an isekai protagonist themselves.

Here, a deep dive in the *Okina Baba’s Kumo Desu ga, Nani ka?* serves a particularly unique example.<sup>40</sup> In it, the whole main character’s class is killed and reincarnated into another world, though with the twist that the main character is reincarnated as a spider-type monster in a dungeon. Despite the

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37 Morita, Kisetsu: *Slime Taoshite Sanbyaku-nen Shiranai Uchi ni LEVEL MAX ni Nattemashita*, n.p.: Shousetsuka Ni Narou, 2016.

38 *Atelier Marie*, Gust Co. Ltd 1997.

39 N.N.: “Talking to Inori,” in: *Pause and Select*, April 19, 2020; <https://www.pauseandselect.com/articles/talking-to-inori>

40 Baba, Okina: *Kumo Desu ga, Nani ka?*, n.p.: Shousetsuka ni Narou 2015.

insistence that the world presented is a true reality, it features exceedingly game-like elements, with whole pages being taken up by literal status displays at times, detailing Skills, HP Points, Mana, and the like.

Figure 3: Status Screen in *Kumo desu ga nani ka*’s English Translation

<Human		LV 14	Name: Julius Zagan Analeit	
Status:	HP: 476/476 (green)		MP: 497/497 (blue)	
	SP: 455/455 (yellow)		: 401/455 (red)	
	Average Offensive		Average Defensive	
	Ability: 469 (details)		Ability: 465 (details)	
	Average Magical		Average Resistance	
	Ability: 488 (details)		Ability: 476 (details)	
	Average Speed			
	Ability: 435 (details)			
Skills:				
[Magic Power Perception LV 10]		[Precise Magic Power Operation LV 1]		
		[Magic Warfare LV 9]		
		[Magic Power Conferment LV 8]		

Source: Baba, Okina: *So I’m a Spider, So What?*, New York City, NY: Yen Press 2019, vol. 5, pp. 166-167

Large passages of the novels follow the main character exploring the game system, trying to min-max it, considering different gameplay choices, and speaking about the way she is dealing with different combat scenarios using her skills. She is in fact engaging in that exact same type of black box analysis described earlier, but this time it occurs on a diegetic level within the main character’s narration. Moreover, as the books progress, they establish the game system as the central mystery by revealing that it was added to the world at a later point in time with a yet clear goal in mind. Suddenly the reader is asked to analyze the game system they have witnessed, recognize its affordances, and build a theory as to what purpose the system might serve,

bringing the idea of analyzing the protocological control full circle, between the author, protagonist, and reader.

Such examples show that the connection of translating interactive game systems as a multi-level recreation of the signifier of a game without using interactivity is central to the writing process of isekai. The implication of the game adaptation, therefore, is a deconstruction of the empty cultural signifier of a game's protocol, i.e., it is a cultural subject imagining how a game thinks and shapes its players as a subject, which is then translated into a system of its own.

Therefore, there are two kinds of systems at play; a metaphorical, memory-based, signifying system of a played game that is completely immaterial and imagined by an author, and then a real, physical, coded system that the game adaptation takes on. How does such a translation back into the signifier function? What form does the attempt to transfer a hyperreal game experience back into a real one take?

The isekai game is at the crossroads of these two elements, and how they interact with each other reveals how protocol extends even beyond its own formal control into signifying ones.

### III. ISEKAI GAMES AND THEIR PARATEXT

#### ***Re:Monster* and Sublimating Control**

*Re:Monster* is a web novel written by Kogitsune Kanekiru revolving around a young man named Kanata Tomokui in an alternate timeline of Earth where people have psychic powers, known as Esper powers.<sup>41</sup> After a party, Kanata is killed by his subordinate. He is then reincarnated in another, medieval fantasy world as a goblin named Gobu-Rou. However, he quickly realizes that his Esper powers remain, though they manifest themselves differently: Gobu-Rou is able to consume and absorb the powers of anything he eats. With this advantage, he seeks to climb to the top of his tribe and build a nation. Originally published on Shousetsuka Ni Narou and then re-published as a light novel by Alphapolis, *Re:Monster* is a nikki-choufuu (daily ledger) styled story where characters—primarily Gobu-Rou—outline the events of

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41 Kogitsune, Kanekiru: *Re:Monster*, n.p.: Shousetsuka Ni Narou 2011.

that day. Using simple, diary-like prose, Kanekiru's style is largely out of convenience, aiming to maintain a simple, linear story structure.<sup>42</sup>

Like many isekai, *Re:Monster* uses interfaces and gamey mechanics despite the setting's insistence that it is a 'real world.' In *Re:Monster*, when characters obtain items or learn new skills, the text is interrupted by paragraphs that outline precisely what they are learning, mimicking a user interface. This interface focus repeats itself in the *Re:Monster* manga, a comic adaptation beginning in 2014. Like the original web novel and the subsequent light novel, the *Re:Monster* manga would make heavy use of both the nikki-choufuu style (Figure 4, left) but also game interfaces (Figure 4, right):

Figure 4: Ledger Style Storytelling



Source: Kogitsune, Kanekiru: *Re:Monster* vol 1, Tokyo, Japan: Alphapolis 2015, pp. 9-10

Though Gobu-Rou initially ponders about the nature of the world and whether it is truly a game, the story quickly discards such notions, and much of *Re:Monster* focuses on Gobu-Rou's rise to power and the expansion of his goblin tribe as a political power on the world stage. In this sense, much like *Tenohira* from the beginning, *Re:Monster* is reminiscent of a *kenkoku-ki*, a nation-building story, but *Re:Monster* more aggressively incorporates an interfacial understanding of the world's setting into its narrative.

Nowhere is this more apparent than in Gobu-Rou's approach to acquiring more power. Not only is Gobu-Rou's ability to absorb power similar to acquiring new abilities, but by doing so he can physically evolve, transforming into different classes. His tribe members, under his tutelage, can do the same; in this case, the 'evolution' of the tribe members refers to class changes

42 N.N.: "Talking to Kanekiru Kogitsune," in: *Pause and Select*, February 12, 2019; <https://www.pauseandselect.com/articles/talking-to-kanekiru-kogitsune>

standard to RPG games, where characters in a party can unlock more specialist, stronger classes. Additionally, in *Re:Monster*, stats are not just a quantification of abstract power, but in video game fashion, a direct passage to greater power. Characters can allocate skill points, leading to specific ‘builds’ which are treated as natural elements of the world.

However, *Re:Monster* more darkly and cynically embraces questions of servitude and systemic control through how Gobu-Rou acquires newer team members. In *Re:Monster*, goblins reproduce largely through capturing and impregnating unwitting female adventurers and villagers. While Gobu-Rou is cognizant of the immorality of these actions, he nevertheless engages in them. While he laments the unfortunate fate of the captured women, Gobu-Rou is also not above capturing and tricking them into becoming his concubines. Unsurprisingly, many of these women are also capable fighters and become central pillars of his military force. Though the narrative presents the women in *Re:Monster* as choosing to stay with Gobu-Rou’s tribe due to their affection for him, the story has inadvertently revealed a power relationship hidden in gameplay: party members are functionally slaves. The Stockholm Syndrome-Esque behavior of these women belies the fact that parties and their compositions are critically concerned with control. In a game, players are often the sole determinant of their party members’ position. In this sense, *Re:Monster* is reminiscent of JRPG games such as SHIN MEGAMI TENSEI: NOCTURNE and FINAL FANTASY TACTICS, where parties are large, specialists are numerous, and functionally have no agency. This constellation is similar to Aneko Yusagi’s *Tate no Yuusha*, where slavery, as mentioned above, is arguably a non-ideological byproduct of what are ostensibly protocological representations.

In attempting to reflect a sense of party-gathering and control, *Re:Monster*, like *Tate no Yuusha*, translates systemic control into very visible actions of bodily control. In a game, party members do not and cannot leave unless the player decides it is the case, in effect making these characters slaves. In *Re:Monster*, they are quite literally slaves, enthralled by Gobu-Rou and his tribe. In this sense, *Re:Monster* partly critiques the player’s control in a party system, suggesting that while party members are individuals, their loyalties and positions within the party are ultimately at the behest of the (player) leader. The end goal, it seems, is to become stronger. However, while the system may be partly critiqued in the web novel, light novel, and manga, what happens when it is turned into a game?

Figure 5: Akane Guides the Player Through the *Re:Monster* iOS Game



Source: RE:MON (AlphaGames Inc. 2017, O: AlphaGames)

Adapted into a mobile game in 2016, simply titled *RE:MON*, the *Re:Monster* game focuses on a player character who builds and constructs their own nation. As it is common in real-time strategy games, the player uses units on a board to attack enemies. By fending off successive waves, players level up their player-characters as well members of that player-characters' tribe. By doing missions, players can gain stars, which net more chances to 'roll' for strong characters, with each successive level and yielding larger maps with

more challenging foes. Though Gobu-Rou and his tribe appear throughout the story, RE:MON, in effect, focuses on a different tribe altogether.

RE:MON banishes *Re:Monster*'s protocol critique, suggesting that systems can naturalize their own control networks. While *Re:Monster* attempts to legitimize (sometimes lengthily) why certain characters join Gobu-Rou's tribe, RE:MON makes no such claims. Though some characters will join as part of a smaller story arc, players can simply roll stronger characters and grind the ones they have. Though the game has a story arc, one can play RE:MON almost entirely without an answer as to why any given team member has joined their team. In *Re:Monster*, the members join and stay because of Gobu-Rou's actions and motivations, oftentimes through a mix of charismatic leadership, fear, and forceful assimilation. In RE:MON, members join because that is simply how the system of the RPG game works.

RE:MON also, in translating *Re:Monster* into a game, ends up revealing how systems can substitute for what are otherwise orthodox tools of non-interactive storytelling. An assumed primacy of system-as-storytelling extends beyond party members: in RE:MON, the player, like Gobu-Rou, can absorb the abilities of the monsters he eats. This is in contradiction with the novels and manga in which that absorption is Gobu-Rou's unique ability. In *Re:Monster*, Kanekiru takes great pains to explain the origins of Gobu-Rou's ability to absorb the powers of his victims; after all, it is his Esper power. In comparison, there is no origin given to the player-character of RE:MON; they simply have the ability, for the sake of fun. However, at the same time, having the absorption skill, like the character rolling, reveals that systems can function as storytelling stopgaps of their own. In other words, what is expository information in non-interactive narratives can be easily explained through systemic features in interactive ones. As with the party system, if the players are given a unique skill by game design, they can experience a similar story to the novels and manga, even if the games explain much less. Furthermore, what ties together the interactive and non-interactive is a broader idealistic representation rather than a direct translation of one media form to another. Kanekiru implied as much, noting that the theme of *Re:Monster* is "becoming strong to eat," arguing that the story has something innately "game-like about it."<sup>43</sup>

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43 Shiki: "(Intabyū: Dokusha Purezento Ari) Honkaku Riarutaimu RPG 'Ri Monsutā (*Re:Monster*).'" Shōsetsu Gensaku 'Kin Ki-Ji Kitsune' Sensei to Kaihatsu Direku-



Development director Hideaki Muraishi also stressed the game-like, developmental nature of the original novels and manga, stating that “the setting of the game has an RPG-like aspect.”<sup>44</sup> At the same time, he carefully warned that “if we translated the original media into a game, the balance would be broken, so it was a little difficult figuring out how to adjust it.”<sup>45</sup> However, because the system is its own form of control, and because the game’s development is more interested in capturing an abstract theme of consumption, the RE:MON game ends up embracing some of the very elements of its source material critiques.

As a product, RE:MON is more focused on maintaining the media mix relationship underpinning the franchise and less concerned with taking its predecessor’s critique and interrogating these structures. It resolves these interrogations by directly embracing them. In fulfilling what Otsuka Eiji calls a “grand narrative,” or overall ur-setting,<sup>46</sup> RE:MON employs the very systems *Re:Monster* critiques. The case suggests that play becomes a form of protocol on its own: Muraishi and his team’s emphasis on mimicking the universe while trying to make the game fun undermines the critique of systems that digital play takes for granted. And yet, in orbital fashion, everything—even a critique of that consumption—ends up needing to revolve around it.

### KonoSuba and Protocological Mundanity

Akatsuki Natsume’s *Kono Subarashii Sekai ni Shukufuku wo! (KonoSuba)* is a comedy-light novel series that originated on Syosetu like many other isekai. The light novels revolve around Satou Kazuma, who, after his untimely death, is given a choice by a goddess named Aqua to keep his memories, reincarnate into a parallel fantasy world, and take one thing of his choosing with him. Annoyed at Aqua’s bad attitude, he asks to take her with him into the new world, and she is forced to comply and join him. They become

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tā Ni Intabyū!” in: *Boom App Games*; [https:// game.boom-app.com/entry/remonster-interview20160209](https://game.boom-app.com/entry/remonster-interview20160209)

44 Ibid.

45 Ibid.

46 Eiji, Otsuka: “World and Variation: The Reproduction and Consumption of Narrative,” in: *Mechademia*, vol. 5, pp. 99-116, here p. 108.

adventures, and a lot of the comedy is based on playing off RPG tropes. Kazuma's stats are extremely average, with only higher-than-average luck and intelligence, while Aqua's are the exact opposite. While she is theoretically very powerful, her inability to spend her skill points in smart ways (e.g., she purchases a skill just because it makes pretty fountains she can show off to people at the guild) and general incompetence create the main dynamic of the show. In typical JRPG fashion, further party members join them later on: Megumin, a mage dedicated entirely to the extremely powerful art of "Explosion Magic," which leaves her unable to move after casting it a single time due to its mana cost and Darkness, a crusader knight who possess great capabilities but fails to hit enemies. She is a masochist and will lose concentration and instead fantasize about the worst-case scenario amidst encounters. Together they form something akin to a classic JRPG party, as one might see in *FINAL FANTASY*, with a melee, caster, healer, and tank.

In *KonoSuba*, Kazuma is originally asked to reincarnate in the parallel world to defeat the Demon Lord (again referring back to classic RPGs) but flat-out rejects this sentiment; first with the intention to simply enjoy his life in a game-like world, then once financial troubles hit him, to get rich and then further to just enjoy himself or deal with problems as they arise. Though the party does end up defeating some of the Demon Lord's generals, it is never done premeditated—instead, they stumble into these victories without knowing. In *Grasshopper—Games, Life and Utopia*, Bernard Suits introduces the idea of the prelusory goal: "a specific achievable state of affairs," e.g., the act of "crossing a finish line first" (but not necessarily fairly)" in a race or in golf the act of "getting a golf ball into a cup" (but not necessarily by using a golf club).<sup>47</sup> If we think about isekai as adaptations of systems, then the prelusory goal Kazuma is presented with is defeating the Demon Lord. Interestingly, he rejects the prelusory goal and instead creates his own ones (to enjoy his time, to get rich, etc.). In *Konosuba*, we can see something interesting crystallize: the line between the lusory and prelusory becoming distinct in isekai. For prelusory means just as such, "before the game," and the goal of a game has to be set from the outside of it. Through the layer of abstraction that the reincarnation provides, we start seeing the game come into view at all. Without it, Kazuma would simply be a character in a world,

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47 Suits, Bernard: *Grasshopper. Games, Life and Utopia*, Peterborough, Canada: Broadview Press Ltd 2005, p. 50.

whichever it may be, but it would not be prelusory. Through the distinct presentation as a separate mode of existence Kazuma enters, the game is truly able to take hold.

Figure 6: *Konosuba Cast at the Adventurer's Guild*



Source: KONO SUBARASHII SEKAI NI SHUKUFUKU WO! -KIBOU NO MEIKYUU TO TSUDOISHI BOUKENSHA-TACHI!- (Entergram 2019, O: Entergram)

Of course, the story can progress as is in *KonoSuba* because all protocological control is only illusive; how then does an adaptation with real, binding protocol function?

KONO SUBARASHII SEKAI NI SHUKUFUKU WO! KIBOU NO MEIKYUU TO TSUDOISHI BOUKENSHA-TACHI! is an adaptation of the *KonoSuba* franchise into a PlayStation 4 and PlayStation Vita game released June 2019 in Japan. In this traditional first-person dungeon crawler, the player takes control of Kazuma and goes into dungeons with the rest of the main characters to fight monsters, fulfill quests, and level up. This gameplay is broken up through frequent intermissions of story scenes wherein the characters joke around, comment on the plot, or play off each other. The game presupposes some knowledge of the franchise. It features frequent callbacks to jokes, all the skills are named after ones mentioned in the books, and they are distributed in an appropriate fashion between the characters. For example, Megumin does possess her signature Explosion magic, and it will reduce her MP down

to nothing upon usage while dealing devastatingly high damage to any monster.

However, when playing the game adaptation, something is lost. In essence, *KonoSuba* is a story wherein there is no clear rhythm or plan; it is the very denial of the plan that is the starting point for the series. And despite the game's jokes and wacky story-tidbits, what is perhaps most notable about the adaptation is the game loop that takes center. Any and all actions have to go through the menus; story sequences are telegraphed in dungeons ahead of time; the dungeons themselves are labyrinths that are slowly traversed through, illuminating them slowly but surely. Characters raise their level, quests are completed, and everything becomes more and more systematic and structured. Even the signature attack cut-scene-like animations that are played during battles lose their sense of excitement over hours of repetition. Ironically, the freedom, surprise, and havoc created through them had been key aspects of the original work.

Figure 7: *Konosuba* Party Exploring a Labyrinth



Source: KONO SUBARASHII SEKAI NI SHUKUFUKU WO! -KIBOU NO MEIKYUU TO TSUDOISHI BOUKENSHA-TACHI!- (Entergram 2019, O: Entergram)

By adapting the story into a true protocoological system, the type of game has changed altogether and is no longer able to transfer Kazuma's own prelusory goal. Isekai concern themselves with the in-between, the thoughts of the characters, the potential of the system, and the fantasy of the game. The loop,

the mundane, is glossed over. *Kumo Desu ga, Nani ka?* may describe in second-to-second detail what skills were used in an encounter, what the decision-making of the main character was, how the HP and Stamina are affected, and finally how many experience points the monster ended up granting down to printing pages of status screens. However, once the fight or chapter is done, it will skip ahead and have the main character comment on having fought numerous monsters. She will basically report back to the reader her findings or thoughts since the last chapter. We can imagine how it went down, now let's talk about the situation at hand, the next challenge. It's a move akin to a cooking show skipping past a part of its preparation phase by pulling out a new dish that's one step ahead in the recipe.

Through adaptation back into a game, the story regains rigidity and repetition, which go in hand with any game but were aspects that had faded in its faux-game form. The critique *KonoSuba* offers us is that when the protocol takes control, the narrative is no longer able to sustain itself.

## CONCLUSION

Though isekai have the potential to be spaces of systemic critique, especially when it comes to systems in digital games, in both the cases of *RE:MON* and *KONO SUBARASHII SEKAI NI SHUKUFUKU WO! KIBOU NO MEIKYUU TO TSUDOISHI BOUKENSHA-TACHI!*, adapting such critique into a digital game reaffirms just how powerful protocological control can be. For *Re:Monster*, the text, perhaps inadvertently, investigates power, specifically just how much power a player-character commands over their party members. In its non-interactive form, Kanekiru's characters employ blatantly immoral acts (such as enslavement, conquering, and sexual assault) to tether the characters into a tribe, maintaining the semblance of an RPG system. However, when translated into a digital game, such critique disappears, and any visible commentary on the nature of a system's power over its nodes subsides in the face of systemic operation. In the case of *Konosuba*, the text opposes the rigidity of an orthodox game narrative through comedy while maintaining its identity as an RPG world. Kazuma's reincarnation provides him with a classical call to action, the prelusory goal to his role-playing game, which he rejects outright. Instead, his story is able to maneuver unique situations and inversions of role-playing tropes that never settle into a predictable rhythm. However,

upon adaptation, any critique and autonomy from the RPG is stripped by the overwhelming control the game loop has over the experience. In both cases, the adaptations end up undermining the essence of their original works—both are critiques of systems but once adapted into systems they lose their respective critiques.

At the same time, both *Re:Monster* and *Konosuba*, while they are discussions of systems and how these systems are played, represent a broad idea of how players interact with such systems. Though both texts heavily draw upon JRPG conventions upon which they levy their critiques, they are notably abstract about which JRPGs and how much influence they draw. However, while game adaptations of isekai are still relatively rare, given their tendencies to be part of a strong media mix push, the likelihood of more isekai games in the future is high. Furthermore, as more direct games-as-system analogue isekai become popular (such as Satoru Yamaguchi's *Otome Game NO HAMETSU FLAG SHIKA NAI AKUYAKU REIJOU NI TENSEI SHITE SHIMATTAKU...*), in theory, these future game adaptations could more effectively translate the systemic arguments of their sources into more effective procedural rhetoric. However, a stronger presence of the faux-protocol in a work could also lead to the opposite effect, with adaptations struggling more to recreate the possibly inconsistent and complex game design of these works. How the strength of the influence of game systems in their linear-narrative adapted form maps onto their ability to be functionally transferred back into an interactive system remains to be seen.

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# The Paratext, the Palimpsest, and the Pandemic

## Finding Meaning in THE DIVISION's Diegetic Artifacts

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HANNS CHRISTIAN SCHMIDT

### INTRODUCTION: NEW YORK COLLAPSE(D)

In *Kotaku's* "The Doctor, The Disease, And THE DIVISION," New York-based kidney specialist Siddhartha Bajracharya reflects upon his playing experience of TOM CLANCY'S THE DIVISION 2 (2019) during the first wave of the Covid-19 pandemic. In the first game of the series (2016), a weaponized and highly lethal variant of smallpox wreaks havoc in New York City, resulting in a collapsed infrastructure, interrupted supply chains, and a flat-out civil war in the sealed off parts of the quarantined city. Bajracharya writes:

"As the coronavirus has spread and hopefully now plateaued in New York, I've kept on playing [...] because I want[ed] to win at something, instead of feeling entirely powerless. I can solve every problem in THE DIVISION 2 with a bullet, but against the coronavirus my armory is all but empty. [...] In THE DIVISION I can freely fight the plague—or at least the enemy gangs who represent the awfulness of its aftermath—with my sniper rifle and shotgun, no ethical considerations necessary."<sup>1</sup>

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1 Bajracharya, Siddhartha: "The Doctor, The Disease, And THE DIVISION," in: *Kotaku* (2020); <https://kotaku.com/the-doctor-the-disease-and-the-division-1843046712>

For Bajracharya, the gameplay experience becomes a strange form of therapy session against the backdrop of the actual Corona pandemic. Helplessness is replaced by a sense of self-efficacy; the feeling of powerlessness due to a lack of vaccines or effective medication is countered by a carefully structured skill tree and a highly efficient arsenal of weapons; and instead of soul-eroding, often futile battles against new waves of infections, Bajracharya fights enemies in satisfying flow experiences and is able to revive team members with the simple push of a button.

Game paratexts<sup>2</sup> like these—written reflections about gameplay experiences—illustrate how stories of an imagined pandemic can surround, frame, and inform the stories we tell each other about actual events (and vice versa). As Gray writes, these stories, then, become more than

“simply addons, spin-offs, and also-rans: they create texts, they manage them, and they fill them with many of the meanings that we associate with them. Just as we ask paramedics to save lives rather than leave the job to others, and just as a parasite feeds

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- 2 In his original definition, Gérard Genette describes the paratext as “a threshold” or “a vestibule” to a literary work of art (Genette, Gérard: *Paratexts: Thresholds of Interpretation*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2001, p. 2). By that, he means “those liminal devices and conventions, both within the book (peritext) and outside it (epitext), that mediate the book to the reader: titles and subtitles, pseudonyms, forewords, [etc.]” (Macksey, Richard: “Foreword,” in: *ibid.*, p. xviii.) As the other contributions in this volume show, the concept also gained much attention beyond the realm of literary theory, leading (for example) game studies scholars like Mia Consalvo to expand upon it in a more general way, understanding paratexts roughly as “artifacts that surround a central text, lending that central text meaning, framing and shaping how we understand it.” (Consalvo, Mia: “When Paratexts Become Texts: De-centering the Game-as-text,” in: *Critical Studies in Media Communication* 34.2 (2017), p. 177.) By that, the paratext does not necessarily rely on an authorial figure or institution anymore, as it was originally intended by Genette. For criticism regarding such a broad definition, see Švelch, Jan: “Paratextuality in Game Studies: A Theoretical Review and Citation Analysis,” in: *gamestudies.org* 2 (2020); [http://gamestudies.org/2002/articles/jan\\_svelch](http://gamestudies.org/2002/articles/jan_svelch)

off, lives in, and can affect the running of its host's body, a paratext constructs, lives in, and can affect the running of the text."<sup>3</sup>

Essays like the one by Bajracharya both reference and color what we experience in real life with the knowledge from a fictional context. In this sense, the essay and the game text exist within a dense intertextual web—a semiotic fabric that is woven together with many other stories told about similar catastrophic events. According to Kristeva, who coined the concept by borrowing from Bakhtin's theory of dialogicity, intertextuality highlights how texts are composed of references to other texts, entering into implicit and explicit relationships with antecedents, including fragments from fictional and actual experiences.<sup>4</sup> Even though those 'older' texts are oftentimes not directly addressed and are hard to see at first glance, they still exist underneath the surface—informing subsequent texts and allowing new potentials of meaning to arise in an ever-growing semantic system. For this reason, it may as well be appropriate to use another term for this phenomenon, also coined by Gérard Genette: Palimpsest.<sup>5</sup> Coming from the Greek word *palimpsēstos*, literally meaning "scraped again,"<sup>6</sup> a palimpsest is a document whose material basis has been recycled and overwritten. In this way, various underlying texts shine out from beneath the surface and become recognizable and tangible to the trained eye.

This essay aims at illustrating how both paratexts and palimpsests can be considered as salient points of reference when discussing narrative meaning in video games. This will be exemplified by taking a closer look at *THE DIVISION*, highlighting how its narrative content in the form of environmental storytelling literally extends well beyond its digital world. After a short comparison of *THE DIVISION*'s diegetic objects with the ones we can find in *GONE*

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3 Gray, Jonathan: *Show Sold Separately: Promos, Spoilers, and Other Media Paratexts*, New York, NY: NYU Press 2010, p. 16.

4 For a general overview of the concepts with references to Kristeva and Bakhtin, see, for example, Alfaro, María Jesús Martínez: "Intertextuality: Origins and Development of the Concept," in: *Atlantis* 18.1/2 (1996), pp. 268-285.

5 Genette, Gérard: *Palimpsests: Literature in the Second Degree*, Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press 1997.

6 Merriam-Webster.com Dictionary, "palimpsest," 2021; <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/palimpsest>

HOME (2013), we will see how the paratext and palimpsest can be combined to form a peculiar hybrid, namely the tie-in novel *New York Collapse* by the American author Alex Irvine.<sup>7</sup> It illustrates a vivid interplay between the material and the immaterial while constantly challenging our theoretical toolbox and leading to new research questions.

## **BETWEEN ADVENTURE PLAYGROUND AND THE WORLD'S MOST EXPENSIVE VERSION OF GONE HOME**

The basic plot of *THE DIVISION* could hardly be more clichéd: A mad scientist named Dr. Almherst releases a virus in Manhattan on Black Friday that spreads via dollar bills. When the social framework in the heart of New York collapses after a few days, the U.S. government activates a top-secret network of sleeper agents disguised as ordinary civilians living among the population—the Strategic Homeland Division. The player steps into the role of one of these agents. As game journalist Arthur Gies puts it: “Left to pick up the pieces, it’s your job to restore the Joint Task Force of local law enforcement and medical services and try to bring hope back to the people of NYC. You primarily do this through shooting people.”<sup>8</sup> It quickly becomes clear that the plot essentially serves to stage a massive game space within an immensely detailed virtual replica of Manhattan in a winterly apocalyptic atmosphere, a space in which players collect experience points and loot, level up and battle each other in multiplayer matches. Looking at the game from this perspective, *THE DIVISION* seems less interested in telling a nuanced, profound story and more about providing an exciting, simulated combat experience in a spectacularly constructed adventure playground. If we take the metaphor of the playground seriously, however, it must also be said that these places do not offer just one valid way of playing. Playgrounds—whether physical playgrounds for children or digital open world games—invite us, as Miguel Sicart describes, to a “constant dance between resistance and

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7 Irvine, Alex: *Tom Clancy's the Division: New York Collapse*, San Francisco: Chronicle Books 2016.

8 Gies, Arthur: “THE DIVISION Review,” in: *Polygon* (2016); <https://www.polygon.com/2016/3/15/11224502/the-division-review-ps4-xbox-one-pc>

surrender,”<sup>9</sup> in which we either participate in the pre-established functions of the existing objects or in which we playfully reinterpret the found materialities: “Playgrounds offer different geometries and locations of the structures, [suggesting] many kinds of potential interactions. Both the materiality of the playground and its aesthetic form are ways of resisting pure appropriation.”<sup>10</sup>

That means that a playground construction with the design of a pirate ship can obviously and primarily invite children to imagine an adventure on the high seas. But it can also become a dwelling for a tea party or a barricade for a NERF battle. In the same way, a game like FORTNITE (2017) can first and foremost function as a battleground for competitive multiplayer matches—but, as recent years have shown, it can also be used by its operators as a platform to become a venue for pop concerts, movie nights, or even the reenactment of historic moments like the famous “I have a dream”-speech by Martin Luther King Jr.<sup>11</sup>

The game and narrative designers of the THE DIVISION seemed to have taken this openness of a freely navigable space to heart. And so, THE DIVISION’s Manhattan is not only filled with trigger-happy gang members fighting for the supremacy of the city but also with numerous narrative fragments left behind by the (more or less) peaceful inhabitants of New York, only waiting for players who are interested in stories of the urban post-apocalypse to pick them up. These fragments tell many, very different, much smaller, and much more intimate stories about the fate of a city during the pandemic. Stephen Totilo writes about this form of miniature narratives scattered throughout the city:

“Many of them are so interesting, so well-written, so emotional that THE DIVISION turned out to be one of my favorite games in terms of storytelling. Sure, I liked the shooting in the game, but I also liked treating it like the world’s most expensive version of GONE HOME. Playing THE DIVISION I was happy to walk through, listening to the stories of the people who lived in its obliterated city.”<sup>12</sup>

9 Sicart, Miguel: *Play Matters*, Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press 2014, p. 52.

10 Ibid.

11 <https://www.epicgames.com/fornite/en-US/news/celebrate-mlk-time-studios-pr-esents-march-through-time-in-fornite>

12 Totilo, Stephen: “The Best Stories Hidden in THE DIVISION,” in: *Kotaku* (2019); <https://kotaku.com/the-best-stories-hidden-in-the-division-1833205284>

Totilo's choice of *GONE HOME* for his comparison is interesting for several reasons. Whereas in its general premise, *THE DIVISION* is characterized by Totilo not without some justification as a "macho shooter,"<sup>13</sup> in which spectacular firefights are fought against the backdrop of an apocalyptic setting, *GONE HOME* is almost spectacularly unspectacular. Instead of political conspiracies of global proportions, the focus here is on a family story, which, due to the narrative reduction to the private sphere of everyday life, represented an unusual contrast to other computer games at the time of its release. More than that, *GONE HOME* tells its story neither through the relatively common form of cut scenes nor through scripted sequences, but almost exclusively through the objects we find in its game world. As a prototypical case study for the genre of what would later be (somewhat ironically) called the 'walking simulator,' it is also a prime example of the effective use of environmental storytelling and of diegetic artifacts that trigger a narrative script in the minds of the players. Just as one text in a palimpsest is superimposed on others, we can find all kinds of different stories within the larger story of each of the games. The palimpsest thus becomes not only an intertextual echo chamber of older texts but also a narrative mosaic. A direct comparison with *GONE HOME* brings to light three essential functions that transform diegetic artifacts—objects that can be found in the game's storyworld—into narrative devices.

## **NARRATIVE FUNCTIONS OF DIEGETIC ARTIFACTS IN VIDEO GAMES**

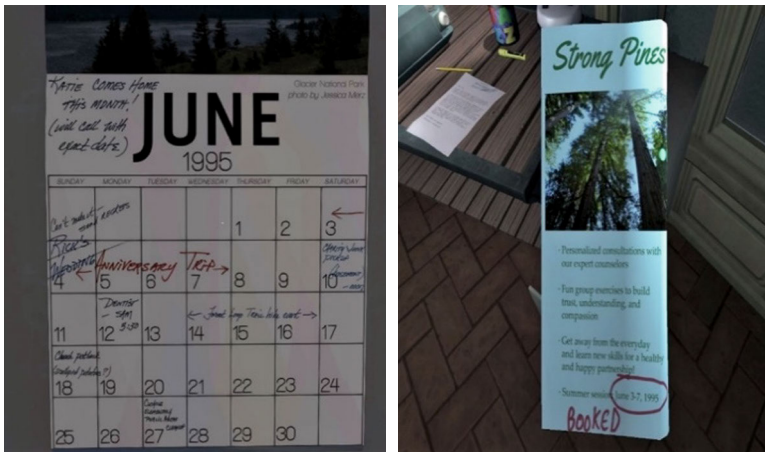
A closer look at environmental storytelling reveals that diegetic artifacts can serve at least three functions: They form (1) a sequence of events, (2) reveal biographical information about the characters, and (3) serve as time capsules, corresponding with the players' knowledge of the depicted world and embracing a certain cultural zeitgeist. The first function corresponds with Jenkins' classical characterization of game spaces as narrative architecture, in which we find a "pre-structured but embedded [narrative] within the mise-en-scene awaiting discovery [turning the game world into] a kind of

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13 Ibid.

information space, a memory palace.”<sup>14</sup> In this understanding, objects in games can be read as (1) clues that, when put together, describe episodic sequences of events that deploy a “change of state” or an “eventfulness.”<sup>15</sup> In *GONE HOME*, for example, we learn from letters we find at one place about a looming marital crisis of the parents; later correspondence hints at an affair with a mother’s work colleague. The clues about the affair become clearer when we find a poetry book in the bedroom under the mother’s bed, along with a dedication by the colleague in question. The plot thread of the marital crisis is woven further and further through the various rooms of the house: We find marriage counseling books; and finally, a brochure in the father’s desk drawer with the handwritten note “booked!” reveals that the short vacation to celebrate the parents’ anniversary (as written down in the kitchen calendar) is actually a weekend of marriage counseling (fig. 1a/1b).

Figure 1a/1b: Diegetic objects in *GONE HOME* as narrative devices



Source: *GONE HOME*, The Fulbright Company 2013, Screenshots by HCS

- 14 Jenkins, Henry: “Game Design as Narrative Architecture,” in: Wardrip-Fruin/Harrington, Pat (eds.), *FirstPerson. New Media as Story, Performance, and Game*, Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press 2004, pp. 118-130, here p. 126.
- 15 Thon, Jan-Noël: “Narrativity,” in: Ryan, Marie-Laure et al. (eds.): *The Johns Hopkins Guide to Digital Media*, Baltimore, Md.: Johns Hopkins Univ. Press 2014, pp. 351.



Although such micronarratives also occur in *THE DIVISION*, they seldom achieve the complexity and carefully coordinated serial dramaturgy as in *GONE HOME*, despite the enormous game space available in the city. The number of objects that can be counted as narrative artifacts in *THE DIVISION* is limited to six sub-categories: Phone Recordings, Incident Reports, Crashed Drones, Missing Agents, ECHOs, and torn-out pages of a survival guide-book. Many of the narratives addressed by Totilo are realized as short, one-off audio logs, mostly in the form of phone recordings that can be played by activating smartphones left behind. Other, somewhat more complex stories only come together within an internal serial structure after we have put them together like puzzle pieces, as in *GONE HOME*. In addition to tragic and intimate interpersonal events, there are also more comical and tongue-in-cheek episodes that play with genre conventions. In the form of so-called ECHOs—three-dimensional hologrammatic snapshots that display a moment frozen in time—we witness a superhero story in three ‘acts’ (fig. 2):

*Figure 2: A superhero story hidden in The Division*



Source: Screenshot by Stephen Totilo; <https://kotaku.com/the-best-stories-hidden-in-the-division-1833205284>

“There’s also a Superman-like guy who first appears in an echo in which he’s talking to a woman about how he seems to be able to survive a car crash, a fire and now the Black Friday attack. ‘C’mon David, what do you think you are, some kind of super-man?’ his friend asks. ‘No, I can’t fly. Or maybe I can.’ In a later echo, the two are on a rooftop. David jumps off. And in a third, called Origin (with the subtitle ‘A man begins to find his true purpose’), the two are sitting on a park bench, marveling at what just happened on the rooftop. ‘It changes everything,’ she exclaims. ‘What are you going to do?’ ‘I don’t know,’ he responds. ‘We’ll see.’”<sup>16</sup>

The objects from which a narrative episode can be extracted go hand-in-hand with objects that serve a (2) descriptive, symbolic, or biographical function, recounting not so much a sequence of events but telling us more about the characters and the world they live in. In *GONE HOME*, mixtapes featuring bands from the feminist Riot Grrrl punk movement are scattered throughout the house, providing the player with information about the musical tastes and anti-authoritarian attitudes of the game’s protagonist. Likewise, we find short stories from her school days, which hint at the discovery of her homosexuality. The protagonist’s first love and her coming out ultimately become the essential thematic cornerstone that forms the core of the story that unfolds in its abandoned mansion. *GONE HOME* thus touches on a somewhat unusual topic for video games—and its great strength lies in the fact that this topic is meaningfully processed through its game mechanics (the discovery of objects) into a story about a family whose members are each confronted with their own individual problems (becoming more apparent with each object found). Such a focus on a single thematic motive is hardly conceivable in *THE DIVISION* since we are dealing with a much larger ensemble of characters, a variety of completely different plots, and fewer unique objects that are scattered across a much larger setting. However, we still can extrapolate similar information through the aforementioned ECHOs and audio logs. Totilo describes:

“There are a series of echoes involving tracking down a woman named Alexis Kwan at the request of a doctor named Jessica Kandel. The doctor tells you of a support group Kwan ran, so you can go to the place where that group met and explore an after-image of a meeting where Kwan no-showed. Then you can go to Kwan’s place, where

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16 S. Totilo: “The Best Stories Hidden in *THE DIVISION*.”

you'll see an after-image of her chucking her cellphone. More detective [sic] work will reveal that she's an acclaimed pianist and was in a relationship with Kendal. Another echo, this one in Kendal's apartment, shows an after-image of Kwan writing a letter, saying she's sick from the weapons attack and doesn't think they'll see each other again. Sometimes these ghostly stories emerge into the main game world. That happens with the search for Alexis Kwan. You find her out in the world, playing the piano in the snow. And then, what do you know? She later shows up back in your base of operations, playing the piano for other survivors."<sup>17</sup>

The fact that these biographical depictions and the characterization of the inhabitants of the house in *GONE HOME* and the city in *THE DIVISION* play out quite convincingly on the basis of their objects is finally also related to their third function. These objects not only form narrative sequences of events in which, as described above, plot arcs are constructed across rooms with the help of diegetic artifacts, or provide us with more detailed descriptions and nuances of the characters, but also serve to place them in (3) spatio-temporal contexts that players are likely familiar with from their own knowledge of the actual world. *THE DIVISION* reconstructs a very believable virtual Manhattan with many of the well-known locations and popular sights from New York City, the rooms of the Greenbriar mansion in *GONE HOME* show us magazine articles reporting on Kurt Cobain's death; video cassettes on which the at times enormously popular TV series *THE X-FILES* was recorded, and a gaming console by the manufacturer Nintendo implying the technical status quo of video game consoles of the time. This bygone period inscribes itself into the spatiality of the house, whereby it becomes—to use a classical term of the literary scholar Mikhail Bakhtin—a *chronotopos*,<sup>18</sup> a

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17 Ibid.

18 Of course, Bakhtin's concept is more complex than it may seem here. According to the German editors of the essay, there are at least six uses of the term *chronotopos* that can be observed: the term fulfills a cultural-theoretical, a genre-theoretical, a narratological, a compositional, and an anthropological function in the text, respectively. (Frank, Michael C./Mahlke, Kristin: "Nachwort," in: Bakhtin, Michail M.: *Chronotopos*, Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp 2008, pp. 205-207.) What has been succinctly described here as a 'time capsule' covers the compositional and anthropological modes of the house as a motif as well as the possibility of drawing conclusions about the human image depicted in the game.

kind of time capsule corresponding with the players' knowledge of the depicted world and embracing a certain cultural zeitgeist.

Of course: The three functions of narrative objects described here are not to be understood as a fixed taxonomy but rather as a heuristic. The proposed system of object functionalities does not fall into mutually exclusive, clear cut and distinct categories, but in ones that often times overlap and can be supplemented by other functions. To give another example: In *THE DIVISION 2* (set in Washington DC), a different form of collectibles can be found—looted art works from the city's museums. At the location where we can collect Rembrandt's most famous self-portrait, the misc-en-scène not only tells us a lot about the state of the world, but also about its cultural values: Next to the painting that was carelessly left behind we see a price board on which the words "1000\$", "100\$", "Food" and "Water?" (fig. 3) have been written, one below the other. Thus, as a diegetic artifact, the painting fulfills both category 2 (if the city is seen as a character) and category 3 (hinting at a zeitgeist of a possible future).

*Figure 3: Rembrandt's self-portrait in exchange for water*



Source: Screenshot by Camzillasmom, 2019; <https://www.camzillasmom.com/the-dvision-2-2019/found-all-artwork-artifacts-location-collectibles-the-division-2-2019.html>

This cursory overview shows some of the ways in which video games can employ different approaches to tell stories with the artifacts scattered throughout their game world. Almost like paratexts (as texts that are physically *next* to other texts), they create narrative meaning, “construct[ing], liv[ing] in, and affect[ing] the running of the text.”<sup>19</sup> Where the environmental storytelling in *THE DIVISION* reveals a remarkable, diverse cross-section of narrative episodes of many individual fates, *GONE HOME* seems at first glance to find a more nuanced and subtle narrative approach, characterized not only by the focus on a central theme but also and especially by the suggestive power of the various materials (such as the handwritten letters, family calendars, and poetry books mentioned above). In this way, it is not only the plain narrative content itself that significantly influences the effect of the story—it is also the “materiality of the playground and its aesthetic form”<sup>20</sup> mentioned above. These aesthetics are heavily informed by the habits and the contexts we associate with them (for example, the intimacy of handwritten notes), and by tapping into this reservoir of associations, experiences, and expectations, the arrangement and the design of the objects also shape our perception of the story in a decisive way. Loosely following Marshall McLuhan, we could say that the in-game-depicted media may not entirely be the message, but they contribute significantly to the experience of the message. Thus, they also lend them a certain *feeling* that can be used to great effect for environmental storytelling.

At first glance, *THE DIVISION*’s material aesthetic, with its focus on the audio logs (partly illustrated by the ECHOs), does not seem to be particularly pronounced. However, a second look that has to be directed *next* to the core text of the video game reveals a completely different picture: A paratext that not only replicates all of the functions mentioned above but adds to them in surprising ways.

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19 J. Gray: *Show Sold Separately*, p. 16.

20 M. Sicart: *Play Matters*, p. 52.

## TIE IN AND TIE OFF: THE PARATEXT AS A TRANSMEDIAL PAPERCHASE

Roaming through THE DIVISION'S reconstruction of New York's Chelsea neighborhood, we can find and enter an apartment building on the corner of 24<sup>th</sup> Street and 9<sup>th</sup> Avenue. There is a symbol on the chaotic living room floor, highlighting another piece of Intel—a torn-out page of the in-game survival guide *New York Collapse: A Survival Guide to Urban Catastrophe*, written by someone named Warren Merchant (Fig. 4). The page we find is a part of the front matter of the book, but in addition to the title and the author's name, it has a special dedication:

"To A, on her birthday! Because you can never be too paranoid about the world coming down around your ears! But if NYC collapses, I know we won't babe. You and me, me and you, the world begins and ends there. Read on, and you'll be all set when the zombies come! Love, much love, all the love—B"<sup>21</sup>

Similarly, on the remaining pages of the book, scattered in other apartments, we repeatedly find personal entries and drawings written in different ink colors on the margins of the actual text. The 24 pages of the survival guidebook we find in the game turn out to be an actual palimpsest,<sup>22</sup> a text above a text. It serves as a fragmentary diary of the New Yorker April Kelleher, who documents the events around her in short entries, comments on the instructions in the survival guide book with regard to their usefulness, and reflects on her experiences in a kind of stream of consciousness. Interwoven with this personal chronicle of the course of the pandemic—including personal stories of new friendships, death, the struggle for survival against hostile factions, and even the protagonist's own course of the illness—are two other plots that

21 A. Irvine: *New York Collapse*.

22 *New York Collapse* is also a palimpsest in the intertextual sense, drawing not only from dozens of already existing survival handbooks, but also drawing its peculiar aesthetics from another book: Doug Dorst's and J.J.Abrams' novel *S.* was released by the same publisher, Melcher Media, and shares many of the same material and textual characteristics. For a closer look at *S.*, also compared to GONE HOME (2013) see Schmidt, Hanns Christian: *Transmediale Topoi*, Marburg: Büchner, p. 47.

mysteriously intersect again and again: The murder of April's husband Bill, who wrote the dedication quoted above, and the mystery surrounding the actual author's identity. These torn-out pages and short diary entries are repeatedly expanded with the ECHOs described above, in which we hear April Kelleher's monologues as well as dialogues with other characters, which become more meaningful as the actual plot unfolds.

Figure 4: A torn page from the in-game survival guide *New York Collapse*



Source: Screenshot by Camzillasmom 2019; <https://www.camzillasmom.com/the-division-2-2019/found-all-artwork-artifacts-location-collectibles-the-division-2-2019.html>

Because of its complex design, this piece of environmental storytelling seems a bit unusual for the world of *THE DIVISION*. Finding out that *New York Collapse* does not only exist within the digital game but also as an actual, physically purchasable book is even more striking, however—including all of the in-game writings, traces of wear, tears, burn marks, and even blood splatters that result from events of the virtual pandemic. Through this two-fold distribution—as a virtual book in the world of the game and as a physical book in ‘our’ world—we can not only touch an analogously reproduced piece of environmental storytelling but also engage with a peculiar hybrid of paratext and palimpsest, a text written over another text. On the first intertextual layer, we find a distillation of other survival guidebooks, focusing in this case specifically on New York City. In it, the alleged author tells us how to use

superglue to close lacerations provisionally, how to construct a makeshift heater from flower pots and a small candle, how to filter water with the help of two screw jars, a hose, and a sunlit window sill, and why a chicken is so crucial during a food shortage (not only for a chicken dinner but for the eggs it lays over time).

As mentioned above in connection with *GONE HOME*, it is not so much the content of the diegetic artifact itself, but rather the material depiction of the information that creates a feeling and a sense of presence of its story-world. Alongside this survival aspect, however, another textual level quickly becomes apparent. On page 14 of the book, April notes that a graph illustrating New York City's commuting situation over the last couple of decades has numerous implausible spikes. She comments on her confusion about the numbers with the words "Oh. OH. Am I seeing things here?" and "Never saw it until I held it upon the light."<sup>23</sup> If we also point the book page toward a light source, four circles become visible on the back of the two-sided book page. Each unusual point in the graph seems to mark a word on the back, which together form the sentence "There will be a virus."<sup>24</sup>

This puzzle virtually opens up a rabbit hole—and it becomes clear to both April Kelleher and to us that there is more to the text than initially meets the eye. In total, we can find 15 puzzles in the book (plus many more text segments, which *may* be puzzles but have not yet been finally categorized as such).<sup>25</sup> Those puzzles vary greatly in their degree of complexity and

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23 Ibid., p. 14.

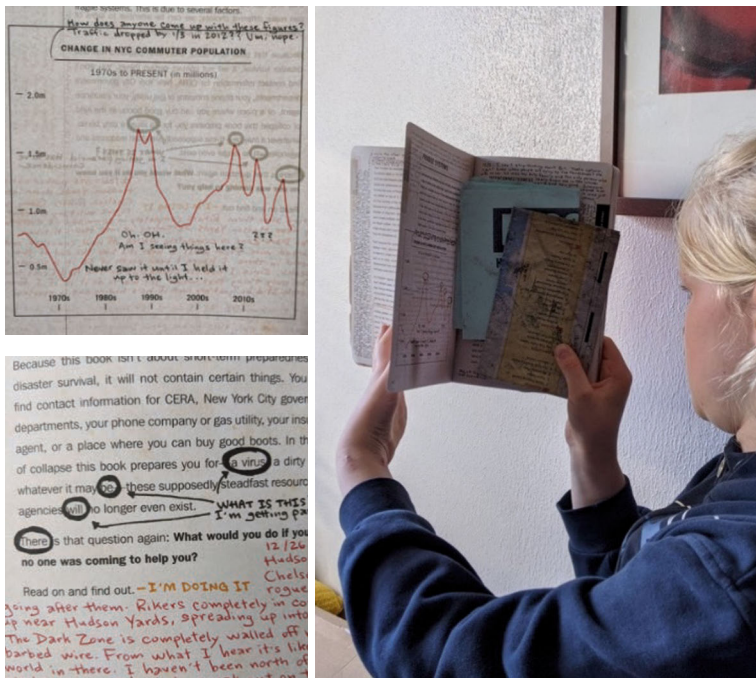
24 Ibid., p. 15.

25 During my time with the book, I personally have not been able to give this puzzle layer a complete and all-encompassing analysis. However, as it is typical of these types of transmedia franchises, many fans quickly gathered around the book, collectively attempting to track down the mysteries in a coordinated effort—a form of collective intelligence and participatory culture entirely in accordance with what Henry Jenkins had originally envisioned in his concept of transmedia storytelling (Henry Jenkins, *Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media Collide*, New York, NY: New York Univ. Press 2008, pp. 95-134.) However, most of these solutions are still well documented on Reddit: Agent John Asher: "[Book Spoilers] New York Collapse Book—Secrets Revealed!" (2021), [https://www.reddit.com/r/thedivision/comments/49z8no/book\\_spoilers\\_new\\_york\\_collapse\\_book\\_secrets/?st=J5ZRG4MX&sh=3e1af14d](https://www.reddit.com/r/thedivision/comments/49z8no/book_spoilers_new_york_collapse_book_secrets/?st=J5ZRG4MX&sh=3e1af14d)



repeatedly hint at the cause, the course, and a possible cure for the disease. But *New York Collapse* reveals even more layers: we find a total of seven other artifacts that accompany the physical copy—a sticky note, a missing persons poster, a miniature drawing by a comic book artist, a subway ticket, a map of Manhattan, and a torn-out book page from a history book.

Figure 5: Page 13 and 14 in *New York Collapse*, the book in 'action'



Source: Irvine, Alex: *New York Collapse* (2016), photos by HCS

All these elements further invite the reader to use the information available in the printed text to hunt for clues and to decipher more codes in order to track down a supposed larger narrative mystery. This way, a sticky note found on one of the first pages becomes a literal puzzle piece that, when attached to one of the last pages in the book, reveals a hidden message. Similarly, a perforated transit pass, placed on the correct page, reveals an address that can be visited in the game world.

Figure 6: Overview of every physical insert in *New York Collapse*

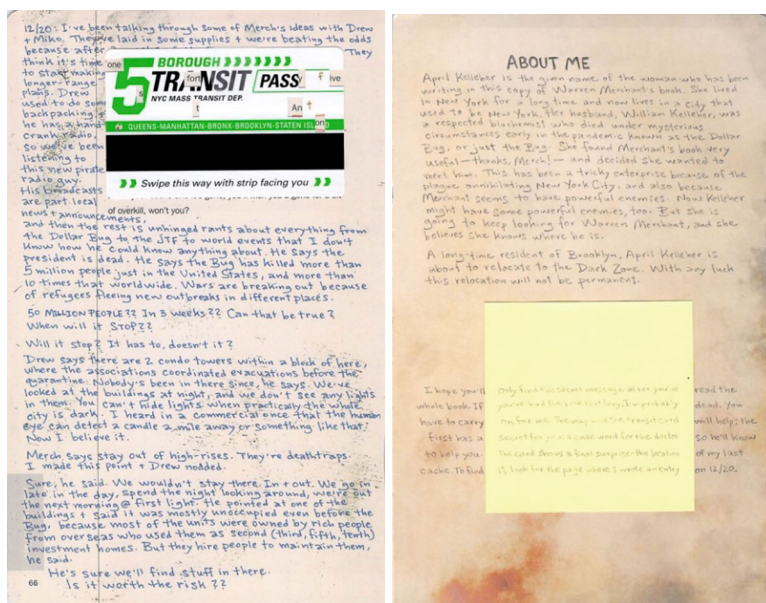


Source: <https://images-na.ssl-images-amazon.com/images/I/814dY1hI-JL.jpg>

*New York Collapse* shows how the three narrative functions of diegetic artifacts described above are reproduced again in the survival guide. By assembling the objects in the right way, we track down a (supposedly) larger mystery piece by piece and learn something about the state of the world, both through April's reports and the physical wear marks in the book (like the bloodstains). Additionally, we get to know the characters related to the book in a textual as well as in a non-textual way (for example, by looking at Bill's comic sketch). In this way, we are not only holding a chronotopic time capsule of an imaginary narrative scenario in our hands but also one that contains artifacts that lead to the narrative's future: Once we have reached the end of the book, the final diegetic artifact that falls into our hands is a missing persons poster that portrays April Kelleher herself—suggesting that the ominous author has been watching our protagonist already for a long time. The solution of a final mystery yields another address—a location in a quarantined area, the so-called Dark Zone. Switching back to the digital game, we neither find April nor the ominous author but a whiteboard with coordinates, seemingly leading nowhere. Is this the end of the story for April Kelleher? Not at all—but in order to find out what became of her, we have to cross another

medial border, right into Alex Irvine's sequel novel, which is also a spin-off to the game's sequel, *THE DIVISION 2*.

Figure 7: Unlocking new meanings with *New York Collapse*'s diegetic artifacts



Source: <https://i.imgur.com/CyQ1ZJj.png>

By assembling these narrative and material layers, *New York Collapse* creates a game of its own, staging many of the narrative functions of the diegetic artifacts of *THE DIVISION*'s environmental storytelling in a medium-specific way, further emphasizing what Totilo enjoyed about the game apart from the shooting. Hence, the paratext and palimpsest also become a best practice case of transmedia storytelling<sup>26</sup> and a convincing example of both world- and character-building across media. With each page we read, we learn more about the collapsed New York, construct more details of our mental model of its storyworld, and joining April Kelleher on a hunt for what Jenkins called

26 H. Jenkins: *Convergence Culture*, p. 127.

“origami unicorns,”<sup>27</sup> trying to find possible plot twists across media that shed new light on the story. By choosing the novel with a first-person, subjective narrator as storytelling medium, is also an interesting take of what Jenkins’ highlighted as a meaningful use of storytelling across media, with “each new text making a distinctive [media specific, HCS] and valuable contribution to the whole.”<sup>28</sup> When I asked *New York Collapse*’s actual author, Alex Irvine, in an e-mail about how the book offers a perspective on the events of the storyworld that is different from the one of the game, he answered:

“Most people’s idea of survivalism is heavily focused on violence. Actual survival in a post-collapse society, however, is going to be more about cooperation and knowledge. You can have all the guns you want, but if you can’t find food, or you don’t have any seeds, or you don’t know how to treat minor medical problems... none of those guns will matter. So I wanted the book to engage what day-to-day life was like in the middle of a collapse. April sees plenty of violence, and she learns to navigate the armed militias and so forth, but she also spends a lot of time going through the mundane motions of daily life. Even in a collapsing society, nobody is going to spend all their time shooting at other people. In fact, even people who are dedicated to shooting at other people wouldn’t get to do it very often. So that’s not what I wanted April’s story to be about. It’s about finding (and losing) a community, learning how to rely on herself, and deciding what’s still important in this new world.”<sup>29</sup>

In the process, the book also turns into a ‘literal’ Alternate Reality Game, with hundreds of fans within different levels of involvement on Reddit working together. By not only trying to solve the mysteries in the book but also by scouting for the hidden locations of April’s stash and the hideout of the mysterious author in the game, the book sends us back and forth across medial borders, always switching between the book, the game, and the internet forums, respectively. Alex Irvine thinks about this transmedial interplay:

“Most transmedia universes consist of a central property and a bunch of dangling, trailing afterthoughts. When I was pitching *New York Collapse*, my essential argument

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27 Ibid.

28 H. Jenkins: *Convergence Culture*, p. 127.

29 Schmidt, Hanns Christian, unpublished interview with Alex Irvine, 2021.

was: What if we had a transmedia ecosystem where every property created direct feedback to every other property—where the game does what only games do well, the book does what only books can do well, and the person who experiences them both doesn't just have more story, but \*different\* story. Better story, enriched and overlaid. Like the book itself..."<sup>30</sup>

## CONCLUSION: „NOW I'M NOT CRAZY, THE WORLD IS“<sup>31</sup>

What lessons can we as game studies scholars draw from this unusual tie-in? First of all, that our case studies very quickly elude our theoretical toolbox when we try to capture and categorize it under already established conceptual labels. *New York Collapse* is part paratext that extends the game world of *THE DIVISION*, but also part palimpsest, assembling textual predecessors (already existing survival guides) and providing a second textual level that turns out to be a transmedial paper chase for narrative meaning. In this sense, Consalvo's statement of 'the paratext becoming the text'<sup>32</sup> is not only illustrated but also receives an additional quality: *New York Collapse* is not a mere paratext of a game, but creates a game itself. Still, it is much more than that: To describe the peculiar aesthetics of the book more closely, we can also look at it through the lens of intermediality, examining it under sub-categories of "media combination"<sup>33</sup> in Irina Rajwesky's taxonomy or as Andreas Böhn's media stylistic "form citations."<sup>34</sup> We could also ask whether it qualifies as what Wolfgang Hallet has described as a "multimodal novel"<sup>35</sup>

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30 H. Schmidt, interview with Alex Irvine.

31 A. Irvine: *New York Collapse*, p. 72.

32 Consalvo, Mia: *Cheating: Gaining Advantage in Videogames*, Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press 2009, p. 21.

33 Irina O. Rajewsky: "Intermediality, Intertextuality, and Remediation: A Literary Perspective on Intermediality," in: *Intermédialités: Histoire et théorie des arts, des lettres et des techniques*, no. 6 (2005), p. 43-64.

34 Böhn, Andreas (ed.): *Formzitat und Intermedialität*, St. Ingbert: Röhrig Univ.-Verl. 2003.

35 Hallet, Wolfgang: "The Rise of the Multimodal Novel. Generic Change and Its Narratological Implications." in: Ryan, Marie-Laure/Thon, Jan-Noël (eds.),

or to what extent the aesthetics of remediation, oscillating between immediacy and hypermediacy,<sup>36</sup> evoke an “aura of realism”<sup>37</sup> and result in a more ‘authentic’ or even more immersive impression of the game’s storyworld altogether. *New York Collapse* also presents an interesting case study for presenting a historical examination of so-called ‘Feelies’—package inserts for computer games, ranging from 3D comics and cardboard 3D glasses for text adventures (both included in the Infocom’s game *LEATHER GODDESSES FROM PHOBOS*, 1986), to audio dramas on cassette tapes (included in Lucas Games’ *LOOM*, 1980), and even used tissues and dry pasta (included in Infogrames’ *MURDERS IN VENICE*, 1989).<sup>38</sup> Perhaps, in the end, it would be a good way to conclude with a statement by Kocurek:

“These experiences stretch the magic circle of games, expanding the ludic sphere into the world outside the screen, and asking the player to engage with the [diegetic] objects not merely as representations of the game world, but as components of the game world—a world, which, owing to the effect of these objects, now extends beyond the confines of the screen.”<sup>39</sup>

Categorizing *New York Collapse* in this respect is unquestionably a valid endeavor and would yield many more interesting insights. The concepts

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*Storyworlds Across Media: Toward a Media-Conscious Narratology*, Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press 2014, pp. 151-72.

36 Bolter, Jay D./Grusin, Richard: *Remediation: Understanding New Media*, Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press 2000.

37 Camper, Brett: “Retro-Reflexivity: La-Mulana, an 8-Bit Period Piece.” in: Perron, Bernard/Wolf, Mark J. P. (eds.), *The Video Game Theory Reader*, New York, NY: Routledge 2009, pp. 169-196.

38 These and other notable examples of these ‘feelies’ of the 1980s and 1990s are featured in a remarkable YouTube video (in German language) by game journalists Gunnar Lott and Christian Schmidt: Schmidt, Christian/Lott, Gunnar: “Aus Dem Archiv, Folge 3: Packungsbeilagen,” (2021), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GshY4-CmQFo&t=3s>

39 Kocurek, Carly A.: “The Treachery of Pixels: Reconsidering Feelies in an Era of Digital Play,” in: *Journal of Gaming and Virtual Worlds* 5, no. 3 (2013), pp. 295-306, here p. 304.

mentioned here serve as lenses with which intertextual, intermedial, and transmedial phenomena can be examined and certain qualities can be brought into focus while other properties, in turn, become blurred. Under this particular lens, we took a closer look at the narrative functions and mechanisms that game paratexts can obtain—but when we think of paratexts as devices for shaping the overall meaning of a text, there is still one aspect that is worth further mentioning.

Especially as a paratext of a game that was being studied at the time when the Corona Pandemic had kept the world on tenterhooks for almost two years and cost millions of lives, *New York Collapse* leaves a strange aftertaste. This has a lot to do with the worldbuilding that pervades the DIVISION franchise in a typical Tom Clancy fashion. At the end of his essay on playing the game at the time of Covid-19, Siddhartha Bajracharya writes:

“The America we see in the game isn’t exactly admirable. The core concept of THE DIVISION is alarming to even the most casual of civil libertarians. Its idea of thousands of sleeper agents of the ‘Deep State,’ now activated and empowered with an indefinite mandate to act as judge, jury, and executioner in the defense of American society, is like something out of an Alex Jones fever dream.”

Bajracharya’s judgment is not only supported by *New York Collapse* but also expanded upon. Reading it as a survival guide, the book feels like a bible for the so-called Survivalists or Prepper movement, whose members firmly believe that the end of the world is imminent—just like the fictional author Warren Merchant knows it. On the other hand, it is also a conspiracy narrative, a story in which nothing is as it seems, we can trust no one, and are left to our own devices (and firepower). In a time when a real pandemic damaged our social fabric to a severe degree and conspiracy theorists are storming government buildings, the book does not just seem like an extension of a fictional narrative world or a ludic magic circle—it feels like an anticipation or even a result of a certain political climate. Alex Irvine thinks:

“If there’s anything to be learned from conspiracy fiction, it’s this: People will die for a good story, especially if they think it’s a story about them. Here’s the thing to remember: In real life, conspiracies are also a narrative rationale. [...] I think writers who work with conspiracies as story fuel need to be very careful not to feed into the same toxic elements that make real-life conspiracies so dangerous. Covid has surfaced



some of those elements in a way that I hope will be cautionary for storytellers. It's too easy to make lazy moves that nourish authoritarian and/or racist conspiracy doctrines."

In retrospect, it seems easy to see how the political paranoia that led to movements such as Q-Anon already existed in *New York Collapse*, even though Irvine characterizes it as a rather inadequate story fuel for novels of this day and age. By integrating that, it only adds to Ubisoft's notoriously oblivious stance toward their games, claiming that their real-life political framings serve no meaning whatsoever but continuously employing recent political issues as a backdrop for their games to make them more buzzworthy.<sup>40</sup> When we think about paratexts and finding meaning in videogames, however, it should be noted that many of the interpretations and readings we associate with games are the result of placing these texts side by side—parallel—to each other, comparing different perspectives, but also allowing different readings and subjective findings to emerge. Hence, a critical reading of the games' politics as well as Totilo's praise for its narrative diversity or Bajracharya's depiction of *THE DIVISION* as a ludic therapy session not only show that games may provide many ways to engage with them meaningfully. They also emphasize the importance of paratexts: How to read a game is not dependent on its text alone but also on the many texts that surround it.

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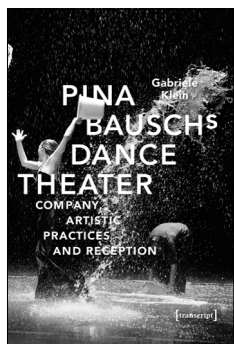
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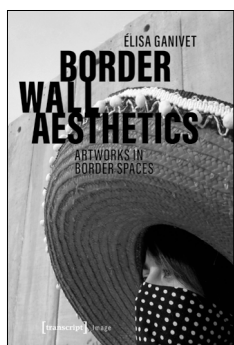
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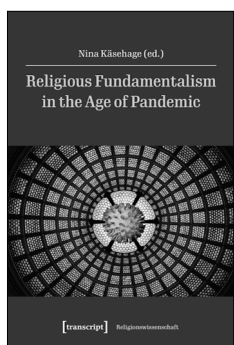
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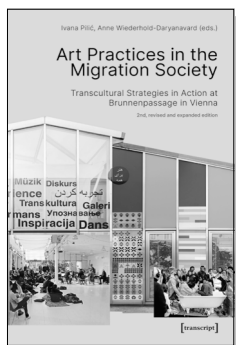
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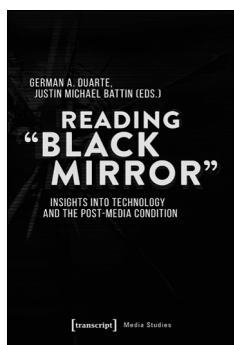
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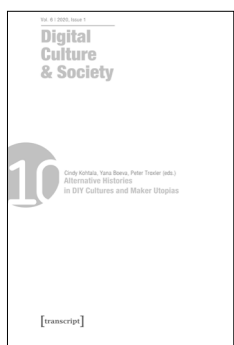
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