

The Paratext, the Palimpsest, and the Pandemic

Finding Meaning in THE DIVISION's Diegetic Artifacts

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.”¹

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 paratexts² 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

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."³

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.⁴ 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.⁵ Coming from the Greek word *palimpsēstos*, literally meaning "scraped again,"⁶ 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*

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.⁷ 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.”⁸ 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

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,”⁹ 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.”¹⁰

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.¹¹

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.”¹²

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,"¹³ 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.

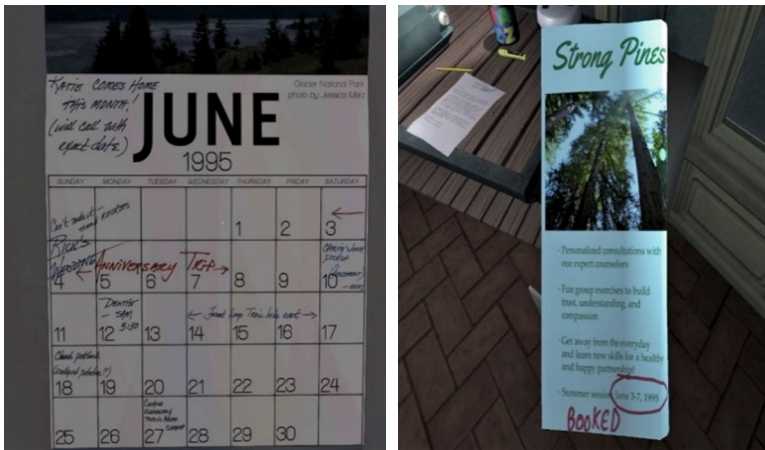
NARRATIVE FUNCTIONS OF DIEGETIC ARTIFACTS IN VIDEO GAMES

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

13 Ibid.

information space, a memory palace.”¹⁴ 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.”¹⁵ 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.’”¹⁶

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

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."¹⁷

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*,¹⁸ a

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-division-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.”¹⁹ 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”²⁰ 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.

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 24th Street and 9th 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"²¹

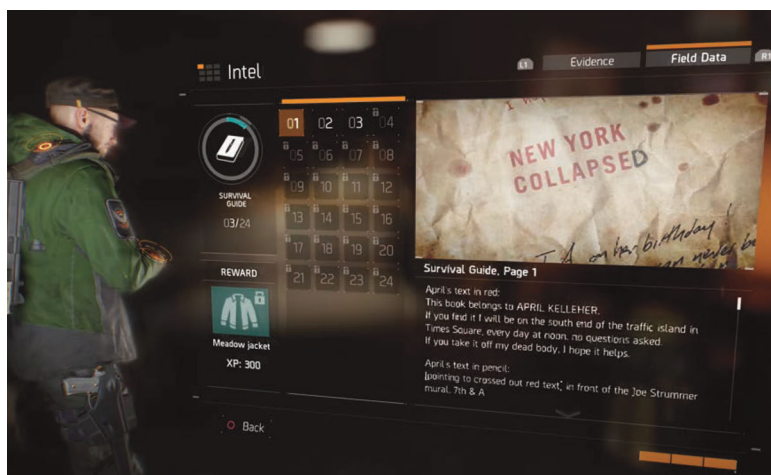
Similarly, on the remaining pages of the book, scattered in other apartments, we repeatedly find personal entries and drawings written in different ink colors on the margins of the actual text. The 24 pages of the survival guidebook we find in the game turn out to be an actual palimpsest,²² a text above 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."²³ 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."²⁴

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).²⁵ Those puzzles vary greatly in their degree of complexity and

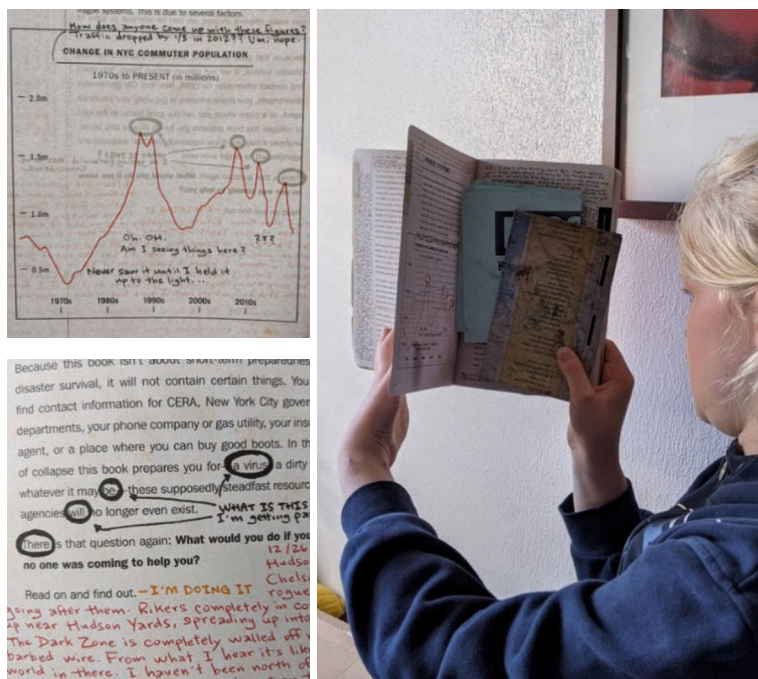
23 Ibid., p. 14.

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

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*

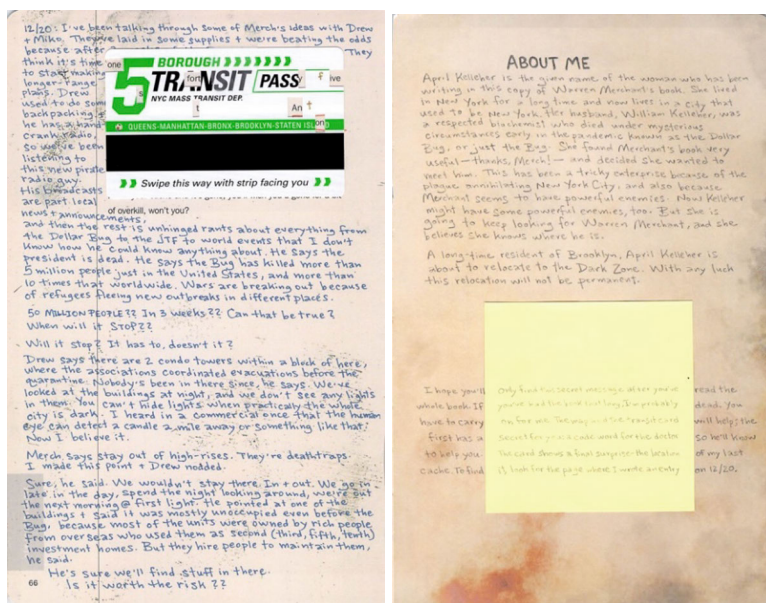


Source: <https://images-na.ssl-images-amazon.com/images/I/814dY1hI-JL.jpg>

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 storytelling²⁶ 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

“origami unicorns,”²⁷ 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.”²⁸ 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.”²⁹

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

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..."³⁰

CONCLUSION: „NOW I'M NOT CRAZY, THE WORLD IS“³¹

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'³² 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"³³ in Irina Rajwesky's taxonomy or as Andreas Böhn's media stylistic "form citations."³⁴ We could also ask whether it qualifies as what Wolfgang Hallet has described as a "multimodal novel"³⁵

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,³⁶ evoke an “aura of realism”³⁷ 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).³⁸ 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.”³⁹

Categorizing *New York Collapse* in this respect is unquestionably a valid endeavor and would yield many more interesting insights. The concepts

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.⁴⁰ 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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