

Marginally Different:

The Ludic Tendencies of Videogame Paratexts

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Abstract

Videogame paratexts – elements that accompany and shape a game’s experience – operate within a complex network around the game. These can be anything from reviews, posters, or trailers to websites and marketing campaigns, functioning to inform, promote, or critique the game. Based on Gérard Genette’s concept of the paratext as a “threshold” that mediates between the game and reality, these materials enable players to connect with the gameworld before, during, and after gameplay. If paratexts are created or presented in a ludic way, they often transcend their promotional purposes, bringing about immersive, playful experiences that blur the boundaries between fiction and reality.

This article examines the playful aspects of paratexts as forms of ‘otherness,’ focussing on ‘official’ paratexts crafted or authorised by game developers and marketers. Paratexts vary widely: factual elements like PG ratings or credits can become playful extensions of the gameworld; gameplay-related elements, like customisable avatars in *The Sims 4*, allow players to experiment with identity; narrative-related paratexts, like *Halo 2*’s ARG *I Love Bees*, transform marketing into collaborative, puzzle-solving experiences. Even technological devices like retro controllers or *Fallout*’s real-world Pip-Boy embody the playful ‘otherness’ of games, bridging the gameworld and real-world experience.

Playful paratexts are distinct because they mimic or extend the ludic elements of games, allowing engagement beyond gameplay itself. Through examples like *P.T.*, *Undertale*, and *Minecraft*, this article highlights how paratexts invite players into a hybrid space between the game and reality, fostering community, narrative immersion, and imaginative interaction. As such, playful paratexts are not just promotional tools; they are critical to how games are perceived and engaged with, embodying the liminal, immersive essence of gaming culture.

Keywords

videogames; paratexts; playfulness; otherness; immersion; marketing; player engagement

Introduction: Videogames, Paratexts, and Playfulness

Videogames do not exist in isolation, but they operate within a network of material in the form of paratexts, which can take on a variety of configurations in the relationship they build with the game they orbit. These paratexts surround the game from conception through distribution and beyond, shaping how ludic experiences are presented to and engaged with by the player (Genette, 1997: 1–2; Consalvo, 2007: 8; Gray, 2010: 12). In this sense, even this website or the conference providing the rationale for this paper can be considered paratexts as they facilitate the construction of discourses around games. This argument is based on Gérard Genette’s (1997: 2) understanding of paratext as a “threshold” or “an ‘undefined zone’ between the inside and the outside” of a text, offering a framework for the reception of a cultural artefact. In the case of videogames, these paratexts create the links between the fictive gameworld and the player’s reality. These paratexts can take on any form, such as written reviews, a poster, or a trailer, and can have various functions, such as promotion, criticism, or comment. In all these variations, paratexts surrounding a game can be playful, particularly if their intention is to mirror the playfulness of the game they frame.

Based on these initial considerations, this article explores the ludic nature of videogame paratexts from two perspectives: first, how paratexts are inherently different from the games they accompany in their form and function; and second, how playful paratext are 'other' from non-playful ones. By understanding the playfulness of paratexts, it will be possible to emphasise their unique role in shaping both the reception of games and the broader cultural significance of play.

Before addressing playful paratexts specifically, however, it is essential to establish a working definition of *playfulness*. Brian Sutton-Smith (2001: 1) emphasises the difficulty of pinning down playfulness, noting that it is a universally recognised concept yet elusive in theoretical contexts: "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." However, scholars such as Roger Caillois and Johan Huizinga have contributed significantly to defining playfulness by addressing what play, as the act that creates playfulness, is (or could be). Caillois (2001 [1958]: 9–10) describes play as free, uncertain, governed by rules, and productive of make-believe, while Huizinga (1955 [1938]: 10–11) conceptualises the "magic circle," a space distinct from reality in which play occurs. Although Mia Consalvo (2007: 85–87; 2009) has challenged Huizinga's notion, Jaakko Stenros (2014) reaffirms its validity, positioning play as fundamentally 'other' than reality.

While Caillois and Huizinga situate playfulness with the game, J. Nina Lieberman (1965; 1966; 1977) shifts the focus of playfulness onto the player, arguing that without a player's willingness to engage, a game may not function as play: "Playfulness, unlike mere play, is an attitude – a quality of the mind and spirit that infuses interactions with novelty and freedom, allowing individuals to engage with their environment in creative and unpredictable ways" (Lieberman, 1977: 21). Human agency is thus central to the experience of playfulness, making play a pervasive aspect of human interaction (Lieberman, 1977: 44). Considering all these definitions, playfulness can therefore be proclaimed as a player's attitude towards a game as playful, whereby they voluntarily agree to engage with a game and its rules in an arena different from their own reality and marked by make-believe. With this understanding, we can examine how playfulness manifests itself in videogame paratexts and how it creates spaces for ludic engagement both inside and outside of the game.

Forms of Video Game Paratexts

Videogame paratexts span various forms, including factual, gameplay-related, narrative, marketing, technological, industry-related, and fan-created artefacts or texts in the broadest sense (Wolf, 2002: 54; Williams, 2010; Fernández-Vara, 2015: 33; Švelch, 2020; Seiwald, 2021; Seiwald, 2023: 15–32; Seiwald and Vollans, 2023: 1–11). While these categories are fluid and frequently also overlap, they provide a useful framework for understanding how paratexts shape the gaming experience. Although paratexts may differ in form and function, they all share that they shape the presentation and reception of games, influencing how players interpret the game through surrounding materials. After all, the act of playing a video game always involves interacting with paratexts, be it trailers, forums, or game reviews, as these materials guide the player's understanding of the game even before playing. In other words, it is impossible to engage with a game without also engaging with its paratexts, in one way or another. Building on this idea, the study that follows focuses on playfulness in the first five categories of paratexts – those either authored or 'authorised' by the game-makers, often but not solely with a marketing intent. Industry-related and fan-created paratexts are not considered here because although they would form interesting case studies, the focus of this discussion is on how 'official' paratexts created with the main focus of making the game present to a potential audience incorporate playful elements.

Factual Paratexts

Factual paratexts typically serve an informational or legal function, such as stating the PG rating on a game sleeve, copyright notices, or opening and closing credits naming those involved in the game-making process. Yet, these paratexts can blur the boundaries between game and reality and become playful extensions of the game's world (Fernández-Vara, 2015: 27), as seen in *Undertale's* (2015) 'True Pacifist' ending. Here, the credits integrate playful elements and narrative sequences, which

extend the gameworld into the factual realm by encouraging to continue interacting with the game's world, even beyond its supposed conclusion. For example, the game invites the player to become an ambassador to the humans, directly addressing them from within the game into their real world. This is followed by a credit roll that integrates humorous elements and narrative sequences. Here, the distinction between the game and its factual presentation is blurred, reinforcing the idea that play can extend beyond the game itself (Booth, 2015: 67; Seiwald and Vollans, 2023). Even in paratextual spaces that are usually not playful, factual paratexts may adopt a ludic function. For example, a simple Google search for *Minecraft* (2009) reveals a playful interaction: a hand appears at the bottom of the screen, allowing users to 'mine' the webpage. This hand soon transforms into a pickaxe and eventually into a diamond pickaxe, mirroring the evolution of axes in the game. This interaction bridges the gap between the gameworld and reality by triggering playful interaction long before actual gameplay begins, inviting players into a playful experience as they transform seemingly mundane interactions, such as a web search, into extensions of the game. In other words, within this Google search, we are moved into *Minecraft's* fictional universe without actually playing the game itself.

Gameplay-Related Paratexts

The second group of paratexts looked at here – gameplay-related paratexts – directly influences how a game is played, such as setting difficulty levels or designing an avatar. The paratexts often incorporate elements of play, as seen, for example, in *The Sims 4* (2014), where players create highly customisable avatars. As Graeme Kirkpatrick (2013: 16) argues, "involvement in these processes involves a new sense of self. As I relate to others and to space on new terms, so I become a different kind of being." Within simulation games, the process of avatar creation allows players to try out these different versions of themselves and even project themselves or their fantasies into the gameworld, transforming avatar creation into a form of play. Some customisation options, such as creating a Shrek- or Darth Maul-like figure, challenge the game's realist convention by letting these bizarre characters engage with 'normal' looking ones in social situations, and this ability to create characters that deviate from the game's norm opens a space for experimentation and playful engagement, where absurdity meets realism. In a sense, then, the playfulness of avatar creation introduces playfulness into an otherwise serious simulation (Taylor, 2006: 96; Sihvonen, 2011: 157–158). In this case, the avatar creation process becomes a playful space of its own, bridging real-world expectations with the imaginative potential of the gameworld.

Narrative Paratexts

While gameplay-related paratexts possess a strong link to how the game is played, narrative paratexts have a strong bond with the story presented in a game, but they are still external to it (or at least at a markedly different level). Examples are story-driven cutscenes, prologues, and external material relating to the game's narrative, such as a teaser video. These paratexts often extend the gameworld into reality, creating ludic experiences beyond the confines of the game itself. The effect of this kind of intertextual relationship between a game and its paratext can enhance the player's understanding and emotional connection to the narrative, thereby enriching the overall experience. In the context of *Portal* (2007, published in *The Orange Box*), for example, the website *aperturescience.com* offers players a DOS-like interface, which is allegedly controlled by the game's AI, GLaDOS. While this website ties into *Portal's* narrative, it also offers players a standalone playful experience, emphasising that the player's engagement with the game's paratexts is often as crucial as the interaction with the game itself, as paratexts extend the immersive world beyond the limits of the game's code (Calleja, 2011: 94). The playful nature of *aperturescience.com* and people's engagement with it clearly underlines how paratexts can function as both game extensions and independent playful spaces, having an existence beyond the game itself.

Marketing Paratexts

Similarly, the promotional campaign for *Halo 2's* (2004) alternate reality game (ARG) *I Love Bees* (2004) blurred the lines between narrative and marketing paratexts. The ARG led players through a series of real-world puzzles linked to an alien AI storyline, transforming a marketing effort into a full-fledged game and thus blurring the line between the real world and the fictional universe. In doing

so, the game “sought to create a highly connected player base dedicated to, and impressively capable of, defining and solving large-scale problems together” (McGonigal, 2008: 204). Just like bees do. As players solved puzzles, they received real-time updates on the website, demonstrating how a paratextual experience can evolve into a collaborative, community-driven game in its own right.

Marketing paratexts, such as trailers or posters, are generally designed to promote games, and often they adopt playful elements to engage potential players. Playable trailers, like *P.T.* (2014; short for ‘playable teaser’) for the unreleased *Silent Hills*, allow players to experience the game’s horror elements the actual game promises to offer. Although *Silent Hills* was ultimately abandoned, *P.T.* became a standalone success, praised for its immersive gameplay and cryptic narrative (Houghton, 2016; Rivera 2019). It also emphasises a crucial feature of paratexts as defined by Jonathan Gray (2010: 135), namely that they “allow audiences to enter the story-world in multiple ways, creating spaces for playful interaction that often transcend the primary text itself.” The teaser’s ability to transcend its promotional role exemplifies how marketing paratexts can transform into significant cultural artefacts. Moreover, marketing paratexts can also serve as platforms for community building because the way fans engage with promotional materials can create a sense of ownership and investment in the narrative. This communal aspect can be seen in the active discussions and theories surrounding *P.T.*, where players shared their interpretations and experiences online, fostering a collaborative environment that deepened their connection to the game’s narrative.

In contrast, some marketing paratexts merge the gameworld with reality in more unconventional ways. For *Resident Evil 5* (2009), Capcom launched a treasure hunt for fake body parts, blending the game’s universe with real-world spaces. The campaign’s surreal nature created a provocative interaction between players and the game’s narrative, making the boundary between fiction and reality increasingly porous. Although logistical issues arose when unsuspecting citizens found some of the body parts and alerted the police, the campaign nonetheless drew attention to the game, highlighting the playful potential of marketing paratexts. And the marketing campaign going wrong actually had a positive effect: incorporating elements of the game’s lore into real-world settings invite players to experience the game in a more immersive and tactile way (McMahan, 2003: 189). Newspaper reports on the treasure hunt might have attracted new players who otherwise would not have been aware of the game. The blurring of lines between the fictional and the real underscores the innovative strategies that marketing teams can employ because these kinds of promotions leverage real-world interactions to deepen engagement with the narrative, creating a participatory culture around the game (Consalvo, 2016: 127). Despite the risks involved, the campaign illustrated how marketing paratexts can foster unique experiences that resonate with players, transforming them from passive consumers into active participants in the narrative.

Technology Paratexts

The paratexts discussed so far all serve the primary purpose of framing the game to present it as a cultural artefact to potential players. In this sense, they follow a specific goal, and in most cases, the goal is promotion. Technological paratexts, however, are set within a different framework. Devices, such as controllers, VR-sets, and consoles, exist independently of the game and are more universal as they may be applicable to more than one game. Furthermore, they are not paratexts in themselves but make paratextual relationships possible by providing the infrastructure for their creation. We simply need technological devices to be able to play games, but their necessity does not mean that they cannot be playful. Retro gaming devices, for instance, offer a nostalgic and playful way to engage with older games. Modern accessories resembling technologies from forty or fifty years ago, such as joysticks and keypads, allow players to experience older games on contemporary systems, bridging past and present technologies in a playful interaction. These retro devices can either be connected to new or old devices, but in both cases, they change the experience we have of a retro game in comparison to playing it on and with fully new devices. As the design of the joystick, playpad, or controller, for example, was so integral to many games, such as *Tetris* (1984), the playfulness can be increased if we opt for using retro devices when playing them.

In some cases, technological devices originally conceived withing a gameworld can materialise in reality. The *Fallout* (1997–2018) series' Pip-Boy, a fictional wrist-mounted device monitoring the wearer's stats, containing a map and later even playable games, has been made available as a real-world product in November 2024. While it lacks many of the in-game features, such as vital sign readings or GPS, its release highlights how technological paratexts can embody the playful 'otherness' of gameworlds. This is a very interesting example because the playfulness of this artefact lies primarily with the device, while it does not permit us to directly engage with the game world through it.

Conclusion

As the analysis of these playful paratextual forms in case study games has shown, videogame paratexts occupy a dual space of 'otherness': they are distinct from the game they accompany and they are distinct from non-playful paratexts. Playful paratexts thus always blur the lines between textual and paratextual play, creating hybrid spaces where players engage with both simultaneously (Apperley, 2010: 40–41). While traditional paratexts present games as cultural artefacts, playful paratexts mirror the gaming experience, inviting players into the game-world even before they play. As seen in examples such as *Undertale*, *Portal*, and *P.T.*, playful paratexts can transcend their original function, sometimes even evolving into standalone texts. This potential for playful engagement reinforces the idea that paratexts, like games themselves, are inherently liminal, occupying the threshold between reality and fiction.

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