

# The Past as (Para)text – Relating Histories of Game Experience to Games as Texts

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## EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Paratexts have received a range of prior attention in game studies (e.g. Carter, 2015; Mukherjee 2015; Consalvo 2017; Švelch 2017; 2020), particularly in recent years with the (pending) publication of two edited collections (Beil et al. 2021; Seiwald and Vollans in press). In this paper, I engage with this broad discussion in relation to paratextual material which is produced entirely, or largely, by players, and which historicises game experiences (Keogh 2018; Schniz 2021). These remnants of play survive when a game is completed or set aside, or paused mid-play but (perhaps unintentionally) never resumed, and they can take a variety of forms, including player accounts (Webber 2016), character sheets (Webber 2019), and maps (Webber 2023). This paper will therefore be of interest to researchers working in both analogue and digital game studies, and to those in historical game studies in particular. My approach here is predominantly theoretical, but I illustrate and explain the theorisation with a range of examples from my extensive existing work on the historical practices of players.

Anders Drachen and colleagues (2009, 3) observe that, the moment non-digital role-playing games end, ‘they cease to exist. Each participant has memories of the game from their character’s point-of-view, in addition to an assortment of props’. Souvik Mukherjee (2015, 104) extends this, adding After Action Reports, Let’s Plays and reviews to the range of materials in which the ‘so-called “disappearing” game narrative’ is preserved. For Mukherjee, these are video game paratexts; essential to the experience of video-game stories and a primary means through which game narrative might be accessed (2015, 118). Here, I reflect on some questions about the textual and paratextual nature of these artefacts, and their relationship not only to a conceptualised game text – whatever that might be – but also to a sense of the past. How can we understand the relationship between such historical documentation and our sense of the game as a text? If, as postmodernists such as Hayden White (1973; 1990) and Linda Hutcheon (2002) have suggested, history in some way represents *The Past as Text* (Spiegel 1997), how might an understanding of paratextuality function between what we might see as two equivalent textual authorities?

These questions are particularly important in relation to games, as they cut to the core of our ongoing uncertainty about quite what games are – where ‘the game’ lies. Whereas Mukherjee (2015), for example, emphasises narrative as the ‘ephemeral’ text to which the paratext relates, a historical sensibility suggests we must also attend to the

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experiential aspects of the game, taking a path akin to that proposed by Clifford Geertz (1973) in thinking about culture (and thus cultural experience) as something textual. In games, these issues are further nuanced by the reintegration of this historical work into game texts. As histories of game experiences are not usually produced by people we might think of as game ‘authors’, we might be inclined to argue that they are not ‘defined by an intention and a responsibility of the author’ (Genette 1991, 262), and therefore not paratexts at all. However, many game ‘authors’ (game makers) in fact use these histories, these records, to enhance or extend their games – not only through the use of saved games to shape New Games+, but also through the creation of in-game markers, characters and narratives which recall emergent events, often augmented by paratextual promotional media which present or retell players’ stories of their gameplay. Such perspectives on authorship are also challenged by scholarship which suggests that the player is part of the game text (Fernández-Vara 2019, 7; Yoon and Cheon 2014, 471).

This paper, then, seeks to unpick some of these complexities, and offer some insight into the relationship between games, history, text and paratext. This relationship is particularly pronounced in respect of historical games, where history – often as part of claims to “accuracy” or “authenticity” – is employed in a paratextual mode by game developers, even as the game itself drives players to that history (e.g. Wright 2022). Considering these gaming remnants, then, helps to expand our understanding of the contingent and potentially multidirectional nature of paratextuality around games, and the meaningfulness of the historical practices of players.

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