

Chapter 4

Video Game Framings

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ABSTRACT

This chapter discusses the applicability of the concept of ‘paratext’ (as coined by Gérard Genette) to audio-visual media in general and to video games in particular. In the first section, some potential elements of a video game’s ‘paratext’ are singled out by means of ‘auto-ethnographic’ description of the introductory sequence(s) of the first-person shooter game BioShock Infinite. Several segments of the game’s ‘threshold’ are differentiated employing a rather tentative ad-hoc terminology. In the second section, Genette’s definitional stipulations, posing the point of reference for everyone actually using the term ‘paratext,’ are reconstructed, clarified and constructively criticized. Here, the author also discusses potential objections to Genette’s definitional criteria and briefly touches upon some media-theoretical constraints of his approach. Ensuing from these meta-terminological considerations, the author turns to the questionable use of ‘paratext’ in video game studies. As critical examination reveals, the terminology in this field of research is rather vaguely connected to, and sometimes even completely detached from, Genette’s definition. As an objection to such redefinitions of the term, the chapter suggests (1) that its use be restricted to communicative signals meeting the following criteria only: (a) functionally subservient to (which obviously implies specifically referring to) ‘the game proper,’ (b) authorized by entitled members of the game’s production collective, (c) verbal, (d) (at least partly) extra-diegetic. Additionally, (2) the chapter proposes supplementing ‘paratext’ as an analytical tool with the higher-order umbrella term ‘framings’ (as coined by Werner Wolf).

INTRODUCTION

[W]e will be wary of rashly proclaiming that ‘all is paratext.’ (Genette, 1997b, p. 407)

In this chapter, I will discuss the applicability of the (narratological) concept of ‘paratext’ (as coined by French literary theorist Gérard Genette, 1982) to audio-visual (‘new’) media in general and to video games in particular. Firstly, I will

single out potential elements of a video game’s paratext by way of a detailed, albeit selective, ‘auto-ethnographic’ description (a ‘close reading,’ so to speak) of the introductory sequence(s) of the state-of-the-art first-person shooter game *BioShock Infinite* (2013). For the sake of clarity and traceability, I will discriminate between several layers, segments, and elements of the game’s ‘threshold’ employing a rather tentative ad hoc terminology. In terms of this chapter’s main objec-

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tive (i.e., conceptual clarification and definition),¹ this description of my own experiences merely serves an illustrative function; even though I consider personal observation and gameplay to be valid research methods in video game studies (see Aarseth, 2003, p. 3; Mäyrä, 2008, pp. 165–167), I am well aware of the fact that there might be additional or missing elements as well as different realizations of the same elements in other game genres or game types (for further remarks regarding the classification of games, see Arsenault, 2009). Admittedly, it might be the case that choosing this (and only this) specific example—this “one-sided diet,” to use a Wittgenstein phrase (1958, para. 593)—somehow influenced or perhaps even narrowed down my perspective. This may have also resulted in slightly biased terminological considerations. If so, this would clearly be an issue further empirical research could resolve and ought to address.

Before proceeding, however, we need to clarify the criteria according to which certain ‘surrounding’ elements actually are or should be defined as elements of the video game’s paratext. Only then might we try to sharpen our conceptual tools in analysis of borderline cases, and perhaps remove or add definitional criteria.

Thus, secondly, Gérard Genette’s definitional stipulations, posing the (alleged) point of reference for everyone actually using the term ‘paratext,’ will be reconstructed, clarified and constructively criticized. Ensuing from these meta-terminological considerations, I turn to the questionable use of said term in new media and (III) in video game studies (the most prominent contributions are by Lunenfeld, 2000; Consalvo, 2007; Jones, 2008). As critical examination reveals, the terminology in this field of research is rather vaguely connected to, and sometimes even completely detached from, Genette’s definition. Instead, ‘paratext’ is used as a vague umbrella term with an extremely broad extension, covering almost everything somehow ‘related to,’ ‘referring to,’ or ‘surrounding’ the primary object (the ‘video game itself’).

As a reasonable objection to such fuzzy redefinitions of the term, I suggest (1) that its use be restricted to messages or communicative signals meeting the following criteria only: (a) produced to be functionally subservient to (which obviously implies: specifically referring to) ‘the game proper,’ (b) authorized by entitled members of the game’s production collective, (c) (predominantly) verbal, and (d) (at least partly) extra-diegetic. Additionally, (2) I propose supplementing ‘paratext’ (as an analytical tool) with the higher-order umbrella term ‘framings’ (as coined by Werner Wolf, 1999).

My contribution will contain three *explicative definitions*, and I will use the following formal abbreviations to refer to them:

- **Expl-Ptx-G:** An explication of Genette’s use of the term ‘paratext’
- **Epl-Ptx-NMS:** An explication of the term’s use in new media studies
- **Epl-Ptx*VG-AR:** My own explication of ‘paratext’ in relation to video games

Two graphic diagrams are attached at the end to visualize possible classifications of both framings and paratext elements.

Finally, a brief note on terminology in advance: Throughout the whole chapter, I will use the terms ‘extra-’ or ‘non-diegetic’ as well as the expressions ‘diegetic’ and ‘intra-diegetic’ interchangeably. For simplicity’s sake, I will use ‘(intra-)diegetic’ to refer to everything that exists (or is implied) on the ontological level of the virtual world, and ‘extra-diegetic’ to refer to everything that does not. Of course, if there are several (nested) virtual worlds framing one another, the problem becomes more complex; these intra-diegetic framing elements might be referred to as ‘meta-diegetic.’ Admittedly, my use of these terms is rather sloppy. For further readings, see Souriau (1951), Genette (1980, Chapter 5; 1988, Chapters 13–14), Kuhn (2013, Chapter 6) and Jørgensen (2011).

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