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The past as (para)text – relating histories of game experience to games as texts

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> *Then, out of nowhere, the biggest dragon we'd ever seen shows up and takes out our warrior in one swipe. Within a few seconds, without any chance to react, we were all dead. Word spread fairly quickly across the server about what was going on, but at that moment it was one of the most startling things I'd ever seen in a game*.[1]

This quote is drawn from a series of blog posts written in 2012 by one *EverQuest* player, about their experiences in the game around a decade beforehand. Posted publicly on the gaming community site *Giant Bomb*, they are, or are concerned with, things we might variously refer to as memory, history, fanwork or lore. There are eight posts in the sequence, followed by a ninth post from 2014 inviting others to add their own recollections. This call attracted 75 responses, demonstrating a reasonable level of interest and engagement.

Such attempts to capture historical records of past gaming experiences are not unusual, nor are they limited to *EverQuest*. Rather, these activities can be seen in some form around a range of games, both online and off.[2] I use the term "historical" to describe them, which sets them immediately into a relationship with the past, and I use "history" to mean a variety of discourse about the past, following the interpretation of historiographers and literary theorists such as Keith Jenkins, Hayden White, and Alun Munslow.[3] The question that concerns me in this chapter, however, is not whether or not these practices can be thought of as history. Here, I am concerned with how we can understand accounts like these, along with other, player-produced historical materials, in terms of paratextuality. At the heart of such an enquiry are a broader set of questions about, firstly, the relationship between these accounts and their originating games, and between these accounts, the past and other histories; and secondly, about the textuality, and authorship, of games, history and the past.

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[1] Marino, "Tales from Norrath: Don't Wake the Dragon", *Giant Bomb*, 14 September, 2012, https://www.giantbomb.com/profile/marino/blog/tales-from-norrath-dont-wake-the-dragon/96306/.

[2] I have written extensively about these practices elsewhere, both as sole author and in collaboration. See, for example, Nick Webber, "*EVE Online* as History", in *Internet Spaceships are Serious Business: An* EVE Online *Reader*, ed. Marcus Carter, Kelly Bergstrom and Darryl Woodford (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2016), 189–209; "Table Talk: Archives of Role-Playing's Personal Pasts", *Analog Game Studies* 2019 Role-Playing Game Summit special issue (2019), https://analoggamestudies.org/2019/12/archives-of-role-playings-personal-pasts/; Nick Webber and E. Charlotte Stevens, "History, Fandom, and Online Game Communities", in *Historia Ludens: The Playing Historian*, ed. Alexander von Lünen et al. (New York and London: Routledge, 2020), 189–203.

[3] Keith Jenkins, *Re-thinking History*, third edition (New York and London: Routledge, 2003); Hayden White, *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth-century Europe* (Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1973) and *The Content of the Form: Narrative Discourse and Historical Representation* (Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1990); Alun Munslow, *Narrative and History*, second edition (London: Red Globe Press, 2019).

Paratextuality

In reflecting on these issues, I am sensitive to recent interventions by Martin Barker and by Jan Švelch, which encourage us to think more carefully about paratext as a concept.[4] They note the imprecision with which paratext is often used, reminding us that Gérard Genette warned against "rashly proclaiming that 'all is paratext'",[5] and offer redefinitions of paratext to respond to this proliferation of usage, and to the employment of the term in relation to a diversity of texts far beyond Genette's codex book model. Notably, both authors move away from the word "paratext" itself, preferring terminology which expresses paratextuality as a quality rather than a label. Barker proposes the idea of "ancillary or paratextual [A/P] materials" which exist "*because of* and *in relation*" to "works", which are themselves complex and "quite formed", "long past being simply 'texts'".[6] Švelch identifies and critiques three different conceptions of the paratext, which he describes as "original", "expanded" and "reduced", before rejecting "paratext" in favour of "paratextuality", "as a quality of a cultural artifact that grounds it within a socio-historical reality while acknowledging that the same element can also exhibit other qualities".[7] Barker and Švelch also remind us of key ideas from Genette's original formulation, around authorship and hierarchy.

These observations are persuasive, and in what follows I emphasise conceptions of paratextuality rather than paratexts as such. I am unconvinced that paratextuality is a quality of a cultural artefact in itself, however, and so my emphasis falls on Barker's observation that paratextuality exists *in relation*: there is no paratextuality in isolation. I focus, therefore, on the qualities of the relationships *between* cultural artefacts and/or texts, including parts of texts in which paratextual relations are constructed internally.[8] Taken alongside attention to authorship, this approach addresses concerns expressed by Švelch that paratextuality is often conflated with other forms of transtextuality (such as metatextuality).[9] In addition, it also gives us greater flexibility to recognise that multiple instances of paratextuality may occur between texts; that paratextual relationships may flow both ways between texts; and that paratextual relationships are not necessarily permanent, being subject to fluctuation and change. Indeed, Mia Consalvo draws our attention to "situations when games themselves become paratexts—supporting texts—to other more central media artifacts", which "demonstrates their contingent nature in the realm of meaning making—and the contingent placement of any such text".[10]

Gaming remnants and the afterlife of game experience

The excerpt which opens this chapter represents just one form of the myriad remnants of game experiences. The experience of a game "at play" is, for many scholars, ephemeral – as

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[4] Martin Barker, "Speaking of 'paratexts': A theoretical revisitation", *Journal of Fandom Studies* 5(3) (2017), doi:10.1386/jfs.5.3.235_1; Jan Švelch, "Paratexts to Non-Linear Media Texts: Paratextuality in Video Game Culture" (PhD diss., Charles University, Prague, 2017) and "Paratextuality in Game Studies: A Theoretical Review and Citation Analysis", *Game Studies* 20(2) (2020), http://gamestudies.org/2002/articles/jan_svelch.

[5] Gérard Genette, *Paratexts: Thresholds of Interpretation*, trans. Jane E. Lewin (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 407.

[6] Barker, "Speaking of 'paratexts'", 242 [emphasis in original].

[7] Švelch, "Paratextuality in Game Studies".

[8] Švelch, "Paratexts to Non-Linear Media Texts", 49–50.

[9] See, for example, Švelch, "Paratextuality in Game Studies".

[10] Mia Consalvo, "When paratexts become texts: de-centering the game-as-text", *Critical Studies in Media Communication* 34(2) (2017): 6, doi: 10.1080/15295036.2017.1304648.

Jaakko Stenros observes of analogue roleplaying games, "the moment they end, at the point of completion, they cease to exist".[11] Yet when a game ends – is completed, set aside, or paused and not resumed – traces of it remain. For roleplaying games, these include, as Stenros indicates, "memories of the game from their character's point-of-view, in addition to an assortment of props and costumes (live action role-playing games), character sheet and notes (table-top role-playing games, freeform)".[12] In respect of digital games, Souvik Mukherjee identifies "player diaries, After Action Reports, 'Let's Play' video recordings and a series of related sources such as reviews, previews, message-board posts, screenshots and trailers" as amongst the diverse range of materials in which the "so-called 'disappearing' game narrative" is recorded and preserved.[13]

For Mukherjee, these remnants constitute paratexts, building on the "expanded" definition (per Švelch) advanced in game studies by Mia Consalvo and Steven E. Jones amongst others, and elsewhere notably by Jonathan Gray.[14] They are essential to the experience of video game stories and a primary means through which game narrative might be accessed, analysed and understood.[15] They are also temporally situated[16] historical texts, with a fluid position within (trans)textual relations and the process of meaning making. Much as their value is often understood to lie in their capacity to "capture", "record", "preserve" or otherwise stand as witness to a moment of play, these remnants have lives of their own. Their presence in archives and collections is called for[17] and made reality.[18] They are cited (for example, in historical work), published and republished (by players and developers alike), and updated, amended and reworked, to correct errors or for new purposes. Sometimes they are even (re)incorporated into a game text to create new experiences, for example through a New Game+ feature.

Textuality and Games

There is, then, a significant diversity of gaming remnants, and of relationships with and between those remnants. I refer to these interrelationships as transtextual, as they exist between and in relation to artefacts which I would consider texts, based on a broad interpretation of the idea of textuality. As Barker notes,[19] Genette's own definition of text is rather sparse – "a more or less lengthy sequence of verbal utterances more or less containing

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[11] Stenros in Anders Drachen et al., "Role-Playing Games: The State of Knowledge", *Breaking New Ground: Innovation in Games, Play, Practice and Theory. Proceedings of DiGRA 2009* (Brunel University, 2009), 3, http://www.digra.org/wp-content/uploads/digital-library/09287.23528.pdf.

[12] Stenros in Drachen et al., "Role-Playing Games", 3.

[13] Souvik Mukherjee, *Video Games and Storytelling: Reading Games and Playing Books* (Basingstoke and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), 104.

[14] Mia Consalvo, *Cheating: Gaining Advantage in Videogames* (Cambridge, MA and London: The MIT Press, 2007) and "When paratexts become texts"; Steven E. Jones, *The Meaning of Video Games: Gaming and Textual Strategies* (New York and London: Routledge, 2008); Jonathan Gray, *Show Sold Separately: Promos, Spoilers, and Other Media Paratexts* (New York: New York University Press, 2010).

[15] Mukherjee, *Video Games*, 118

[16] Genette, *Paratexts*, 4: "the date of its appearance and, if need be, its disappearance (*when?*)".

[17] Carolyn Jong, quoted in Mukherjee, *Video Games*, 114. See also James Newman, *Best Before: Video Games, Supersession and Obsolescence* (London and New York: Routledge, 2012), 154–158.

[18] Webber, "Table Talk".

[19] Barker, "Speaking of 'paratexts'", 240.

meaning"[20] – and subsequent interpretations of textuality often expand the concept into something more appropriate to the contemporary media environment. Nick Couldry, for example, defines the text as "a complex of interrelated meanings which its readers tend to interpret as a discrete, unified whole",[21] a perspective further nuanced when "reading is no longer exclusively related to the process of decoding letters or interpreting static images, but it is also linked with an invitation (or challenge) to assemble, play, activate, download or install".[22] Establishing games themselves as texts would therefore seem straightforward, but this has not been uncontroversial in game studies, where textuality was understood as linked to narratology in early discussions in the field.[23] As with paratextuality, conceptions of game textuality build on ideas applied to printed texts, extending them into the digital space through ideas such as "cybertext", "machinic text" and "cryptotexts, endotexts, and spatiotexts".[24] While games are now quite widely seen as texts, the specific nature of game textuality is debated.

The nature of this textuality is important here for a number of reasons, not least as it should be clear exactly *what kind of text* the paratextual relationships of these remnants point towards. What exactly is a game text? In Mukherjee's analysis, paratextuality is constructed in relation to an "ephemeral text, which the player plays out and changes with each gameplay", a "configurative", "experiential" and ultimately "'disappearing' game narrative". It is this narrative which paratexts such as After Action Reports record.[25] The implication that narrative might represent the limits of the textuality of games is echoed in Espen Aarseth's claim that "games are not 'textual' or at least not primarily textual[...] a central 'text' does not exist – merely context". For Aarseth, games consist of three aspects: rules, a material/semiotic system, and gameplay: "of these three, the semiotic system is the most coincidental to the game".[26] Thus games "can exist without actual, current players, as material and conceptual game objects ('texts')".[27]

The sense of the game text as the inert, stable, or "static" conception of a game is visible elsewhere in older game studies literature,[28] but more recent work recognises that many games – particularly sandbox games – are in fact texts "in flux", "constantly being updated

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[20] Gérard Genette, "Introduction to the Paratext", trans. Marie Maclean, *New Literary History* 22(2) (1991): 261.
[21] Nick Couldry, *Inside Culture: Re-imagining the Method of Cultural Studies* (London: Sage, 2000), 70–1.
[22] Daniela Côrtes Maduro, preface to *Digital Media and Textuality: From Creation to Archiving*, ed. Daniela Côrtes Maduro (Bremen: Transcript, 2017), 9.
[23] Mukherjee, *Video Games*, 5–6; Švelch, "Paratexts to Non-Linear Media Texts", 2–3
[24] Espen Aarseth, *Cybertext: Perspectives on Ergodic Literature* (Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997); Mukherjee, *Video Games*; John Aycock and Patrick Finn, "Uncivil Engineering: A Textual Divide in Game Studies", *Game Studies* 19(3) (2019), http://gamestudies.org/1903/articles/aycockfinn.
[25] Mukherjee, *Video Games*, 103–4.
[26] Espen Aarseth, "Genre Trouble: Narrativism and the Art of Simulation", in *First Person: New Media as Story, Performance, and Game*, ed. Noah Wardrip-Fruin & Pat Harrigan (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2004), 47–8.
[27] Espen Aarseth, "I Fought the Law: Transgressive Play and The Implied Player", *Situated Play, Proceedings of DiGRA 2007 Conference* (University of Tokyo, 2007), 130, http://www.digra.org/wp-content/uploads/digital-library/07313.03489.pdf.
[28] See for example Consalvo, *Cheating*, 21

and transformed through updates, patches, and ongoing development".[29] Furthermore, many writers see players as a core component of the game-as-text. Clara Fernández-Vara, for example, insists that "the player is a necessary part of the text:[…] the game is not really a complete text without a player who interprets its rules and interacts with it".[30] Similarly, Tae-Jin Yoon and Hyejung Cheon observe that "the game text is never complete; gamers attempt to produce the completed form of text from the semi-structured text".[31] This adoption of a Barthesian conception of text as something which "exists only when caught up in a discourse" and which "*is experienced only in an activity, in a production*" connects directly with the idea of players as co-creators of video games, something particularly common in discussions of massively multiplayer online roleplaying games (MMORPGs) such as *EverQuest* and *World of Warcraft*, and in respect of fan practices more generally.[32]

(Para)Textuality and the Past

If game texts are dynamic, then, given their textuality is shaped by further development and by player interpretation, paratextual relations with these texts will necessarily be complex and themselves dynamic. In addition, further complexities arise when we consider that game remnants are not only texts, but also a form of history. When discussing paratextuality, scholars have tended to concern themselves with text *a* having a paratextual relationship to text *b*, with all of the implications of hierarchy that entails. Yet it is of course possible that text *a* can simultaneously be paratextual to texts *x*, *y* and *z*. This not only challenges the notion of hierarchy somewhat – if a text shapes our experience of a number of other texts, it would be difficult to understand it as subordinate to them – but also invites questions of just how paratextuality functions. How do relationships with multiple textual "authorities" shape paratextuality across those texts? To pick up on Genette's "airlock" analogy,[33] what happens when the airlock leads to more than one place? Does this matter?

This is of concern with respect to game remnants because their relationship is not only with a game text, however defined, but also with a past game experience (which may, or may not, be the same thing). As historical discourse, they relate to the past, again in a potentially paratextual manner. The textuality of history has been extensively discussed over several decades: for example, in the title of her collected essays, Gabrielle Spiegel refers to history as *The Past as Text*.[34] This textuality emerges from "the unavailability of a full and authentic past, a lived material existence, that has not already been mediated by the surviving texts of the

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[29] Marcus Carter, "Emitexts and Paratexts: Propaganda in EVE Online", *Games and Culture* 10(4) (2015): 315, doi:10.1177/1555412014558089.

[30] Clara Fernández-Vara, *Introduction to Game Analysis*, second edition (New York and London: Routledge, 2019), 7.

[31] Tae-Jin Yoon and Hyejung Cheon, "Game playing as transnational cultural practice: A case study of Chinese gamers and Korean MMORPGs", International Journal of Cultural Studies 17(5) (2014): 471, doi:10.1177/1367877913505172..

[32] Roland Barthes, *The Rustle of Language*, trans. Richard Howard (New York: Hill and Wang, 1986), 57–8. On productive players and fandom, see for example T.L. Taylor, *Play Between Worlds: Exploring Online Game Culture* (Cambridge, MA and London: The MIT Press, 2006), 125–50, 155–156 and Hannah Wirman, "On productivity and game fandom", *Transformative Works and Cultures* 3 (2009), doi:10.3983/twc.2009.0145.

[33] Genette, *Paratexts*, 408.

[34] Gabrielle Spiegel, *The Past as Text: The Theory and Practice of Medieval Historiography* (Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997).

society in question".[35] We predominantly experience history through a narrative which is, as Linda Hutcheon notes, "always already textualized, always already interpreted".[36] This postmodernist perspective on historiography does not reject the existence of the past but, given history's mediated and textualised nature, asks "how we can know real past events today, except through their traces, their texts, the facts we construct and to which we grant meaning".[37] We might ask the same question of past game experiences, with a similar answer.

The idea that, as Spiegel puts it, "history is always a written account of the past that is itself based on the mediatory texts left by the past"[38] resonates strongly with Mukherjee's remarks on After Action Reports, which *he* refers to as paratexts. Discussing video game narrative as an assemblage, he says:

> The game narrative itself cannot be analysed as it lasts only as long as the game is being played and is available when each action in the game is performed or played out. The way forward in attempting any analysis of the game's story is then, to access the game narrative via the paratextual elements of the assemblage.[39]

The ephemeral nature of the narrative is critical here, but so too is its pastness. Mukherjee adopts a dictionary definition of an After Action Report, which indicates its nature as historical discourse, "a detailed critical summary or analysis of a past event[...]".[40] Thus, the relationship between the AAR and the game narrative is paratextual, and appears to directly correspond to that between history and the past.

The implication of this is that we can consider history to be in a paratextual relationship with the past, and the past itself to be a text, a position which Hutcheon sees as "semiotic idealism".[41] Certainly, the idea is challenging, and of course Mukherjee is concerned here with narrative *specifically*, which we might already see as a form of textualisation, and thus mediation, of game events. As I note above, in many perspectives the game text goes beyond narrative to incorporate the player, and the remnants under discussion here are of players' *experiences* in relation to, and as part of, this text. The nature of this as a discussion connected to cultural experience evokes Clifford Geertz' thinking about the textuality of cultural forms, "as imaginative works built out of social materials".[42] The Balinese cockfight, the centrepiece of one of Geertz' best-known essays, can be understood as a space where aspects of the

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[35] Louis Montrose, "Renaissance Literary Studies and the Subject of History", *English Literary Renaissance* 16(1) (1986): 8.
[36] Linda Hutcheon, *A Poetics of Postmodernism: History, Theory, Fiction*. New York and London: Routledge, 1988, 143.
[37] Hutcheon, *Poetics*, 225.
[38] Spiegel, *Past as Text*, 48.
[39] Mukherjee, *Video Games*, 118.
[40] Mukherjee, *Video Games*, 110. Here, AARs have much in common with related outcomes from analogue games, including battle reports, dramatizations, and early forms of 'actual play' – see Jon Peterson, *Playing at the World: A History of Simulating Wars, People and Fantastic Adventures, from Chess to Role-Playing Games* (San Diego, CA: Unreason Press, 2012) and Evan Torner, "Actual Play Reports: Forge Theory and the Forums", in *Watch Us Roll: Essays on Actual Play and Performance in Tabletop Role-Playing Games*, ed. Shelley Jones (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2021), 20–31.
[41] Linda Hutcheon, *The Politics of Postmodernism*, second edition (New York and London: Routledge, 2002), 78.
[42] Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Culture: Selected Essays* (New York: Basic Books, 1973), 449.

cultural ethos and private sensibilities of the Balinese are "spelled out externally in a collective text[...] the two are near enough alike to be articulated in the symbolics of a single such text".[43] Importantly, the value and meaning in this text is experienced through a series of repeated events which reproduce a similar cultural experience:

> Enacted and re-enacted, so far without end, the cockfight enables the Balinese, as, read and reread, *Macbeth* enables us, to see a dimension of his own subjectivity. As he watches fight after fight [...] he grows familiar with it and what it has to say to him.[44]

The textuality of cultural texts, and the experience of them, would thus seem to be constructed over time, through the repetition of practice and process, and ways of doing and being. Is this sufficient, though, to pass through the "barrier" which separates the past from history's textualisation of it? From Geertz' own later comments on text and the "text analogy", he considered the process of textualisation to be about "the fixation of meaning from the flow of events", as with the inscription into text of the meaning of a speech event described by Paul Ricoeur.[45] As Geertz points out, this is what history does in relation to "what happened", implying that the inscription of meaning is temporally distant from the event once again.

In some regards, a sense of distance is integral to our thinking about history, certainly in academic terms. Critical distance, the quality which has long underpinned many of history's problematic claims to "truth" and "objectivity", situates historical work in both metatextual and intertextual terms in relation to other texts, but makes no argument for paratextuality. And while some game remnants may appear to establish critical distance through elapsed time – the opening quotation of this chapter describes events from a decade before, and there is an entire genre of blog posts about the rediscovery of old character sheets – they generally depend upon memory along with direct experience to establish their authority, as I explain below. However, there is something in the consideration of memories as textual *in themselves* due to "the conditions that language itself imposes on thought [...] In Jacques Derrida's words, writing actually 'founds memory'".[46] Memory sits outside the past, then, as something which can create only texts; like history, it cannot reproduce events.[47] Yet history, in the broad discursive sense, may serve as the paratextual threshold and facilitator of our access to memory, even where (especially where) it does not critically address it.

History's paratextual relations, therefore, are with the texts that have gone before it, shaped by the progress of time and loss which brings it ever closer to the event horizon of the inaccessible past. Thus, history may claim paratextual (and meta- and intertextual) relationships with texts *now lost*, something commonplace in medieval historical writing, for example. Its paratextual connections thus flicker and fade across time, as citation becomes

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[43] Geertz, *Interpretation*, 449
[44] Geertz, *Interpretation*, 451–452.
[45] Clifford Geertz, "Blurred Genres: The Refiguration of Social Thought", *The American Scholar* 49(2) (1980), 175; and see Paul Ricoeur, "The Model of the Text: Meaningful Action Considered as a Text", *New Literary History* 5(1) (1973): 93.
[46] Peter Middleton and Tim Woods, *Literatures of Memory: History, Time, and Space in Postwar Writing* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2000), 6, citing Jacques Derrida, *Writing and Difference*, trans. Alan Bass. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978), 228.
[47] Hutcheon, *Poetics*, 154

preservation. Similarly, history's paratextuality with respect to memory is shaped by the process of remembering and forgetting. The cultural dissonance of particular histories speaks to the need to know about the "main" text, to see history in relation to the political discourse within which it is produced, and the cultural-historical context of its production. This again makes an argument for its paratextuality: as Genette suggests, and Švelch reminds us, paratextuality creates a link between a text and its socio-historical reality.[48] And the status of all of history's paratextual relationships are of course subject to conceptions of authorship.

Authorship

The limits of the text and its authorship play a central role in defining paratextuality as analytically distinct from other forms of transtextuality. Although many authors are willing to look past this authorship criterion, Švelch rightly reminds us that this is of significant importance in distinguishing between paratexts and metatexts.[49] In his original conception, Genette indicated that paratexts were characterized "by an authorial intention and assumption of responsibility",[50] and identified three potential "senders"[51] of paratextual messages: the author of the main text ("authorial paratext"); that text's publisher ("publisher's paratext"); and a third party whose contribution receives official approval or recognition: what Genette refers to as an "allographic paratext", and often thinks of in terms of a preface.[52] Transferred to video games, the construction of authorship is considerably more complex than for books, given the collaborative nature of game production, and Švelch's proposes six different kinds of paratextuality: "(1) authorial, (2) worker's, (3) publisher's, (4) distributor's, (5) retailer's, and (6) allographic".[53]

Authorship is a concern for our analysis of game textuality even without considering the broader sense of "text" defined by the context of interpretation, and the idea that the player is integral to the game text. Stephanie Jennings refers to the "distributed authorship of video games" as "works" (rather than "texts") in Barthes' sense: "the static container of the authored contents".[54] Equally, in his discussion of a game as a literature-machine, Mukherjee conceives of the game text as machinic, with a "wreader" who creates the text through gameplay.[55] Acknowledging early game studies ideas that authorship of game narratives is procedural, he sees it "as an ongoing process of interaction between the game and the player".[56] Play not only completes the text, therefore, but is itself an act of authorship. This gives texts produced by players and connected with their game experiences a robust claim to

[48] Genette demonstrates this for example through his canal-lock and airlock analogies: *Paratexts*, 407–408. Švelch explores this in some depth in "Paratexts to Non-Linear Media Texts", 64–86.
[49] Švelch, "Paratextuality in Game Studies".
[50] Genette, *Paratexts*, 3.
[51] Or "addressers": see Genette, "Introduction to the Paratext", 266.
[52] Genette, *Paratexts*, 8–9
[53] Švelch, "Paratexts to Non-Linear Media Texts", 77.
[54] Stephanie Jennings, "Co-Creation and the Distributed Authorship of Video Games", in *Examining the Evolution of Gaming and Its Impact on Social, Cultural, and Political Perspectives*, ed. Keri Duncan Valentine and Lucas John Jensen (Hershey, PA: IGI Global, 2016), 124. (https://www.igi-global.com/chapter/co-creation-and-the-distributed-authorship-of-video-games/157619)
[55] Mukherjee, *Video Games*, 48–72.
[56] Mukherjee, *Video Games*, 149–150.

paratextuality, at least with respect to that specific "version" (or playthrough) of the game text.[57]

The author's voice in historical writing is often downplayed. Hutcheon notes how history typically attempts to hide the narrator and narrative process from the reader,[58] and Michel de Certeau draws our attention to the use of "nous" ("we") which "makes it possible to write 'without a subject of writing'" as Philippe Carrard observes. According to de Certeau, "'we' stages a social contract 'among ourselves,' in which a plural subject 'utters' the discourse". Thus, a "place" opens up where that discourse can "originate without being reduced to it".[59] However, contemporary historians still view history as "an act of authorial narrative creation",[60] meaning that the collective sensibility here does not open discussions of historical game experiences to wider claims of authorship and thus of paratextuality. Claims to (historical) authorship are also intimately connected with the idea that history might have a paratextual relationship with memory, and specifically here to the idea that our remnants reference (personal) game experiences.

Authorial complexity

With all this said, it seems reasonable to understand our opening epigraph as having a paratextual relationship with *EverQuest*. Written by a player, about their game experience, it is paratextual to the game text of which their play is part, and of which they are therefore (co-)author. At the same time, this account also constitutes historical discourse with, arguably, a paratextual relationship with the memory of that experience. This paratextuality can help to structure our engagements with, and interest in, *this* game and *that* past – the recollection draws us in, encourages us to ask why, and what happened next as it narrates an affecting event in a somewhat nostalgic mode. We begin to see the interaction between the two manifestations of paratextuality shaping one another.

The relations of player/author and texts here are, however, comparatively straightforward. Other forms of game remnants pose additional questions. As Sandy Baldwin and Gabriel Tremblay-Gaudette indicate, it is not always clear precisely who is the author of a complex media text.[61] They use the example of the performance piece *Poems You Should Know*, which employs a multiplayer video game – *Counter-Strike: Global Offensive* – as the basis for a performance of (well-known) poetry, both written and spoken. This is, admittedly, an unusual case, but there are similarly complex cases in respect of game remnants. Amongst the most striking are those in which a developer or publisher incorporates game remnants authored by players into a game's textuality. In some respects, this dissolves concerns about direct player

[57] Although Švelch would disagree: "Paratexts to Non-Linear Media Texts", 76.
[58] Hutcheon, *Poetics*, 91–2.
[59] Michel De Certeau, *The Writing of History*, trans. Tom Conley (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988): 63; Philippe Carrard, "History as a Kind of Writing: Michel de Certeau and the Poetics of Historiography", *South Atlantic Quarterly* 100(2) (2001): 470–1, doi:10.1215/00382876-100-2-465. Note that I move between Tom Conley's 1988 translation and Carrard's own rendering here as I find that the latter reads more clearly in some cases.
[60] Julia Nitz and Sandra Harbert Petrulionis, "Towards a Historiographic Narratology", *Spiel* 30(1) (2011): 2.
[61] Sandy Baldwin and Gabriel Tremblay-Gaudette, "Pwning Gamers, One Text at a Time", in Maduro, *Digital Media and Textuality*, 58.

authorship in the certainty that these texts now have allographic authority underpinning their paratextual relations.

This incorporation happens more or less directly; one of the more direct instances is that of game saves. Sunghee Cho has argued, however, that the action of loading and saving video games is itself a form of player authorship.[62] Does a game save thus have an existence independently of the game text, and a paratextual relationship with it, as well as a claim to capture the past of player experience? Or is it simply *part of* the game text? Does the answer to these questions change if that save forms the basis of a New Game+, where it informs a new iteration of the game text – for example in the *Dark Souls* or *Final Fantasy* series? How might transtextual relations be understood if that save informs an iteration of a different game text – for example when *Mass Effect 2* or *Dragon Age: Inquisition* allow the player to draw in a save game from the previous instalment in the series? It seems reasonable to interpret these relationships as paratextual, but also as increasingly intertextual and ultimately hypertextual.

Amongst the most complex situations concern extended texts produced by players, like those mentioned at the outset of the chapter. Player stories and memories emerge from a range of games, but those concerning massively multiplayer online games are among the most visible. This is due in part to their use by game publishers in promotional materials, something particularly pronounced for the game *EVE Online*.[63] Significantly, these promotions foreground these as *historical* player experiences, suggesting that this is important in their value and function as paratexts – history sells. This interaction, between player experiences and stories, and the authorship of CCP Games (*EVE*'s developer/publisher), was perhaps most apparent at *EVE*'s tenth anniversary, when CCP ran a competition – *True Stories from the First Decade* – to encourage players to submit stories of their *EVE* experiences. The winning story, "The Mittani Sends His Regards: Disbanding Band of Brothers," was turned into a comic book series by a third party team, and later published as a graphic novel.[64] In addition, promotional videos were produced to promote the competition, and later to historicise it in order to promote the graphic novel, creating an intricate mesh of paratextual, and other transtextual, relationships.[65]

The specific intermingling of these different roles and responsibilities means that the authorship of the *True Stories* graphic novel fulfils all three of Genette's criteria for paratextual material: its incorporation of *EVE*'s fictional setting represents the authorship of the game developer; its representation of player experience as a "True Story from New Eden" speaks to player-authorship;[66] its orchestration reflects the responsibility and direction of the publisher; and its articulation of a narrative and visual representation of the *EVE* universe

[62] Sunghee Cho, "The Effects of Game Saves on Player Story Generation", *Journal of Korea Game Society* 9(1) (2009): 16, 19.
[63] See, for example, CCP Games, "Recording History: The Bloodbath of B-R5RB", *YouTube*, 20 May 2014, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3O56g8KC6CM; CCP Games, "EVE Online – Celebrating 15 Years of EVE", *YouTube*, 6 May 2018, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qKHLFeVMgXY.
[64] Daniel Way et al. *EVE True Stories*, Milwaukee, OR: Dark Horse Books, 2014.
[65] CCP Games, "True Stories from EVE Online's First Decade", *YouTube*, 17 April 2013, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vLFVEG9gB20; CCP Games, "True Stories – an EVE Online comic book", *YouTube*, 1 August 2014, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gTT0K_u9XyY.
[66] Frontmatter to Way et al. *EVE True Stories*. New Eden is the fictional universe in which *EVE Online* is set.

represent an allographic act of authorship by a third-party team sanctioned by the publisher. It is also worth noting, however, that not only did some players dispute this account of events,[67] but this was not the only version of this story which was produced. The journalist Andrew Groen wrote a book-length history of *EVE*'s player conflicts the following year, which told a version of this story.[68] However, Groen was neither an *EVE* player nor was he commissioned by CCP, and his book had the critical distance that the graphic novel lacked. His particular inscription of meaning, therefore, was situated in a significantly different set of transtextual relations from the *True Stories* project.

Where does this leave us?

If we recognise players' roles as game authors, through their participation in the creation of the text, then all player-generated material is potentially paratextual to the games they play. This is simply a more specific version of the idea that "any text is potentially and in fact inevitably paratextual", and that Genette simply decided "to engage with categories of texts that [we]re, in his opinion, somehow more paratextual than others".[69] The significance, however, lies in the direction of the paratextual relationship, and the way that player-created material can structure our engagement with a game text. As I noted earlier in this chapter, it is neither inevitable nor necessary that paratextual relationships are one-way or stable. A consideration of the paratextual qualities of history helps to draw out this contingent nature, even as the dynamic sense of the game text increases the likelihood of change.

This fluidity is also important in considering the hierarchical overtones of paratextuality, and the relationship between paratextuality and other forms of transtextuality. Texts each sit at the centre of a web of transtextual relationships; in some of these they play a subordinate role to a "main" text (to which they direct emphasis and offer a context), even as other texts do the same for them. Texts can have multiple relationships with one another which reflect their own variety, and relationships between historical remnants and game texts can reflect multiple transtextual connections. Any sense of subordinacy must be understood in this context. Even the most critical historical work is not purely metatextual in respect of its object of study (which is itself textualised, as the past comes to us only in textual form). Such fluidity is represented well in another domain of games and history, historical games. There, history – often as part of claims to "accuracy" – is employed in a paratextual mode by game developers, even as the game itself drives players to that history.

The relationship of history with the past itself is not generally paratextual, although it might become so in situations where we could conceive of (part of) the past as a text. History's relationships are ordinarily with textual forms. The expectation that academic history will be critical places emphasis on metatextuality over paratextuality, although a more open sense of historical work as discourse permits more personal, paratextual relations. This perhaps characterises the interplay between the historical and game-orientated aspects of game remnants. As they are experiential in their conception, they represent a direct, personal – potentially affective – relationship with the past and with the game. This seems to offer further support for players' claims to be co-authors of game texts. To return to Geertz, it is

[67] For further discussion, see Webber, "*EVE Online* as History", 201.
[68] Andrew Groen, *Empires of EVE: A History of the Great Wars of EVE Online* (Chicago, IL: Lightburn Industries, 2015), 214–217.
[69] Švelch, "Paratexts to Non-Linear Media Texts", 65–66.

through player action that meaning is inscribed, completing games' textuality. This meaning is often reinscribed, through further play or through deliberate additional action, in other textual forms, which sit in paratextual relationships both with the game text itself and with the experiential past which these forms capture. Such remnants may prompt players to return to old games, many years later, articulating nostalgia and a desire to revisit the text.

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