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Response: In and out of the game, as usual

Steven E. Jones

Abstract

In this response article (part of a special issue of *Games and Culture*, edited by Alan Galey, and with contributions by him, Regina Seiwald, and Jon Saklofske: <https://journals.sagepub.com/page/gac/special-issues/video-games-paratextuality>, 2021; 2023), I revisit the idea of paratext in video games. I start, however, with the example of a book by Tolstoy, and the textual studies work of McKenzie and McGann, in order to make the point that paratextuality has never been limited to Genette's rigid definition, even in the case of print texts. Video games foreground what has always been the case: the dynamic, volatile, multidirectional nature of paratexts, which can take you into but also out of the enclosure of the main text (or "game itself") in unexpected ways. Illustrations include *Animal Crossing: New Horizons* and a mobile sneakerhead game, *Aglet*.

I am reading Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina*. In this part of the novel, Anna sits on the terrace of her country house as Vronsky is about to arrive through the garden. The scent of jasmine is in the air and a mockingbird rustles the vines. Wait. That last bit is actually a description of my own patio, where I'm sitting to read the book. I've paused, distracted, to look around, a finger holding my place in the the Oxford World's Classics edition, translated by Rosamund Bartlett, its back cover printed with this unattributed sentence (in all caps): "Love . . . It means too much to me, far more

than you can understand.” No blurbs, no plot summary, no QR code, no author’s biography, just those enigmatic thirteen words. This sentence, looking like a bit of verbal decoration on the cover, is what Gerard Genette famously called a paratext. Like a preface, or a blurb, or a plot summary, it’s an element that serves as a “threshold” to the main text of the novel, shaping its interpretation. But my pausing to notice it, then becoming aware of the mockingbird in the jasmine, is a banal reminder of how paratexts often work in practice, a reminder that total immersion is a myth. We are never *entirely* lost in a book. Some part of us remains aware of the world outside of even the most engrossing text. A paratext, designed to draw us in and shape our reading experience, is as Genette said a “transactional” element, and the transactions can go both ways. The threshold can lead us out of the book as well as into it. A paratext can function as a portal that drops us, disoriented, someplace else, even sometimes out into the surrounding sunlit world, just as often as it draws us into the world of a novel, for example, where Anna Karenina sits on her terrace in the Russian countryside.

The edition of the novel I am reading is advertised at the publisher’s website as “[b]eautifully crafted,” and the books in the series are described as looking “as great on the shelf as they do in your hands.” The (presumably) same text of the novel is also available in a less-expensive paperback edition with a picture of an elegant woman on its cover. I see this on the publisher’s website. Googling it, I learn that the image is cropped from a painting by Sir John Everett Millais, a portrait of the artist Louise Joplin. In the full-length portrait Joplin holds a closed fan behind her back. On Twitter, as I learn with a click (crossing yet another threshold), Oxford University Press used the book-jacket image in a marketing tweet, with a photograph of the paperback cover being held up by a real woman in front of her face, so that the image of

Joplin on the book cover overlaps with the woman's body, as if she were wearing the book like a mask. The hashtag #BookFaceFriday apparently links this tweet to a larger Twitter trend, but I don't have time to search that. Behind the book cover, and the woman holding the book cover in front of her face, the tweet shows a sunny landscape outside an open window, the whole thing creating a surrealistic effect of multiple embedded frames, an infinite regress of thresholds within thresholds. The text of the tweet is the same cryptic sentence about love that's on the back of the hardcover edition. The quoted sentence from the novel, which is in fact in the voice of Anna, is pulled out and turned into a paratext; the image of Joplin on the paperback is a paratext made out of a painting dating from around the same time as the novel's first publication; the tweet using the paperback cover image in a photograph of a contemporary woman, along with the pull-quote, is yet another paratext; so is the indexed and searchable image of the full painting by Millais out on the internet. But by now I've stopped reading the novel to go down the kind of rabbit-hole we are all familiar with.

My point is that Genette's tidy definition of paratext—even when applied to codex books—never fully corresponded to what we might call normal *reading* practice. (To be fair, Genette's focus was on authors and publishers rather than the reading experience per se.) Paratexts themselves are often messy, unpredictable, overlapping, and they can take readers to lots of unexpected places. This is why I was never interested in simply applying the theory of paratext to the study of video games—at least not in its original form. I *began* with what Jan Švelch (2020) has called “the expanded definition” (n.p.), initially inspired by conversations with both

game theorists and textual scholars. For me, Genette's theory of paratext was most interesting in the place where game studies and textual studies overlap.¹

D. F. McKenzie's (1999, p. 13) "sociology of texts" opened up what he still preferred to call "bibliography" to the analysis of a whole range of diverse objects, including "non-book texts" and any recorded form of "verbal, visual, oral, numeric data, in the form of maps, prints, and music, of archives of recorded sound, of films, videos, and any computer-stored information . . ." . It makes sense to add video games to that list. Almost anything could be studied under this definition. Not only a printed map, for example, but the part of the physical landscape it represents could be treated as a text, and the study of such texts could go well beyond traditional reading and editing. McKenzie's most famous use-case was the ancestral lands of the aboriginal Arrernte (or Arunta) people of central Australia. His argument may have included a facile distinction between oral culture and written culture, but his call for a sociology of texts and his openness to the study of non-book texts were in the end enormously productive even for postcolonial textual studies (Cohen, 2020, pp. 191-92). His capacious definition showed how textual understanding could, for example, traverse the boundaries between landscape, map, and written document. Writing in 1986, McKenzie admits that "computerized cartography" might complicate the picture, and it certainly did, especially when GPS and massive troves of data were linked to daily accessible, dynamically rendered, mobile maps. Digital games depend

¹Sometimes they overlapped in person. For example, at a conference in 2004, I had coffee with Espen Aarseth, whose *Cybertext* cites walkthroughs and packaging as examples of game paratexts (117), though he sees these as "extrinsic" to "the game itself" and I am arguing here against any easy distinction of that kind.

on this kind of dynamic, data-connected map. Game worlds are often referred to as “maps” in just this sense. We can trace a line of direct descent from McKenzie’s reading of physical landscapes and maps as meaningful texts to Saklofske’s call for the application of deep mapping to the study of the procedurally generated worlds of a game like *No Man’s Sky*. As Saklofske suggests, paratextuality, properly understood, works to decenter the main text. We just need to redefine Genette’s thresholds as dynamically unfolding traversals, shifting explorations of a game’s expansive “social architectures” (Saklofske).

In taking up the mantle of McKenzie’s social-text theory, Jerome McGann saw games as a model for textuality in general. His experimental *Ivanhoe* game, created with Johanna Drucker, Bethany Nowviskie, and others, used a digital interface to track multiplayer moves in games of interpretation (Drucker and Rockwell, 2003). Players competitively rewrote a shared text (the first iteration was played with Sir Walter Scott’s novel, *Ivanhoe*) after adopting roles that implied various interpretive perspectives. In one late version, the results were graphed on a dynamic pie-chart representing the game’s discourse field, with “marbles” as markers for player avatars. The minimalist interface reminded us that the famous “magic circle” of Johan Huizinga, the circumscribed space in which gameplay takes place, is in practice more like a chalk circle for a playground game (of marbles, for instance). It’s a boundary drawn not in a timeless and transcendent space apart from the world, as Huizinga suggested, but on the ground, as it were, by the players themselves. And the game is played at the edge or circumference of the circle, played across that circumference, never entirely locked within it. The magic circle is an agreed-upon social boundary. Instead of emphasizing the fealty to its spell required for gameplay to proceed, we might instead emphasize its everyday social foundation, and acknowledge that it is a

boundary designed to be crossed as well as observed. Such crossings in and out of the game happen repeatedly, just as a matter of course.

In the *Ivanhoe* game, the initial text (Scott's novel) became a pretext for making new game texts, which then in turn became new centers of attention, blurring any clear distinction between text and paratext.² As in the fan fiction that may have helped to inspire the game, a minor character, an implied setting or context, even an extrinsic element—the story of an editor or a publisher or historical figure—could become the subject-position from which to engage in an interpretive rewriting of Scott's text. Paratext became the main text at the drop of a marble. In this way, the *Ivanhoe* game anticipated Mia Consalvo's 2017 argument about how modding and streaming on Twitch, for example, can flip the relationship between game text and paratext. Games become paratexts for other texts in different social settings. This essential volatility is what makes the concept of paratext useful in the study of video games. That was essentially my point in 2008: video games are “always already predominantly paratextual,” that is, the typical media ecosystem surrounding any game—and not only the authorized packaging, load screens, merchandising, and so on—provides any number of paratextual openings, which can activate crossings like “concentric circles rippling out into the world” (Jones, 2008, p. 43). Games

² The rewriting involved in the *Ivanhoe* game may seem at first like the production of what Genette would call *hypertexts*—texts linked to the main *hypotext*. But the whole point of the game is that the discourse field surrounding any text is part of the latent potential of the main text. The players' texts are not essays about or evocations of *Ivanhoe* but are instead attempts to express just a fraction of the multitudinous meanings of the (n-dimensional) novel through acts of competitive rewriting.

foreground this effect. But a similar dynamic potential has always been present in texts of all kinds.

As Seiwald argues, and the other essays in this cluster agree, “the idea of paratext as received from Genette” is indeed too limited to be applied to video games. We have to remix it, perhaps “braid” it together with other theoretical concepts (Saklofske) so that it better suits the experience of gaming. This need to expand the theory reflects not Genette’s bookishness but a limitation in his treatment of book-based textuality. As shown by Mikhail Bahktin, Julia Kristeva, and Roland Barthes, among a host of other literary theorists, even print texts were never really static, self-enclosed, or non-dialogic. Likewise, despite Genette’s taxonomic style, the paratext itself was always a dynamic and “*malleable* threshold” (Galey; my emphasis), linking one possibility space with another, affording travel in more than one direction. The hierarchical relationship between text and paratext has always been undermined by close attention to the dynamics of actual paratextuality. *Portal*’s central in-game mechanic works as a metaphor for these dynamics. You blast a new opening for the traversal of the game-map, but in doing so sometimes you discover an easter egg like the URL for ApertureScience.com, for example, which takes you out of the game to explore *that*. From there you can re-enter the game world at will. In other words: normal gameplay. Crossing a threshold or jumping into a portal, you may find yourself in another part of the world, even outside what you had hitherto understood as the game world, where you find adjacent possibilities for making new meanings. Adjacent possibilities for meaning-making: that’s one expanded definition of paratext. Not decorative accoutrements but cues to “an interpretive strategy,” which begins with paying attention to the “edges” of the text, and to features that lead “into (and out of) what lies beyond”

(Galey).³ This expanded view takes us beyond debates over whether video game paratexts are limited to canonical packaging, marketing campaigns, or preliminary load screens, or can also include wikis, discussion boards, or fan art. The expanded view acknowledges the “fluidity” and dynamic “ephemerality” of gameplay (Seiwald), but also the equally dynamic and fluid nature of paratexts themselves. It defines the text-paratext relationship as emerging from the process of play and from the perspective of the player.

The value of taking such an expanded view becomes clear if we consider the massively popular life-simulation game, *Animal Crossing: New Horizons*. Its release for the Nintendo Switch in early 2020 coincided with the onset of the COVID-19 global pandemic and worldwide lockdowns. It became a celebrated escapist pastime, like working jigsaw puzzles or binge-watching streaming TV, but in this case through a therapeutic immersion in the colorful cartoon world of a deserted island, with friendly anthropomorphic animal NPCs as fellow residents, and the chance to interact with a handful of other players locally or by visiting others’ islands online. For many who found themselves quarantined, working or schooling from home, *Animal Crossing* provided a welcome alternative to endless Zoom meetings. In your island existence you

³ Ellen McCracken suggests that readers can be prompted to follow both centrifugal and centripetal vectors, moving in and out of the text, when it comes to reading electronic texts: “With the verbal literary text as the center, outward and inward pathways of semiotic engagement lead readers in various ways to the exterior and interior” (106). As she points out, the same paratext can work either centrifugally or centripetally, depending on the stage of the reading process one encounters it (110).

could control, craft, and customize a radically simplified environment on a slow quotidian schedule, making a small second life during a dark and unpredictable time out in the world.

Of course the game was never hermetically sealed. To begin, the un-docked and hand-held Nintendo Switch console, its often brightly-colored joycons attached on either side, literally frames the experience. And multiplayer interactions, local or over the internet, provide other potential thresholds (as they have always done in multiplayer games). After the game's release, the thresholds only multiplied. During the momentous 2020 US presidential election, just as previous political campaigns and corporations had established presences in *Second Life*, the Biden-Harris campaign created a Biden HQ Island open to visitors in the game, with a voting center displaying a URL for a vote-planning website, text prompts for signing up for the real-world political campaign, virtual yard signs, banners, T-shirts, and other in-game merchandise for your own island, a Biden avatar wearing aviator sunglasses (with whom you could take selfies), a campaign field office, divided between Joe Biden and Kamala Harris—with a virtual sneaker collection mounted on the wall on her side. (It's a bit more elaborate sneakerhead collection than we might expect, based on her preference during the campaign for simple black Chuck Taylors.) At the island's edge, the White House was visible in the distance. The Biden HQ Island was introduced in a live Let's Play Twitch stream, which was in turn promoted on Twitter. As in *Minecraft*, recreating real-world spaces and objects has always been a popular activity in *Animal Crossing*. Although it was criticized as being too political, intrusive, or awkward in its attempt to reach the supposed youth vote, the Biden-Harris campaign's presence in the game, mounted during the pandemic and lockdown, felt more directly connected to the troubled real world than usual, despite its game-appropriate lightheartedness. Maybe that was because a

desperate utopianism reflecting the stakes of the election was often detectable below the whimsical surface.

The boundary between even this kawaii (cute) game world and the real world remained all-too porous, however one might have wished for total immersion on any given day. Earlier in the year, another example in the game made the point in a more somber key: Julia Maiuri, a Minnesota MFA student, created on her island in *Animal Crossing* the Museum of Contemporary Art Kittengale (MoCAK). Through her avatar, Joolz, she curated exhibits there of the work of real-world artists, including Mark Schoening. His *Red Tulip Glitch Memorial*, April 23-29, 2020, consisted of wall-mounted portraits of tulips, broken up on four canvases each, and a large twelve-panel matrix reading “never again,” in a small red gallery with potted tulips arranged in rows. Outside the gallery, more red tulips were on display in the front garden. The work—which players could visit on Kittengale Island, but which was also featured on Maiuri’s Instagram and elsewhere online—commemorates a glitch in the earlier *Animal Crossing: Wild World* (2006), when a blank note and a red tulip suddenly arrived one day at a player’s island. When planted, the flower carried a malicious glitch into the game. As a result, thousands of players were frozen and locked into their houses, isolated from the game and other players for months, until Nintendo patched the game. The 2020 exhibit was an homage and commemoration of this traumatic in-game event. As one article put it: “There’s a *fil rouge* connecting the previous lockdown with the current situation” (Bittanti, 2020). Players who visited the art exhibit received a pack of red tulip seeds, which they could plant on their own islands—safely, they were assured, “without fear”—each serving as a kind of symbolic antivirus. The exhibit not only tied the escapist game to the

outside world, which was suffering severe lockdowns in the early peak of the pandemic, it provided a therapeutic gesture of resistance against the general sense of dread.

Schoening created the artwork using Photoshop, then used a fan-made online tool, ACPatterns (acpatterns.com), to convert the image files to a format *Animal Crossing* could use and to generate QR codes that allowed them to be imported by Maiuri into the gallery via an in-game app. So, to recap: the in-game objects were made by an artist not officially associated with the island of Kittengale, using an external image editor created by fans in March 2020 (but soon sanctioned by Nintendo). These images were integrated into the game, but were also displayed, advertised, and discussed on multiple social media platforms. The image editor also links to its own Discord group, where the artist could well have discussed his formal process. Maiuri's Instagram, just to select one from among these concentric, rippling elements, may have served as a paratext for the in-game gallery and even for the game in general. But for some who only encountered the Instagram, it could also have stood alone. Following Consalvo, we might flip the relationship and see *Animal Crossing* as a paratext for the Instagram post, with the latter's rich combination of images from the exhibit, text descriptions, strings of emojis, and hashtags. Put another way: did the artist create a paratext, which only via the use of editors and QR codes became part of "the game itself?" Or did the border of the game expand dynamically like an amoeba to include his creativity once he engaged in making something with an eye to the game? A more productive way to look at it might be to see how the whole exhibit was premised on the exploration of multidirectional thresholds: in an out of virtual spaces in the game, between the game and the world you may be trying to escape, and in and out of quarantine in that disturbing everyday world. The thresholds also included the borders between the game, as played on the

Nintendo Switch, and all the surrounding potential paratexts—tools, boards, fan art, in this case professional art, out on the internet and in the physical world—that make gameplay what it is. Players cross those kinds of thresholds all the time as part of normal gameplay.

Another very different game emerged during the pandemic year, with a much smaller player base than *Animal Crossing* but illustrating important features of the game-world relationship. Instead of an escapist virtual world, *Aglet* located its gameplay in the physical world people traverse every day. Its release coincided with an increase in people's taking more walks during the early 2020 quarantine, aided by the existing widespread use of fitness trackers and apps on wrists or mobile phones, all accelerated by enhanced network connectivity, especially in cities. Described in the press as *Pokémon Go* for sneakerheads—serious collectors of sneakers—the iOS mobile game further gamified that already gameful subculture. In the financial world, resellers often flip highly desirable lines of sneakers based on Discord chat, then buy large numbers of Yeezys, say, when they hit the market, using online programs “capable of gaming a system meant to limit purchases to one pair per customer;” some resellers reap tens of thousands of dollars in profits per day in this way (Hunt, 2021, p. 41).

Aglet wasn't meant primarily for that resale market, though a digital marketplace is in the works, as are possible collaborations with brands. The game is connected by design to the collecting subculture, the fan culture that makes reselling feasible. CEO of Onlife and creator of *Aglet*, Ryan Mullins, who served as Director of Future Trends at Adidas from 2017-2019, theorizes the game in terms of the shifting relationship between digital and physical worlds. He told me that *Aglet* is one step towards the larger goal of building a new platform, a spatial engine, like a game engine (Unreal or Unity for example) but for the combined digital and physical

worlds, which he thinks of as the metaverse. Mullins sees that projected platform and the current game as emergent effects of what I have elsewhere followed William Gibson is calling the “eversion,” or turning inside out, of the digital world, its spilling out into the mundane physical world (Jones, 2014, pp. 18-20). We increasingly live in a mixed reality, an everted world. *Aglet* is just one of many recent applications taking that condition as a given—the intersection of data-rich mapping, cloud computing, and denser connectivity—which allows augmented reality in the everyday environment to serve as an alternative to immersive virtual worlds apart from the physical world.

In *Aglet* you walk around in the real world, logging your steps and earning digital currency (called “aglet”) in order to collect virtual (and sometimes physical) sneakers. Data about local weather and distance traveled cause the sneakers to wear in real time and make some pairs more suitable to a day’s walk than others. The game layer on top of your local map includes data about the weather, checkpoints and power-ups for sneaker repair, “treasure chests,” and (so far rare) geocache-like “drops” of real-world sneakers. The ethos and style of fan-level collecting, including the use of jargon (“drop,” “cop,” “grail,” “kicks,” “Don”), binds the game to the already existing subculture, just as Nintendo’s beloved intellectual property made possible Niantic/Nintendo’s *Pokémon Go* in 2016. For those who collect sneakers, variations when it comes to the fabrics, designs, and their associations with sports and hip hop, make the shoes tangible embodiment of material culture. There is an obvious fit—pun intended—between a game based on walking in physical sneakers and the collecting of virtual sneakers. Sneakers are fashion—functional clothing, but also sometimes fanciful or radical in their aesthetic designs. Digital shoes in the game draw on these associations to connect the virtual collections to the

tangible pleasures of collecting, displaying, and wearing sneakers. The virtual shoes come in a box that flips open with an animation, capturing in a split second a bit of the excitement of unboxing rituals. Once collected, the shoes go into transparent boxes on narrow shelves on the wall. Visually, these digital images of rows and columns of boxes are reminiscent of the individual cells of a data grid—which, of course, under the surface of the graphical interface, they are.

Aglet deliberately explores the back-and-forth between digital and physical realities that has come to characterize so much of everyday life. It's no accident that the game has begun to experiment with making sneaker designs viable as NFTs (non-fungible tokens, based on smart contracts using blockchain technology). There are plans to partner with shoe manufacturers and to allow independent, unknown designers to create new virtual sneakers in the game, then own and market the digital files as NFTs (you may also be able to earn an NFT virtual sneaker by completing a collection), then perhaps produce the designed shoes outside the app, in the physical world. Finally, as with many games these days, players can join a Discord server to discuss the game, make trades, share strategies, brag about their finds, and so on. There's also a YouTube channel, an Instagram, livestreams on Twitch, and other dedicated social media outside the app.

But the whole point of *Aglet* is to blur what counts as outside the app—and to blur the boundaries between exercise and gaming, creativity and commerce, world and map—the physical and the digital. Indeed, when we ask where are the paratexts for *Aglet*?, it immediately becomes obvious that the question is complicated and requires that we radically expand Genette's definitions. We see that the threshold-crossing figured in Genette's concept of paratext

is the *donnée*, the starting premise, of a game like this. We might say that *Aglet* is from the start and predominantly paratextual. What was traditionally relegated to the paratext—the opportunity to cross in and out of the main text as part of the textual (or gaming) experience—has moved to the foreground, has become the very reason for the game’s being. While it may have taken certain technical and social developments to make this sort of thing possible in the everyday world of mobile gaming, that tendency of games to foreground such paratextual possibilities has always been part of what they offer as forms of cultural expression and experience. When we look closely, we see that games just make more obvious a game-like feature of all expressive texts, in any form, including literary texts. That is to say, all texts work through constructed, provisional enclosures (which are not really magic circles). We can cross in and out of those enclosures as part of the normal experience of their aesthetic or visceral pleasures, as part of the process of traversing, reading, or playing them, including the process of making their meanings, of making them meaningful.

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