# The Ludic Nature of Paratexts

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# The Ludic Nature of Paratexts

## Playful Material in and Beyond Video Games

REGINA SEIWALD

> The very essence of playfulness is an openness to anything that may happen. The feeling that whatever happens, it's ok. So you cannot be playful if you're frightened that moving in some direction will be "wrong" —something you "shouldn't have done."
> JOHN CLEESE[1]

## INTRODUCTION: PLAYFUL GAME PARATEXTS

Video games, as cultural artifacts and as pastimes, play a key part in the lives of most people. The digital age has brought about a full-fledged *homo ludens* more than 80 years after the term has been promoted by Johan Huizinga, making playfulness a conscious effort and not just a natural instinct.[2] A possible explanation for the popularity of games is that unlike most other media, such as literature in its printed book form, films, or paintings, video games allow us to experience their worlds by actively engaging with them, creating

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1   John Cleese cited in Sandberg, Berit/Frick-Islitzer, Dagmar: *Die Künstlerbrille. Was und wie Führungskräfte von Künstlern lernen können*, Wiesbaden: Springer Gabler 2018, p. 230.

2   Huizinga, Johan: *Homo Ludens. A Study of Play Element in Culture*, Boston, MA: Beacon Press 1955 (*1938), p. 10.

personalized stories in and through them, and executing (or consciously breaking) the rules they afford. In a sense, a game, as an experience, only exists through being played and is uniquely realized in response to the player's engagement with it. The character we embody in a narrative video game fulfills actions we make them do while we, through them, establish relationships with other in-game characters. At the same time, a game possesses a notion of artifactuality, which is marked by less ephemeral characteristics due to the physical materiality associated with this denotation of game, such as a disc or a cartridge.

The experience we have of a game, however, is not only generated by playing it but also influenced by material surrounding the game, which closely relates to it and connects the game world and the player's reality. This means that while playing a game, the player occupies two spaces simultaneously, namely the fictive game world and the reality from where they access the game. The elements linking these two worlds are akin to what Gérard Genette has termed 'paratexts,' namely "a threshold" or "an 'undefined zone' between the inside and the outside."[3] This supporting, transitional material frames the game and makes it visible as a cultural artifact to the public.[4] Video game paratexts can take on diverse forms and functions, such as those pertaining to gameplay (e.g., setting the difficulty level or creating the avatar), those resembling Genette's "factual paratexts"[5] (e.g., opening and closing credits, copyright information, or PG ratings), narrative paratexts (e.g., unplayable prologues or cutscenes), marketing paratexts (e.g., the disc cover, the publisher's or developer's logo, merchandising products or trailers), technological paratexts (e.g., devices on which the game is played, which establish a relationship between the game and its players), critical material (e.g., industry media outputs or game reviews published in newspapers) as well as fan-created paratexts (e.g., mods, Let's Play videos, forum discussions, wikis or archives).

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3   Genette, Gérard: *Paratexts. Thresholds of Interpretation*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1997 (*1987), p. 2.

4   Cf. Uricchio, William: "Interactivity and the Modalities of Textual-Hacking. From the Bible to Algorithmically Generated Stories," in: Pesce, Sara/Noto, Paolo (eds.), *The Politics of Ephemeral Digital Media*, New York: Routledge 2016, pp. 155-169, here p. 155.

5   G. Genette: *Paratexts*, p. 7.

While these and other paratexts relating to and surrounding video games follow defined functions, they themselves can possess playful characteristics. Although this appears to be a very straightforward statement, the problem with this argument is that 'playfulness,' as the baseline characteristic of and attitude encouraged by games, has never been explicitly defined in Game Studies but is assumed to be the underlying feature all games possess. Brian Sutton-Smith has outlined this paradoxical situation as follows: "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."[6] We, therefore, need to take a look at concepts related to 'playfulness' within Game Studies and other fields in order to understand what it implies and to be able to define it for the purposes of the present study. Playfulness underpins the aspects that make up play as defined by Roger Callois, namely that it is free, separate, uncertain, unproductive, governed by rules, and accompanied by make-believe.[7] His taxonomic division of play into *paidia*—the unstructured "primal power of improvisation and joy"[8]—and *ludus*—structured, rule-based play "to which […] a civilizing quality can be attributed"[9]—led to the appreciation of the *ludic* (yet not *paidic*) as the underlying core characteristic of all games in studies that followed, and eventually resulted in the critical field of *ludology*, which has its origins in Espen Aarseth's discussion of "ergodic" texts in *Cybertext*.[10] Despite the liberal use of Callois' terminology for subsequent

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6    Sutton-Smith, Brian: *The Ambiguity of Play*, Cambridge, MA/London: Harvard University Press 2001, p. 1.

7    Cf. Callois, Roger: *Man, Play and Games*, trans. Meyer Barash, Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press 2001 (*1958 Fr., *1961 Engl.), pp. 9-10.

8    Ibid., p. 27.

9    Ibid.

10   Cf. Aarseth, Espen J.: *Cybertext. Perspectives on Ergodic Literature*. Baltimore/London: The Johns Hopkins University Press 1997. Cf. Wardrip-Fuin, Noah/Harrigan, Pat: "Ludology," in: Wardrip-Fruin, Noah/Harrigan, Pat (eds.), *First Person. New Media as Story, Performance, and Game*, Cambridge, MA/London: MIT Press 2004, p. 35.

research, such as works by Gonzalo Frasca,[11] Graham H. Jensen,[12] and Gerald Voorhees,[13] the unalterable essence of playfulness all games possess remains ambiguous. It evokes ideas of Huizinga's "magic circle,"[14] whose existence has been challenged by some, notably by Mia Consalvo,[15] but defended by others, such as Jaakko Stenros.[16] These discussions have collectively made clear that games and our playful engagement with them are somehow different from other experiences. The magic circle resembles a possibility space in which we can move freely (to some extent, at least). In relation to games, playfulness thus denotes their characteristic of toying with alternatives to circumstances present in reality without being assigned notions of coercion, while still being regulated by rules.

An alternative to transfixing ideas of playfulness to games is to look at the players themselves and the attitudes they have towards ludic concepts. J. Nina Lieberman assigned the characteristic of playfulness to the agent playing the game rather than the game itself to the result that it can be seen as a character trait.[17] Without a person's willingness to act playfully in response

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11  Cf. Frasca, Gonzalo: "Simulation Versus Narrative. Introduction to Ludology," in: Wolf, Mark J.P./Perron, Bernard (eds.), *The Video Game Theory Reader*, New York: Routledge 2003, pp. 221-236.

12  Cf. Jensen Graham H.: "Making Sense of Play in Video Games. Ludus, Paidia, and Possibility Spaces," in: *Eludamos. Journal for Computer Game Culture* 7.1 (2013), pp. 69-80.

13  Cf. Voorhees, Gerald: "Genre Troubles in Game Studies. Ludology, Agonism, and Social Action," in: *Kinephanos: Journal of Media Studies and Popular Culture*, Special Issue (May 2019), https://www.kinephanos.ca/2019/genre-trouble s-in-game-studies-ludology-agonism-and-social-action/

14  J. Huizinga: *Homo Ludens*, p. 10.

15  Cf. Consalvo, Mia: "There Is No Magic Circle," in: *Games and Culture* 4.4 (October 2009), pp. 408-417.

16  Cf. Stenros, Jaakko: "In Defence of a Magic Circle. The Social, Mental and Cultural Boundaries of Play," in: *DiGRA—Transactions of the Digital Games Research Association* 1.2 (2014); http://todigra.org/index.php/todigra/article/vi ew/10/26

17  Cf. Lieberman, J. Nina: "Playfulness and Divergent Thinking. An Investigation of their Relationship at the Kindergarten Level," in: *The Journal of Genetic Psychology* 107 (1965), pp. 219-224; Lieberman, J. Nina: "Playfulness. An Attempt

to a game, it becomes doubtful whether we can even talk about the existence of the game as a game. That is, we need someone to enter the magic circle in order for play (and game) to be realized due to it being a process and an action. Humans are intuitively playful, and hence many of our daily encounters are also playful without being in response to games. For example, the way young children explore and engage with their environment is marked by a large degree of playfulness that allows them to test their own reactions to specific situations and probe the consequences of their actions, whereby they learn important life skills.[18]

While games are thus inherently playful and our engagement with them is marked by playfulness, the discussion that follows focuses on the area lying between the game and the player, namely on paratextual elements surrounding the game that are equally ludic. By taking this perspective, it will be possible to negotiate between the playfulness of the game and that of the player's engagement with it, which takes place in the transitional spaces of paratexts linking them. I will be looking at two kinds of ludic paratexts, namely games incorporated within other games and playful marketing elements. My discussion begins with looking at paratextual relationships formed by intertextual links embedded within the game, which create a second in-game level of playfulness to the effect that this embeddedness strongly emphasizes the ludic characteristic of games and gaming in general. I will then move to the margins of the game and explore how the game is constituted as a cultural artifact and thus presented to its players (and the public) by means of marketing materials such as trailers or games made to promote other games. By looking at these two kinds of playful paratexts, I will be able to explore how material surrounding the game can be playful and how, in turn, this influences the perception of the game, its 'gameness,' and the act of playing. The aim of this paper is, therefore, two-fold: On the one hand, I want to determine how hybrid materials lying beyond the playable part of the game support the game world presented therein, thus emphasizing the act of framing and hybridization paratextuality accomplishes. On the other hand, I will discuss various modes how this paratextual material can

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to Conceptualize a Quality of Play and of the Player," in: *Psychological Reports* 19.3 (1966), p. 1278.

18  Cf. Skard, Geva/Bundy, Anita C.: *Test of Playfulness (ToP). Test zur Spielfähigkeit*, Idstein: Schulz-Kirchner Verlag 2011 (*2008).

itself be playful, thus mirroring the act of playing and our engagement with the game they relate to. Through this, it will be possible to uncover the tight relationship between playful material within the game and that outside of it, which is often neglected and seen as simple addenda to the game.

## PLAYFUL GAMES WITHIN GAMES

Video games aim at creating coherent worlds that allow players to enter their universes and occupy a space that is different from reality. This is achieved by proposing playfulness as an integral part of this world to the effect that it is not emphasized but rather becomes an internalized mode associated with the actions committed by the player. If this enclosed zone becomes willingly or unwillingly disrupted by highlighting that the player is currently playing a game, this playfulness is emphasized, exposing the artifactuality of the game and its difference from reality. This can be caused by errors such as glitches, for example, the infamous "No Face Glitch"[19] found in some cutscenes of ASSASSIN'S CREED UNITY (2014) or the 'demonic babies'[20] in THE SIMS 4 (2014). However, many game-makers consciously use devices that emphasize the status of a game as a game as a way to encourage a stronger sense of playfulness. While exposing the ludic nature of games and their difference from reality, it may seem that this challenges the player's "willing suspension of disbelief"[21] and their engagement in a "make-believe"-setting[22] that are prerequisites for any fictional world, including that of games, to be entered as such. Although seemingly breaking the fourth wall and thus, in a sense, exposing the fictitiousness of the game, players still appear to be willing to stay within the fictional realm and the magic circle the

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19  Cf. N. N.: "Assassin's Creed Unity No Face Glitch," https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=T2zgtwLi15w&t=2s

20  Cf. Hernandez, Patricia: "Oh Good, The Sims 4 has Demon Babies," in: *Kotaku*, September 2, 2014; https://kotaku.com/the-sims-4-demon-babies-are-a-glitchy-nightmare-1629680047

21  Samuel Taylor Coleridge cited in Ferri, Anthony J.: Willing *Suspension of Disbelief. Poetic Faith in Film*, Lanham, MD: Lexington Books 2007, p. 1.

22  Cf. Walton, Kendall L.: *Mimesis as Make-Believe. On* the *Foundations of the Representational Arts*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press 1990.

games create. The reason for this is that a different process is instigated, namely one that closely resembles Niklas Luhmann's notion of *second-order observation*:[23] Players are able to observe the act of playing and a game's playfulness through playing and playfulness, thus exploring the object forming the center of the observation by means of engaging with its characteristics through the observation of this observation. This has the effect that the experience players have of a game (and its playfulness) is not limited by their own perspective but rather makes 'blind spots'[24] visible by conducting an observation of an observation.[25]

One way to generate a stance of second-order observation is by incorporating minigames within the main games, which the player(-avatar) can play.[26] Games-within-games generate two levels of playfulness and a tension between material associated with the fictive game-realm and the reality-

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23 Cf. Luhmann, Niklas: *Die Gesellschaft der Gesellschaft*, Frankfurt: Suhrkamp 1997; Luhmann, Niklas: *The Reality of the Mass Media*, Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press 2000, p. 97; Moeller, Hans-Georg: "On Second-Order Observation and Genuine Pretending: Coming to Terms with Society," in: *Thesis Eleven* 143.1 (2017), pp. 28-43.

24 Cf. Luhmann, Niklas: "Die Autopoiesis des Bewußtseins," in: *Soziale Welt* 36.4 (1985), pp. 402-446, here p. 440; N. Luhmann: *Die Gesellschaft der Gesellschaft*, p. 1095; Borch, Christian: *Niklas Luhmann*, Oxon: Routledge 2011, pp. 134-141. Blind spots are essential to second-order observation because they make differences visible, allowing the observer to determine that which needs to be observed. Cf. N. Luhmann: *Die Gesellschaft der Gesellschaft*, p. 1121.

25 Cf. ibid., p. 281. Devices that double the fictional layer within games can also be seen as third-order observations because a second-order observation is inherent to all games in which players assume the role of an avatar and explore the fictional space through the perspective of this character. This simultaneously limits and expands their observational positionality: we can only see what the game allows us to see but we can also see things we cannot see in our reality.

26 The games considered here are not game collections or 'party games,' such as SUPER MARIO PARTY (2018) but games that constitute coherent main worlds interspersed with embedded games. Cf. Seiwald, Regina: "Games within Games. The Two (or More) Fictional Levels of Video Games," in: Zagalo, Nelson et al. (eds.), *Videogame Sciences and Arts*, Cham: Springer 2019, pp. 18-31.

realm of the player, thus creating self-reflexivity.[27] They, therefore, constitute paratextual relationships between the game and the player by situating the embedding game within a certain discourse of game genres or gaming history, particularly if the game exists outside of the fictional realm of the game it appears in. The relationship between the embedded and the embedding game, on the other hand, is intertextual. This emphasizes Genette's argument that his proposed categories of transtextuality should not be seen as isolated, static types but as overlapping classes of relationships, texts can have with other texts and their audiences.[28] This intertextuality emphasizes the playfulness of games and grants players a meta-perspective onto their act of playing, which is a characteristic shared with metaleptic devices, such as game worlds occurring within VR.[29] Intertextuality also encourages different ideas of playfulness through paratextually embedding other games to the effect that these embedded games tell us something about the playfulness of games in general and our engagement with them. Jesper Juul has noted that embedded games can only occur "in a game with a fictional world. You can play abstract games against characters in a fictional world, but you cannot play *EverQuest* (1999) inside *Tetris* (1984). It is graphically impossible to place *EverQuest* inside a game of *Tetris*."[30] This is also the reason why the analysis that follows only focuses on narrative games with coherent game worlds. The relationships games establish to their embedding games can be various, and the effects they have on the notion of 'gameness' as well as the kind of playfulness they encourage are manifold. Based on these

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27  Cf. ibid., pp. 22-23. Cf. Zhu, Feng: "The Freedom of Alienated Reflexive Subjectivity in *The Stanley Parable*," in: *Convergence* 26.1 (February 2020), pp. 116-134.

28  Cf. Genette, Gérard: *Palimpsests. Literature on the Second Degree*, Lincoln, NE/London: University of Nebraska Press 1997, pp. 1-7. Besides paratextuality and intertextuality, Genette proposes architextuality (the relationship between a text and its genre), metatextuality (a critical text about another text), and hypertextuality/hypotextuality (the relationship between a text and another preceding text or a textual transformation) as categories of transtextuality.

29  Cf. Backe, Hans-Joachim: "Metareferentiality Through In-game Images in Immersive Simulation Games." in: *Proceedings of Foundations of Digital Games,* Malmö (2018), pp. 1-10.

30  Juul, Jesper: *Half-Real. Video Games between Real Rules and Fictional Worlds*, Cambridge, MA: MIT Press 2005, p. 133.

relationships, I propose a two-vector spectral taxonomy that considers gameplay mechanics and impact (see Fig. 1).

In the context of gameplay mechanics, the incorporated games can either resemble the play-structure of the game they occur in (e.g., by following similar rules or modes of engagement) or completely depart from it (e.g., by incorporating an entirely different genre in the game). The horizontal axis, therefore, ranges from congruent gameplay mechanics on the left to divergent structures on the right. Embedded games following the play-structure of the embedding game occur less frequently.

*Figure 1: The relationship between embedding and embedded games*
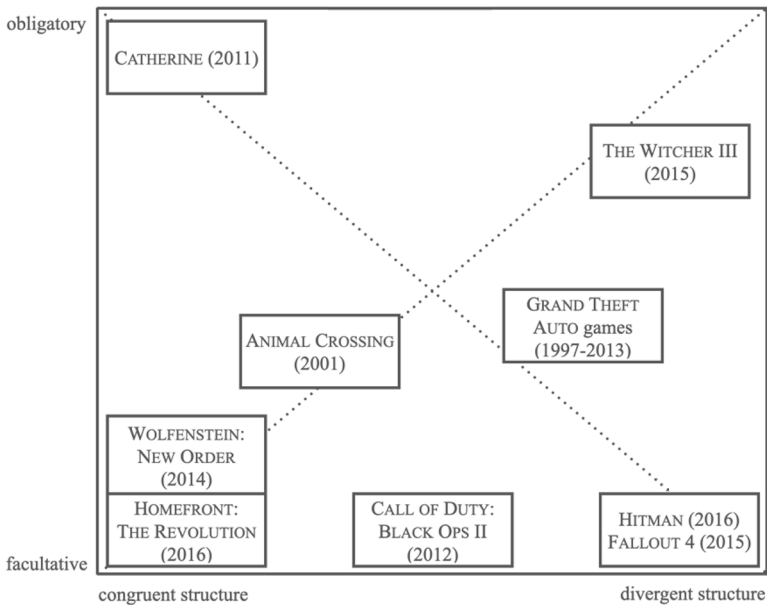


Source: Graphic by R. Seiwald

In a homage to itself, WOLFENSTEIN: NEW ORDER (2014) contains a playable version of WOLFENSTEIN 3D (1992). When B.J. Blazkowicz falls asleep in the resistance headquarters, he has a nightmare resembling the first level of WOLFENSTEIN 3D, which can be played as the beginning of the side mission "Escape from Castle Wolfenstein." The gameplay mechanics of the embed-

ded game are akin to the one of the main game, while this paratextual-inter-
textual reference to the game's origin also points toward the history of the
WOLFENSTEIN-saga. The first-person shooter HOMEFRONT: THE REVOLU-
TION (2016) uses a similar mode of embeddedness, but this time the player
must enter the second game-layer through an arcade machine located in the
prison area to the effect that the playfulness of their engagement with this
game-within-the-game is very apparent. The arcade machine contains the
first two levels of the first-person shooter TIMESPLITTERS 2 (2002), whose
gameplay mechanics resemble those forming the core of HOMEFRONT: THE
REVOLUTION, namely a combination of combat and tactics to defeat enemies.
The two games are also linked on a publishing level: TIMESPLITTER 2's de-
veloper Free Radical Design became first owned by Crytek UK and later by
Deep Silver, which is HOMEFRONT: THE REVOLUTION's publisher.[31] What we
can witness here is, therefore, not just a link between two games but also an
account of how their publication histories are connected. When situating the
relationships these embedded games form with their embedding games on
the horizontal axis of the model, they are placed on the left side of the spec-
trum because the gameplay mechanics of the incorporated games resemble
those of the main games.

Moving towards the right-hand side of the horizontal axis, we can find
embedded games that more and more depart from the gameplay structure of
their embedding games. Some games contain other games within themselves
that display noticeable resemblances between their gameplay mechanics,
while they nonetheless depart from them, in most cases due to the temporal
distance between the two games and the concomitant technical and generic
developments of games and gaming. CALL OF DUTY: BLACK OPS II (2012) is
a typical first-person shooter, being part of a series that is known for its de-
velopment of and innovation in this genre. It contains minigames that were
equally innovative when they came out. Players who own the Hardened Edi-
tion or the Care Package Edition of CALL OF DUTY: BLACK OPS II can access
the Nuketown 2025 map. After shooting off all mannequins' heads within
two minutes, the map displays an Activision logo, which gives access to four
classic Atari 2600 games, namely KABOOM! (1981), RIVER RAID (1982),

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31 Cf. Phillips, Tom: "Watch. TimeSplitter 2's First Level in Homefront: The Rev-
olution," in: *Eurogamer*, May 17, 2006; https://www.eurogamer.net/articles/20
16-05-17-heres-timesplitters-2-playable-in-homefront-the-revolution

PITFALL II: LOST CAVERNS (1984), and H.E.R.O. (1984). Just like CALL OF DUTY: BLACK OPS II, these games are built around action and a fast playstyle. They also share with the main game that they were all published by Activision, and hence the link between the style of games is notably strong. In an allusion to the history of playfulness and playing, the CALL OF DUTY: BLACK OPS II's avatar's hands change into 2D, and they are holding an Atari 2600 controller. This very obviously emphasizes the act of playing and the mechanics associated with it.

On the right end of the spectrum, we find games that incorporate minigames whose gameplay structure is completely different. The action-adventure stealth game HITMAN (2016) goes back to the origins of games as pastimes. Once the player has blown up the windsock located at the helipad, they need to disguise themselves as the Chief Surgeon and enter the operating booth. The main computer in the theatre contains a game called "Hitman," which is essentially Microsoft's MINESWEEPER (1992).[32] The gameplay mechanics of the embedding and the embedded games could not be more different but playing "Hitman" nonetheless grants us an observing perspective onto games and gaming itself. That is, although the gameplay structure of the main game and the incorporated game differ significantly, the fact that they invite us to playfully engage with them reflects on the act of playing in general. Unlike games situated on the left side of the horizontal axis, which present a mirroring of (almost) exactly the same gameplay mechanics, the games found along the spectrum when moving towards the right address playfulness and playing more generally.

The vertical axis structures embedded games based on the impact they have on the embedding game. On the one hand, these incorporated games can have an effect on the main game, such as THE WITCHER III's card game "Gwent." In the "Collect 'Em All" sidequest, players need to go on a hunt over the whole in-game world to collect all of the 120 cards available for Gwent. If they want to gain all the achievements in the game, they need to

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32 Other examples of games that include other games with divergent gameplay mechanics are the games of the GRAND THEFT AUTO series (1997-2013), which contain various arcade games discussed below as well as FINAL FANTASY VIII (1999) and FINAL FANTASY XIV's (2013) card game "Triple Triad," which fulfils similar functions to "Gwent" in THE WITCHER III (2015) addressed below. Cf. Seiwald: *Games within Games*, p. 28.

complete this quest; hence it is, to some degree at least, essential for the game. An even stronger notion of connection between the embedded game and the embedding game is found in CATHERINE (2011), which consists of two worlds that mirror each other but whose gameplay is entirely different. One layer of the game focuses on the social encounters the protagonist, Vincent Brooks, has with other people in a bar during the daytime, resembling the gameplay structure of a social simulator. The other layer, occurring in the nighttime, is a puzzle-platform game in which the same protagonist needs to navigate deadly tower blocks. Interestingly, the bar Vincent is in has an arcade machine, on which he can play a game called "Rapunzel," which mirrors the gameplay of the nighttime sequence. This means that while this embedded game is closely tied to the gameplay mechanics of one half of the game, it is entirely different from the other.

In other cases, these embedded games function as pastime activities in the game world. ANIMAL CROSSING (2001) includes minigames that were originally published as independent titles for the Nintendo Entertainment System (NES), such as DONKEY KONG (1981) or WARIO'S WOODS (1994). While these games can be obtained 'legally' within the game world, for example, by winning them in Tom Nooks' lottery, others, such as MARIO BROS. (1983) or THE LEGEND OF ZELDA (1986), are obtained by means of external assistance. These NES games share some characteristics with the main game, namely a notion of personalized storytelling (in contrast to predefined narratives) and an open-world structure. While these minigames are not essential for the main game to be experienced, the fact that ANIMAL CROSSING in itself does not work towards a specific goal makes them an apt fit for the sense of leisure communicated in the main game. By playing these games, players shift their in-game identity from occupying their ANIMAL CROSSING avatar to taking on the position of the conceptualized or realized NES-game character. This changing role from one fictive form to another doubles the fictional plain within the game to the effect that the experience of the fictional world is carried out from within the main fictional world. A similar situation can be observed in FALLOUT 4 (2015), but unlike ANIMAL CROSSING, the embedded games are only loosely modeled on games that exist in reality. Through a Pip-Boy, which is a device the protagonist wears around his wrist, the player can access various games, such as "Red Menace" (modeled on DONKEY KONG), "Atomic Command" (modeled on MISSILE COMMAND, 1980), and "Zeta Invaders" (modeled on SPACE INVADERS, 1978). The games

FALLOUT 4 alludes to are canonical games, which each have a unique position in game history. In a sense, these allusions are apt considering the overall nostalgia and longing for the 'good old days' communicated in FALLOUT 4. The same situation occurs in games of the GRAND THEFT AUTO series, which allow players to play retro arcade games, such as "Duality" (modeled on ASTEROIDS, 1979), "Race and Chase: Crotch Rockets" (modeled on HANG-ON, 1985), and "QUB3D" (modeled on TETRIS, and PUYO PUYO, 1991).[33] These games each follow different gameplay mechanics, which link to aspects of their embedded game, but none of them fully mirrors the overall structure of the GRAND THEFT AUTO games since they consist of many different components.

The various relationships between embedding and embedded games are grounded on notions of playfulness and paratextuality. In their unique connections, which serve as links between the player's reality and the game world as well as between individual layers within the game, these minigames allow us to observe our own act of playing. This is achieved through emphasizing the fact that they are games, which encourages the player to engage with them in a playful mode, yet one that is occupied by the avatar of the respective game and not by the players themselves. That way, the concept of playfulness as the core characteristic underpinning every game, as well as our engagement with them, can be observed.

## PLAYFUL MARKETING ELEMENTS

While the previous section focused on how in-game elements address notions of playfulness (albeit on a different fictional plain), the discussion in this part moves towards the fringes of the game and explores how it can be playfully presented as a cultural artifact to the player by means of paratextual elements. Marketing paratexts possess a distinct function because very often, players encounter them before they actually engage with the game. Official announcements on online forums and social media, trailers, and other forms of official and unofficial advertising give us a first taste of what we can expect from the game itself, its world, and its gameplay mechanics. These materials ultimately make the game visible as a cultural artifact and constitute a

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33  Cf. R. Seiwald: *Games within Games*, p. 25.

narrative around it (and sometimes a very hyperbolic one—after all, the aim of marketing is to sell the game). In some cases, these practices themselves are playful to the effect that they not only show the content of the game they market but also allow us to experience parts of it. As will become evident in the discussion below, some AAA games go for very bold playful marketing strategies in order to generate a sensationalist effect. This is connected to the budget allocated to marketing, which tends to be fairly big for AAA games in comparison to indie games and increasingly moves towards that of Hollywood blockbusters.[34] This should not mean, however, that non-AAA games do not use playful marketing strategies but simply that they do so on a different scale due to cost considerations.

The discussion that follows only considers official marketing elements for games and ignores unofficial (fan-made) endeavors. The reason for this is that my aim is to determine the kinds of playfulness found in the networks created between the game makers, their games, and the players. Furthermore, unofficial marketing material follows different purposes than official channels: The sellers of unofficial yet game world-related mugs, for example, do not aim at increasing the sales of the game but only of the specific product they sell. In this sense, unofficial merchandising products are not really marketing material for the game. In order to explore various forms of playfulness, I will look at games made to market other games in the form of playable trailers/teasers, accompanying websites, and playful analog marketing campaigns for digital games. The discussion of these playful sales strategies will allow me to determine how these paratexts can be realized in a playful mode as well as how this affects the playfulness of the game and the player.

The first marketing element addressed here, the trailer, plays a key role in marketing concepts focusing on the release of video games. Conventionally, game trailers do not ask players for active engagement, but they are solely watched, hence being akin to movie trailers.[35] Some video games,

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34 One reason for this is that "revenues from video games passed revenues from the Hollywood box office around 2004" (Zackarisson, Peter/Dymek, Mikolaj: *Video Game Marketing. A Student Textbook*, London/New York: Routledge 2017, p. 4). The more money is made from the sales of the current game, the more money can be invested in the next one (including its marketing).

35 Cf. Vollans, Ed: "So Just What is a Trailer anyway?" in: *Arts and the Market* 5.2 (2015), pp. 112-125, here p. 119.

however, were presented to the public by means of a playable trailer, which should give the potential player an idea of what to expect from the full game. P.T. (2014, short for 'Playable Teaser'), a puzzle horror game, was originally intended for evoking interest in the forthcoming SILENT HILLS game.[36] The production history of this trailer is particularly interesting: It was designed and directed by Hideo Kojima in partnership with film director Guillermo del Toro.[37] To hide the fact that P.T. was SILENT HILLS's teaser, it was published under the pseudonym 7780s Studio and not Kojima Productions.[38] P.T. picks up on the underlying horror and the cryptic information found in previous SILENT HILL (1999-2012) games to build up tension before giving away in its credits that it serves as an introduction to SILENT HILLS. However, the main game this paratext frames has been abandoned due to disputes between Kojima and publisher Konami.[39] While the game project was abandoned, the teaser lived on, becoming a playful material in its own right and ceased to be a framing device for another game. Due to its clever and innovative refor-

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36  Cf. Backe, Hans-Joachim: "The Aesthetics of Non-Euclidean Game Spaces. Multistability and Object Permanence in Antichamber and P.T.", in: Bonner, Marc (ed.): *Game | World | Architectonics. Transdisciplinary Approaches on Structures and Mechanics, Levels and Spaces, Aesthetics and Perception*, Heidelberg: Heidelberg University Publishing 2021, pp. 153-167, here p. 156. Cf. Shaw, Luke: "Luto is a Brand New First-Person Horror Game Inspired by P.T.," in: *NMW*, June 3, 2021; https://www.nme.com/news/gaming-news/luto-is-a-brand-new-first-person-horror-game-inspired-by-p-t-2955112

37  Cf. Klepek, Patrick: "Five Years Later, It's Nearly Impossible to Play Horror Classic P.T.," in: *Vice*, August 16, 2019; https://www.vice.com/en/article/zmjvw3/five-years-later-its-nearly-impossible-to-play-horror-classic-pt

38  Cf. Miller, Ross: "Guillermo del Toro's Silent Hills Teaser is the Scariest Thing You Can Play This Weekend," in: *The Verge*, August 15, 2014; https://web.archive.org/web/20150529082642/http://www.theverge.com/2014/8/15/6006477/pt-silent-hills-ps4-guillermo-del-toro-hideo-kojima. Cf. Bakalar, Jeff: "P.T. is Pure Video-Game Marketing Genius," in: *CNET*, August 13, 2014; https://www.cnet.com/news/p-t-is-pure-video-game-marketing-genius/

39  Cf. Brown, Peter/Crossley, Rob: "Kojima Expected to Leave Konami After MGS5, Inside Source Confirms," in: *Gamespot*, March 20, 2015; https://www.gamespot.com/articles/kojima-expected-to-leave-konami-after-mgs5-inside-/1100-6426024/

mation of the horror genre, P.T. has been praised by many critics for the immersive experience it creates and, as argued by David Houghton, "[b]y spreading out into the real world, by forcing solutions by way of hearsay, internet whispers, and desperate, rumored logic, it has become its own urban myth."[40] In this sense, the artifact that has originally been conceptualized as a paratext has become a text with its own paratexts.

While a trailer is normally released before the actual game, it is also possible to establish playful marketing paratexts in temporal analogy to the game. HALO 2's (2004) trailer contained a link to the website ilovebees.co, and the inquisitive player who looked up this link ended up on a seemingly hacked page about beekeeping and honey sales. The link to the website has also been circulated by sending out jars of honey containing the letters that make up the URL to people who have participated in ARGs in the past. By solving puzzles on this website, players received more and more information about an artificial alien intelligence that crashed on earth and managed to upload itself on the website in an attempt to reassemble itself. One way this ARG would interact with its players is by sending out codes that reveal themselves to be coordinates to payphones, which would ring at specific times and ask the player to answer a set of questions. Another way to engage with the game was by means of solving riddles, rewarding successful players with snippets of a video detailing the AI's story. Although the ARG's narrative does not bear a strong connection to that of HALO 2, both were tied in by announcing the link to the website in the latter game's trailer. The sense of community and collaboration constituted by I LOVE BEES (2004) mirrors the advanced multiplayer function of HALO 2, which by far surpasses the functions and quality of experience offered by previous games due to the concept of 'matchmaking': "a system where players only got to choose the general type of match (e.g., Free for all, Big Team Battle, etc.) and then Bungie would choose the map, game type, and opponents."[41] This innovative pairing mode does away with traditional multiplayer lobbies and has since then

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40  Houghton, David: "P.T. is Still the Purest Horror Game Around, and One of the Smartest on PS4," in: *Gamesradar*, October 31, 2016; https://www.gamesradar.com/why-pt-first-real-horror-game-years-and-best-game-ps4/

41  Hopson, John: "The Time I tried to Ruin Halo 2," in: *Polygon*, July 9, 2019; https://www.polygon.com/features/2019/7/2/18651880/the-time-i-tried-to-ruin-halo-2-user-research

become "the gold standard for online gameplay."[42] What has to be emphasized, however, is that the ARG created in I LOVE BEES has gone beyond its paratextual status by becoming an experience in itself, while its link to HALO 2's marketing strategy is still notably strong. This has the effect that I LOVE BEES is both a paratext and a text, which emphasizes that the textual status of a cultural object is not a static, unalterable characteristic but a fluid state dependent on the relationships a text forms with other texts.

Although I LOVE BEES exists on a website, it carries the ludic elements generated by the game into the reality realm, meaning that the website is solely the base from which the game takes off. Another game that shows a strong affinity with a website, namely PORTAL's (2007) connection with aperturescience.com, functions on a different level: The website exists (or existed) in the player's reality, while it is also part of the game world. Its DOS-like interface resembles the one for Aperture Science workers within PORTAL's game universe and is operated by the AI GLaDOS. The website accommodates information about Aperture Science and a video showing a room filled with elements from games published in THE ORANGE BOX (2007), namely HALF-LIFE 2 (2004), TEAM FORTRESS 2, (2007), and PORTAL. The website further contains a log-in section, where the password is either "Portal" or "Portals," while any username longer than two characters works. Within PORTAL, however, an Easter egg reveals a special access code. On one of the walls in the Enrichment Centre's maintenance area, the username "CJohnson," referring to Aperture Science's CEO Cave Johnson, and the password "Tier 3" are scribbled. Using these credentials offers the player two options, namely either to read up on Aperture Science and Johnson himself by typing the command 'NOTES' or to run a test asking humorous questions (mainly about cake) when typing 'APPLY.' The player will inevitably fail the test and is asked to "remain at your workstation until a Computer-Aided-Enrichment Crisis Team arrives." The website aperturescience.com makes many allusions to PORTAL, and its intrinsic link to the game cannot be denied. At the same time, however, it is possible that players only engage with the website without playing the main game, which still grants them a ludic experience. This raises the question whether the website is actually a playful paratext in relation to the main game or a playful text and thus a game in its

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42   Ibid.

own right when engaged without any knowledge of PORTAL, which points to the fluidity of the text–paratext–relationship.

The final playful marketing element discussed here are playful analog or mixed analog and digital marketing campaigns for digital games. Their purpose is to bind potential players to the game world through an active experience of and engagement with it before actually playing the game itself. Two days prior to the release of RESIDENT EVIL 5 (2009) on Friday, March 13, 2009, publisher Capcom launched a marketing campaign in form of a treasure hunt for body parts on Trafalgar Square, London. Players could sign up to collect as many fake human remains as possible and return to Westminster Bridge at 11 am, whereupon the winner will receive a trip to Africa.[43] Things took a bad turn when some of the body parts, including a head, went missing.[44] Furthermore, members of the public not knowing of this event notified the police upon encountering some of the blood-covered human remains. Despite these unforeseen issues, this marketing campaign moved the spotlight to the release of RESIDENT EVIL 5, making it a highly successful game. This paratext, therefore, not only framed the text of the video game but brought its gory fictive universe closer to our reality.

A similar overspill of a game world into reality can be observed for BIOSHOCK 2 (2010), albeit one that lasted for longer. In March 2009, a year before the game's release, publisher 2K Games started their massive marketing campaign. Posters appeared all over the US East coast, warning its readers of an undersea threat and directing them to the "Something in the Sea"[45] website. The website initially only displayed a map of the world, but over time, it got filled with newspaper clippings. The person adding them turns out to be Mark Metzler, who investigates girls gone missing around the Atlantic coast area in 1967, which ultimately results in the kidnapping of his daughter Cindy. The fictive world created on the website merged with reality when players were invited to write to Metzler and, in return, received cryptic

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43  Cf. Stuart, Keith: "Resident Evil 5 Marketing Fun—Hunt the Body Parts," in: *The Guardian*, March 10, 2009; https://www.theguardian.com/technology/gamesblog/2009/mar/10/gameculture-xbox

44  Ibid.

45  https://www.somethinginthesea.com. This website is now inactive and redirected to the designated BIOSHOCK 2 website, https://www.2k.com/en-US/game/bioshock-2/

recordings about undersea creatures and mysterious cities. It also blurred reality and fiction when wine bottles containing posters of a city called Rapture, BIOSHOCK's dystopian aquatic city, washed ashore on beaches around the world, whose locations were logged on the website. The online narrative ends with Metzler setting off on a boat from Baltimore in order to trace down Cindy overseas. All these elements making up Metzler's hunt ultimately led to the finding that the girls were abducted by the Big Sister and taken to Rapture, leading into the story of BIOSHOCK 2. This unprecedented, longitudinal marketing campaign has developed a fanbase for the text it frames long before the release of the video game. The playfulness of these marketing elements clearly illustrates that the threshold function of paratexts, linking a game and its (potential) players, has a vast impact on the perception of the game world, and in the case of BIOSHOCK 2 and "Something in the Sea," the narrative development and the player's involvement go far beyond the possibilities available for conventional digital games.

The examples discussed in this section have shown that marketing elements can be playful, while it has also been emphasized that they can become texts in themselves, asserting independence from the artifact they frame through their unique characteristic of playfulness. The reason for this is that, on the one hand, utilizing play as a means to invite potential players into another context of play is highly effective, while on the other hand, the people engaging with these marketing paratexts do so in a highly playful attitude. This shows that the paratextual relationships established between the triumvirate consisting of the game, its makers, and its players either function as means to support the creation of the game world and making it visible as such or to form texts that can potentially exist independently of the player due to their unique ludic nature. In this sense, the act of play that is encouraged in these playful marketing paratexts can have the effect that the potential player is prepared for the narrative and gameplay mechanism found in the main game, but it could also mean that the paratext becomes the preferable playful text players engage with (and in the case of P.T. the only one).

## CONCLUSION

Video games are playful through and through, hence it only seems logical that paratexts surrounding them are also playful. However, the functions paratexts normally fulfill, i.e., presenting a game as a cultural artifact to the potential player, mostly do not call for playfulness. For this reason, they conventionally appear without any ludic characteristics, particularly if they resemble Genette's notion of factual paratexts. As has been shown, however, some game makers consciously make paratexts and paratextual relationships playful in order to support the overall playfulness of the games these elements frame. This argument has been explored with recourse to two kinds of paratexts, namely games incorporated within other games and playful marketing elements.

The first section, which discussed embedded games, explored a number of case studies that allowed me to propose a two-vector spectral taxonomy on which games can be ordered according to the distance between the main game and the embedded game. On the one hand, this distance concerns the similarity of individual gameplay mechanics, while on the other hand, it regards the necessity of the embedded game for the main game. Although it has been shown that the relationships between embedding and embedded game can be various, it has been made clear that these intertextual links form paratextual relationships of a ludic nature which, in a sense, exposes the playfulness of the main game. This has the effect that the player can take on a position akin to Luhmann's second-order observation to examine their own playfulness and that of games through playing a game within a game.

The second section discussed marketing campaigns that possess game-like characteristics or were themselves conceptualized as games. By looking at various examples of games being promoted through other game(-like) elements, it was possible to determine the potential effects this ludic framing can have on the player's relationship to the game. In all of the examples discussed here, the original paratext has emerged into a text in its own right, while for some, the game they were supposed to relate to became peripheral (and in the case of P.T., even non-existent). This does not mean, however, that their status as paratexts becomes defunct once they enter a textual status but rather that the labeling is problematic due to the fluidity of the text-paratext-relationship. The discussion of games within games as well as the one of playful marketing elements have shown how crucial a considertion

of the concept of playfulness is in paratextual study and, I would argue, in Game Studies in general, which ironically has not discussed in depth what playfulness is, how it relates to the player, and what it means for games.

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