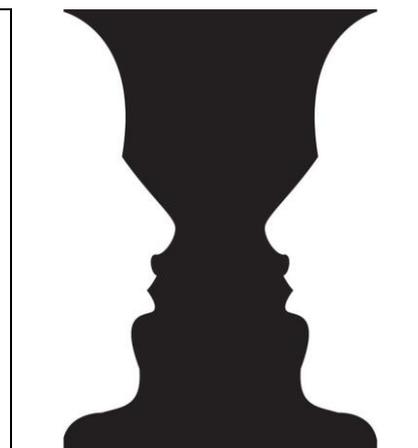


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## Paratext and meaning-making in indie games

Mikhail Fiadotau<sup>1</sup>

### **Abstract**

*The essay discusses the role of paratext in framing players' experience of videogames, focusing on the indie game scene and specifically examining three types of paratext: game title, game description, and the readme file. It cites examples coming from the author's experience as an independent game creator and as a player. The focus on concrete manifestations of paratext reflects the author's belief that examples should not only be used to illustrate theoretical arguments about paratextual phenomena, but should help deepen our understanding of them.*

### **Keywords**

*Paratext, videogames, indie games, meaning-making*

### **Introduction**

The concept of paratext (text accompanying and supporting another text), popularized in game studies by Mia Consalvo (2007), provides a productive framework for game scholars and has been successfully utilized in a number of subsequent studies. Most of these studies seem to have followed Consalvo in focusing on paratexts created by media audiences *in response* to games: forum discussions, walkthroughs, YouTube playthrough videos, and other manifestations of what Genette (1997) would have called epitext<sup>2</sup>. A few works, however, have addressed paratexts that are created by developers or game

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<sup>1</sup> Tallinn University, Estonia, [fiadotau@tlu.ee](mailto:fiadotau@tlu.ee)

<sup>2</sup> I will not delve here into the discussion of epitext as an “inferior,” “less pure” form of paratext. Nor will I discuss the argument that content generated by users, rather than authors or meta-authors, is not actually paratext (Rockenberger 2014). These discussions are peripheral to a paper explicitly focusing on the other end of the spectrum of paratextuality.

publishers and put out into the world together with the game itself (in Genette's terminology, peritexts). Notably, Peters (2014) followed Karhulahti (2012) in examining the role of feelies (physical objects bundled with videogames) in "materially connect[ing] virtual, digital gaming worlds to our own," and Rockenberger (2014) used the concept of paratext in analyzing the opening sequence in *Bioshock Infinite*.

Such studies, however, remain scarce compared to numerous epitext-centered works. There is still a shortage of research into the specific ways in which paratexts shape players' experience and perception of videogames. This essay is an attempt to widen the scope of the research of videogame paratexts by looking at the indie game scene. It will discuss manifestations of paratext in indie game context and ways in which paratexts contribute to meaning-making and interpreting ludic experience.

Preferring to be exploratory without a commitment to being comprehensive, strictly systematic, or theory-driven, the essay will focus on three specific kinds of paratext: game title, game description as seen on game portals, and the readme file. Some of the examples cited in the essay come from my experience as an indie game creator and others are my reflections as a player.

### **Problems of definition**

The concept of paratext is evoked so often in videogame studies these days it may seem unnecessary to dwell on it beyond giving the obligatory nod to Genette (1997) and citing such archetypal examples of "texts surrounding texts" as a book preface, a blurb, and cover design.

However, my perception is that while the concept of paratext has proved a fruitful one in game studies, many researchers seem to have adopted a somewhat utilitarian reading of it, whereupon the concept's inherent complexities are overlooked in order to make it more immediately functional. The assumption that the boundaries of paratext are clearly defined and that it is easily distinguishable from the text itself is the most obvious of such practical sacrifices. In contrast, Genette writes of paratext as a "threshold" (Genette 1997: 102), "a zone between text and off-text, a zone not only of transition but also of transaction" (ibid. 2). A readme file explaining the game's controls is clearly a paratext. But what about a help window within the game itself containing the same information? And what about in-game tutorials or, better yet, initial missions or levels where messages like "Use arrow keys to move" pop up on the screen? There is no clear boundary between text and paratext, and even in its most concrete manifestations (such as the readme file) paratext cannot be fully separated from the text itself.

Moreover, Genette's own ideas and definitions can – and should be – problematized. For example, the idea of a clear-cut distinction between peritext (paratexts adjacent to the text: author's name, table of contents, bibliography) and epitexts (paratext separated from the text: promotional videos, interviews, press-releases) should, as Stanitzek (2005) demonstrated, be taken with a pinch of salt.

Additionally, an inevitable question for anyone studying indie games is of course what an indie game is. Does one define indie purely in terms of the distribution model?

Should one focus more on the contents, the aesthetics, the artistic vision? Or does it make more sense to adopt more of a Wittgensteinian approach, arguing that indie games are indie because we choose to consider them as such?

I am aware of the complexities at play and the term's vulnerability to deconstruction. I still believe, however, that indie games – whatever they are – are *real* in that they are discursively institutionalized: by Steam's "indie" tag, by "indie game" blogs and portals, by developers identifying themselves as indie, and so on. I also believe that studying indie games can offer a different perspective and yield different insights to the study of mainstream videogames.

For the purposes of this paper I will not adopt any single all-encompassing definition of indie gaming. The examples I cite are of self-published games developed by individuals; the aesthetics, generic characteristics, and discursive intent of most of these games are if not unique then untypical of the medium in general. These features, I believe, suffice to describe these games as "indie" regardless of how you define the phenomenon.

### **Why study paratexts in indie games?**

The question above is more than just rhetorical. We already know – or can deduce – a lot about the relationship between paratexts and player experience. After all, there is nothing new about paratexts attempting to frame or shape the players' experience of a game.

In days where videogame industry was already burgeoning, but technological constraints somewhat limited the range of narrative techniques available to the developer, many games would bundle with user manuals whose function extended beyond providing instructions on how to play. Many also contained a short prologue to set the scene or introduced the game's characters. Sometimes, as in the case of Blizzard's *Blackthorne* (1994), an entire novella by a professional writer would be bundled with the game. While not absolutely necessary for the completion of the game (it would be overly hopeful to assume every teenage gamer would have the patience to complete the novella before starting the game), the novella was obviously intended to frame and shape experience in a certain way, providing depth and backstory to *Blackthorne's* protagonist. (And, of course, increasing the product's value for the player by adding an appealing materiality to the fundamentally virtual game, thus promoting the boxed game distribution model.)

Even when the user manual was used for copy protection, developers would often attempt to integrate it with the game world or, at least, its tone. *The Colonel's Bequest* (1989), a murder mystery/detective story, asked the player to identify a fingerprint by consulting a table in the manual. This created an intricate connection between the paratext of the manual and the game, not only because one literally cannot play the game without the paratext, but also by extending the game world to the manual, creating a continuity between the two.

So what can we gain from adding indie games into the equation? In my view, there is an immediacy to indie games that mainstream and casual games lack: it is usually the authors themselves, not separate PR teams, who generate paratexts surrounding their creations. Thus, it is safer to assume a correspondence between the authors' artistic intent and the framing of their work that paratexts provide. Indie games in general are good material in this sense as they are considerably less shackled by market demands and corporate censorship than AAA titles and can thus provide more direct insight into their authors' and communities' tastes, beliefs, and values.

## Title

The title is the first and the most inalienable of peritexts. A game, of course, can be left untitled, but its "untitledness" can never be complete: at the very least, the game's executable file or the web page (if it is played in a browser) has to have a name, and even if the name is *game.exe* or *untitled.html*, this is still something to refer to the game by. Furthermore, on game portals the title is a mandatory field, so if one decides to share their creation online through a portal (which is a typical trajectory to follow), they will have to explicitly specify the title as "Untitled" (or something similar), thereby – whether they desire it nor not – giving the game a name. This is consistent with Mulvihill's (1998: 1-2) observation that titles are needed for, and in fact were institutionalized for, the circulation of literary – and, we might add, other artistic – works.

Being thus the only paratext which every game possesses, the title plays a crucial role in both positioning the game in a broader extratextual space and framing the player's perception of it. (Titles like "Game" or "Noname" may represent the author's refusal to give anything away, but they still respond to a long-existing tradition of untitled works.)

Genette's (1988: 707) observation that "the title addresses itself to many more people than does the text" holds true for videogames as well. Indie games are usually distributed on game portals (such as *GameJolt*, *IndieDB* or *Newgrounds*) or forums (such as *TIGSource Forums*) where each submission finds itself surrounded by thousands of others from which it has to differentiate itself. On a game portal, a small thumbnail picture and a title (sometimes accompanied by a very brief description) are typically all there is to attract a potential player's attention; on a forum, the title is incorporated into the name of a thread which, depending on the poster's competence, may or may not provide additional information (compare "Alien Explosion! [adventure, Windows]" to "Check out my new game: Alien Explosion!"). In either case, a visitor will only see the full description if they elect to open the game page. The title plays the role of a filter: ideally, it should attract the attention of the players who are likely to enjoy the game, while signaling others to move on.

A common practice is for a title to indicate a certain type of game by following an established naming convention. For example, even before playing *Hovendall Tactics* one could assume it to be a tactical role-playing game set in a fantasy world. The naming pattern "x Tactics" has been used by dozens of titles including *Final Fantasy Tactics*,

*MechWarrior Tactics*, and *Fallout Tactics: Brotherhood of Steel*, and the name Hovendall, while not a name existing in real world, is reminiscent of a toponym morphologically. The combination of the two factors helps the player makes assumptions about the game's contents, supposing, of course, the said player is familiar with the intertextual traditions the title alludes to. Further examples of naming patterns that hint at the game's contents include the self-explanatory "x Wars" (*Tower Wars*, *Miner Wars 2081*, *Medieval Wars 2*), "y Assault" (*Steel Assault*, *Mutant Alien Assault*), and "x Tycoon" (*Super Cult Tycoon 2*, *Ultra Business Tycoon III*, *Werewolf Tycoon*).

Another prominent example is the "x Quest," where x usually indicates the subject matter or setting and "quest" signifies that the game likely belongs to the genre of adventure. This particular template goes back to 1980s adventure games such as Sierra's *Space Quest* and *Police Quest* series, but it has proved popular in indie games as well, with *Depression Quest* and *Heroine's Quest* being two of the better-known examples. "Quest for x" is a variation of the same pattern, going back to Corey and Lori Ann Coles' genre-defining *Quest for Glory* adventure-RPG series (which, curiously, had to deviate from the "x Quest" pattern because the first installment's original title, *Hero's Quest* conflicted with the unrelated *HeroQuest* board game series). *Quest for Infamy* and *Quest for Humour* are two indie titles that employ this pattern, though both also subvert it at the same time as neither "infamy" nor "humor" are words one would normally expect to fill the x, where a term with a more epic and heroic connotation is anticipated.

The "x Quest" pattern also instantiates the intermedial character of naming conventions. While Sierra's "Quest" series have set the precedent for videogames, R. Silverberg's 1958 novel *Starman's Quest* and D. Koontz's 1968 novel *Star Quest*, as well as the Hanna-Barbera 1970s TV series *Jonny Quest*, show that Sierra's own titles feed into a wider intertextual continuum of literary and other artistic works. The title of T. Davis' *Vision Quest* (1979), further, points to outside the artistic realm, alluding to an eponymous rite of passage found in many Native American cultures. That said, "x Quest" does not seem to have been as popular a trope as it is now before the likes of *Space Quest*, *Police Quest*, and *King's Quest* appeared. One is tempted, thus, to assume that Sierra's games helped promote this naming pattern in popular culture in general, not just videogames, leading to a proliferation of titles like *Sword Quest*, *Assassin's Quest*, *Survivor's Quest*, and *The Eternal Quest*.

It is important to note that, despite a large number of adventure games following the "x Quest" naming pattern, a game having "quest" in its title should not automatically be assumed to belong to the adventure genre. *Deity Quest* and *Unemployment Quest* are role-playing games, while *Elliot Quest* and *Mibibli's Quest* are platformers; other games, such as *Calculator Quest* and *Puzzle Quest*, are not as easily classifiable. What all of these titles have in common lies deeper than videogames' generic conventions: it is a commitment to telling a campbellian tale of a "hero's journey." Doing so through the conventions of the adventure game genre is a convention of its own, but other genres can (and are) be used to that end as well.

The same commitment is also embedded in such naming patterns as "x Adventure" (*Artifact Adventure*) and "x Journey" (*Dandelion: Starchild Journey*); both are

also often (but not exclusively) linked to the genre of adventure. Sometimes, the patterns can combine, as in the case of *Letter Quest: Grimm's Journey*.

Other naming patterns are even less specific as to the game's genre: consider, for example, "x Chronicles" or "x Story." This is not to say they have nothing to tell about the game: *Chronicles* hints of a massive fictional universe, perhaps appearing across several games (consider, for example, *Chronicles of Riddick* or *Assassin's Creed Chronicles*); *Story*, at the very least, indicates that the game places some importance on the narrative.

The examples above demonstrate how indie games can appropriate naming patterns from mainstream gaming, whether to emulate (*Medieval Wars 2*, *Hovendall Tactics*) or to subvert them in a creative way by defying expected meanings and connotations while still keeping the pattern recognizable (*Unemployment Quest*, *Super Cult Tycoon 2*).

There are, however, naming patterns exclusive to indie games with no direct correspondence in mainstream game conventions. They tend to be more subtle and elusive, irreducible to a fixed formula. Many puzzle platformers (a genre much more common in the indie scene than in mainstream gaming), for example, have short, quizzical titles: *FEZ*, *Knytt*, *Sym*, *suteF*, *K.O.L.M.*

Game titles can, of course, be informative without adhering to any obvious naming convention, reflecting the game's theme (*I Love You*), setting (*Within a Deep Forest*) or overall atmosphere (*Uncanny Valley*), or hinting at the game's message (*Gods Will Be Watching*). Even in this case, indie game naming conventions can diverge from mainstream gaming practices: for example, full-sentence titles are rather common in indie games (*Gods Will Be Watching*, *Thomas Was Alone*, *The Sea Will Claim Everything*, *I Fell in Love with The Majesty of Colours*)<sup>3</sup> but untypical of AAA releases.

There is, of course, no arguing that all titles provide definite information about the games that bear them; rather, the argument is that there is an intrinsic link between a work and its title, and that any work to some extent is viewed through the prism of its name. Sometimes this framing effect of the title is used by indie developers to play with audience expectations by giving their games deceptive or ironic titles. *Ultra Business Tycoon III*, for example, is far from a conventional economic simulation, but the game's postmodern nature is not reflected in the title – or, for that matter, the description or the main menu.

Some titles are more explicitly informative than most, whether because of artistic intent or due to constraints imposed on other paratexts or the game itself. An example of the latter scenario can be found in a game I collaborated on that was submitted to TWIFComp<sup>4</sup>, a competition for interactive fiction games with a source code of no more than 140 symbols (external data files were allowed). Text is pivotal to interactive fiction,

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<sup>3</sup> Note the enigmatic and evocative character of the full-sentence titles. Rather than attempt to be concise and informative, they try to evoke a certain feeling in the player, both giving them a feel of the game's atmosphere and shaping their experience of it. This kind of title is more difficult to use in mainstream games where both more concrete and more standard titles are expected.

<sup>4</sup> [http://blog.templaro.com/?page\\_id=118](http://blog.templaro.com/?page_id=118) [Accessed 24 April 2015]

and limiting its length in such a radical way was intended to challenge authors' preconceptions of interactive storytelling and inspire them to think outside the box.

The project I was involved in dealt with the limitation by eschewing text-based presentation in favor of voice narration (achieved by playing back external audio files) and thus allowing the entire 140-symbol length of the source file to be used towards a simple game engine. Even so, the resulting engine was barely functional, capable of little more than the game absolutely required. It was thus impossible to include in the game any kind of introduction that would provide a frame of reference for the player's experience.

To deal with this challenge, we decided to make heavier use of the title than is customary. In line with the game's tongue-in-cheek style, we named it *Shoot Your Evil Twin Brother Who Has Trapped You In a Mirror Room and Who Drinks People's Blood*. Such an unconventionally lengthy title provides the player both with a basic setting and an antagonist, as well as informs them of the game's objective and highlights the game's style, all of that while not detracting from the precious character count.

A less specific title would make it necessary to inform the player of the game's setting and objective in another paratext (a description on the competition site, for example), which some players would likely not pay much attention to. Plus, it would reduce the game's "stand-out" value (there were some sixty submissions to compete for player attention with). And, had we elected to give the name a more epic or "scary" title (for example, *Mirror Maze of Doom*), the irony of the tone could have been lost on the player.

All in all, there seems to be more diversity in indie game titles than in those of mainstream games. Some indie games employ naming conventions appropriated from the mainstream scene (and from non-videogame contexts), often seeking to challenge or subvert them in the process. Other conventions are specific to indie gaming. Yet other games have titles where a concrete naming pattern is more difficult to pinpoint, but which still reveal some kind of information about the game and frame the player's perception in some way.

### **Web portal description**

As mentioned above, Internet portals such as *GameJolt* and *Newgrounds* are one of the main sources of indie game dissemination. Many games are specifically intended for distribution on one or several portals; other games still end up being uploaded there to gain additional publicity.

In the previous section, I described how the title is the first paratext a visitor is likely to encounter on a portal. If the title of the game and/or its thumbnail have managed to attract a potential player's attention, they will find themselves on the game page which features a description and a few screenshots or a trailer. This page is what stands between the visitor and the game itself; the visitor can still turn back without playing the game if the page's contents fail to convince them it is worth their time. Like

the title, the description plays the role of a filter, but it is expected to be more informative, akin to a blurb on the back of a book.

There is no single convention dictating the contents of a game description. Some descriptions will focus on the circumstances of the game's creation ("The game was initially developed for the Ludum Dare compo...") or disclaimers ("Warning: disturbing content"); others will describe its plot ("The game follows a girl on a quest to save her dog...") or generic characteristics ("Short horror platformer with an emphasis on exploration"); others yet describe game controls or system requirements; most will feature a combination of the above. Whatever the content, an adequate description should provide a potential player with further information on the game and, if they correspond to the author's image of the target audience, arouse their interest. (Paradoxically, a few weeks ago I came across a GameJolt game whose description began with: "Please DO NOT PLAY THIS GAME. This is my first game and it's actually the worst thing I've ever done." After a bit of investigation, I discovered that the description has been retrospectively modified to redirect players to the author's newer and, in his opinion, worthier effort.)

Sometimes, descriptions will do more than that. I remember coming across a game on the now-defunct Russian indie game portal *gamin.ru* whose description told a story of the game's being discovered on a computer belonging to the uploader's deceased relative, who, it was intimated, died while developing it. The uploader then lamented how their own disturbing inability to tear themselves off the game was taking a toll on their life and pleaded whoever would dare play it to be careful. The story was, of course, fictitious, likely drawing inspiration from sources like "repost or die" creepy chain letters. Yet it definitely altered the player's perception of the game. My impression was that the author's intent was exactly to evoke a sense of cognitive dissonance stemming from the discrepancy between the game's initially lighthearted mood and its gruesome fictional origin; to make playing the initially innocuous game an experience filled with a sense of uncanny apprehension. (I keep stressing "initially" because I never completed the game and subsequently lost it.) I cannot recollect the title of the game (I have a vague recollection that it was designed to sound suitably like a working name for an unfinished work, the kind a beginner would give their first game just because they have to give it a name), but it was one of the most dramatic cases of paratextual (re)framing of player experience that I can think of.

*How are descriptions of indie games different from those of mainstream titles?*

The difference in the budget and production value often translates into difference in scope. Games such as *Cave Story* and *The Spirit Engine 2* may take many hours to complete, but by and large indie efforts are closer in scope to vignettes and short stories than novels and sagas. This is not only a consequence of the scarcity of the resources at the indie developer's disposal; after all, one resource they have aplenty is time: unlike the ultra-competitive world of AAA gaming with its ever-pressing deadlines, there is little pressure to deliver. Indie developers, for whom recognition is often the main, if not the

only, extrinsic impetus, are often impatient to let something out into the world. The idea of toiling for several years with little encouragement in order to deliver a monumental work can appear both less appealing and less manageable than producing several smaller-scale but self-sufficient works over the same period.

The challenge with such short, small games is that one has to be economical with paratext and not give too much of the game away. A PR team promoting an AAA game can safely disclose the setting and certain story elements, as well as describe the game mechanics. The blurb on *Mass Effect's* official site may contain spoilers regarding the plot and the nature of the adversary (“An ancient machine race invades the galaxy. With ruthless efficiency, the machines wipe out all advanced organic civilization.”<sup>5</sup>) and other details which are not initially disclosed in the game itself. This however is not a problem, as the game keeps plenty of value even after these relatively minor details are made known; what most players probably bought the game for was its promise to let them “experience an amazingly rich and detailed universe where your decisions have profound consequences <...> build a personalized arsenal with powerful weapons complete with their own upgrades and modification <...> unleash devastating abilities and skills as you command and train an elite squad”<sup>6</sup> – and, not least, to give them the gratification of saving the universe. Conversely, a mainstream game whose cover description does not give a relatively clear account of it would struggle to compete in a saturated market where the customer wants to be sure they are spending the money on the kind of game they would want to play.

By contrast, an indie game that takes fifteen or thirty minutes to complete is little more than an idea; if the idea is given away before the game even starts, there is no reason for anyone to actually play it. And yet, a game with no description is also unlikely to receive attention: in all probability, there are many other games on the same portal that have attractive descriptions to appeal to the player. So the challenge a developer of a small vignette-type game is that they have to persuade a potential player to play it without being too specific about the game itself.

I faced this challenge when preparing to release *Rat Happening*<sup>7</sup>, a short visual novel which is deliberately mysterious and vague in relation to the causalities of its story. The “secretiveness” of the game itself put additional pressure on me when writing its description to disclose as little as reasonably possible. Thus, instead of describing the plot I focused on setting up an interpretative framework for the player to make sense of their experience and on explaining exactly why the game is so vague:

Rat Happening is a short visual novelish interactive story about premonition, waiting, and random(?) encounters. And rats. In our daily lives, we are surrounded with stories. Yet we brush against them, cast them a sideways glance and hurry on past. In the safety of our homes, we can speculate about a fragment of a story we saw in the street, but when we actually get a chance to become part of it we often elect to remain bystanders. And even if we do get involved, we never get to witness the story from

<sup>5</sup> Cited from <http://masseffect.bioware.com/me1/gameinfo> [Accessed 13 May 2015]

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> <http://gamejolt.com/games/adventure/rat-happening/32805> [Accessed 3 May 2015]

beginning to end. *Rat Happening* will not tell you the entire story, nor will it put you in the center of the stage. But it will give you a chance to relive the moment. Maybe changing your path can somehow affect what is happening and help you decide what to make of it.

Gregory Weir's descriptions for his critically acclaimed conceptual vignette-games are a more prominent example. Due to the same need to avoid disclosing too much, his descriptions are often intriguingly cryptic. Consider, for example, this:

This game is about two lovers named January and September.  
No, wait; it's about a group of people who don't believe in the sky.  
No, it's about a pantheon of scientific disciplines.  
Or maybe it's about an ancient beast who knew exactly when it was going to die, and how.  
It's about a place. A place called Looming.<sup>8</sup>

Or this:

After a long journey, you will reach the Narthex, the waiting place before the oracle. There you must wait until your time. Then you will be given the answer to a single question. This game has two endings. The second is not worth getting.<sup>9</sup>

These descriptions give the player a vague "feel" of the game, while making them want to know more. Obviously, not everyone will be impressed by them – but then, considering the somewhat arcane atmosphere of the games themselves, gamers who decided against playing the games after reading their descriptions would in all likelihood not have enjoyed themselves anyway.

Even the process of choosing screenshots to complement the game description can be challenging as the screenshots too have to contribute to a potential player's idea of the game but not give them any unwanted spoilers as to its idea or story. This is particularly true of text-heavy games where screenshots contain both textual and visual cues. In *Rat Happening*, this led me to limit the number of screenshots to three, one of which was the game menu and the other two were chosen to highlight the game's writing and visual style without saying much of the story.

Some authors in fact choose not to supplement the description with screenshots at all, but that can be damaging to the number of downloads/plays, since many players will assume – not entirely unreasonably – that the author included no screenshots because the game looks ugly.

Summing up, whereas mainstream game descriptions advertise the game by highlighting its appealing aspects (graphics, gameplay, parts of the story), the challenge for many indie developers when composing a description is to strike the balance between making the game seem appealing to its intended "playership" and not revealing too much of it lest the player loses their interest. (This, of course, is not

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<sup>8</sup> <http://ludusnovus.net/my-games> [Accessed May 4 2015].

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

necessarily the case with indie games more ambitious in scope, but they are a minority in the indie scene, if – understandably – a disproportionately discussed one.)

### Readme file

Most authors intend the readme file to be read prior to starting the game (hence the appeal embedded in the now conventionalized file name); most players only turn to it if they have trouble figuring out how to do something in the game. Readme files will often be examined fragmentarily over the course of playing the game, or sometimes after playing it: to find out, for example, who made the game and where to find more similar works.

Crucially, readme files differ from titles and descriptions on Internet portals (assuming the game is exclusively distributed on such portals) in that the player may not read or even set eyes on them *at all*. A thoughtful author would therefore avoid *exclusively* delegating information that they deem absolutely crucial for framing the game experience in a readme file. Some game creators will fill the readme file with the same contents as the portal description, which may be useful in case players obtain the game from other sources (say, receive it by email from a friend); but if they consider it essential that players familiarize themselves with the file before playing, they should think of a way to stimulate them to do so. That being said, many developers only choose to include a readme file in the distribution because it is common practice to do so, rather than because they have any particular information they want to share.

There are various models to follow when writing a readme file, with different aspects coming to the fore: credits and acknowledgements; playing instructions; backstories and character introductions; hints or walkthroughs; appeals for donations or thanks for buying the product. Most of these tend to resemble readme files bundled with mainstream games, except generally being shorter (as the games themselves are) and largely sticking with plain text, while many mainstream titles now have “fancier” readme files with custom design and illustrations.

The readme files bundled with most of my games primarily include acknowledgments and credits (largely composed of links to third-party resources I used, which would be too cumbersome to mention within the game itself). Once, I made a little birthday present game for a friend of mine which consisted of a series of rather idiosyncratic puzzles alluding to his personality and image in the gaming community we were both part of. Rather than a personal present, the game was intended as a “public congratulation” and as such was announced in the IRC chatroom where the said community congregated. The readme file was a walkthrough and humorously shamed the player for not being able to figure out the solutions to the puzzles on their own (not the kind of communicative act one would expect to see in a readme for an AAA title). To avoid players seeing the walkthrough before they were actually stuck and, I slightly modified the conventional “readme.txt” to “read me when stuck.txt.” This worked because the file contained no other information. When an author wants to include both a walkthrough and other information, the common practice is to exile the walkthrough to

the very bottom, separated from the preceding content by empty lines and spoiler alerts. Alternatively, a walkthrough can be made into a separate file (with the readme focusing on other information), or hints can be integrated in the game itself.

Overall, indie game readme files seem to be the most “conservative” of the three types of paratext discussed in this essay, as they generally do not stray very far from mainstream conventions and are rarely explored as a space for experimentation. Indie developers can, however, afford some liberties such as using the readme file to make fun of the player, or not include one in their game at all. Readme files can also embed other paratexts as well: title, developer name, and sometimes screenshots or additional illustrations, among other things. The example with the walkthrough (which can be a separate file from the readme, or part of the readme, or *comprise* the readme) shows how certain types of paratexts can conflate and disengage freely, which destabilizes the basis for their very distinction.

### **Conclusion?**

The chapters above, I hope, not only demonstrate that paratexts are crucial in framing the player’s experience (Genette already told us as much), but also show a few ways in which such framing can occur and hint at a number of recurring patterns in indie game titles, descriptions, and readme files. Some of these patterns mirror the mainstream scene, or at least playfully appropriate its conventions, while others are specifically characteristic of indie gaming.

There are, of course, many more ways in which each of the three paratext types discussed in the essay can affect the player’s experience. And there are certainly other types of paratext that are just as relevant: game trailers, in-game tutorials, developer’s name, desktop icons, and so on. Each of these warrants a separate discussion.

Moreover, the essay has not touched upon cultural and linguistic variation in paratext conventions, which would undoubtedly prove fertile ground for exploration.

It would also be interesting to see, for example, how the discourses of author- and user-created paratexts interact when displayed in direct proximity to each other (on a game portal, for example). And, from there, one could go on to problematize the very “player–developer” distinction in the context of indie games.

This essay, I hope, can be a starting point for discussion. Its insistence on focusing on specific examples (whether real or imagined) reflects my belief that examples should not only be used to illustrate some theoretical point about paratextual phenomena, but should help deepen our understanding of them. Symbolically, the paper will be followed by another example of (this time literary) paratext:

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**Mikhail Fiadotau** is a doctoral student at the Department of Social and Cultural Anthropology, Tallinn University, Estonia. His research interests include game studies, digital anthropology and anthropology of technology, media archaeology, and Japanese studies. Mikhail is particularly interested in independent games and gaming cultures in Japan. Mikhail is also an aspiring game developer.