Videogames as "Minor Literature":
Reading Videogame Stories through Paratexts

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Abstract

Videogames have, since the beginning of game studies as a discipline, been placed at a problematic cusp between games and narratives. Stories are important in videogames, especially in those such as *Grand Theft Auto IV* (2008), *Fallout 3* (2008), and other games with a pronounced narrative intention. However, the element of play and multiplicity of the narrative makes it difficult to analyze them with traditional critical tools: it is easy, therefore, to dismiss them from the narrative canon. Another problem that videogame research faces is that game-narratives are ephemeral and the textual artefact of the game is substantially contained in the player's experience. However, an entire range of paratexts, such as walkthroughs and after-action reports, where players construct narratives while recording their in-game experiences, are available for analysis. This paper points towards the urgency of beginning to study ludic paratexts like walkthroughs and after-action reports to understand better the narrative process in videogames. In doing so, it will explore how a player has rewritten the history of Rome through *Rome: Total War* (2004) and how to do science fiction differently in *Fallout 3*. Simultaneously, it will identify similar characteristics in examples from established literary media, such as Julio Cortazar's *Hopscotch* (1987) and Italo Calvino's *A Castle of Crossed Destinies* (1977), to name only a couple.

Keywords: videogame, paratext, minor literature, Gilles Deleuze, Felix Guattari.

In a recent workshop on digital media held in 2014 in the University of Bergen, Norway, the following question was raised: "Is paratext *becoming* the story?" ("Workshop: Paratext in Digital Culture," italics mine). The question, if applied to videogames, has already been raised in Mia Consalvo's book, entitled *Cheating: Gaining Advantage in Videogames* (2009), where she sheds light on the relevance of paratextual material, or material that develops around or adds to the main text(s) of the videogame narratives. It is intriguing to see that storytelling is connected to the paratext in the question asked at the workshop. For the purposes of this essay, the word "becoming" included in the question raised above as well as the connection between storytelling and paratext will be further explored. The claim that videogames tell stories is one that has been hotly debated during the early decades of Game Studies[1] and the case against videogames telling stories was made in extreme and deceptively simple terms: "If I throw a ball at you I don't expect you to drop it and wait until it starts telling stories" (Eskelinen). Storytelling in videogames is difficult to comprehend if it is claimed that "the dominant user function in literature, theatre and film is interpretative, [whereas] in games it is the configurative one" (Eskelinen). By such standards deriving from earlier notions of storytelling, videogames might seem an anomaly given the experiential and, at the same time, ephemeral nature of the game-narrative. Dismissing the videogame-

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[1] See, for example, Espen Aarseth's *Cybertext: Perspectives on Ergodic Literature* (1997) and Janet Murray's *Hamlet on the Holodeck: The Future of Narrative in Cyberspace* (1998).

narrative connection means ignoring an essential element in the experience of the videogame-story, that of the paratext. It will be argued here that the paratext is not the "new" story but that it has always been an intrinsic part of storytelling. The so-called "disappearing" game narrative may be configurative, but it is also experiential, and although the actual instance of the game might not be available again, the narrative is, nevertheless, recorded in diverse ways, such as player diaries, after-action reports, "Let's Play" video recordings, and in a series of related sources, such as reviews, previews, message-board posts, screenshots, and trailers. Speaking in a similar vein, digital media theorist Peter Lunenfield argues that the "backstory [. . .] is fast becoming almost as important as the original thing itself" (11). Using the example of the videogame paratext, the latest entrant into the dialogues around textuality and narratives, I will attempt in this essay to position videogames within a literary context, and, in doing so, I will re-examine the idea of the literary itself in terms of how texts that are characterized by such multiplicity can be better comprehended.

Both Consalvo and Lunenfield borrow the term "paratext" from Gérard Genette, who describes it as the "number of verbal and other productions," such as the author's name, the preface, and the illustrations that "surround or extend" a book: "accordingly, the paratext is what enables a text to become a book and to be offered as such to its readers and, more generally, to the public. More than a boundary or a sealed border the paratext is a *threshold*" (1, italics in original). Among later examples of the concept in videogame criticism, Genette's "Structuralist insistence that there be an interior and exterior to the text" has been disputed; likewise, his definition of the text as a verbal statement has been seen to indicate that he intended for the concept of paratext to be applied only to books, and, therefore, questions have been raised as to whether his concept also works for digital media. Genette, however, seems well aware of other media beyond the printed book and, although he restricts his own comments to the paratexts of the printed book, in *Palimpsests* he refers to the "transtextuality, or the textual transcendence of the text, which I have already defined roughly as all that sets the text in a relationship, whether obvious or concealed, with other texts" (1). While it is true that Genette's extensive categorizations of transtextuality and the paratext could be viewed as restrictive, and therefore somewhat off-putting in terms of current discourses on textuality, his assertion that "we must not view the five types of transtextuality as separate and absolute categories without any reciprocal contact or overlapping" (7) makes it clear that his concept certainly considers intermedial relationships within its scope. Jonathan Gray, writing on the paratexts of modern media ranging from films to videogames, acknowledges Genette's position that "we can only approach texts *through* paratexts" (25, italics in original). Gray illustrates this with an apt example: "for instance, an ad telling us of a film's success in Cannes or Sundance would prepare us for a markedly different film than would, say, an ad that boasts endorsement from Britney Spears" (25). Ellen McCracken extends the Genettian analysis to paratexts in electronic books, stating that "[n]ew paratexts sometimes move beyond Genette's precise formulations but continue to function in the spirit of his analysis" (106).

In videogame criticism, the concept of paratext has become popular in a wide range of discourses. In his online *GameSpot* article, writer Tomcat thinks that "it's strikingly easy to transpose this notion of the paratext from novels onto video games" and points out that the heads-up displays (HUD) that are so intrinsic to playing the games are actually paratexts.

Clara Fernandez-Vara, in her *Introduction to Game Analysis* (2014), states that "if we consider games texts, then we can also understand them better by analyzing what Genette calls *paratexts*—texts that surround the main text being analyzed, which transform and condition how the audience interprets the main text" (25). Although coming from different perspectives, both Tomcat and Fernandez-Vara agree on the fact that videogames can be likened to texts that tell stories.

Like Eskelinen, many scholars have been reluctant to acknowledge the narrative potentials of videogames. The so-called Ludology-Narratology debate has been going strong for quite some time within Games Studies. From the extremely unhelpful polarized positions in which videogames are seen as either purely games that might have secondary artistic ambitions, or providing a possible Holodeck-like medium, the discourse has shifted to a more nuanced acceptance of their storytelling function. Jesper Juul, in his study *Half-Real* (2005), moves on from his earlier distinction between games and narratives and states that videogames are "half real" in that they mostly "project a fictional world" that is contingent on the game's rules. Writing in 2006, Marie-Laure Ryan quite clearly views videogames as a storytelling medium that, instead of aiming to emulate earlier media, "must learn instead how to customize narrative patterns to the properties of the medium" (xviii). It is only after the recognition of the storytelling potential of videogames as well as their media-specific properties due to extensive analyses of videogame narratives, such as those by Steven Jones and Fernandez-Vara that such views have gained attention. Writing in his weblog *Confessions of an Aca-Fan* in 2007, Henry Jenkins points out that "the encyclopedic ambitions of transmedia texts often result in what might be seen as gaps or excesses in the unfolding of the story: that is, they introduce potential plots which cannot be fully told or extra details which hint at more than can be revealed." Jenkins's comment moves the discussion around the game-text and storytelling in the direction of paratextuality in the sense that the understanding of the game is linked to other media connected to the game experience.

The issue that one needs to be aware of is the ephemeral nature of the game and the fact that there may be multiple endings of the story in the different instances of play. Especially in sandbox-style games, where the player is free to roam across a vast game-world and undertake side missions that can be completed at the same time as the main mission, what the player experiences in each iteration of the game will be quite varied. For example, in games such as *Fallout 3* (2008), *Red Dead Redemption* (2010), and *Skyrim* (2011), given the large game spaces that players can explore, the number of non-player characters with whom the player can interact and other actions not related to the main story that the player can perform, the story(ies) in the videogame can only be perceived as a changing and constantly shape-shifting entity. Even in games with a more rigid and "monorail" narrative, where the entire sequence of actions is scripted quite restrictively, the player's experience of the game, constituted by his or her skill, emotional reactions, imagination, and prior engagement with similar games, can vary greatly from instance to instance and from player to player. The game narrative is, therefore, not rigid or readable in any way. The videogame-story, by virtue of the fact that it has to be written into existence by the player (although there is, of course, a back story that has been pre-coded by the game's developers) is more *scriptible* (writerly) than *lisible* (readerly) to use Roland Barthes's terminology. In his analysis in *S/Z* (1970), Barthes identifies two kinds of texts—the "readerly," or one where the reader is the receiver

of a fixed predetermined meaning, and the "writerly," where the reader actively constructs the meaning of the text. In the "writerly" videogame-story, therefore, it is not possible to obtain a static text that can be analyzed in the same way as printed narratives and cinema. As such, to analyze the videogame-story, one needs to consider both the material (such as the CD or DVD, the code, maps, manuals, and other things that are packaged with the game) and the experiential aspects (obtainable from player journals, reviews, and commentaries). Both of these aspects are paratextual; indeed, to construct any textuality for the videogame, the paratextual elements need to be considered first, as other commentators, such as Fernandez-Vara, Consalvo, and James Newman, have also remarked.[2]

Paratextual analyses of videogames have hitherto been interested in a range of related material, such as cheat-codes, heads-up displays on the game screen, character inventories, and menus. Little has been written about the stories that are built up around a game or even the recorded instances of games that are popular among a section of enthusiasts. The comparatively new phenomenon of game wikis has also not been considered. The analysis of game paratexts that comes closest to the function of describing the events in the game is that of walkthroughs or the step-wise guides that tell the (often frustrated) player how to get past various game challenges and move from one level to the next. Another academic project involving the paratext is the *Well Played Journal* that describes itself in its 2011 online issue as "a forum for in-depth close readings of video games that parse out the various meanings to be found in the experience of playing a game." The journal also describes its title in the same issue as follows:

> Well played is to games as well read is to books. So, a person who reads books a lot is "well read" and a person who plays games a lot is "well played." On the other hand, well played as in well done. So, a hand of poker can be "well played" by a person, and a game can be "well played" by the development team [. . .]. Contributors are encouraged to look at video games through both senses of "well played." So, with well played as in well read, contributors are looking closely at the experience of playing a game. And with well played as in well done, contributors are looking at a game in terms of how well it is designed and developed.

In such a description of the gameplay experience, the acts of reading and doing are simultaneous processes. In the journal, the close-reading of the game (also sometimes called "close-playing") and its experiential aspects are presented. The contributors share their views that derive from their own gaming practice, also serving as personal reviews of the game under consideration. Game designer, Clint Hocking, commenting on *BioShock,* says, "the game literally made me feel a cold detachment from the fate of the Little Sisters, who I assumed could not be saved" *(Well Played* 256), and then remarks that "in the game's fiction on the other hand, I do not have the freedom to choose between helping Atlas or not" (256). Hocking differentiates this response of his from a game review while admitting that "with the language of the game being as limited as it is," understanding what he is "reading is hard, and

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[2] Fernandez-Vara (15) states that paratexts lead to a deeper and complex understanding of videogames. Writing earlier, in *Cheating: Gaining Advantage in Videogames* (2009), Consalvo points out how gamer-groups use paratexts to promote knowledge of videogames and similarly (38), Newman, in *Playing with Videogames* (2008), also argues that game videos and such elements that are not directly part of the gameplay themselves are, nevertheless, important for creating channels of communication between developers and players and also between players themselves (39).

trying to articulate it back to people in a useful way is a full order of magnitude harder" (258). Describing the player's experience while at the same time maintaining a critical distance is not easy, but this is probably as close as one can get to the "text" of the game.

Moving from academic commentaries to quotidian gaming practices, one notes how the walkthroughs attempt to define story-pathways through the game. The walkthroughs have been defined as "detailed guides to how a player should play a game sequence to find all of the hidden bonuses and surprises, how to avoid certain death, and how to advance past difficult puzzles or trouble spots to best play and win the game" (Consalvo, "Zelda 64" 327-28). Daniel Ashton and Newman in their online article see the walkthroughs' function as threefold:

> First, walkthroughs can be approached as a means of recording and codifying playing styles, thereby legitimising specific approaches or strategies [. . .]. Second, walkthroughs as textual codifications of gameplay potential can encourage new styles of engagement with authors and performers by outlining opportunities for play, and illuminating strategies and techniques previously unknown to the reader [. . .]. Third, we suggest that the prefigurative potential of walkthroughs may be seen as having a regulatory quality and, therefore, represents a key mechanism for shaping the way videogames are played.

Effectively, then, walkthroughs serve as a record, a code of playing styles (similar to the generic expectations that are connected to reading) and, by extension, as a mechanism for shaping the practices of play and design. However, walkthroughs are not written expressly to tell the story or to freeze a certain instance of gameplay in time. They are about rules, subverting rules, and usually about taking the best pathway to completing a game. In a walkthrough, failure cannot be an end in itself; in the actualized experience of playing a videogame, this is commonplace. The walkthrough also has a regulatory quality, which may be good for designing gameplay, but which definitely takes away some of the fun of the open-ended exploration that videogames offer. Nevertheless, Ashton and Newman's second point about the new styles of engagement draw attention to their degree of openness whereby with the new strategies there will be new walkthroughs and, therefore, new iterations of gameplay to be explored. As a result, additional opportunities open up for researching the paratextual storytelling material that the new strategies of engagement contribute to the videogaming experience.

Besides walkthroughs, one could also consider game guides (often published with supplementary material and endorsed by the game companies) as well as game reviews that are published in both the mainstream media and online. Again, these are concerned with the game as a text, but more so with a general overview of the game and, specifically, with the completion of the game. Often, as Garry Crawford et al. point out, "the unavoidable consequence of playing a goal-oriented walkthrough [. . .] is the devaluation of socially oriented play" (149) and the walkthroughs that allow the player to speed through the game often make the basic narrative tools of the game, such as reading the quest descriptions, unnecessary. Rene Glas points out that whereas strategy guides serve as an introduction to the game by stressing on the narrative elements, walkthroughs can sometimes detract from the narrative experiences (88). Both Glas and Crawford, as well as others, have in mind the *World of Warcraft* (2004) walkthrough called "Joana's Walkthrough." Game Guides, such as

the *IGN Assassin's Creed 4: Black Flag Wiki Guide*, contain not only the walkthroughs for the main game and the DLC (downloadable content) but also cheats, details about the side missions, instructions on hunting and harpooning (the game lets the player do these in specific locations), descriptions of weapons and a slew of other things related to the game. The guide provides the narrative context and also informs the reader about the locale:

> *Assassin's Creed 4* takes place in 1715 in the Caribbean, featuring new locations. *Assassin's Creed 4* stars a new protagonist, pirate and Assassin named Edward Kenway, grandfather of Connor and father of Haytham Kenway of *Assassin's Creed 3*. Ubisoft Montreal has traditionally developed *Assassin's Creed* games, but a new team developed *Assassin's Creed 4*. *Assassin's Creed IV: Black Flag* is set in the Caribbean on multiple islands including playable areas in Kingston, Havana and Nassau. The Caribbean ocean is an explorable region via Kenway's ship Jackdaw. Smaller islands and locations can be visited, and underwater locations can be explored for the first time in the *Assassin's Creed* series.

If the walkthrough and the game guide are ways to present the narrative aspect of videogames, other paratextual forms work in more concerted ways to record, present, and develop on the narrative experience. One of the most obvious examples would be books that are written with the games' storylines as their plots. Oliver Bowden's *Assassin's Creed* book series[3] features the plots from the popular videogame titles such as *Assassin's Creed 2* (2009) and *Assassin's Creed: Revelations* (2011), but also adds new stories to the series that are not part of the videogames, such as *Assassin's Creed: The Secret Crusade* (2011). Other book series based on videogames also often add to the stories found in the games themselves; the *Halo* novels, written by Joseph Staten and Eric Nylund, as well as the *Halo* graphic novel (2007) are cases in point.[4] However, the restrictive and prescriptive limitations to the game-narrative as found in the walkthrough and the imaginative adaptations and modifications to the game-narrative as these derive from the book series both signal a departure from the narrative experience of videogames themselves. The experience itself might vary depending on the nature of the game, but, ultimately, it is a different experience in a different medium than either the walkthrough or the book series. At this point, two other kinds of game paratext need to be considered as similar in nature, that of the "After-Action Report" and the "Let's Play" that have not yet received as much scholarly attention. It could be argued that a close reading of these forms will be of major importance to the establishment of a framework for analyzing the videogame narrative.

The After-Action Report (AAR henceforth) is a term taken from military jargon and is defined as "a detailed critical summary or analysis of a past event (such as a military action) made for the purposes of re-assessing decisions and considering possible alternatives for future reference" ("After-Action Report"). The term has been appropriated in videogame culture recently: "AARs are a fun way to read about a game and provide interesting details and examples of gameplay that reviews often don't. They also can be very funny, entertaining

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[3] The *Assassin's Creed* book series is a popular series of novels based on the *Assassin's Creed* videogames series made by Ubisoft. The novels are based on the stories of Altair Ibn-Ahad and his descendants and are set in various historical periods, from the Crusades to the French Revolution. The novels are written by Anton Gill who writes under the pseudonym Oliver Bowden.

[4] The *Halo* novels are based on the *Halo* science-fiction videogames made by Bungie Software beginning in 2001. The central narrative of the franchise features the supersoldier Master Chief.

and even enlightening!" ("Command Ops Christmas 2013 AAR—Part 5"). Michael Cook, writing in the online article "Story Time with Agent 47" for *The Escapist* magazine, comments: "For the uninitiated, it works exactly as it sounds—you play a game, and you tell its story afterwards to anyone willing to listen. It's particularly popular among the more meticulous and strategic gaming communities, where the method of play is more unique to you." Cook is referring to the blogs of "Jimius," an AAR writer whose work has featured on the games blog *Rock, Paper, Shotgun.* Cook also claims that some of the AARs "read like the blog of a TV history channel, mixing game accounts with footage and images from the real wars and eras they are describing, creating a surreal retelling of some quite famous and, in some cases, quite recent periods in global history" ("Story Time with Agent 47"). An entry from the online entry "The Rise and Fall of the House of Jimius" is illustrative:

> 204BC—Roma Victor
> Quintus II finally reaches the front, having abandoned his infantry for extra speed, but all he gets to do is hunt down a Brutian family member that's just hanging around. Galerius goes to the boot of Italy and sieges Croton, while Lentulus hits Tarentum on the heel. Meanwhile, a scipian [sic] fleet carrying 2000 troops is sunk in the Tyrhennian sea. Takes about fifteen separate attacks to sink a single ship, but still. I did it.

Jimius, whose real name is Mike Prescott, says that " 'House of Jimius' was based on *Rome: Total War* (2004) and was a chronicling of a grand campaign, from city state to Europe-spanning behemoth." Prescott presents his AAR accounts with detailed screenshots from the relevant sections of the game displaying the seriousness with which this new paratextual form is treated by its practitioners. In an email interview dated June 1st, 2011, he states:

> What you write has to reflect what happens, the events described must be an accurate portrayal, otherwise there's no point, go off and write some fanfic. Sure, come up with the fluff that connects the dots the game presents, but don't let that overwhelm it. I've seen some massive, sprawling AARs that divorce themselves from the game being played far too much to be interesting, that devolve into florid prose and twiddly stuff that is just filler and distracts from the point of the thing [. . .]. It has to be clear what you, the player, have done and how the gameworld has responded, you never want to come away from reading a diary with a lack of understanding over what just happened. This can be difficult to put across in text and image form so you have to be imaginative in how you get it across without being overly boring.

Prescott's blog is not the only such attempt to share narratives of the playing experience. AAR writers develop a range of styles that can be anything from reflective to downright funny. The online "Command Ops Christmas 2013 AAR— Part 5" begins:

> If I had more time, and if the Germans weren't still pressuring 1st battalion, 16th Infantry Regiment in Schoppen, I might have set them up in a defensive line from Oberweywertz to Waimes (with B and C Companies of the 26th Infantry Regiment and the 18th Infantry headquarters adding some length), but their odd advanced position will have to do for now.

This is quite different from more humorous attempts at AAR writing, such as "Charles Dickens-Football Manager," which is a report of the games in *Football Manager,* supposedly

in the voice of the author Charles Dickens. AARs are quite common for strategy games, such as *Empire: Total War* (2009), while the game forum, "Total War Centre," even has a monthly AAR contest as well as an index of completed AARs featuring over twenty-five titles. Varied as their styles and scope can be, AAR writers, nevertheless, explore the very depths of the game mechanics and Ben Abrahams's *Permanent Death—The Complete Saga* (2009) is a case in point. Abrahams explores the many deaths and reloads that form part of the experience of playing videogames and decides to play *Far Cry 2* (2008), a fairly long open-world game, without reloading it even a single time.

> Death in games is often very... temporary. I want to find out what happens to me as a player if I make my videogame death much more permanent. This is the story of one game of *Far Cry 2*—one single narrative that one way or the other will end in my death. Whether it is at the hands of my enemies, the harsh environment, or my own ineptitude, I am not going to survive the telling of this tale.
> **The rules: Normal difficulty; fortunes DLC installed. When I die, that's it. Game over.**
> (ellipsis and emphasis in original)

Abrahams brings out the key characteristic of the AAR: his narrative is built around an exploration of a key characteristic of videogames—the multitelic narrative that can be reloaded and replayed at will. Unlike the walkthrough, though, Abrahams is interested in telling a story and his story is not that of how a game can be completed most quickly. Prescott identifies all the key elements of the AAR in his comment:

> With The Amateur I was playing in-character which does help with that. That is, you can't just play the game and write the AAR afterwards, you need to have played it in a certain mindset and reported on it accordingly, whether that's a sneering disdain for the game, some naive optimism in one aspect, or whatever. Having something personal that a reading audience can latch onto is important.

The personal touch and the faithfulness to the gameplay are essential to the conceptualization of the AAR. The After-Action Reporter has as its tagline the phrase, "Why play when you can read?," but clearly both reading and playing are intrinsic to each other in the AAR.

Another paratextual form that has been largely neglected in academic discussions is the "Let's Play" (LP henceforth). The *Let's Play Archive* defines it as such: "LPs show a video game being played while the player talks about what they're doing in commentary with video, screenshots or both" ("Frequently Asked Questions-The Let's Play Archive"). This is like the AAR except that LPs often use video. Though now quite widespread in gaming communities, the AAR and LP still occupy a grey zone in the discourses of these communities. For example, a post in *The Alpha Centauri* forum expresses the confusion regarding their position in relation to games: "In my humble opinion I feel that AAR's are stories, I agree with Sisko on that, but I feel that they will eventually need to be cataloged and put into their own subsection. They aren't always directly stories of fan fiction, some of them are just the equivalents of lets plays in a forum post format" ("The Right Forum Place for AAR/Let's Play Threads?"). Another website attempts to subdivide them into "analytical," ones which mention the game mechanics, and "literary," those that use the game as an inspiration for their own narratives and, therefore, are similar to fan-fiction.

The AAR is as difficult to classify as the story in the videogame, and the reason for such a problem is similar: both of these can be seen as occupying multiple planes of existence, which makes it difficult to put them into a clearly-defined structure. The story in the videogame becomes accessible in its many iterations through paratextual material such as the AARs, but the question remains as to how this relates to the wider set of narratives, both oral and written, that exist in earlier media. Or, to put it simply, if videogames have narratives and if, indeed. their paratexts are the "new" story, then where does one place them in the narrative canon?

The "newness" in question has already been argued against in the earlier discussion on Genette and, also, of storytelling in videogames. Also, the deconstruction of the reading/writing and the reading/playing binaries have already taken place in the early days of poststructuralist criticism. As early as 1970, Barthes's *S/Z* made the case for the reader as the co-creator of the narrative and around the same time the Reader-Response critics claimed that literature exists meaningfully in the mind of the reader and that the literary work is the catalyst for the possibility of literary meaning. Writing about digital texts in 1992 in *Hypertext: The Convergence of Contemporary Critical Theory and Technology.* George Landow has brought these ideas into the analysis of digital fiction through his concept of "(w)reading" (6), or reading that is also an act of writing and vice versa. Although it has taken Game Studies some time to move beyond the polarized positions on the narrative function of the videogame,[5] by and large, it is evident that the issues raised by poststructuralist theories of textuality connect to how videogame narratives are perceived today. As evidenced earlier, many commentators on paratexts of videogames also explain that they wish to engage in a post-structuralist reading of Genette's original concept. Despite the similarity to current concepts of textuality, videogames are still seen as difficult to describe within studies of narrative. Even though films and graphic novels have now been placed on university literature courses with relative ease, videogames have not yet found their place within received notions of the narrative and the literary. It could be argued that it is their multiplicity that poses a problem for the commonly understood norms of literary studies. The point now is to find such a literary framework within which texts are characterized by such multiplicity, whether it is because of their multiple endings or because they plug in, as it were, to many media and to many planes of storytelling at the same time.

To better understand game narratives and their paratexts, it is useful to consider the framework of "minor literature" that is developed by Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari in *Kafka: Toward a Minor Literature* (1975). The following paragraphs will address the complexities of this framework first and then proceed to make substantive links with this essay's initial argument about how game narratives function or "play out." "Minor" does not mean that such literature is of any less importance or value; the interpretation of the word is somewhat different for Deleuze and Guattari. According to Claire Colebrook,

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[5] See, for example, Marie-Laure Ryan's *Avatars of Story* (2006) and Fernandez-Vara's *Introduction to Game Analysis* (2014).

[a] minor literature, also, does not appeal to a standard but creates and transforms any notion of the standard. If I seek to write a film script that is just like the popular and financially successful *Star Wars* (appealing to the spirit and tradition of American science fiction), then this is a *major* work. But if I aim to produce a film that critics may not even recognise as a film, or that will demand a redefinition of cinema, then I produce a minor work. For Deleuze and Guattari all great literature is minor literature, refusing any already given standard of recognition or success. (*Understanding Deleuze* 25, emphasis in original)

Deleuze and Guattari apply their concept of "minor literature" to the work of Franz Kafka as well. For example, for them, Kafka's novels, short stories, diaries, and letters all form part of a process that simply avoids closure; many of Kafka's letters and novels, such as *The Trial* (1925), *The Castle* (1926), and *Amerika* (1927), are unfinished and thereby perpetuate readings and re-readings. Deleuze and Guattari see this as being part of a writing machine that is geared towards the avoidance of closure. Ronald Bogue observes that they "make no distinction between Kafka's life and art, arguing that his diaries and letters communicate directly with his fiction, and that in his stories and novels he engages forces that are part of the real world" (4). Bogue also goes on to point out how in Kafka's *The Trial,* the Deleuzoguattarian writing machine also connects to the law machine that is itself a massive network of diverse characters, institutions, and sites.

Kafka's language is also a case in point: a German-speaking Jew living in Prague, he also speaks Czech, and although he writes in German, according to Deleuze and Guattari, he subjects the language to displacements and subverts it in order to propose new uses of the language. They explore the problem of Kafka's language in terms of this multiple identity and show that his "Prague German is a deterritorialised language, appropriate for strange and minor uses" (17). Minor uses would be any uses of the language that could be anticipated or accounted for by the existing systems. Deterritorialization is a term that Deleuze and Guattari use in an attempt to emphasize the processes of constant displacement that characterize the multiplicity of the "minor." Deleuze and Guattari describe the process of deterritorialization as "always connected, caught up in" reterritorialization. Illustrating the connection of the two processes, Deleuze and Guattari use their famous example of the wasp and the orchid: "The orchid deterritorializes by forming an image, a tracing of a wasp; but the wasp reterritorializes on that image. The wasp is nevertheless deterritorialized, becoming a piece in the orchid's reproductive apparatus. But it reterritorializes the orchid by transporting its pollen" (A *Thousand Plateaus* 10). Explaining the process further, Colebrook states that:

Everything, from bodies to societies, is a form of territorialisation, or the connection of forces to produce distinct wholes. But alongside every territorialisation there is also the power of deterritorialisation. The light that connects with the plant to allow it to grow also allows for the plant to become other than itself: too much sun will kill the plant, or perhaps transform it into something else. (*Understanding Deleuze* 22)

This transformation into something else is, therefore, a key characteristic of minor literature. The two other characteristics are that minor literature is political and it is a collective enunciation. These two terms, too, have a specific Deleuzoguattarian usage. "Political" and "collective," in this sense, are connected in that here the individual is forced "to connect

immediately to politics. The individual concern thus becomes all the more necessary, indispensable, magnified, because a whole other story is vibrating within it. In this way, the family triangle connects to other triangles—commercial, economic, bureaucratic, juridical— that determine its values" (Deleuze and Guattari, *Kafka: Toward a Minor Literature* 17). Deleuze and Guattari see the authorial subject as being not one but "collective assemblages of enunciation" (18). Colebrook simplifies this rather complicated terminology quite skillfully, explaining minor literature by applying the concept to William Shakespeare:

> Literature, when it fully extends its power of being literature, is always minoritarian. Minor literature is great literature, not necessarily the literature of minorities, although this can be the case [. . .]. Shakespeare can be considered a "minor" author precisely because his works do not offer a unified image of man, or even a unified image of Shakespeare. His texts are more like question marks with each production or reading raising new questions. Of course, when Shakespeare becomes an industry (of tourism, culture and academia) he becomes a major author: we seek to find the real Shakespeare, the origin of his ideas and the true sense of his works. He becomes minor, again, only if we recognise the potential in his work to be read as if we did not know who Shakespeare was. (*Gilles Deleuze* 105)

For Deleuze and Guattari, all great literature is minor and is, therefore, not a single univocal entity but rather an assemblage. Manuel DeLanda, commenting on the nature of the assemblage, observes that "a component part of an assemblage may be detached from it and plugged into a different assemblage in which its interactions are different [. . .]. Assemblages may be taken apart while at the same time [. . .] the interaction between parts may result in a true synthesis" (10). Plugging-in, here, describes the flexible process by which elements in the assemblage link to other elements and other assemblages and where both elements in relation to each other effect a change but without losing their original characteristics. A simple example would be that of a toolbox where the tools are fitted together to perform a particular function and then be dismantled. John Phillips remarks that "assemblage" is originally *agencement* in French and the word has the connotations of " 'arrangement,' 'fitting' or 'fixing'" (108-9)—almost like fitting the parts of a body or a machine together. Both the concept of minor literature and the related notion of the assemblage can be seen as forming an extremely significant framework in the field of literary interpretation itself. Such a framework forces readers to reconsider the fundamental nature of the text and because of this, it is possible to consider other media (such as games) as not only cultural documents that function as assemblages but also function according to the same modes of enunciation as texts that are more recognizably classified as "literary."

One might, therefore, argue that there is a clear link between the minor literature of Deleuze and Guattari's writing machines and the newest form of storytelling media, or the computer game, which is, in fact, itself better known as a machine. In Deleuzoguattarian terms, however, the machinic is more than the code that the game is written in or the computer or console used to play it. In his *Dialogues* (1987) with Claire Parnet, Deleuze defines the machine as "a clustered 'proximity' between independent terms (topological proximity is itself independent of distance or contiguity). A machinic assemblage is defined by the displacement of a centre of gravity onto an abstract line" (125-26). The literary machine or the writing machine is an assemblage; therefore, it displaces the narrative beyond

the usual and anticipates modes of meaning-making. As discussed above, the game-narrative is also such an assemblage that plugs into various systems of meaning-making, different kinds of media assemblages, the imagination and experience assemblage of the player, and also paratextual assemblages. The paratextual assemblages in videogames, in turn, connect to a wide network of narratives, rules, and media-specific experiences. Similar in their characteristics to the Deleuzoguattarian conceptions of minor literature, the videogame paratext is a kind of multiple, political, and collective enunciation. Like the videogame narrative itself, the AAR tells multiple stories, and the subject, even if it speaks from the position of the same protagonist, is always different—indeed a collective enunciation. It is the multiplicity as opposed to the individual communication that makes the AAR a political text in the sense Deleuze and Guattari see it. Sometimes, the notion of the "political" becomes more obvious and takes on its commonly understood meaning as in the intrigues between the warring factions in the narrative of *Far Cry 2* or the AAR of *Empire: Total War* (2009), where the player tries to resolve an unexpected political problem that arises during the process of playing the game:

> So I've taken most of Europe as Sweden and but (sic) I keep having money issues from exempting tax from lots of conquered cities and eventually its (sic) still not enough to fund my huge army and stop rebellions. I've rebuilt most of the junk in those cities that gets destroyed during a siege or takeover but they keep rioting a rebellion and eventually my large army is forced to stay behind and kill the rebels. ("Strikes, Riots and Rebellions. How Do I Stop Them?")

The engagement that this AAR shows is one with various assemblages: the game assemblage, consisting of the rules and affordances of the game; a history assemblage, consisting of historical narratives, in the above example taken from Swedish history (the game allows the player to create "historical" events); the software and hardware assemblages; and the players' experiences and imaginative connections serve as game "plugging-ins." The game narrative itself cannot be analyzed as it lasts only as long as the game is played and is available when each action in the game is performed or played out. The way forward in attempting any analysis of the game's story is then to access the game narrative via the paratextual elements of the assemblage. The AAR plugging-in, as it does to both the game rules and the narrative experiences of players, is in itself an assemblage that "plugs into" the assemblage of the videogame narrative.

The concept of minor literature helps put the notion of storytelling in videogames into context and allows, through a critical analysis of the AARs, an entry point into comprehending the multiplicity of the videogame narrative itself. Conversely, the AAR and the more ephemeral game-narrative themselves necessitate a notion of literature that can accommodate narratives characterized by multiplicity. Deleuze and Guattari see Kafka and James Joyce (to whom Colebrook adds Shakespeare, as noted above) as exemplars of minor literature—where the lines of flight take the narrative towards the unexpected and the multiple. Earlier examples of an open or "scriptable" textuality include examples such as Julio Cortazar's playful novel *Hopscotch* (1987) or Italo Calvino's *The Castle of Crossed Destinies* (1977), and these are more overtly closer to the AARs in the way in which they portray multiplicity than the authors who Deleuze and Guattari cite. For instance, *Hopscotch*

contains two recommended pathways for reading the novel, leading to two separate stories. Cortazar declares that the reader can look for more narrative paths and read the novel in other, quite different, ways. Calvino's novel, where the stories take the form of different arrangements of the cards in a tarot pack, also illustrates how stories develop and are read in multiple ways through the formal device of tarot card combinations. Novels with multiple endings, reading-order or a hint that the reading process can be different in each iteration of the narrative already come close to the multiplicity that is characteristic of game-narratives.

In the light of discussions in literary studies around multiplicity and narratives that emerge out of the unanticipated and the affective zones of experience, the stories that videogames tell are not "new." Neither can one call the paratext, such as the AAR, a story in itself because it exists as part of an assemblage that includes the videogame itself. For any of those critics who claim that videogames cannot tell stories or those who are unsure about where to place them, what the AARs and other paratexts have to say about literary conventions is quite clear. With the emergence of newer narrative media, some of the intrinsic qualities of narratives are increasingly coming to the forefront. By dismissing or neglecting narrative forms that seem anomalous in the more traditional understanding of literature, the multiplicity that characterizes narratives per se has been overlooked. The idea of the "story" has intrinsically always (and already) included the paratext. From Genette's groundwork identifying the paratext as key to the reading and Derrida's claim that "[the paratext] paradoxically frames and at the same time constitutes the text for its readers," as Graham Allen restates it (100), narrative theory already recognizes the link between the paratext and the story; consequently, it is the multiplicity of the paratext that now needs to be accommodated within the present literary consciousness.

Constantin V. Boundas acknowledges that "Deleuze and Guattari's 'minor deconstructive' approaches to language are more timidly invoked in the context of our local discussions, and the timidity begins to lose its initial innocence" (16). Any literature and language that shows the potential for not remaining limited to its obvious boundaries of meaning is, for Deleuze and Guattari, in the realm of the minor. Becoming-minoritarian is, Deleuze writes in "One Less Manifesto," "a goal that concerns everyone" (221). In literary terms, Bogue points out how Deleuze provides a reading of Carmelo Bene's adaptation of Shakespeare's *Richard III* where, although the lines are taken from Shakespeare, the action strips "Shakespeare's history play of its conventional markers of power [to] expose the links between Richard's treachery and the women around him" (6). The effect is to acknowledge the multiplicity in which Shakespeare can be experienced. Seen within such a different framework of literature, where the multiplicity of meanings figures importantly, the After-Action Report, the "Let's Play" commentary, and other paratexts find a fitting position as does the ephemeral computer game narrative that is played out in each instance of gameplay.

Through the computer game's disappearing text, the notion of textuality as a given is itself brought under scrutiny. Instead of attempting to "fix" texts, one is aware that texts are in a state of becoming and that they can only be approached rather than established. As means of telling the story, therefore, the role of the paratext is much greater than it has been recognized so far. As a form of minor literature, then, the videogame-story has opened up ways to recognize that all great literature, that is literature that can grow and adapt, is minor. In fact, instead of asking "Is the paratext becoming the new story?," analyzing the AARs and

"Let's Plays" makes it seem equally valid to ask whether the story is the new paratext, thus pointing towards a rethinking/recoding of any form of narrative media.

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