

Board, game, media: Interactive board games as multimedia convergence

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Abstract

Interactive media board games reflect a changing media culture. Converging media text and technology with game play mechanics and rules, these board games served as both paratext and adaptation. These paratextual board games are an understudied phenomenon in media studies. While previous discussions of media franchising investigates these paratexts through industrial and economic shifts, I hope to explicate some aesthetic, ludic, and textual concerns of cult franchises through an analysis of three interactive board games: *Isaac Asimov's Robot VCR Mystery Game*, the *Star Trek: The Next Generation Interactive VCR Board Game*, and the *Indiana Jones DVD Adventure Game*. Ultimately, I argue that these interactive paratextual board games manifest, reflect, and augment early convergence culture characteristics, revealing that so-called "outdated" media like board exemplify contemporary new media characteristics as well.

Keywords

Paratext, game, adaptation, licensed, franchise, cult media

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The tape slid into the VCR as if it was 1988 all over again. Of course, getting the video recorder hooked up wasn't an easy task in the first place: not only did I have to find one, but figuring out how to hook up the cables from a piece of technology that boasts "stereo!" as its defining feature to my HDTV and surround sound speakers revealed near impossible. But once I did, and the obligatory early 80s graphics and cheesy upbeat music faded away, the game began *Isaac Asimov's Robot VCR Mystery Game* (1988). In some ways a direct adaptation of Isaac Asimov's (1953) novel *Caves of Steel*, and in other respects a paratextual addition to it, the *Robot VCR Mystery Game* highlights the "interactive" licensed board game's liminal status between adaptation and paratext. Although not the first game to be designed to be reliant on an electronic piece of media (that honor belongs to 1985's *Clue: The VCR Game*), the *Robot VCR Mystery Game* embraced the form to such an extent that forces one to question how much of a "game" exists with it at all.

This all-but-forgotten genre of the interactive media-based board game represents a crucial step in the history of interactive and electronic technology, and prefigures and refocuses scholarship on convergence and contemporary digital media. Interactive board games exemplify analog media's reaction to new technology, as the integration of multimedia, and/or interactive elements within these games reflects an attempt to deal with encroaching electronic home entertainment. According to Crocco (2013):

During the 80's and 90's, board game developers discovered a new competitor in the growing influence of household digital games With the spread of systems like Nintendo and Sega ... [s]ome feared that board games would become obsolete in this

new electronic world. ...more was needed to keep them relevant in the public eye. Some new gimmick. They found it in VHS.

These licensed, interactive games have obtained a sense of subcultural cache today: websites like *The Cardboard Republic* or *Boardgamegeek* often feature these games, and YouTube and other video hosting sites are peppered with clips of the (often terrible) acting. Even mainstream media references these games: in a 2014 episode of NBC's *Community*, characters Abed and Annie become obsessed playing "Pile of Bullets," a fictional VHS Board Game.

To that end, I want to investigate how these early interactive games reflect contemporary concerns of convergence media. Interactive paratextual board games are games that utilize alternate forms of mediation in order to generate gameplay. For example, VCR board games use VHS tapes that run consistently throughout the game in order to both structure play temporally and also to "randomize" changes in the rules and mechanics, while the digitized DVD allows for greater perceived randomness within gameplay. Paratextuality and adaptation are central tenets to understanding media-based board games. But it's the unique relationship of both concepts that underscores the board game's relevance as a marker of the relationship between texts within a media universe. On the one hand, the paratextuality of licensed board games must always be tempered by an awareness of the particular affordances of the board game medium as they apply to each media franchise (see Johnson, 2013). That is, different games for different franchises must both fit into the narrative imaginings of that storyworld/universe, but also must create unique gameplay situations to support and augment player understandings of that universe. On the other hand, as adaptations of key moments within the original media text, interactive licensed board games do not affect the larger narrative of the series, but rather focus on the players'

immersive feelings within the text. As adaptations, these games mirror concepts while building on contexts.

In this article, I use the examples of the *Star Trek: The Next Generation Interactive VCR Board Game* (1993) to illustrate the paratextual connections between the game and the originating text, *Isaac Asimov's Robot VCR Mystery Game* to describe the ludic adaptations within interactive licensed board games, and the *Indiana Jones DVD Adventure Game* (2008) to illustrate what I term the “manufactured control” that these interactive paratextual games illustrate. These games create the illusion of interactive control over the “flow” of the game, but instead are limited by the trajectories of the original text. In addition, because they are tethered to a media product (VHS, DVD), they ultimately contradict the interactivity assumed by the addition of that media product. Space prevents me from exploring every type of interactive game, and so I do not look at interactive trivia games (like the *Scene-It!* or *Trivial Pursuit* titles) in this article. I differentiate by looking at narrative: trivia games are party games that exist non-diegetically in the cult text's universe (e.g., *Star Trek Trivial Pursuit* is about *Star Trek*, not a narrative extension of the *Star Trek* universe). In contrast, this article examines games that attempt to construct a narrative that could take place within the storyworld of the text.

I want to take games seriously not just as ludic experiences, but as representations of a shift in convergence media. While interactive licensed board games utilize multiple *media* to create a game experience, they also use the cult world of the original text to converge multiple *interpretive styles*. That is, it's not just media converging with these games, it's styles of mediation as well. Ultimately, the use of media products within paratextual board games reduces interactivity by tethering the game more closely to the media franchise. The games give players the sense that what we think of as “real” is just an imitation of a media-created “reality,” but in

actuality they provide a mechanism by which the paratextual portion of the game becomes more meaningful than the board game portion. Through a comprehensive textual analysis of these interactive games, I illustrate the mechanisms by which paratextuality links the interactive licensed board game to the originating text. Through this analysis of yesterday's interactive media-based board games, I uncover a relationship to today's contemporary media, revealing ways that so-called "outdated" media like board games reflect, problematize, and exemplify contemporary new media characteristics.

The Paratextual Game

In this article I refer to these interactive licensed board games as "paratextual board games." The term paratext refers to specific textual products that are both part of and also apart from a different text; for example, a trailer for a film that utilizes the same footage but reflects promotional material would be paratextual. The term paratext originated with literary theorist Gérard Genette (1997: 1), who established that a paratext was an element of a book that framed how readers could interpret the work, an exterior element that defined the text through its very presence outside of the text. By pointing to what a text *is* – by stating that it is a text in and of itself – a paratext functions as definitional. Genette's literary analysis of the paratext has been applied usefully to other media as well, including video games (Consalvo, 2007), digital technology (Lunenfeld, 1999) and popular media texts (Gray, 2010). Today's digital media environment harnesses the paratext even more: Jonathan Gray's (2010: 23) *Show Sold Separately* discusses how the paratext exists in the spaces in between contemporary text, audience, and industry, "variously negotiating or determining interactions among the three." Gray (2010: 26)

notes that no matter how many texts we may read or view, we always encounter more paratexts, each of which provides “an interpretative construction” of the text and “become the very stuff upon which much popular interpretation is based.” We place value judgments on texts based on nothing more than paratextual material – how many film trailers try to convince us *not* to see the film, or book covers not to read the book?

Paratextual board games serve a unique function in the media landscape. They can develop strong intertextual connections to the original text, serving as marketing for franchises (Johnson, 2013). But they can also be pursued and purchased as products in and of themselves (toys, ancillary products, see Geraghty, 2006; 2014). Board games in general have been little explored in media research, and games based on other media products are even less discussed. One exception, Stewart Woods (2012: 19), does investigate complex “Eurogames,” and does discuss licensed board games; however, he relegates them to a minor subset of mass-market games, arguing that “the mechanics of these types of games [licensed board games] are typically derivative and uninspired.” For some critics, board games are useful for study only as they apply to video games (see Sharp, 2011; Zagal, Rick and Hsi 2006: 7). Other games critics are not as open to investigating licensed games at all: David Parlett (1999), author of *The Oxford History of Board Games*, describes them as “essentially trivial, ephemeral, mind-numbing, and ultimately [of a] soul destroying degree of worthlessness.” Botermans, Burrett, van Delft, and van Splunteren (1987: 180), in their encyclopedic *The World of Games*, elide the entire genre and write merely that they are “readily available commercially and rules of play are always included in the game.”

One of the few academic studies that examines board games as aspects of the media landscape is Kurt Lancaster’s (2001: 67) *Interacting with Babylon 5*, which explores how fans

can “‘visit’ and perform simulated battles from episodes of *Babylon 5*...[and] immerse themselves in this universe” through playing games based on the series. The *Babylon 5* games become less ancillary products and more media texts that generate imaginative play, allowing fans to invest in the narrative of the show. For his study, Lancaster describes the paratextual board game’s two key characteristics – its ability to generate narrative and its ludological sense of play – as elemental to the genre of the licensed game. Although board games have largely been shelved in the closet of the academy, their continued popularity (even in a downturned economy) illustrates their importance for fans, players, and media audiences (Lawson, 2009; Martens, 2012). In addition, studying paratextual board games reveals aspects both exemplary of and problematic to the study of paratextuality in general and of paratextual play specifically in the digital media environment (Booth, 2010).

If the transition from analogue to digital has both augmented and problematized Genette’s original conception of paratextuality, then the interactive board game further distances such concepts from absolutes. Specifically, the *Star Trek: The Next Generation: The Interactive VCR Board Game* highlights how interactivity as a key characteristic of the paratextual board game is both limiting and freeing in the interface between game and show. The *Interactive VCR Board Game* references characters and situations, and even utilizes a familiar actor from the original *Star Trek: The Next Generation* text. Mirroring the aesthetics and trapping of an episode of TNG, the game finds players trapped about the famed Starship *Enterprise* as it lies in dock for a computer upgrade. Unbeknownst to the crew, who have all abandoned the ship to go on shore leave, a rouge Klingon named Kavok (played by Robert O’Reilly, famed for also portraying Klingon leader Gowron in both *The Next Generation* and *Deep Space Nine*) has hijacked the ship

to start an intergalactic war between the Klingons and the Federation – among whom an uneasy peace is oft tested.

Locking himself on the bridge, Kavok uses the half-rebooted computer to interact with the characters, speaking to them on various view screens. This manifests at home for the players via the mechanism of a video tape. The game is billed on the rules and onscreen as an “interactive” episode called “A Klingon Challenge”; the tape even opens with a credit sequence and lists the personnel that worked on the episode in a *Star Trek: The Next Generation* style of credits. Further, as Kavok sets the ship flying towards Kronos, he informs the crew (players) that the trip will take sixty minutes, mirroring the timing of an episode as well.

The interactivity of the game emerges both as the players interact with the game board, and also as Kavok appears at various times on the ever-playing video cassette. For the majority of the game, the players move around the board, enter rooms, and pick up Isolinear chips which allow further access to the ship. One Isolinear chip allows access to the Holodeck, for instance, which grants players the ability to pick up Holodeck cards and get help from holographic images of the TV series characters like Data, Troi, and Riker; another Isolinear chip grants access to the armory, in which players can pick up a phaser, necessary to defeat Kavok at the end of the game. Every two or three minutes, however, Kavok himself will appear on the screen and demand particular actions take place: for instance, he appears towards the beginning of the game and shuts off all movement in the stern of the ship; any player unlucky enough to be travelling in that section at that point of the game must forfeit a turn. Kavok will often turn on the Status Field, which stops players from moving for multiple turns.

The *Star Trek: The Next Generation: Interactive VCR Board Game* is described on the box that it “never plays the same twice!” To a certain extent, this is true: indeed, the same could

actually be said for most games, as any game involving chance (dice, cards, or other mechanisms to enable chance) will always have minor variations in gameplay (Costikyan, 2013). Instead, the insinuation of this statement, used also, for instance, on the *Isaac Asimov's Robots VCR Mystery Game* (“Within 5 minutes you’ll be on one of 256 possible courses to save the galaxy”) seems to be that the video component of the game sufficiently randomizes the key plot points of the game’s narrative so as to present alternate *narrative* modes of interaction each time it is played. The game thus hinges on the dual meaning of “play” here – not only are participants “playing” the game by following the rules and interacting with the boards and elements of the game, but they are also “playing” the video tape and seemingly participating with that mechanism as well. And this highlights the particular paratextual space of the game, as the players are not just active participants of the *play* but are also participants in the *media* as well. The playing of the video tape becomes one more component of the ludic elements of the game, so much so that, if one can remember that Kavok always places a “hold” on the players in the lower half of the ship about ten minutes into the game, then one can try to evade that section during gameplay.

It stands to reason that some people may encounter the game before they encounter the original text; for example, when my group played the game, only about half of the people had seen much *Star Trek*). Playing the game may serve as a decent substitute for experiencing the show. Aesthetically, the game tries to fit in with the series. For instance special effects shots of the *Enterprise* flying through space are drawn directly from previous episodes, and if the players end up losing the game and the ship blows up, the special effect is taken from the episode “Cause and Effect.” O’Reilly is filmed on the set of the *Next Generation*, and the sound effects are dubbed directly from the original series. By calling the game an episode, fitting it into the time frame, featuring a narrative arc similar to the series, and aesthetically linking the game to the

show, Decipher, the producer of the *Interactive VCR Board Game*, highlights those textual and tangible connections to the original text.

At the same time, however, the manifestation of the board game involves non-tangible elements like player interaction, verbal cues, and even token/figure play as paratextual as well (Peters, 2014). For instance, the *Interactive VCR Board Game* is played incredibly quickly. The instructions reference the hectic nature of the play: The rules even state that “the fast pace of this game may create a certain amount of confusion.... If you lose track of where you are or whose turn is next, just pick a placer and keep moving!” During our group session we were confused many times over whose turn was next. Our conversations, productive of meaning but ancillary to the text, could also be considered paratextual, as we attempted to stay in character (calling the leader “Commander” instead of her first name, for instance). The videotape augmentation of the game played into this as well – Kavok would come on periodically and command “whoever is moving now” to do something. The intangible nature of this paratextual activity creates confusion not only because of the fast pace and disorientation of the interactive video, but also because it is so different from what we might expect from watching a *Star Trek: The Next Generation* episode. While theories of active audiences have for over thirty years been extolling the activity that individuals do while watching television, such activity usually falls under the Fiskean (1992) parameters of either semiotic productivity (making meaning from watching), enunciative productivity (making conversation with others), or textual productivity (e.g., writing fan fiction; see Jenkins, 1992).

In contrast, interactive paratextual board games engender a “ludic productivity,” in which the boundaries of the text and the paratext conjoin through the interactive potentiality within the game. That is, while reifying the boundaries of the game and the original text, players must still

negotiate their own activity within the game world. *Star Trek: The Next Generation: The Interactive VCR Board Game* is both part of and apart from *The Next Generation*, and its liminal status within the Trek canon means that players are not just navigating the board, but navigating the meaning of the game in relation to the show as well.

In many ways, then, this multimedia navigation is reflective of interaction between media elements in today's media environment. *Star Trek: The Next Generation: Interactive VCR Board Game* asks its players to keep tabs on multiple worlds at the same time: we are literally multitasking as we experience the VHS component and the board component. In the same way, we are also multi-worlding, as we are asked to both place the game within the narrative world of the *Star Trek* series as well as see as it necessarily separate from that world. Like the second screen viewing and social media expectations of today's media environment, which similarly asks us to both participate with and immerse ourselves within story worlds simultaneously, the interactive media board game reveals the antecedent to today's participatory moment.

Interactivity, Agency, Participation.

In tandem, the *Isaac Asimov's Robot VCR Mystery Game* exists in a liminal space between adaptation and paratext; the game both invokes elements of Asimov's novel *Caves of Steel* and also deviates from them to embrace paratextuality in gameplay. Using the mechanisms of the VCR to depict a detective plot, the *Robot* game highlights moments from Asimov's book; but the ambiguity inherent in the players' solution to the murder that opens the story reveals alternate endings that could have existed, both in the novel and in the game. In revealing a solution, the novel closes off alternate conclusions, leaving them for the realm of fandom and fan

fiction; the game, however, intimates at all the possibilities that *could have been* the solution. While the majority of the game functions as adaptation, the ambiguity of the ending presents a playing understanding of the media text as a mutable product: as with today's media, which are often open to audience participation, the underlying thematic meaning of *Isaac Asimov's Robot VCR Mystery Game* reveals this connection.

If paratextuality is a key media concept underlying this investigation, a second characteristic is commensurable: interactivity. Often cited as a key characteristic of digital texts, interactivity becomes a way of examining user activity through digital manipulation. For Andrea Phillips (2012: 119–120), interactivity is a key marker of contemporary transmedia creation, as transmedia allows an audience to interact with the larger story world. Although interactivity can mean many different things in this context, she highlights the way audiences can learn more of and generate knowledge about a transmedia franchise. Wagner (2012) demonstrates that both games and stories invoke different levels of interactivity, supporting Manovich's (2001: 55) notion that the term interactivity is "too broad to be truly useful" (see Zimmerman, 2004). He points out how all media are, in one way or another, variously "interactive" – one must interact with art through visual accessibility, with film through the interpretation of juxtaposition and editing. "When we use the concept of 'interactive media' exclusively in relation to computer-based media," he writes, "there is the danger that we will interpret 'interaction' literally, equating it with physical interaction between a user and a media object...at the expense of psychological interaction" (Manovich 2001: 57). Phillips (2012: 122) essentially concurs with Manovich, writing that the goal of most transmedia franchises is to create the "illusion" of interactivity instead: to make audiences feel as though they are a part of the story. Indeed, this problematic ascription of physicality to interaction manifests in paratextual board games most directly. To be

interactive with a game it not just a communicative act (Rafaeli and Sudweeks, 1997); it is a standardized and incentivized intervention into the game world (Peters, 2014).

This level of this interaction can vary greatly. For example, as Janet Murray (1997: 128) notes, while players of board games can “be kept very busy spinning dials, moving game pieces, and exchanging money...they may not have any true agency.” Interactivity, the manipulation of elements, is different from agency, the ability to have an influence over the outcome of the game. Henry Jenkins (2006) notes in *Convergence Culture* that there is also tendency to conflate interactivity with participation in contemporary media. Interactivity, for Jenkins (2006: 133), is a property of the medium – it is an attribute that is built into whichever technology one is manipulating. Participation, alternately, is “shaped by the cultural and social protocols” of the culture in which the activity sits. More or less *participation* can be engendered by a particular type of game. A role-playing game like *Dungeons and Dragons* will be participatory as players’ discourse will be the focus of the gameplay, but it may lack an interaction between the mechanics of the game and the players; alternately, professional games of chess will rarely have players participating with each other, but may be highly interactive between the movement of the pieces, timer, and player.

If, as Murray suggests, we should not confuse interactivity with agency, interactive paratextual board games do precisely the opposite. By citing *interactivity* as a key marker of value within the name of the game, or by including additional mediation within the game (via VCR- or DVD-themed gameplay), these paratextual games develop a discourse of randomness within the play that highlights interactivity *as* agency. All games are, to a certain extent, uncertain in outcome (see Costikyan, 2013; Elias, Garfield, and Gutschera, 2012: 137). It is from this uncertainty that winning often achieves its sense of satisfaction. The presence of uncertainty

in games leads to indeterminacy in action – the play that one might take can be influenced by indeterminate factors outside of the player’s control. Some randomness can be built into the game: throws of dice or draws of cards will be, in effect, random. But other uncertain elements can develop throughout games as well; the skill of the opponent, the initial set-up, the randomness of simultaneous action, or even the randomness of human action (Bewersdorff, 2004; Elias, Garfield, and Gutschera, 2012: 142–143).

A party game in which 1–12 players watch a 40-minute science-fiction/detective program based on Asimov’s book *Caves of Steel*, *Isaac Asimov’s Robot VCR Mystery Game* invites participation through forced interactivity. In the future, the earth is overpopulated, but those that have emigrated to outer space (“Spacers”) live in relative comfort. The robot servants of the Spacers are programmed not to kill, to obey orders, and to protect their own existence – the famous three Laws of Robotics. The game finds the player investigating an attempted murder on noted roboticist Hans Fastolfe. Fastolfe is a Spacer who wants humans and robots to live together in peace; the attempted murder happens on the eve of a conference between Spacers and Earthlings. Throughout the game, players watch a VHS tape of actors playing out the roles of the detective Elijah Bailey, his robot helper Daneel Olivaw, and the various suspects they interview. Various robots populate both the human world and the Spacer worlds, but the technology of the robots reveals dichotomies between the groups.

Isaac Asimov’s Robots VCR Mystery Game encourages participation through direct address, what I have previously called “convergent interpellation” (Booth, 2012). In convergent interpellation, the players of a game, or viewers of an interactive experience, become imbricated in the methodological and interpretive ideology of the text through diegetic participation. At key points in the game (indicated by the protagonist Elijah Bailey’s breaking of the fourth wall and

looking at the camera), the players pause the video tape and consult a clue by drawing cards randomly from different decks. Each card has two sides, a clue on each side accompanied by a different number. With each clue's different number at the top of the card, and different sets of clues drawing randomly, algorithmic manipulation will point to one of scores of different endings, each of which can be referenced in a guide book that comes with the game. For example, in my game group's game, the first clue we drew was a news item – "Train Wreck Paralyzes The Northeast! Baltimore Tunnel closed until 7am on May 26"; from this clue we learned that one of the characters would not have been able to make it through the Baltimore Tunnel at the time of the murder, and was thus innocent. Another clue noted that a communication from one suspect, Ken Amadiro, to a Spacer world occurred at 8:35, which confirmed his alibi. Throughout the game, we drew six clue cards, and added up the number on them all at the end of the game to discover that we had solution AA – the daughter did it!

The game thus hinges on two complementary points: first, there is an appearance of randomness because the cards that are drawn will add up to different numbers, pointing to one of the 32 different endings; and second, the VHS tape will play precisely the same way each time, indicating an adaptive connection between the original text (the novel *Caves of Steel*, which forms the same overarching plot) and the game. Unlike the other board games discussed in this book, the "board" in *Robots* consists of a single piece of paper depicting a map of the "world" in which the characters reside. The game is not played *on* the map (there are no pieces, no tokens, no dice) but rather the players themselves huddle around the map and clues as they are laid out on the table in front of them. There is enough ambiguity built into the video tape that any one of the seven suspects *might* be guilty, and so like any good detective story the players are encouraged to figure out the ending. But like the technology of the book, the ending appears to

be fixed the entire time: the images and script of the VHS game provide a structural element that coheres the points together.

The interactivity of the game appears, therefore, not in the way the game itself unfolds, as the narrative is already given and the structure of the story remains static. There is no agency in the players' activities – they can discuss and debate the meaning of the clue; they can argue about the placement of characters within the diegesis that is unseen on the video; they can point to particular moments in the tape that seem relevant. But from the moment a card is chosen and from the instant that number becomes formalized, the solution is crystalized through no particular interaction of the players themselves. The game invokes an algorithmic function that precludes player involvement. This function ultimately undermines the underlying plot of the game. With a story about the rules-based processing of robots and how to circumvent the supposedly-stable Three Laws of Robotics, *Robots* reveals rather a complete subservience to the rules of the game. In order to “beat” the game by discovering the attempted murdered, all players have to follow the precise, mathematical functionality of certain purposeful structure. Whereas in his work Asimov reveals how laws and rules are societally-constructed and dependent on the uncertain structures of a flawed social system, in the game the complete opposite happens. The rules become sacrosanct and reveal the same algorithmic application of instruction that digital textualities do as well. It's not just that the game isn't interactive; its that that game highlights Manovich's myth of interactivity by revealing the structure at the heart of technological manipulation. Rather than viewing the Three Laws of Robotics as fodder for plot manipulation, the game *Robots* forces players to experience the Laws of Play: follow the rules through simulated, convergent interpellation.

In many ways, then, *Isaac Asimov's Robots VCR Mystery Game* reflects a turn to the digital in the media environment. Digital media is ruled by algorithms – they dictate what we see on websites, the types of interactions we have on chats, and the presence of advertising on streaming entertainment sites. We have the freedom to interact within this rule-based system, but ultimately we subscribe to our daily algorithms or we give up digital media. Our digital lives are constrained by sets of rules, and as a precursor to this, the *Isaac Asimov's Robots VCR Mystery Game* presents a more narratively-driven algorithmic experience through forced interactivity.

VCRs and DVDs: Playing the Media

If *Isaac Asimov's Robots VCR Mystery Game* reveals a forced interactivity via the mechanisms of the VHS tape, more contemporary interactive paratextual board games harness newer media technologies in order to generate a greater *sense* of freedom, flexibility, and interactivity in game players. In the *Indiana Jones Interactive DVD Game*, all players inhabit the character of Indiana Jones as he travels around a mysterious, unexplored cavern that contains the treasures from the film series. Throughout the game, the Interactive DVD is used to generate games and challenges for players. The game is a type of “random board” game – as Indiana Jones, players navigate through individual squares of a game board, and when reaching the edge of a square, pick another square at random from the deck of board squares to continue the board. This effect of randomness accentuates the feeling of exploration in the game; since players and characters have no idea what the next square reveals, the board can constantly change.

In practice, most squares are pretty similar and reveal very little in the way of artificial randomness. Each square might contain a gaping pit, a skull, or a tunnel. Special squares reveal the treasure itself, so the main strategy of the game is to continue to explore unexplored areas of

the board. The gaping pits stop Indiana Jones in his tracks and players must play a challenge on the DVD. The skull is a battle space upon which players will “fight” using a die against the DVD. The tunnel is a secret passageway that can lead to other passages; its accessibility is determined by the DVD. Upon encountering each of the three pieces of treasure, one from each of the original *Indiana Jones* movies, player uses the DVD to interact with a series of challenges based on each of the original movies. Although the *Indiana Jones Interactive DVD Game* was released in 2008 to coincide with the fourth Indiana Jones film, *The Kingdom of the Crystal Skull*, it is entirely based in the first three films. No mention of the adventures of Indiana Jones, his son Mutt, or the alien storyline permeate the *Interactive DVD Game*, perhaps because the game itself plays on nostalgia for the original films. Each challenge, fight, or passageway on the DVD comes with a clip from one of the original films, and although viewers are not quizzed in the clips as they might be in a game like *Scene It!*, there is a retro nostalgia inherent in playing such clips in an interactive game.

The clips on the DVD highlight one of the major issues at the heart of gameplay within any interactive paratextual board game: the tension between control and feedback. On the one hand, using the DVD would seem to be able to harness the ability of the digital technology to generate true randomness. In his book *Luck, Logic, and White Lies: The Mathematics of Games*, mathematician and game designer Jörg Bewersdorff (2004: 42) argues that randomness in a game is often not completely random, but rather a subjective experience due to a lack of information. Given knowledge of all the variables, including weight, density, airflow, muscle mechanics, etc., one could undoubtedly figure out the results of a die role before it was cast; the fact that we can't understand all these variables makes the die roll *seem* random, although it actually is not. The computerization of the DVD allows for *true randomness*; as Bewersdorff

(2004: 44) argues, “randomness in chaotic relations is actually something purely mathematical.” Removed from the confines of the physical world, true randomness with computer number-generation is possible.

Yet, the DVD of *Indiana Jones Interactive DVD Game* hides any of its ability to generate “true” randomness within its attempts to generate a *feeling* of skill within its game players. For example, in the “fight” scenes on the DVD, players first watch a clip of Indiana Jones fighting a bad guy from one of the films (when we played, scenes included Jones facing off against Belloq in *Raiders of the Lost Ark*, against Mola Ram from *Temple of Doom*, and against general random baddies like the swordsman from *Raiders*). Players are then given a random digit and must roll a die to match or beat it. If they beat it, the scene plays out and players see Indiana Jones defeating the enemy; if they do not, a different scene is played where Indiana Jones loses. Although the generation of the number by the computer may be random (it is difficult to determine whether or not it is truly random or whether the computer code tends to generate higher numbers; it is worth noting that most of the time when we fought – which was quite often as its one of the few ways players can earn rewards – we tended to get numbers higher than five on an eight-sided die), the overall effect of the play is split between the seeming-randomness of the DVD and the seeming-randomness of a die roll. Complicating matters, players can also turn in cards they’ve earned that can increase rolls by set numbers; in practice, the game is far less “random” than the moniker “interactivity” would indicate.

Although players are rewarded with gold coins for “winning” the die roll, each clip functions as a type of reward as well. Robert Brookey and I (2006: 219) have argued that these rewards actually hinder the progress of the game: “at the points in the game where the narrative is advanced, the player is also rendered passive and has no agency in changing the game’s

narrative.” Although we were discussing video games, our ultimate conclusion that “interactivity [can] be theorized as a form of incorporation and that the structure of a video game creates an interactive experience that connects players to the interests of production and attracts them to a particular media choice” holds true for the interactive DVD of the *Indiana Jones Game* as well – as such, the game seems to straddle the video game/board game divide (Brookey and Booth 2006: 219). The interactivity of the game seems to be used not to generate agency, but rather to reward players with clips from the *Indiana Jones* movies – a strategy that was fun at first but rapidly grew wearisome as the game progressed. Given the limited number of clips on the DVD, it was not unexpected that some would repeat; what was difficult was when we knew how the fights were going to take place (a die roll) and just wanted to get on with the game. Rather than watching clips of *Indiana Jones*, we wanted to play the game by becoming Indiana Jones.

The tension between feedback and control of the game in terms of paratextuality came to a head in the quests for the different final treasure. During the game players had to try to find each of the three items that formed the central plot of each of the three films: the Ark of the Covenant from *Raiders of the Lost Ark*, the Sancara Stones from *Temple of Doom*, and the Holy Grail from *The Last Crusade*. When landing on the space of that particular artifact, players start a unique game on the DVD that relies on the context of the film to structure its mechanisms. When attempting to retrieve the Ark, for example, players are shown a safe path through a snake pit (“Snakes; why did it have to be snakes?”) and then use their DVD remote control to navigate that pathway. When finding the Sancara Stones, players have to navigate through a maze simulating the mine cart chase scene from the *Temple of Doom* film. The beginning of the race finds players reading a map of the mine; at locations throughout the race, players have to decide whether to go right, left, or straight depending on what the map originally stated. Each choice comes with a clip

from the film to illustrate the route (“Left, Indy, go left!”). Memorizing the route helps, so the third time through the mini-game, the player achieving the Stones has the route well-laid out. Retrieving the Holy Grail finds the player going through the same three trials as Indiana Jones does in the *Last Crusade*, each one punctuated with clips from the film. This includes ducking past the swinging blade (“only the penitent man will pass; the penitent man is humble; the penitent man kneels before God!”), and walking on the letters that spells God’s name (“The word of God! In Hebrew Jehovah begins with an I!”).¹ Upon reaching the Grail, players are shown an image of what the Grail looks like, and then must match that to one among the twenty or so shown on screen (“this is the cup of a carpenter’s son”).

On the one hand, such interactive finales allow the player to “play” as Indiana Jones, to go through the same trials as he went through in the three films. In a type of “role-play” offers a type of “immersion in an imaginary entertainment environment” for the players, according to Kurt Lancaster (2001: 30). The world of Indiana Jones becomes real – and realized – for the players, opening up the fictionality of the adventure story into the world of the players. This immersion brings with it a particular type of enjoyment to live through the scenes that have nostalgic remembrances for the players – it means more to those that have already seen the films and lived through the cinematic immersion as well. The game simulates the immersion of the film. This immersion highlights the feedback of the players, as they get to make the same decisions as Indiana Jones does and play the game as he does in the film. Feedback is rewarded with fond memories of clips of films.

But on the other hand, this immersion also highlights the control of the original text over this paratext. The game challenges much remain wedded to the original media product in order to

¹ Players do not have to engage in the last trial from the film, the faith trail.

generate those feelings of interaction and nostalgia. Imagine if the player were to approach the three trials before the Holy Grail and, instead of following Indiana Jones' quests (the penitent man, the word of God, the cup of Christ) they had to follow different quests: searching for the Treasure of the Sierra Madre, or saving some orphans from an evil nun. Not only would the game be decidedly different, but players might be understandably confused. The tragedy of the interactive, paratextual board game is that in its immersive tethering to the original text, it cannot expand past its own roots. While player feedback is essential, game control remains forever mired in the original text.

Ultimately, today's interactive, paratextual board games like *Indiana Jones Interactive DVD Game* present a form of manufactured control, as the game must remain tethered to the original text in order to function. However, rather than generating a unique feedback system of interactive potential as one might expect or experience with (unlabeled) interactive games, or even the non-paratextual, the manufactured control of the interactive, paratextual game leads to a type of manufactured flow. Immersion occurs because of the film clips and nostalgia to the original text, not because of the unique properties of the game. The challenges of the game, when experienced via an interactive medium like the DVD, does not so much generate a sense of flow, but rather simulates flow through the nostalgic remembrances of immersion into the cinematic diegesis. Interactive, paratextual games suffer from their very ontological definition.

Conclusion

In this article I've demonstrated how interactive paratextual board games reflect changing notions of media textuality. While the notion of paratextuality guides our understanding of licensed video games, board games reflect a new direction to explore in the intersection of games

and media. Control is the antithesis of interactivity: having some aspect of the game control players' movements ultimately limits his or her ability to have freedom in the game. As Salen and Zimmerman (2004: 225) caution, "feedback systems can take control away from players." Some games maintain massive amounts of control, the player operating with a limited number of options: for example, *Isaac Asimov's Robots VCR Mystery Game* relies on the control of the VHS tape, the storyline, the original book, as well as the vague-but-still-limited number of endings. 256 endings may seem to be a lot; but in comparison to more open-ended play it is quite limited. Other games grant enormous freedom to the players to create their own rules and world, such as *Dungeons and Dragons* (Ewalt, 2013). Players can articulate their own endings, their own narratives, as they play. At the same time, however, a certain amount of control (attributes of character types; the results of die role) must be maintained in order to balance the openness of the play with the structure of a game. This balance is what Salen and Zimmerman (2004: 337) call the "Paradox of Control." As they write, describing this paradox as an aspect of *flow*:

In an optimal experience, the participant is able to exercise control without completely being in control of the situation. If there is no chance of failure, the activity is not difficult enough. ... As game players struggle against the system of artificial conflict, they attempt to assert control by taking actions. Yet the outcome of a game it is always uncertain.

In this way, game players always navigate through control via their own mechanisms of feedback and interactivity.

For over twenty years "interactive" board games have been developed that harness multi-media technologies to augment the play experience; using what is usually the heights of technology at the time (VHS tapes, DVDs, and now Electronic game boards, etc.), the

development of games (and what board game manufacturers might try to market as “new” and “futuristic” game play mechanics) become tied to the contemporary media market. Ultimately, as our media environment becomes more convergent across multiple corporations and multiple outlets, and as the numerous methods for viewing books, films, and television all merge into similar devices, the paratextual board game sits at the nexus of multiple production spaces at once. It is analogue but hinges on digital changes; it is game-based but hinges on narratological principles. Far from becoming part of a large, nebulous media environment, paratextual board games reveal the diversity within the media sphere, and highlight the various ranges of meanings constructed by audiences and creators alike.

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