Chapter 2
The Margins of Bookishness: Paratexts in Digital Literature

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ABSTRACT
In this chapter, the author approaches the paratexts of digital literature from a post-structuralist point of view, according to which a paratext cannot be seen as simply outside a work but rather collaborates with it and helps shape its place in the world. The paratext is in need of analysis and interpretation as much as the text itself, and even more so in the context of the World Wide Web, in which the paratext has become more hybrid and more widespread. It performs the double action of, on the one hand, disappearing and merging with the text itself and, on the other hand, expanding into an infinite online context. Current critical practice involves focusing only on paratexts that communicate authorial intention directly. Here, that approach will be expanded to take in the “texts” that cluster around a digital text and become part of it, even if there is no authorial consent. The social space in which print literature is printed, sold, bought and taught is partly replaced by these paratexts in digital literature, which is analyzed with concepts borrowed from the sociology of art. The author begins by evaluating the possibilities offered by the theoretical expansion of paratexts within the digital realm. That evaluation leads to the conclusion that, in general, and contrary to standard assumptions, digital-literary artists seem to use traditional rather than disruptive avant-garde strategies. It also gives insights into the ways in which a new and dynamic genre of art is produced, consumed and evaluated.

INTRODUCTION
New genres and new media of art have always interacted with transformations in their social and media contexts. In digital literature, it is no different—the new form points to changes in the boundaries between art and literature, between authorship and readership, and between text and paratext.

Gérard Genette’s Seuils (1987) and the English translation Paratexts: Thresholds of Interpretation (1997) refer to printed books. In this chapter, I will apply his theory of paratexts to e-literature, using Derrida’s notion of the frame (“parergon”). As Stanitzek (2005) points out, the study of paratext is crucial in new media: first, because there has been “an explosion” of paratextual forms, and second,
because it may help to avoid focusing exclusively on the object from a hermeneutic approach (p. 41).

I would add that a paratext tells us about the social and economic networks that the text in question is involved in, but also about the ways in which our interpretation of the text is influenced by these extra-textual elements.

This chapter has two sections, each addressing a separate question. The first is twofold: What is the nature of paratexts in digital as opposed to traditional literature? If we find discontinuities between digital and analogue paratexts, may they be said to run parallel to discontinuities between e-works and traditional literature? The second section concerns the strategic functions of these paratexts: How do authors and others use them to establish a place for digital literature in the literary field, and what can that tell us about the ways in which a new genre of art is produced, consumed and evaluated? I then evaluate the possibilities offered by the theoretical expansion of paratexts within the digital realm.

In order to give a complete account of possible paratextual strategies and effects, I look at canonical, non-canonical, anthologized and privately published digital works.

Please note that throughout this chapter, full individual references to online anthologies or electronic works were removed in order to alleviate the text. Complete references can be found in the reference list. Unless otherwise indicated, all the websites and other online sources were accessed between June 21 and July 5, 2013.

TRANSFORMATIONS IN DIGITAL PARATEXTS

A text never comes to a reader directly. Various thresholds, in various forms, are found between a work and its reader: “a zone not only of transition but also of transaction, a privileged space of a pragmatics and a strategy, of an influence on the public” (Genette, 1997, p. 1). In Paratexts: Thresholds of interpretation, Genette distinguishes between peritexts, located within a book, and epi-texts, outside it. Examples of the latter include an interview with the author, a publisher’s newspaper advertisement and the author’s correspondence. Examples of the former include elements such as a table of contents, the title, dedications, notes and the author’s name. Genette shows how all these elements can contribute to the meaning and status we attribute to the text. Obviously, how this takes place depends heavily on the historical and social contexts in which a work exists.

Genette’s (1997) theory of paratext is both broad and narrow: narrow in that he considers paratext to be only that “which is characterized by authorial intention and the assumption of responsibility” (p. 3), but broad in that he, quite contradictorily, holds that context is also paratextual (the genre is paratextual, as is, for example, the periodical in which a work may appear). Moreover, Genette’s definition of responsibility is vague, for he places it with the author or “his associates,” who may be editors, colleagues, or agents.

I propose to adapt Genette’s ideas to the digital age. The digitality of literary texts deeply affects not only the text itself, but everything that comes with it: the logistics and economics of its production, distribution and reception. Both the text and the paratext are affected by the Medienwechsel. Firstly, the terms “ownership” and “authorization” have become more fluid in the digital forms of literature compared to the traditional situation. Therefore, we should extend the definition of paratext to include the visual and verbal information that clusters around a digital text, even if there is no authorial consent: for example, the results produced by a search engine. I will have more to say about this later. Next, we could expand the mainly “textual” aspect of Genette’s paratext here to include other media that are also part of the presentation of the text: typeface, images, sound, interface and software. I will include these, too, in the definition of paratext—the criterion remaining that the elements included
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