Chapter 16

Post-Book Paratext: Designing for Haptic Harmony

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ABSTRACT

The earliest artifacts of expression, represented by cave art and carved statuettes, had a paratext of their own that surrounded and supported their significance. However, there is a fundamental difference between the way these artifacts operated in society and the way writing and print operate. Writing and print are associated with a “print culture” centered on fixity, social isolation, and authority. This opposes a preceding emphasis on orality, fluidity, and social communication. However, the hegemony of print culture has been challenged by the binary revolution. The widespread success of e-readers, apps, the Web, and electronic reading in general indicates a nascent post-book era. The essential difference between a paper book and its electronic analog is the stripping of the former’s paratextual elements. This chapter suggests that we should be deliberate about designing the paratext of our digital post-book experiences. We have the opportunity to reintroduce elements of pre-print orality, continuing what scholars have noted as the development of a “secondary orality” instigated by radio and television. An entire profession already exists whose mission is to design and implement platform-specific elements that attend to the delivery of content: interaction designers. These professionals can help us design the future of reading.

INTRODUCTION

Watch out for the paratext! (Genette, 1997, p. 410)

What is more meaningful: the book or the text it contains? (Carrión, 1975)

A book as it is understood today (or was in the 20th century) is a very specific artifact. Most specifically, it is a printed codex—a paper technology hinged, strung, and stitched into being. This sort of book delivers static and authored content. In this conception, it is this physicality that makes something a book. Books are manufactured, not authored. As book theorist Roger Chartier (1994) indicates, quoting historian Roger E. Stoddard, “Whatever they may do, authors do not write books. Books are not written at all. They are

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manufactured by scribes and artisans, by mechanics and other engineers, and by printing presses and other machines” (p. 9).

As I will demonstrate below, the physical book is not a mere container for the author’s content. Rather, a book’s cover, paper, typography and other elements play a significant role in the meaning and reception of the text. This will be demonstrated by analyzing the shifts in meaning that occurred as the present book form evolved from pre-book written artifacts. I will also analyze existing paper books and the effects of their thingness on their reception. I will trace this assertion through the nascent binary revolution and the disruptions presently experienced in this moment when books are trading this physicality for something altogether new.

A historical approach will provide exciting findings and insights from the history of reading that may be applied to new ways of reading. However, this historical approach is not merely a feature-mining mission. It takes into account the words of Chartier (1995), who succinctly summarizes the wider role of historical analysis in this moment of book evolution:

The historian’s analysis is neither prophetic nor nostalgic: It has a dual task of pleading for the preservation and protection of the evidence of a written culture that for five centuries has been identified with the circulation of printed matter, and of making the revolution of the present moment more intelligible—a revolution as radical as the one that, seventeen or eighteen centuries ago, imposed a new form on the book. (p. 5)

As the founder of Exprima Media, a software strategy and design company, I have first-hand experience with the importance (and challenges) of crafting effective paratext for digital products and services. Exprima’s work with a number of publishers and other content providers has provided practical evidence of both the existence and importance of digital paratext. This perspective will help guide my observations and recommendations for the way ahead vis-à-vis the design and implementation of the digital reading experience.

“A way ahead” is a common discussion in the digital reading business. Reading digital book content displayed on electronic devices has been possible for decades; however, not until the past four years or so has there been a plethora of competing devices, software products, and business models attending to book content. Goliath corporations like Apple, Amazon, and Adobe, robust code standards like ePub (IDPF, 2013), HTML 5, iOS, and Android, and a variety of software startups like Readmill1 (Berggren, et al., 2011) and Beneath the Ink (Hawkins, 2013) populate a crowded ecosystem of hopeful monsters, all vying for survival and reproduction. None have proven fit enough to dominate.

This stalemate may be attributable to the skeuomorphic approach to paratext that is the common denominator of all these hardware, software, and business solutions. By cleaving to backwards-facing object and book metaphors, the current slew of solutions avoids an opportunity. Digital deployment can provide so much more than an electronic version of the accustomed book and book market. Instead, we have an opportunity to solidly innovate storytelling and information delivery. With digital technology, we can craft experiences that incorporate a variety of sensual elements, creating a situation more akin to pre-literate story and information practices than to the book as we know it. An iPad, for example, can deliver visual and audible content, haptic feedback in the form of vibration, and response to device geolocation and 360-degree positioning.

This opportunity has been imagined and discussed since well before computers became a viable means of content delivery. Works of theorists like Walter Ong (2012) and Marshall McLuhan (1962) indicated an electrically powered return to the pre-literate multisensual transfer of information, albeit in innovative containers and experiences. Both saw this as a logical and
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