Examining Paratextual Theory and its Applications in Digital Culture

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Introduction

CROSSING DIGITAL THRESHOLDS ON THE PARATEXTUAL TIGHTROPE

Most readers, as they encounter these lines, would agree that they are reading text. Those familiar with the works of French theorist Gérard Genette may add that they are, in fact, reading paratext.

Although Genette had introduced the concept of paratext in *Palimpsestes*, published in 1981, and in other, shorter works, his work *Seuils* ("Thresholds") is the seminal text pertaining to this theory. Since its publication in 1987, followed by partial (1991) and integral (1997) translations, Genette's paratextual theory has been summarized numerous times. In the pages of this book alone, authors from various disciplines will present their take on the framework and cite other scholars and thinkers who have done the same, thereby illustrating the multiplicity of approaches supported by what appears to be, at first glance, a relatively straightforward proposition.

Let us likewise summarize, albeit briefly. The basic premise is as follows: in the published book, the text, the narrative, the core of the work, does not stand alone. In fact, it cannot. An assemblage of other elements is required to "make present" the text, to render it apprehensible to the reader and suitable for both "reception" and "consumption" (Genette, 1997, p. 1). From the outset, Genette listed the following paratextual elements: "an author's name, a title, a preface, illustrations" (p. 1); in so doing, he provided commonplace references, establishing just how familiar we readers already were with the paratext, even though it had not yet been theorized as such prior to his work.

We begin, then, with Genette's (1997) basic definition: "For us, 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... an 'undefined zone' between the inside and the outside" (pp. 1–2). To get to the text, the reader must cross a threshold; in the book, that threshold is the paratext. It should be noted here that Genette, in the text and in an accompanying footnote, gave credit to other thinkers and theorists (Duchet, Compagnon, Lejeune) who inspired or used the "threshold," "fringe," or "zone" metaphors.

A subset of concepts is also essential for the reader's understanding of paratextual theory. The paratext, in Genette's (1997) framework, is presented in two distinct categories. The *peritext* is the paratext contained within the book; its elements are constitutive of the object. Examples include the title, footnotes, epigraphs, tables of content. The *epitext* accompanies the text from a distance; Genette (1997) perceived it as taking shape in mediated events (such as interviews with the author) or through "private communication (letters, diaries, and others)" (p. 5). What ensues can be seen as the "$E=mc^2$" of literary studies: "paratext = peritext + epitext" (p. 5).

The impetus for this book lies in the following question: why is a theory that is so deeply anchored in book culture and aimed at explaining the mechanisms of the printed work so inexorably appealing to scholars and designers from various disciplines and applied to a wide range of objects that seemingly share so little with the traditional codex?

Or do they?

This is where context, the inevitable backdrop to historical, social, and technological shifts, makes its thundering entrance.

Continuity and Disruption in Digital Culture

As texts, or, less specifically, "contents," have become digital and increasingly *born-digital* or *digital only,* questions have arisen about the nature and implications of what may conveniently be termed a double transitional situation, that is, the transition of textual and audiovisual content to digital formats. This most recent permutation, which has been referred to as the digital turn, shift, age or era (not to mention revolution) follows three previous, and commonly acknowledged, intellectual and technological revolutions: the shift from oral literacy to writing, the invention of the printing press, and the adoption and distribution of pre-Internet mass media, dominated by television. It is both remarkable and challenging that the digital transition has taken little more than three decades, a very short interval in the long history of human culture. This implies that anyone endeavoring to explore and interpret how digital content is conceived, produced, accessed and reused in digital environments needs to take into account the lack of historical distance from the phenomena observed which may cloud their intellectual objectivity towards the object of study.

That said, being immersed, as both users and observers, in the digital flow of transient bits while trying to make sense of how meaning is constructed and transmitted does not necessarily mean being nearly submerged while desperately hanging on to a runaway raft (to echo Doherty's (2014) water-based analogies, discussed later in this text). Indeed, the digital scientist enjoys the relative privilege of being able to study with some serenity and *in vivo* aspects of what may well constitute a radical revolution in the history of the "technologies of the intellect" to cite Jack Goody's neologism (see Goody, 1999, 2000, n.d.). Goody uses the expression "technologies of the intellect" to define the nature of writing and of the literate mind, emphasizing the fundamental difference in modes of representation and social interaction in pre-literate, oral cultures as compared to literate cultures (see Goody & Watt, 1963). Surprisingly, Goody has not, in his abundant scientific production, defined the notion of "technologies of the intellect," something for which he has occasionally been criticized (Harris, 2009, p. 71). We think, however, that such criticism is partially unjustified. Goody's reluctance to offer precise elucidations of this expression seems fully premeditated, since he uses it chiefly as a rhetorical tool first to draw attention to what he considers constitutes the nature of the fundamental epistemic innovation associated with the adoption of writing—the literate mind and literacy—and, second, to draw a line from this epistemic innovation to corresponding patterns of social interaction.

Building on Goody's program for exploring the innovative implications of literacy, analysts of the bewildering variety of contemporary digital inscriptional practices should not proceed as if man were "imprisoned by the concepts he has produced and hence fail[ed] to account for the generative aspects of his culture" (Goody, 1995, p. 9). In this context, it is crucial to note that the term "generative" does not imply that the advent of a new technology (e.g., networked information technologies) fully cancels or replaces former speech-based or gestural technologies and literacies, nor that the digital shift, more

than the print revolution (or for that matter the advent of the written form) were the result of abrupt time warps in the history of humankind, apt to relegate former tools and functions to oblivion. Rather, the ecology of new technologies of the intellect may be thought of as a complex, potentially metastable blend mixing continuous aspects inherited from past periods (such as devices, functions, and tactics) with disruptive aspects (also devices, functions, and tactics) with little or no obvious roots in earlier technologies. Digital culture's blend of old and new characteristics, similar to other cultural variations in human societies, forbids the scholar "to put forward a simple, technologically determined sequence of cause and effect," since "there are too many eddies and currents in the affairs of men to justify a monocausal explanation of a unilineal kind" (Goody, 1995, p. 10).

The continuity dimension means that, being built on a new-old literacy, digital culture is bound to integrate and recycle inherited goods and functions in very diverse, and not always obvious, ways; for the disruptive dimension makes it inevitable that any new literacy will generate, over time, unprecedented artifacts and techniques, with no obvious prefiguration in earlier literacies. One should heed the fact, however, that the distinction between "continuous" and "disruptive" is by no means dichotomous. The appearance, structure, and even core functionalities of traditional artifacts may migrate into a digital medium and, over the course of time and in given contexts or through given usages, acquire new, unforeseen functions. Similarly, disruptive artifacts may over time acquire what could be perceived as traditional functions. This intricate synergy of old and new requires users to develop new meta-competences based on revised or reinvented cognitive strategies; it also requires new epistemological frames. All this entails novel ways of learning and engaging with cultural products, as ancestral devices (such as the title, the page, the table of contents, or the index, to use paratextual examples) and novel digital artifacts flow together in the minds, practices, and lives of individuals through a yet-to-be-explored process of instrumental genesis (Rabardel, 1995).

Yet, do we not use similar strategies, almost instinctively, as we adapt to new signals and signs? Or do we offer a futile but reassuring resistance to change by seeking refuge in familiar frames of reference, be they "desktops," "folders," or "pages"? We may ask whether our collective memory associates the logo inserts popping up and disappearing within seconds on our favorite TV channels with the wonderful illuminations of the 15th century manuscript masterpiece *Très Riches Heures* on exhibit at the Musée Condé in Chantilly. Do we perceive the bold fonts used to highlight the title of a blog entry as reminiscent of the Old Egyptian *cartouches* used to highlight royal names? Might the status bar of our favorite computer game evoke in us the image of some obscure bas-relief inscription in a medieval cathedral? Somewhere deep in our minds, the spatially constrained structure of a tweet is perhaps akin to the laconic but amorous message of the Old Norse Runic *runepinne*: "Arne priest wants Inga!" (DigitaltMuseum, n.d.); and there may be a functional analogy between IMDb listings and the papacy's *Index Librorum Prohibitorum* (*List of Prohibited Books*, abolished in 1966), other than in their respective illustrations of our propensity for assembling, organizing, and distributing information in list form.

Because of the pervasive nature of the digital revolution, the mingling of continuity elements (such as inherited narrative or paratextual devices and strategies with clear roots in print culture) and disruptive elements (such as access functions performed by software agents in *Wikipedia*, non-human poetry generators, or AI-driven conversational machines) augurs a different kind of literacy. This mingling provokes a complexified version, rather than a repetition, of what Walter J. Ong expounded in his seminal study of residual orality in written culture: the productive coexistence of a "deeply interiorized literacy and more or less residually oral states of consciousness"; in other words, a culture of heterogeneous

elements (Ong, 2002, p. 29). The difference between the state of things described by Ong and Goody and the present situation, at the digital turn, is that the layering and entanglement of various strands of pre-literate and literate modes of communication and knowledge are of a higher order of magnitude. As formulated by Terje Hillesund and Claire Bélisle (2014),

> *the long-term consequences of the convergence of computer and network technologies into a new text medium are not at all obvious, but the consequences are far-reaching and penetrating in more than geographical terms and degrees of diffusion. The writing system itself, meaning the characters and numbers, is as yet not dissimilar from the systems used in manuscripts and print publications. However, there are significant differences in how digital texts are created and stored and how they are distributed and presented to the reader, and as Roger Chartier (1995) points out, new text features will inevitably change our conception of text, intellectual habits, and ways of reading, thus creating an entirely new framework for digital text editions.* (p. 117)

Along the same lines, as we look back at the rapid growth and dissemination of networked digital media and imagine possible futures, we find rich implications in Peter Shillingsburg's (2006) concise diagnosis of our academic and practical challenges: "We need more people thinking deeply about ways in which texts translated into new mediums lose old functions as they acquire new functions and how interactions with texts in the electronic world differ from interactions with print editions" (p. 145).

Yet, while fully endorsing Shillingsburg's statement, we may expand the scope of his program by considering three additional perspectives. First, as suggested earlier, we may need to realize that key characteristics of the configuration and dynamics of digital content may lack prefiguration in the Gutenberg era. If such is the case, then the terms "translation," "transfer," or "reuse" may fail to fully address the disruptive and quite often perplexing characteristics of contemporary digital culture. Examining digital content in use, *in situ* and *in vivo* may, as a consequence, require us to assume that new functions, new kinds of interactions, and new vectors of content are, in fact, endemic to digital culture and, as a consequence, can only be studied and interpreted in their immediate technological, social, and cultural environments. This applies particularly to highly transient, dynamic, remixed, or mashed-up digital products.

Second, we may need to fully process the fact that the print era's definition of "text" as inscribed lines of characters, with or without illustrations, on paper or on screen, does not do justice to the plethora of inscriptional forms and their intricate digital choreography. The term "text," or any new term chosen to replace it in the digital context, should also address a rapidly changing and evolving population of dynamic objects performing various well-known and less well-known functions in the construction of meaning. The expanded notion of text applies particularly to computer games and various cultural products that include highly fluid, haptic, kinetic, or biosensory aspects. The digital "object," although it is inscribed in code, calls for a rethinking of the concept of "text."

Third and last, Shillingsburg's notion of "text" (understood as this expanded concept) needs to be somehow freed from assumptions about the centrality and even the necessary existence of an authoritative primary core content (e.g., the actual YouTube video displayed) that may be analyzed separately from all the surrounding, introductory, and infiltrating devices. To play on Jacques Derrida's notion of "decentering," such decentering may apply not only to the displacement and destabilization of the Author, as heralded by the French Nouvelle Critique, but more fundamentally to the destabilization of the textual architecture, a rupture in the Barthesian view of the text as a woven cloth (Barthes, 1977, p. 159).

That being said, it is essential to reiterate that all is not rupture; in digital culture, centralistic textuality "as we knew it" can persist, at times quite adamantly so, but it coexists with highly decentralized, fragmentary, or hyperfluid processes.

The Digital "Para"/"Text" Tug of War

We therefore begin to see how a theory based on the book can offer a window into the digital realm; not because the object (of consumption, of study) has not changed, but precisely because, while it has changed, it still needs to be apprehended, to be "made present," to be "stepped into." Genette's theory has often been called text-centric, book-centric, or print-centric, and of course, at inception it was, despite the fact that Genette himself foresaw the possibility of exploring the paratextual apparatus of other types of cultural artifacts, such as visual art or music (1997, p. 407).

This may seem incongruous given the textual semantics embedded in the theory's very name, and one might argue that the transfer of the theory to electronic literature is a more natural one. Even then, however, the gap widens upon close investigation. As Birke and Christ (2013) point out, Web-based digital objects exist in a context where the "'thresholds', paratextual elements that negotiate the space between text and context, become increasingly difficult to isolate and identify" (p. 80). They therefore argue that there may be important limitations to this "media-specific" (i.e., book-specific) (Birke & Christ, 2013, p. 81) theory in the digital era, particularly for born-digital works; that being said, they also posit that certain aspects of paratextual theory may be retained in order to compare how digital formats offer various modes of departure from their printed counterparts or predecessors (Birke & Christ, 2013, p. 81).

Needless to say, academia and popular culture have moved well beyond the printed-text-to-e-text comparison. Text, film, music, games, websites, programming languages, and digital objects of every shape and texture have been gazed at through the paratextual lens and, on many occasions, studied precisely for their paratextual content. In fact, the current applications of the theory may have moved it from "text-centric" or even "core-centric" to "threshold-centric." As Blaise Cronin writes in his foreword to this book, "the paratext may itself become the story"; or, as the *Chronicle of Higher Education* recently proclaimed, "The Paratext's the Thing" (Doherty, 2014).

Interestingly, Genette disavowed this perspective, and quite strongly so; the last page of *Seuils* warns all concerned to "*watch out for the paratext!*" (italics in the original; Genette, 1997, p. 410). In his view, it would be "unfortunate" to replace what he calls "some idol of the closed Text" with "a new and even more hollow fetish: the paratext." He describes the paratext as an "assistant," an "accessory," "a silly show" when separated from its core text. According to Genette (1997), "the discourse on the paratext must never forget that it bears on a discourse that bears on a discourse, and that the meaning of its object depends on the object of this meaning, which is yet another meaning" (p. 410).

Despite this warning, and as should be evident by now, the paratext, by gaining in momentum, may have lost its "boundary" status—its "para" status. This book explores digital culture's possible shift in focus from what Thomas Doherty (2014) has recently and wryly called "the text as the holy of holies" to an eco-system of paratextual phenomena whirling in the "slipstream" of bits. Doherty invokes Genette's view that "the paratext is neither on the interior nor on the exterior: it is both; it is on the threshold; and it is on this very site that we must study it, because essentially, perhaps, *its being depends upon its site*" (italics in the original; Genette as cited by Richard Macksey in his Foreword to *Paratexts*, 1997, p. xvii). Doherty then argues that if the distinction between "core" and "periphery" is not fully tenable in the book

world, it is immeasurably less tenable in digital culture. So untenable is such a distinction that one may, as Doherty and several authors in this book boldly do, theorize that the whirls and eddies of flowing paratextual bits have replaced the "text," the "core," as the focal point. This appears as problematic to Doherty as it was to Genette, albeit for different reasons. The paratext, Doherty (2014) claims, is what one needs to wade through to get to the "good stuff" that makes the content, the discourse, the television show "matter."

> *The paratext is the satellite debris orbiting and radiating out from the core text: what the post-telecast chatfest Talking Dead is to The Walking Dead, what Madonna-vs.-Lady Gaga mashups are to the original music videos, what Wolverine action figures are to the X-Men franchise—what all the buzzing swarms of trailers, teasers, bloopers, tweets, swag, webisodes, podcasts, chat rooms, fanzines, geek conventions, DVD extras, synergistic tie-ins, and branded merchandise, in all their infinite varieties, are to the mother ship.* (Doherty, 2014)

This book does not seek to resolve the tensions or to be the definitive guide on paratextual theory in the digital age; such a pretension would imply that the theory is fixed, unmoving, unable to be adapted to the ever-evolving forms and formats of humankind's transcription and recording of ideas. That notion would be contrary to Genette's (1997) viewpoint:

> *The general history of the paratext, punctuated by the stages of a technological evolution that supplies it with means and opportunities, would no doubt be the history of those ceaseless phenomena of sliding, substitution, compensation, and innovation which ensure, with the passing centuries, the continuation and to some extent the development of the paratext's efficacy.* (p. 14)

Rather, this book confirms that the paratextual evolution and its study are quite strongly rooted in the current academic landscape, and that the taxonomy it presents for the printed book can be operationalized for the study of digital objects. It also confirms that paratextual theory supports what we French speakers would call a "décloisonnement," a decompartmentalization of the disciplines, which can only be beneficial at a time when the digital object has just begun to suggest the many shapes it might take in years to come. Indeed, the question is not whether Genette's theory is useful beyond the study of the printed book, the print industry, and the oft-debated notion of "authorship"—to that, this collective work answers a resounding Yes. The question is rather to ponder how, as the objects morph, mesh together, and surprise us, the theory itself will continue to evolve. This book is an exploration, of course, but also a testimony to the will of today's scholars to provide, with a compelling and justified respect for a framework born in a pre-Internet and literary context, the theoretical portals we can use to engage in a common dialogue about the elements that shape our thoughts and ideas into dynamic digital objects. While scholars may not always agree on the nomenclature or on the applications of the theory, the underlying resolve of the contributors to this book seems to be that Genette's initial premise still stands: something, here called "paratext," is required to make our thoughts and ideas "present," to shape them into inscribed, accessible, apprehensible, but also classifiable, analyzable (not to mention enjoyable) objects.

The Seductive Power of Genette's Paratext

Why is the concept of paratext still so relevant today, in such a broad range of disciplines and for such a wide array of objects? And despite efforts to move towards broader semantic labels, such as "paracontent" (Bhaskar, 2011), why do scholars constantly refer back and with deference to Genette, albeit, at times, to discard his strongest warnings?

The chapters of this collective work offer literature reviews that provide the reader with an overview of the applications of Genette's theory in various disciplines—an influence further measured through the metrics provided by Fredrik Åström in his chapter, "The Context of Paratext: A Bibliometric Study of the Citation Contexts of Gérard Genette's Texts". The seductive power of the framework endures, no matter what the object of study and however broadly its tenets may be interpreted. As for the contributors themselves, they submit Genette's theory to everything from conceptual and broad-stroke applications to minute scrutiny and reconceptualizations complete with propositions for updated taxonomies. Taken as a whole, this book synthesizes the existing literature on the subject; needless to say, it also, *de facto*, adds to this literature.

Judging by the uses of the theory made in both the chapters of this book and the texts referenced by its authors, the appeal of the paratextual viewpoint seems to lie in certain key factors. We shall therefore aim to distill what, in the root text, seem to be the focal points that bring coherence to a landscape shaped from so many perspectives.

First, there is the fact that the essence of Genette's work *Paratexts* is contained, in highly concentrated but extremely readable form, in its introduction. Indeed, this introduction makes such strong and important contributions to the world of knowledge that it was imported into the English language as a standalone piece under the pragmatic title "Introduction to the Paratext" (Genette, 1991) six years before a different translator presented the English-language community with a complete version of the work, under the revised title *Paratexts: Thresholds of Interpretation* (Genette, 1997). A keen eye will notice the distinct difference between the eloquent, albeit laconic, *Seuils* (literally, "thresholds") and the explanatory elements of the English title. This may have been said before, but if it has, it bears repeating. In English, the title features the name of the proposed concept, "paratexts," made plural although Genette himself keeps it singular: the proposed "thresholds" may be numerous, but his "paratext" is one complex whole composed of singular elements. The English reader then encounters the term "thresholds" and with it both the notion of crossing into something and the slightly unnerving sense that these devices create "the possibility of stepping inside or turning back" (Genette, 1997, p. 2) from a textual space. Finally, the translated title positions the paratext as a tool appealing to the reader's judgment and subjectivity.

And so, through five little words in two languages, the paratext begins its work.

In the introduction, which the reader will find cited frequently in this book and elsewhere, Genette lays down the main aspects of the theory, not only in its tenets, but also in its most important ramifications. We will look here at some of the key points that have captured the attention of those who, with us, have chosen to pursue this "examination" of paratext in digital culture.

Within a few pages, Genette proposes a concise model, reminiscent of journalism's Five W's, for the analysis of the paratext. The definition of a paratextual element is dependent on the answers to the following questions: where, when, how, from whom, to whom, and to do what (Genette, 1997). This establishes that a paratextual analysis should be based on the following dimensions: location (hence the peritext/epitext divide), temporality (when was it created), substance (one might say format, but Genette limits himself to text), communication (seen as pragmatic in the relationship it creates between sender

and addressee), and function (also pragmatic; pp. 4–13). This framework is enticingly straightforward, to say the least, and will be used as a starting point for some chapters in this book.

Each individual dimension offers a plethora of avenues for the study of digital objects. Location, of course, is at the heart of much debate. Despite the traditional or print-inspired lexicon of "pages," "e-publishing," and "citations," hypertextuality, source codes, and Web-based digital content have rendered the peritext/epitext dichotomy highly conjectural. What is "location" in an object whose very materiality is debated? Let the reader be aware that there is no consensus in this book. Rather, the epitext/peritext relationship is questioned, resolved by some, and made obsolete by others; and so the lack of historical distance challenges us, even as it enriches our conversations.

As paratextual location changes in nature, so, too, does temporality. Genette (1997) reminds us that additions and omissions in various editions of printed books can bring "intermittent" life to certain paratextual elements (p. 6); in French, Genette (1987, p. 12) characterizes the paratext's duration as "*à éclipses*", an image translated as "subject to eclipse" by Maclean (Genette, 1991, p. 265), but which disappears in Lewin's 1997 translation. This image seems extremely well suited to digital culture, where "refreshing" a page or "overwriting" a document can, in the blink of an eye, create ecliptic cycles of presence and absence. Writing in the mid-90s about early online practices and communities, Brown and Duguid (1996) highlighted the intrinsically social and fluid aspects of Web-based documents. This "fluidity" is perhaps, at times, a euphemism for the ephemeral, changing, or even volatile nature of the digital world, where so much is created, but so much is lost, despite archival efforts such as the Wayback Machine or paratextual messages hidden in the source code and that sometimes attest to changes, edits, and updates. Still, "404" and "410" messages have become new paratextual conventions. Creation and destruction both have their paratext in digital culture.

The "substantial status" (Genette, 1997, p. 7) is equally as complex in the digital realm. "Text," "content," "core," "code," "narrative," "index," "file structure," "file name"—most if not all the building blocks of the digital object will be given or denied paratextual status in this book. The text/paratext relationship has been marred by both the source code conundrum and the new meaning of "information architecture"—that much is undeniable. This marred relationship creates an ambiguity (not to mention a divergence of opinions) when trying to define what, in fact, the digital paratext is made of; or simply put, what, in the digital realm, is the paratext's "substance."

This speaks directly to the first of Genette's pragmatic considerations and one of the utmost importance: who emits, and who sanctions, the paratext? Genette (1997) states that the paratext may have a variety of senders, but the bottom line is that "[b]y definition, something is not a paratext unless the author or one of his associates accepts responsibility for it, although the degree of responsibility may vary" (p. 9). This leads to two questions that haunt this book: how can authorship in the digital age be defined when it seems to sit at the confluence of original content, user-generated content, mashups, and poaching? And what of the source code, templates, and platform interfaces, adopted but not designed by the sender, uncontrollable in many regards, yet inherently linked to the apprehension of the object? Can they be perceived and studied as paratext, if only on the basis of their spatial relationship to the text?

Reception causes similar issues. Genette (1997) makes a distinction between paratextual elements addressed to the general public (a title, announcing a book) and those addressed to people who engage with the book (the preface, for example) (p. 9). Again, in digital culture, the concept of paratext becomes stretched beyond its printed limits, with elements "hidden" in the source code and access granted (or denied) through passwords and digital rights management technologies. An increasing number of hidden software agents are performing an ever-expanding array of content transformations, irrespective

of the original owners and users of that content, and invading the domains of decision and reasoning, thereby exacerbating this paratextual expansion. Haptic and sensorial considerations in the reception and consumption of certain digital objects also mark a departure from the physical experience of the look, feel, touch, and, of course, smell of the printed book.

Finally, Genette (1997) introduces the all-encompassing functional aspect of the paratext, lodged, primarily, in its "illocutionary force" (p. 10). The paratext acts upon the reader and upon the work. It is "the privileged place of a pragmatics and a strategy, of an influence on the public" (Genette, 1997, p. 2). Indeed, it shapes both our perception and our understanding of the object it "makes present," and it can do so in many ways. Genette (1997, pp. 11-12) provides a list which ends by endowing certain paratextual elements with the "power logicians call *performative*—that is, the ability to perform what they describe." Genette (1997, p. 11) gives the traditional example of a dedication. However, once more, the disruptive aspect of digital tools is highlighted by this function. Markup languages prescribe and perform. Folders and files organize, structure, and classify. URLs designate. Metadata describe. Measuring those functions and their transmedial potential against the illocutionary force of traditional elements such as titles or genre designations will also be investigated within the pages of this book.

In a little more than 15 pages (of paratext, no less), Genette (1997) summarizes an outlook that has spawned countless other pages (and their own paratext, of course). *Paratexts: Thresholds of Interpretation* is, in its entirety, over 400 pages long; and although its introduction is by far the most cited excerpt in this collective work, the various authors will take the reader through the rest of its content, which, like its introduction, has the rare quality of being imminently accessible, even for those who do not have a literary background. *Paratexts* further indulges our common propensity, mentioned above, for lists and classifications (its chapters bear names like "Titles," "Epigraphs," or "The Functions of the Original Preface") and the elements Genette analyzes are presented in "the order in which one usually meets the messages [his] study explores" (p. 3). In short, Genette creates taxonomic order in the paratextual world. This has not escaped the attention of classification scholars: Paling (2002) writes that "[t]he table of contents from *Paratexts* reads like a list of bibliographic elements" (p. 140) and Andersen (2002) proposes to use Genette's theory, along with concepts from Gracia and Shillingsburg, to study the "bibliographic record as text" (p. 39).

As noted earlier, Genette is obviously well aware of the unstable status of paratextual elements, which, in his own words, "may appear at any time" or see their use revoked, namely through "the eroding effect of time" (p. 6). He further refers to his work as an inventory, assembled "in a preliminary, condensed, and doubtless incomplete way" (p. 3). Needless to say that one cannot throw an invitation of such pragmatic charm into the academic universe with impunity, and this book will show how ripe for extension Genette's initial list has become in the digital era.

It is also difficult to deny, when reading the fruits of our collective endeavor, the intrinsically poetic appeal contained in the layered meanings, parallels, and interpretations that Genette's founding metaphor conjures up for us: "*seuils,*" thresholds, manifold promises of discovery, at times almost spellbinding in their form, at times deceptive or crude in their intent, but always, still and seemingly, inherently essential. If nothing else, this powerful image, expressed in a language of "characteristic Gallic clarity" (Doherty, 2014) may have granted the paratextual framework a more malleable future than Genette ever intended. This and the five key dimensions of the paratext's status all lead to fascinating forays into digital culture. Then, of course, there is also the possibility of taking one or a handful of paratextual elements—titles, notes, acknowledgments, citations, or signs of authorship—and running with them, as with highly sharpened scissors, in the digital maze.

"A threshold exists to be crossed" (Genette, 1997, p. 410); those words form the final sentence of Genette's book—if one does not count, tongue-in-cheek, the paratextual paragraph-long footnote that accompanies it. So comes his final warning against the allure of the "para" over the "text," his ultimate plea for the reinstatement, despite his 400-page analysis, of the text as our focus of study. Yet, even as the digital revolution causes upheaval and disruption in the evolution of our conceptual tools, paratextual theory remains too appealing, too pragmatic, too accessible, and too inherently befitting not to be considered, in itself, as a threshold to our growing understanding of digital content, which, like text, does not present itself "in an unadorned state, unreinforced and unaccompanied by a certain number of verbal or other productions" (Genette, 1997, p. 1). It goes without saying that, as scholars, we seek to find meaning; but our references have shifted, and the force, illocutionary or otherwise, of paratextual elements cannot be ignored—be it in the power of citation counts in the scientific world or in the undeniable role of platform design in the shaping of social practices. As Blaise Cronin writes in his foreword to this book: "Such is the power of the paratext!" If "each element of the paratext has its own history" (Genette, 1997, p. 14), that history is still being inscribed, if not printed, in ways that warrant the discussions presented here.

Therefore, balancing on the tightrope of a theory built for books, seduced by the idea of expanding its powerful and interdisciplinary tools, enticed by the thought of writing a new page in the chasm between traditional and disruptive forms, we advance over the uncharted waters of digital culture, knowing that something, in this notion of paratext, remains astonishingly relevant.

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