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Paper: What I See and What You Read: A Narrative of Interdisciplinary Research on a Common Digital Object

Abstract: This paper presents the dual narrative of a shared research combining approaches from LIS and literature studies. Content and textual analyses of the digital novel *The Unknown* help identify areas of common interest, such as genesis and access. Interdisciplinary issues, such as methodology and reporting styles, are also addressed. **Résumé:**

1. Introduction

The intimate relationship between researchers and storytelling is both pervasive and crucial. Grant applications, papers, conferences, posters, teaching – most of academia's deliverables are a telling of what was done, how it was done, what was found, why it matters. Given this common ground, it is at times disconcerting to see how fundamentally different, if not radically opposed, the value placed on various aspects of these narratives can be in various fields, even as certain objects of study are shared.

This paper offers a dual perspective on the academic narrative: first, it combines two retellings of a shared research; second, it presents parallel testimonies to the issues raised and challenges met when studying a common object. The first researcher (R1) works in information science and has a literature background; the second researcher (R2) brings a literature studies approach supported by website architecture analysis. The shared narrative is further enhanced by the cultural context of the researchers, hailing, respectively, from Canada and Norway. Together, they look at *The Unknown: The Original Great American Hypertext Novel*, by William Gillespie, Scott Rettberg, Dirk Stratton and Frank Marquardt (1999), a work characteristic of electronic literature, or cyberfiction, namely by the fact that it is deemed "unprintable". Using Gérard Genette's narrative-based theory of paratext, the researchers each apprehend the digital novel in an effort to see how the digital object can be studied beyond disciplinary boundaries, creating possible dialogues on topics ranging from information-sharing habits to the reading experience and from website architecture to trends in digital creation.

2. Theoretical Framework

When Gérard Genette (1987/1997) first introduced the notion of paratext, his aim was to examine the book as a material object and entity, and to understand how the various elements that accompany or wrap the text proper colour and influence our perception of the book. He deemed these elements to be "thresholds", authorial or publisher-sanctioned

boundaries from which one could step inside the text. From blurbs to titles and from notes to prefaces, Genette presented a thorough – albeit non-exhaustive, of his own admission – listing and analysis of various parts of the book.

As the book and other textual objects migrate to online formats or get created as such in digital environments, rethinking some of the framework's contents and extending the parameters to tackle the elements Genette tactically avoided is to build on both an outlook and a lexicon already in use in multiple disciplines. Media and film studies (Gray 2010), documentation (Skare 2010), scholarly communication (Cronin 1995, 2005; Cronin and LaBarre 2005, Cronin and Franks 2006) and database design (Marcoux and Rizkallah 2009) are all fields that have claimed and used Genette's work. Furthermore, various paratextual elements have been studied from complementary perspectives: book covers have retained the attention of cultural studies scholars (Matthews and Moody 2007) as well as information science researchers and practitioners (O'Connor and O'Connor 1998).

3. Methodology

The research is based on the respective researchers' outlooks and what they can bring to each other's work. The first question must therefore be, "what do you see?" or can we, using a common framework, study the same digital object in a complementary way?

The Unknown has the particularity of having certain information lodged in the source code, which the reader is invited to consult. Hence, in order to tell of the work, data beyond the text itself – digital paratext – needs to be accessed, creating further issues of retrieval. Technology is thereby more than a support, for it affects both the way this work is accessed and analyzed.

The research is being conducted in and around the work and takes into consideration what Siegfried J. Schmidt (1989) termed the social system of literature, scoping the field from a publishing perspective and seeking to answer why this novel is published in its present form. Along with the analysis of the home page and a sample from each of the 6 sections, the researchers are also looking at the Google search result page for various search strings pertaining to the work, in order to see how this paratext shapes expectations in relation to the keyword "unknown". In the full paper, the novel's records in the ELMCIP (Electronic Literature as a Model of Creativity and Innovation in Practice) Knowledge Base of Electronic Literature, Electronic Literature Directory, and Nouvelles technologies nouvelles textualités (NT2) databases, will also be studied in order to extend the analysis to related paratext and input from scholars and readers.

Qualitative content analysis and textual analysis are performed, complementing each other, and comparative findings are reported. Here, intercoder disparity is prized, since the very differences between approaches are at the heart of the academic narrative.

4. Early Findings and Discussion

This section is a condensed version of the early findings, presented as a dual narrative based around two pages and their source code: the home page, and the page http://unknownhypertext.com/sanfranfrank.htm, plus any links to or from these.

R1: The home page of *The Unknown* contains what would traditionally be included in the title page verso of a published work. The "Map" link is misleading: instead of a map of the site or work, it is a map of the USA, with locales (of writing? of the narrative?) linking to various pages of the text. The "?" icon is a broken link, situated above the all-important quote: "(information about the authorship and writing of individual pages can be found by viewing the source code)". Indeed, the body section of the page http://unknownhypertext.com/sanfranfrank.htm reveals that this is "possibly the first scene written by Frank", indicating that authorship for various pieces can be traced – and, eventually, indexed. Two audio recordings are available on this page; these recordings are not indexed and cannot be accessed as a list. Along the same lines, the page is untitled, but referred to as "SanFranFrank" for the recordings, "sanfranfrank.htm" in the URL, and "We Meet Frank in San Francisco" in the table of contents, creating issues for indexing, retrieval, and access. While the source code explains that the table of contents is formatted to accommodate browser issues, it does not explain the discrepancies in titling.

R2: The visual outline with its six individually coloured buttons on the entry page to the novel reveals many access points to "begin reading". Other links such as "Map", "Bookstores", and "People" provide additional points of access. Here, the image of the map is read by way of the source code. It offers a rich textual source in which the mouse-over text serves as paratext. As such, the link on the image to nebraska.htm comes with a title that appears nowhere else than here, announcing "Near death in Nebraska".
All these access points in the source code are referred to as part of the html-library item called "unknownnavbar.lbi" (probably short for "unknown navigation bar"). It thus is part of the work's design, appears on each individual page of the novel, and therefore does not necessarily provide beginnings to the novel. So the question remains as to whether the work has a specified beginning. After "entering the Unknown" through the first link from the top of the cover page, one reaches a page in which the authors declare in a "historical note" placed in the source code that "This is the first page written collectively by The Unknown".

This overview shows how the researchers often raised similar questions – access points, for example, seem to be of concern – while their outlook and impetus remain different. The parallel narrative also identifies areas which may benefit from the paratextual approach to digital objects and environments: the genesis and background of digital works, digital publishing trends, web architecture, and information sharing, as well as indexing or cataloguing, access, and retrieval issues. These common areas open the door to transforming a parallel narrative into an interdisciplinary dialogue. However, questions of methodology, shared references, and reporting styles are potential pitfalls that have to be negotiated at every step.

5. Conclusion

By working alongside one another and engaging with each other's analysis, the researchers have to contend with varying academic values and premises for receivable work. The paratextual approach, by providing a common lexicon, eases the dialogue and helps uphold the relevance of the respective approaches within the broader landscape of knowledge, encouraging the researchers to create more permeable borders, more exportable tools. In so doing, the interdisciplinary dialogue further creates a new

narrative, a paratext that may help readers, scholars, authors, and users better understand or shape the digital object. This is what this shared research, based in narrative theory, seeks to achieve: to tell the story of the story, so to speak, and to bring a combined insight into the study of digital environments and their numerous but fascinating unknowns.

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