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Paratext – a Useful Concept for the Analysis of Digital Documents?

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1. Genette's concept of the paratext

In his study, *Paratexts: Thresholds of Interpretation* (which appeared in French with the title *Seuils* in 1987), the French literature scholar Gérard Genette introduces the concept of the “paratext” to the public.¹ Genette explains the term paratext as that “what enables a text to become a book and to be offered as such to its readers and, more generally, to the public” (Genette 1997, 1). In doing so, Genette points out the importance of paratextual elements in transforming the text into a book, and the fact that a text is not necessarily the same thing as a book, even if texts often appears in the format of the book.² By using numerous examples from the history of the book he shows what role the title, subtitle, forewords, dedications, cover blurbs etc. play in interpreting a text, as well as the degree of an author's celebrity, his age and gender, awards, honorary degrees, and so on. Genette divides the paratext into a peritext and an epitext: the former being aspects that are relatively closely associated with the book itself, such as the dustcover, the title, genre indication, foreword and epilogue or even various themes, while the latter consists of statements about the book beyond the boundaries of the book, such as interviews, correspondences and journals. In so doing, Genette also explores non-textual elements such as format and cover design:

Most often the paratext is itself a text: if it is still not *the* text, it is already *some* text. But we must at least bear in mind the paratextual value that may be vested in other types of manifestation: these may be iconic (illustrations), material (for example, everything that originates in the sometimes very significant typographical choices that go into the making of a book), or purely factual. (1997, 7)

By drawing our attention not only to textual elements, but also to factual and material, Genette also includes social and economic aspects in his analyses. As Genette's points to, these elements not only present a text to a potential readership, they are also influencing the marketing, selling and interpretation of a book by attempting to steer the way of our experience in a particular direction. Or as Birke & Christ put it: Paratextual elements have both interpretative, commercial and navigational functions (2013, 67-68).

Genette's concept and especially his division into peri- and epitext is not completely unproblematic, because elements of the peritext can change their position and become epitext and vice versa. In addition, in many cases it can be difficult to decide where to draw the line between text and paratext and between paratext and non-paratext. Genette himself advises against proclaiming all as paratext:

¹ Even if the term “paratext” appears for the first time already in Genette's *Introduction à l'architexte* (Paris 1979), Genette here gives a complete study of the concept.

² Other literary scholars like Katherine N. Hayles are also pointing out this difference. See for instance her pamphlet *Writing Machines* where she claims “that *the physical form of the literary artifact always affects what the words (and other semiotic components) mean*” (2002, 25).

Inasmuch as the paratext is a transitional zone between text and beyond-text, one must resist the temptation to enlarge this zone by whittling away in both directions. However indeterminate its boundaries, the paratext retains at its center a distinctive and undisputed territory where its “properties” are clearly manifest and which is constituted jointly by the types of elements I have explored in this book, plus some others. (1997, 4007)

Genette concludes that “the other arts have an equivalent of our paratext” (1997, 407), for instance “the title in music and plastic arts, the signature in painting, the credits or the trailer in film” (1997, 407). Not surprisingly, the concept has since also been applied to other media, especially audiovisual forms, such as film and television. Film scholars are using the concept when analyzing the importance of opening scenes and credits in films (cf. Kreimeier/Stanitzek 2004), or the significance of different technologies in providing the viewer with extra material about the film (cf. Gray 2010).³ Other media scholars have applied the concept to computer games and gaming (Burk 2009), electronic literature and digitized narratives (cf. Birke & Christ 2013 for an overview).

2. The paratext of digital documents

As mentioned above, the concept of the paratext has been developed for the printed book, but has also been used successfully for the analysis of other media.

As pointed out by Cronin, “the idea of paratext is no less relevant in the online world, perhaps even more so” (Cronin, 2014: xvii). He mentions “metadata elements and tag clouds linked to digital objects, the supplementary materials and datasets that accompany scientific publications, and the extra-textual indicators of quality, trustworthiness and credibility that are built into websites” (Cronin, 2014: xvii). Social media indicators as for instance Facebook “Likes” or comments are contributions made by users who become more than readers or consumers; they become a kind of co-author.

The question of authorship or co-authorship is not a new one in the digital world. Already the printed book, and especially many of the material elements of the paratext involved other producers than the author of the text, but in the digital world this becomes more and more visible. Terms like “collective intelligence” (Jenkins 2006), “collaborative writing” and “produsage” (Bruns 2008) have been used to describe these processes.

³ Gray’s study “is a look at how much of the media world is formed by ‘book covers’ and their many colleagues – opening credit sequences, trailers, toys, spinoff videogames, prequels and sequels, podcasts, bonus materials, interviews, reviews, alternate reality games, spoilers, audience discussion, vids, posters or billboards, and promotional campaigns” (Gray 2010, 4).

In addition to authorship and authorization, the document's materiality and its boundaries⁴ are other questions that have to be raised when discussing the paratext of digital documents, both digitized former analogue documents like printed books and celluloid film and digital born materials.

Birke & Christ are mapping the field of paratext and digitized narratives. They argue "that as long as a text [...] is available in the form of a distinct physical object like the CD-ROM and is, as such, limited in its expanse, the concept of paratext can be applied productively", while the concept "loses its analytic value at the moment when, on the World Wide Web, context [...] moves so close to the text" that paratextual elements become "difficult to isolate and identify" (Birke & Christ 2013, 80).

I will take this argument as my point of departure to discuss the paratextual elements of different digital documents.

2.1. Distinct physical objects

Birke & Christ are using CD-ROMs and DVDs as examples that make content available to the viewer/reader "in the shape of a material object" (2013, 71).

An especially clear case of the interpretative dimensions of a primarily navigational paratext is that of the chapter menu features on many DVDs, which divides the film into sections, illustrated with stills and often also with titles. Such paratextual elements can be called "new" insofar as they result from the DVD's specific materialization of film [...] and from the increased storage space and options for accessing information [...]. (2013, 72)

The authors of course also mention the bonus materials as the "most intriguing paratextual elements specific to the DVD" (Birke & Christ 2013, 72). It seems that most authors have been occupied with bonus or extra materials as paratextual elements when it comes to films and DVDs as storage medium. As far as I can see the obvious – the disk distributed with a cover that reminds us of the book medium – is little discussed in the literature about paratext and films.

A DVD is much more than a film and contains of more paratextual elements than a film's opening sequence, its trailer and bonus or extra materials. The DVD-cover and in some cases the DVD-box comes with its own paratextual elements as did the book cover. We even might find examples where the DVD-box includes other documents than just the film disk.

One example is a special German edition of the film *The Lives of Others* (2006) that in addition to the film-disk also includes a CD-disk with the soundtrack of the film, a bonus DVD-disk with a documentary about the secret police in East Germany and a book with the film script and several articles about the film.

⁴ See Birke & Christ 2013, 68 where these three fields of debate are pointed out as relevant to digitized documents.



DVD-box (front cover)



DVD-box (inside with content)

All these extra documents – the book, the CD and the DVD – have paratextual elements on their own and could be analyzed as separate documents, but they are also functioning as paratextual elements that surround the film and might influence the viewer’s interpretation of the film. As with many other paratextual elements, it is up to the viewer/reader to take these documents into consideration or not.

So even the boundaries of a distinct physical object are not so easily to define as it might appear at first sight. In addition to that, we have as for printed books, materials outside that can be produced by the film company as for instance an official web page⁵ or a fan page on Facebook or other pages produced by fans. These pages do not necessarily present completely new or different materials than for instance the special edition of the DVD. By spreading the paratextual elements in several media, the visibility is increased and probably more potential viewers will actually see and use these elements either as a threshold into the film or as a guidance for how to understand the film.

An interesting question is whether these paratextual elements get archived and thus available also for audiences in the future. As discussed by Jonathan Gray, many of the paratextual traces vanish and “[e]ach paratext that vanish [...] represents yet more meaning, or paths to meaning that similarly disappears and that is lost to us as media analysts” (Gray 2016, 32).

So even if the document’s materiality in the case of a DVD might seem more stable and easier to distinct as for digital born documents, paratexts might disappear – as they could in the case of printed books: “If, then, a paratextual

⁵ Cf. <<https://www.sonyclassics.com/thelivesofothers/swf/index.html>>, accessed 21.5.2019. Many of the extra materials from the DVD can be found here.

element may appear at any time, it may also disappear, definitively or not, by authorial decision or outside intervention or by virtue of the eroding effect of time.” (Genette 1997, 6)

In addition to that instability, the document’s boundaries are another issue not so easy to decide on as it seemed to at first glance. When it comes to the question of authorization – who is responsible for /who is the author of the different paratextual elements – both the DVD, the book and the web page have official producers, but as in the case of the printed book other than the author/director are responsible for different elements of the paratext, a graphic designer, a sound specialist, the authors of the articles about the film, just to mention some of the most obvious ones.

If we choose a more recent film or TV-series, it becomes even more complicated with social media appearance and the opportunity for audiences to comment online or to chat with the producers in real time. These paratexts will often only be available for a limited period of time. We therefor might call them ephemeral paratexts that might have many authors, both professional and amateur, and only exist for a very short period of time.

It seems that digital documents, also those on distinct physical entities, have the same problematics as printed books when it comes to define what to include into the paratext and what not, but the problem gets even more obvious for digital documents because of the amount of materials surrounding a document in one way or another. Nevertheless, are these materials important for its users.

2.2. Digitized documents

Many of the digital documents we are surrounded of are digitized former analogue documents like printed books and celluloid films; according to Bolter a remediation where “an older medium is highlighted and re-presented in digital form without apparent irony or critique” (Bolter 2000, 65).

We are all familiar with examples belonging into this category: we are watching films on DVD, we are reading research articles and books online. There are different initiatives – local in-house initiatives in the beginning and national or international initiatives with common standards like the Project Gutenberg (www.gutenberg.org), the Internet Archive (<https://archive.org>) or Google books. Many national libraries have also digitized their collections during the last decades. In Norway for instance, we can read books published in Norway before the year 2000 when we are on a Norwegian IP-address.⁶

There are different solutions for how the texts are available to the public. When the books are scanned – as in the case of the Norwegian National Library – the cover and all pages, including empty pages are scanned. As in the physical library we might find different editions of the same text also in the digital

⁶ The digitizing process at the Norwegian National Library contains of three steps: scanning, structure analysis and post-processing. For an explanation of the process see <https://www.nb.no/en/digitizing-at-the-national-library/>, accessed 21.5.2019.

library. In addition to the paratextual elements of the physical book, new elements like the address of the web page appear when the book gets digitized. We also can choose different options for how we want to read/see the text: one page at the time or as double page, we can see the metadata, we can search for words or phrases in the whole text, we can download the reference to our own reference program, we can save the document to our own library, we can share the permanent link on social media, and we can send an e-mail if we have any comments. The web page as part of the National Library of Norway gives authority to these digital documents.

Other examples often produced and used by researchers can be enhanced by for instance comments or explanations. In the case of older material, we also can view the facsimile in addition to the printed text, as for instance the works of Henrik Ibsen.⁷

These examples, especially in cases of digitization without enhancing are not very different from the distinct physical objects. Each book on nb.no is still an entity, but our search strategies might result in different surroundings, thereby also in different paratexts. As in the case of Amazon or streaming services like Netflix where we get personalized recommendation based on our preferences, we can expect personalized paratexts too.

2.3. Digital born documents

If we compare the digitized printed books with e-books, there are of course differences in how we can access and read the book. The reader has often the option to choose between downloading the book as a PDF or to read it online. Both options make the reader encounter something that looks like a printed book. In the downloaded PDF-version we also can write our comments and we can highlight text as we could do in a printed book. There are some differences due to the medium: we can choose the size of the page by enlarging or minimizing, we can move easily around in the text by clicking on the hyperlinks in the table of contents, and we can search the text for certain words or phrases. In addition to that we can read the book on different devices. As pointed out by Birke & Christ “elements with navigational functions come to the fore” (2013, 76). But in contrary to Birke & Christ who argue that these elements⁸ cannot be considered paratextual elements because they belong to the delivery device and not to the book (2013, 76), I would argue that they are important paratextual elements the same way as for instance the format or the font or the paper quality for the printed book because they imitate what the reader is used to experience and also able to do with a printed book in a digital surrounding.

⁷ Cf. <<https://www.ibsen.uio.no/forside.xhtml>>, accessed 21.5.2019.

⁸ Birke & Christ are using the five main navigation menus available on the 2011 Kindle as an example to illustrate their point and conclude: “As with the front matter, paratextual elements become spatially separated from what may be considered the ‘unified object’ of the text, the e-book’s data file. The menus circumscribe the ways in which readers can access and navigate the different parts of the text; the degree to which this has an interpretative function again depends on individual cases.” (2013, 77)

What about digital narratives,⁹ narratives that share the computer “as the medium of production, performance, storage, and distribution” (Guertin 2013, 234)? As mentioned above Birke & Christ argue that “the concept of paratext loses its analytic value” (2013, 80) for those digital documents that are not a distinct material object. The authors seem most concerned about “hyperlinks that lead outside the fictional world” (2013, 80). I would like to discuss the paratextual elements of one concrete example, Talan Memmott’s *Lexia to Perplexia*, first published online in 2000.

This might look like an outdated example on first sight, but the work has on the one hand become a classical, almost canonical text discussed by several scholars and on the other hand this text also illustrates the problems that appear when the work no longer functions properly in current software.

If we start our search on the Internet, for instance using a search engine like Google “[t]he results of such a search function are [already] a paratext” (Dijk 2014, 25), because each hit gives us paratextual elements like the title, the hyperlink to the actual web page and a short description.

We get a huge amount of hits (4,360 results), where the first and third hits are an anthology of digital literature and the second hit is the author’s own web page.

The search-engine hits thus perform multiple functions: They contextualize the work like a bookstore, a library or an academic reading list would, but they also “sell” the work as a publisher would, depending on which hits we encounter, obviously. It is hard to say whether the hits are epitext or peritext; the distinction has become problematic (inasmuch as it has not always been problematic). (Dijk 2014, 27)

A closer look on the three first hits reveals that all three pages of course contain some of the same paratextual elements necessary to identify the work as title and name of the author. The pages also include a description of the work and information about the publisher. These paratextual elements are also the elements necessary according to Genette: “[...] nowadays the only items virtually (if not legally) obligatory are the name of the Author, the title of the work, and the emblem of the publisher” (Genette 1997, 24). The web pages obviously remediate parts of the printed book’s cover, thus giving the potential reader the information needed to identify the work. Even if some of the URL is visible in the search contain the same information, the short text describing the work states title and author of the work in an easily accessible way for the potential reader. Again, what information the potential reader uses to decide if he/she opens the link or not will be individual and depend on the reader’s expectations and experiences.

⁹ Different terms are used for these works, for instance electronic or digital literature, technotext (Katherine N. Hayles), hypertext, hyperfiction or hypernarrative.

About 4,360 results (0.42 seconds)

Lexia to Perplexia - Electronic Literature Collection

collection.eliterature.org/1/works/memmott_lexia_to_perplexia.html ▾

Author description: Lexia to Perplexia is a deconstructive/grammatological examination of the "delivery machine." The text of the work falls into the gaps between theory and fiction. The work makes wide use of DHTML and JavaScript.

Lexia to Perplexia | TalanMemmott

talanmemmott.info/?p=41 ▾

Oct 10, 2015 - Lexia to Perplexia was developed 1998-1999 and debuted on the web in early 2000. The work is a deconstructive/grammatological ...

Lexia to Perplexia | ELMCIP

<https://elmcip.net/creative-work/lexia-perplexia> ▾

Author description: Lexia to Perplexia is a deconstructive/grammatological examination of the "delivery machine." The text of the work falls into the gaps between ...

Metaphoric networks in 'Lexia to perplexia': Digital Creativity: Vol 12 ...

<https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1076/digc.12.3.133.3226>

by NK Hayles - 2001 - Cited by 3 - Related articles

Aug 9, 2010 - Is computation altering how humans conceive of themselves and their relations to others? In Talan Memmott's literary hypertext Lexia to ...

"Lexia to Perplexia" by Talan Memmott – I E-Poetry

iloveepoetry.org/?p=505 ▾

Jan 13, 2012 - Open "Lexia to Perplexia" by Talan Memmott. This celebrated work of e-literature is not only hard to label—poetry, fiction, theory, essay, ...

Thomas Dreher: Talan Memmott's "Lexia to Perplexia" - Dichtung Digital

www.dichtung-digital.org/2005/2/Dreher/index-engl.htm ▾

Memmott marks "Lexia to Perplexia" as "theory/fiction".¹ The project thematizes relations between observers/readers, screen and digital(izing) processes via ...

Lexia to Perplexia (2000 – 2013) – Zach Whalen

www.zachwhalen.net/posts/lexia-to-perplexia-2000-2013/ ▾

Jan 20, 2014 - For this reason, Lexia to Perplexia, in its reliance on a specific swarm of web client and server behaviors, has much to suggest about pitfalls of a ...

Screenshot of my Google search, 22.05.2019

These elements can be compared to what Genette calls the publisher's peritext for printed books' under "The cover and its appendages" (Genette 1997, 23-32). While the size of the page will depend on the screen of the delivery device, and the size of the text and images on the page can be chosen by the reader, the choice of words, their positions and color and the number of links are made by the producer, in this case probably the editors of the anthology.¹⁰

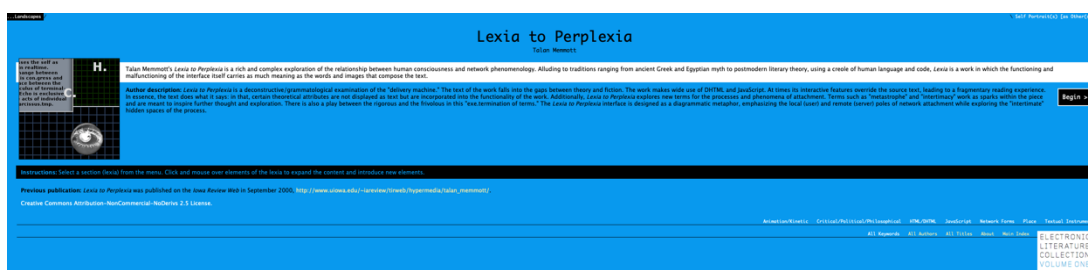
The first hit brings us to the Electronic Literature Organization (ELO).¹¹ The work is introduced as follows:

Talan Memmott's *Lexia to Perplexia* is a rich and complex exploration of the relationship between human consciousness and network phenomenology. Alluding to traditions ranging from ancient Greek and Egyptian myth to postmodern literary theory, using a creole of human language and code, *Lexia* is a work in which the functioning and malfunctioning of the interface itself carries as much meaning as the words and images that compose the text.

¹⁰ As in a printed book on the page with copyright information, we find the similar information under the "About"-section: <<http://collection.eliterature.org/1/aux/about.html>>, accessed 24.05.2019.

¹¹ <http://collection.eliterature.org/1/works/memmott_lexia_to_perplexia.html>, accessed 22.05.2019.

This paragraph is a kind of promotional statement focusing on the qualities of the work that could be found on the back cover of a printed book. In addition to that statement, we also find on this first page the author's own description of his work, an image, instructions for how to read, where the work was previously published and several links that bring us to the first volume of the Electronic Literature Collection. We also find a begin-button on the right side of the page. 4 colors (blue, black, grey and white) are used on this first page that can be compared to the cover of a printed book. The link to the Iowa Review Web is not active any longer: "The requested page "/~iareview/tirweb/hypermedia/ talan_memmott" could not be found." Other links on this first page allow us to see a list of works and a list of authors that work like a table of content. Other links again as for instance "About" has, among other things, information about the editors, the sponsors and the publisher.



Screenshot of the web page, 22.05.2019

On the top of the page are links to the previous (on the left side) and the next work (on the right hand) in the anthology that allow the reader to browse back and forward, almost like in a printed book.

Even if there is a large number of possibilities for the reader to click on a link and thus moving around in the anthology, the reader nevertheless will not leave the pages of the Electronic Literature Organization (ELO) that functions as an editor or publisher and gives authority to the texts collected.

ELO has published several volumes of electronic literature and by doing so given the works included a sort of canonical status. Each of the volumes works as a paratext to the single work, and each volume to each other.

The second search result brings us to the author's own web page (<http://talanmemmott.info/?p=41>) where he has posted a text about the work, images from the work, a PDF where he presents the work in words and images and also a list of critical writing on the work, and two links where the work can be found.

TalanMemmort

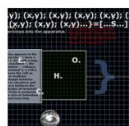
CV	Media Work	Video Work	Writing	Images & Design	Research	Teaching	Sounds
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Lexia to Perplexia

Posted by tmemmort in Media Work, on October 10, 2015

Search for:

WORK DETAIL (PDF)



Lexia to Perplexia was developed 1998-1999 and debuted on the web in early 2000. The work is a deconstructive/grammatological examination of the Internet apparatus as "delivery machine," exploring the processes and phenomena of attachment and networked being; and, as Katherine Hayles has stated, (provide) "a set of interrelated speculations about the future (and past) of human-intelligent machine interactions, along with extensive re-inscriptions of human subjectivity and the human body" (Writing Machines 49). The text of the work falls somewhere between theory and fiction, between the rigorous and the frivolous. Within the work, neologisms such as "metastrophe" and "intertimacy" work as sparks that are meant to inspire further thought and exploration. The work also makes reference to classical literature including and Greek and Egyptian mythology, as well as postmodern theory.

The Lexia to Perplexia interface is designed as a diagrammatic metaphor, emphasizing the local (user) and remote (server) poles of network attachment while exploring the "intimate" hidden spaces of the process. At times its interactive features override the source text, leading to a fragmentary reading experience. In essence, the text does what it says: in that, certain theoretical attributes are not displayed as text but are incorporated into the functionality of the work and hidden within the source code.



The work makes wide use of DHTML and JavaScript, which at the time of production was experimental, with browser dependent conditions and protocols. Though the work is still discussed today, its functionality has been affected by standardization and will not display correctly in most current browsers. That said, the work predicted its own obsolescence, with its slow decay seen as part of its performance. This aspect of the work has been most recently observed by Zach Whalen, who states, "Lexia to Perplexia's gradual obsolescence, prolonged only by backward-compatibility, is just the final part of its fictive performance."

In 2000 the work was awarded the trAce/Alt-X New Media Writing Award, and received an honorable mention from the 2000 Electronic Literature Organization Awards.

ONLINE AT: <http://goo.gl/sC4haA>
ELMCIP record: <http://elmcip.net/creative-work/lexia-perplexia>

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You must be [logged in](#) to post a comment.

Screenshot of Talan Memmort's web page, 22.05.2019

The first link is to ELO, the second one to the ELMCIP record,¹² a page where we also find a list with critical work about the text. Here a range of epitexts have been moved close to the text and become peritexts. The page also has tags, a description of the work by the author, a range of resources, for instance a video of the author's reading at the University of Bergen and a range of links with information about the author and his activities.

If the reader is logged in, he/she might leave a comment. We find also an e-mail-address to the author, thus a certain form for reader/user activity.

Because of updates in web browsers, the work is no longer accessible unless we run or emulate an outdated version of browser software. We only have access to the opening paragraph, and we can't be sure if we actually see it the

¹² "The ELMCIP Knowledge Base is a research resource for electronic literature and it is open for new contributions and submissions. It provides cross-referenced, contextualized information about authors, creative works, critical writing, platforms, and practices. Current contributors should log in to the knowledge base to enter new records."

way we were supposed to. Both the main text on the author's web page and the PDF on that page informs about the problems with current browsers:

The work makes wide use of DHTML and JavaScript, which at the time of production was experimental, with browser dependent conditions and protocols. Though the work is still discussed today, its functionality has been affected by standardization and will not display correctly in most current browsers.

We might compare this with missing pages in a printed book, but here we have no idea what we can't get access to and what we miss. We can only read about the work and watch images that others have taken while they were reading it. Here we have an example of a digital document where the paratext – or the different paratexts – are the only documents visible and available to us today. While printed books could be damaged and disappear, here the text still exists, but we are no longer able to access it. As with other older media formats, we not only need the document, but also the right devices to access the content.

The paratext itself has changed too, the front page of ELO looks different today than it did in 2000 when *Lexia to Perplexia* first was published. The way back machine makes some of these old pages available today, but we have to search for them actively. Maybe not so different from looking for and finding different editions of a printed book or the different versions of a film we might find on different storage media?

So, what about my initial question? Is paratext a useful concept also for digital documents and all kinds of digital documents? We might conclude that digital documents, also digital born ones and digital narratives, and 'traditional' documents like for instance printed books are not so different at all when it comes to the paratextual elements. Also 'traditional' documents can be unbounded when it comes to different editions or versions and the paratextual materials that surround each edition or version. But digital documents may have more paratextual elements and we might find the 'same' text on many different pages surrounded by different paratexts. The same way as we have to specify what edition of a printed book we are talking about, it is even more necessary for digital literature to specify what threshold to the text is used, when we visited the page etc.

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