

Chapter 1

Get Out of My Sandbox: Web Publication, Authority, and Originality

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ABSTRACT

This chapter considers how one may use Genette's concepts of paratext and hypertext within transmedia narratives and born-digital texts and explores how Web publication problematizes standard ideas of authorship and copyright. This challenges our concepts of originality and our understanding of what constitutes the text and what stands outside it. This chapter explores Nick Montfort's "Taroko Gorge," a born-digital poem, and Jasper Fforde's "The Eyre Affair," analyzed as a transmedia narrative, within the framework of Genette's theories of "paratext" and "hypertext." This chapter highlights the difficulty of reconciling the intellectual and political necessity of a world in which data is freely shared with the practical concern of how the producers of creative work can make a living.

INTRODUCTION

Transmedia narratives¹ and born-digital texts exist within structures that are different from those relating to print books. They force us to revise our ideas of authority and originality, and to reconsider the paratextual elements of a particular work. In this chapter, I explore how Web publication of transmedia narratives and born-digital texts problematize commonly held notions of authorship and copyright, thus challenging the Romantic idea of originality and our notions of what constitutes the text and what stands outside it. Genette's seminal work has shown that the distinction between text and what is outside it is complicated by "paratex-

tual" features, which influence our reading to the degree that there is no clear distinction between text and outside-text, but rather (in his formulation) a series of "thresholds," shading into one another (1997a, pp. 1–3). As McCracken (2013) points out, while the advent of digital literature has multiplied these thresholds and their relations with each other, Genette's observations remain useful and I build on them in my analysis.² I show that some authors have come to terms with these shifts in our understanding of authorship and originality, while others resist them, or struggle to accommodate them, and I illustrate this with one author in each category: Nick Montfort for the first, Jasper Fforde for the second. Furthermore,

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literature from the pre-romantic period has a much more open attitude towards authorship and originality, which may serve as a signpost to us.

NICK MONTFORT: CODE AS PARATEXT

Nick Montfort may stand as an example of an author who embraces the recreation of his own work as well as its republication. “Taroko Gorge” first appeared on the Web on January 8, 2009. When one goes to his Taroko Gorge website at http://nickm.com/poems/taroko_gorge.html, at first one sees what seems a conventional poem, though one that appears line by line as you look at the screen. Thus, at midday on October 30, 2013, here is what first appeared, one line a fraction of a second after another, in my browser:

*Stone sweeps the coves.
Coves dream.
Mists command the flows.*

The impression one gets is that the poem is actually being written as it is being read. Indeed, that is precisely what is happening. What appears on screen is being generated by JavaScript computer code, operating on sets of words defined by Montfort. Since its first publication, both the poem and its code have been available for everyone to read (Montfort, 2009). The poem had been originally written in Python while the author was at the Taroko Gorge National Park in Taiwan and was later ported to JavaScript (Montfort, 2011) before being published online. On July 26, 2011, Montfort (2011) remarked that the code from his poem, “Taroko Gorge,” had been appropriated and altered five times by other people to create different poetry generators. To this date, there are twenty-two poetry generators that use the JavaScript from “Taroko Gorge” to generate different versions of the text, creating a new kind of textual

tradition where the text in common is the code that generates the poem. Montfort acknowledges these as derivatives of his work, and lists them in his curriculum vitae.

But what is “Taroko Gorge”? Is it the words as they appear on the computer screen in a particular sequence, at a particular time? Is it the code that generates those words? Is it a combination of both of those? Matthew Kirschenbaum (2009) offers some insights into these questions at the beginning of the article “Hello Worlds,” where he describes the questions raised when someone learning programming writes Hello World. He states that:

The act of writing and then running Hello World can raise some intriguing questions: Who, or what, exactly, is saying hello to the world? The original author of the program? The neophyte who just transcribed it on a computer? The computer itself? All of these somehow together? Whose “world” is being greeted? The world around us, or the virtual world inside the machine? Is anyone (or anything) expected to return the salutation? Hello World, whose syntax varies from one computer language to another, is a postmodern cultural artifact, and to me such questions are irresistible. (para. 1)

The questions posed by Kirschenbaum are relevant when we consider “Taroko Gorge.” And if we could give concrete answers to the questions above, and suddenly we could fully define and classify Nick Montfort’s poem, then how do we view those other poems that use the “Taroko Gorge” code and that allude to it with their titles: “Tokyo Garage,” “Gorge,” “Toy Garbage,” “Yoko Engorged,” “Takei, George,” “Alone Engaged,” “Fred and George,” “Argot Ogre, OK!,” “Tasty Gougère,” “Tacoma Grunge,” “Taroko Gary”?³ The answer to this question would help us answer how paratexts work in the digital age, since by understanding the essence of this poem we could start defining its surrounding paratextual elements.

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