Reading Text and Paratext in the Digital Era: Douglas Coupland's *JPod*

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"Have you recently reduced your paper-based work flow?" Douglas Coupland's *JPod* (2006) issues us this question on the inside of the front cover, before we even reach the story proper. The question's seeming simplicity, its benign tone, camouflages its significance as a direct motion to the concerns most vital to the novel: in both form and content, *JPod* reflects and ruminates on the ways our attachments to the material have been fundamentally altered by the digital. Published just five years after the release of the original iPod, two years after the initial launch of what was then called The Facebook, and one year before Amazon pushed out the first version of the Kindle e-reading device, *JPod* emerged to a world of rapid technological development. Situating the novel within the context of these developments, this paper argues that, through the ambiguous relationship presented between text and paratext, *JPod* invites the reader to encounter it as if it were a digital text and thereby "activates" the reader in a number of ways. The reader must make decisions about what *is* paratext versus text, for example, and must construct meaning hierarchies that gauge what is meaningful versus trivial content. The process of unravelling text from paratext, moreover, challenges readers to vary their reading practices and to marshal strategies for reading both print and digital material in order to traverse the novel's pages. *JPod* thus facilitates and even legitimizes a kind of on-the-go or "distracted" reading experience. Yet, unlike a mobile reading device, *JPod*'s unconventional print novel form forcefully reminds readers that it is an object and requires the reader to interact with it in unique physical ways, thus emphasizing the corporeal participation inherent in all forms of reading, both print and digital. These stages of reader activation, which are catalyzed by the novel's text/paratext relationship, parallel a similar mobilization undertaken by the characters in the novel, and, as the final section of this paper argues, these paralleled experiences can be read within the novel's anti-capitalist framework.

In 1987, Gérard Genette published *Seuils*, later translated as *Paratexts: Thresholds of Interpretation* (1997).[1] In this inaugural text of the field of paratext studies, Genette surveys a vast number of literary works with an eye toward the "verbal or other productions, such as an author's name, a title, a preface, [or] illustrations" (1), that lie outside the text proper but materially *introduce* the book to the reader. These productions, called paratext, "surround [the text] and extend it, precisely in order to *present* it, in the usual sense of this verb but also in the strongest sense: to *make present*, to ensure the text's presence in the world, its 'reception' and consumption in the form . . . of a book" (1). Genette divides paratext into two types: peritexts, those productions that appear *within* the text, including titles, prefaces, chapter headings, back matter, and other "elements inserted into the interstices of the text" (5), and epitexts, those that "circulat[e] . . . anywhere outside the book" (344), including advertisements and promotional material, author interviews, book trailers, and so on. In Genette's formulation, peritexts and epitexts constitute the book's material meanings, which are supplementary to its textual meanings; these meanings may relate to one another, and the former may contextualize the latter, but they work on different levels of form to produce the reader's experience of the book.

The field of paratext studies has grown to focalize, in recent years, non-print media (trailers, deleted scenes, websites, fan fiction, and so on) that often accompany the release of content. On the heels of a body of scholarship that has thoroughly destabilized the categories of print and digital,[2] the relationship between text and paratext has also come under considerable scrutiny in a media climate that does not explicitly reveal the relevance of such distinctions. "Everyone consumes many more paratexts than films or programs," Jonathan Gray explains from a television studies standpoint, and thus paratexts "become the very stuff upon which much popular interpretation is based" (26). Therefore, "audience members take their cues regarding what a text means from the paratext's images, signs, symbols, and words, rather than from the film or program's" (46). The primary function of the text — as a purveyor of meaning — is displaced by paratext. In the context of digital media, editors Nadine Desrochers and Daniel Apollon wonder "whether the 'thing' that makes cultural objects 'present' will still be known as 'paratext'" in the future, particularly as "the digital dust settles" ("Preface" xxvi). They maintain that scholars need to trouble the notion "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" ("Introduction" xxxii). Contributors to Desrochers and Apollon's collection persistently call for "a more dynamic understanding of the notion of paratext" (Nacher 63): Yra Van Dijk foregrounds the ambivalence of paratexts as "spaces that are neither completely in, nor outside of the work" (40); Barbara Bordalejo asserts that digital textualities particularly "challeng[e] . . . our notions of what constitutes the text and what stands outside it" (128); and Janez Strehovec and Patrick Smyth point respectively to "the new mediascape" (49) and "the rise of digital media" (329) as conditions that have rendered indistinct the text/paratext relationship. These assessments raise the following question, articulated by Amy Nottingham-Martin: "If paratextual boundaries can no longer be drawn according to being part of a single material object (book-peritext) or linked to the author (epitext), where is the line between paratext and context?" (296). Perhaps a response might be that the "concept of paratext itself . . . is too media-specific to adequately describe the elements used to frame such convergent forms of digital narrative," as Dorothee Birke and Birte Christ conclude (81). Clearly, following Marshall McLuhan's proclamation that in the conditions brought about by new media, "the medium is the message" (7), contemporary scholarship perceives a need to rethink paratext and to reconsider its relationship to text in an era of fan fiction, memes, and e-reading, of ubiquitous replication, reference, and what Hayles calls "remediation," or "the cycling of different media through one another" (5).

The creative works of popular and prolific Canadian author Douglas Coupland exemplify, in general, this blurry relationship between text and paratext, something which perhaps stems from his history as a visual artist proficient in different material compositions — for example, his self-portrait sculpture Gumhead, onto which passersby could stick their chewed gum, or his installation Canada House, a refurbished 1950s Vancouver home that Coupland transformed to evoke the spirit of Canada as he saw it. Coupland's first novel, *Generation X: Tales for an Accelerated Culture* (1991), was a test case in experimental paratext that included, in abundance, graphics and comics, sidebar neologisms, back matter statistics, and other marginalia. At the time, Andrew Tate explains, this "distinctive typography and hectic use of paratextual

material . . . ha[d] no real precedent in contemporary fiction" (11). The novel's "embracing of technological innovation and its appropriation of techniques from other media," G.P. Lainsbury adds, "tests a reader's preconceptions as to what a novel should be" (230). Coupland's later works perform similarly unconventional paratextual maneuvers, as seen in *JPod*, of course, but also in, for instance, *Life after God* (1994), a pocket-sized collection of short stories for adults that comes complete with children's book-style hand-drawn illustrations, and *City of Glass: Douglas Coupland's Vancouver* (2009), which blends the usual photographs, maps, and texts of typical guidebooks with hand-drawn illustrations, a scan of a short story, and a multi-coloured list of the "Top 100 Surnames in Vancouver" (150-51).

Because Coupland's writing consistently challenges textual/paratextual boundaries and conventions of literary production, it can be read with and against a tradition of formal experimentation led by some of Coupland's creative predecessors. The deployment of visual-textual collage in his works recalls similar techniques used by Dadaists, for example, such as the "cut-up" technique of generating creative text by cutting up and rearranging other text (a method later popularized by William S. Burroughs's *The Nova Trilogy*). In a Canadian context, the para-textual play that textures many of Coupland's written works recalls bpNichol, whose concrete and visual poetry maximizes the creative possibilities of blank space in its often-unexpected arrangement of words and letters on a page. Coupland's insertion of graphics, comics, bumper-sticker slogans, and other visuals into more conventional forms of prose fiction have led some scholars (Forshaw; Ness; Lainsbury; Tate) to connect the writer to Pop Art, especially because of the art movement's use of juxtaposition and found images. Tate has linked Coupland's canon to Modernist art for some of the same reasons, but mainly for Coupland's "interest[ ] in generating fresh, defamiliarizing idioms and dislocating assumptions regarding literary form" (168). For the purposes of the present paper, it might also be useful to situate Coupland within the context of novelists who have, more specifically, employed *paratext* in unusual ways. Examples that are proximate to *JPod*, as contemporary and Canadian, include Yann Martel's *Life of Pi* (2001), which begins with an Author's Note intended to seem as if it were written by Martel, but is actually part of the fictional story and of the author-character's self-narration (v-xi), and Margaret Atwood's *The*

Handmaid's Tale (1985), which ends with a section titled "Historical Notes on *The Handmaid's Tale*" that resembles, in its name and its location in the book, paratexts that actually deliver real-world information about the historical context of a work (343). In the latter, the notes are actually a transcript of proceedings from a fictional symposium held to study the world of the novel.

It is useful to point to the linkages between *JPod* and these works, movements, and authors, but it is perhaps even more important to emphasize how *JPod* is different from the formally disruptive works that have come before. In short, this difference is in how *JPod* constructs an ambiguous relationship between text and paratext and then brings the very stickiness of that relationship, quite inescapably, to the reader's awareness. The "text" part of this relationship, it must be noted, is surprisingly linear and straightforward: Ethan Jarlewski, the main character, works at a gaming company in a group of cubicles that he and his five neighbouring colleagues call "jPod," a name they crafted as a nod to the computer glitch that resulted in the six of them, all of whom have surnames beginning with "J," ending up in the same office area despite having very different roles in the corporation. In part, the novel follows the six employees as they while away their workdays sitting in meetings, developing new games, and finding what might be described as more imaginative uses for their time, such as writing letters to Ronald McDonald to convince him that each of the employees would be his perfect match (52), or racing each other to find the one incorrect number in a string of pi's first hundred thousand digits (383). This branch of the narrative takes place in a space of corporate drudgery that is repurposed, by the jPod workers, as a site of playfulness, leisure, social connection, and embraced arbitrariness. The other narrative branch follows the personal adventures of Ethan and his family outside of his work, and this storyline is more dramatic. For example, within the first twenty-five pages of the novel, Ethan is called to his mother's house to help her get rid of a biker she has just killed (somewhat accidentally) via electrocution in her basement grow-op (23). Over the course of the book, other events occur in Ethan's life that seem outlandish but are handled, by the characters and the book itself, as if they are not a big deal: murder, adultery, people smuggling, missing persons, and dead bodies concealed in cement (only to be uncovered again later) are just a few of the phenomena that characterize Ethan's life.

JPod also features much textual and graphic material that neither fits within nor develops this plot but that appears in pages inserted regularly throughout the text. In addition to the book's more conventional paratexts (e.g., pages demarcating different sections of the novel), *JPod* includes fifteen pages of content-laden front matter that occupies the space before Ethan's story begins; four pages of back matter after the story ends, including one which asks the reader in large, bolded print, "Play again? Y/N" (517); and at least seventy-eight pages of what may also be considered paratextual material, or what I call "interstitial material," scattered throughout the plot outlined above. For a book comprising just over five hundred pages, *JPod*'s extra material (front, back, and interstitial) constitutes, significantly, around one-fifth of the publication. The interstitial material varies widely in content and form. There are the spam-like emails sometimes addressed to no character or individual in particular, such as one from an "Exchange Company in Russia" that is looking for a US-based partner to accept wired money (229). There are some pages that include stream-of-consciousness lists based on often sprawling topics, as in the list that begins with the word "Brrrrr," ends with "Lies," and includes items as varied as "Apu from the Kwik-E-Mart," "Shitty old car," and "Eyes like Woody Woodpecker" (364-65). Other pages are taken up with text that resembles concrete or visual poetry, one of which spells "MotHeRFuckE" (*sans* final "r") in letters that are broadly distributed across the blank page (474). And still others combine, in seemingly random ways, computer language, references to digital culture, and mathematical symbols and equations (69, 71, 104). Much of the material is too difficult to categorize. For example, a page in Part One simply commands, "Grind the molten bucket," perhaps a reference to the game *Tony Hawk's Pro Skater 3* (156). Another page offers a plethora of symbols (arrows, boxes, other shapes) arranged in lines with four words embedded within them: "collapsing Korean department store" (350). In general, while this content echoes the thematic concerns of the novel — technology, corporate culture, consumerism, gaming — it is left unexplained and unacknowledged by the parts of the story surrounding it, and thus it interrupts rather than contributes to the more linear plot.

The core question here might be: is this material paratext or not, and why does it matter? If we adopt Genette's original conceptualization of paratext, *JPod*'s interstitial material does not really meet the criteria.

Unlike those productions that manipulate a text's relation to the public, such as the cover of a book, these pages do not provide a throughway by which the reader is introduced to the text. Existing, as they do, throughout the very text itself — and not just as a vessel *for* the text — these pages can justifiably be read as *simply more text*. Yet, because this material is most often interruptive, constituted by unrelated pages-long intrusions into the narrative, after which the story continues as if it never broke away, it might also be seen as fundamentally separated from the text proper. Moreover, the interstitial material bears striking resemblances to the front and back matter which, because of its location in the text, is more straightforwardly categorized as paratextual — for example, a page reading "FINAL / FINAL.FINAL / final.FOR REAL / FINAL.version 2," and so on, that appears in the front matter before Part One (2). The similarities between the front matter paratext and the interstitial material might therefore lead us to conceptually group all of that content together, to read it all as paratext, and to let the formal differences between that paratext and the text proper (which is not interruptive, random, or abrupt, but instead continuous and more predictable) inform our understanding of the work.

The purpose of this paper, however, is not to judge which is the better categorization, text or paratext, but to argue that *having* that choice, having some confusion about what constitutes the text versus not-the-text in a novel, activates the reader in a number of ways. For one, being confronted with this decision to see interruptive, sometimes nonsensical material as either a core part of the text or as peripheral to the text (and therefore, perhaps, "skippable") means the reader is engaged in determining what is text and what is paratext. Different from novels that adopt standard sequences of paratext (blank flyleaves followed by a copyright page, table of contents, chapter headings, and perhaps a note about the author and assorted back matter at the end), *JPod* assumes the hypothetical form of a television channel in which the reader must actually *choose* "what is commercial?" and "what is television program?" This choice is not typically taken on by readers or viewers, Gray explains, and "is often an analyst's alone" (46). Readers of *JPod* might not necessarily have the language to articulate what they are doing — distinguishing paratext from text — and they might not even do it knowingly, but in the very act of encountering something that looks like not-text and deciding what to do with it, they are democratic-

ally participating in the social, critical practice of shaping these categories through use. The ambiguity of *JPod*'s interstitial material therefore empowers the reader with the task of questioning the very ontology of the paratext and invites the reader into a dialogue about form that has chiefly been advanced by scholars thus far.

In the process of prompting the reader to make decisions about the relationship between paratext and text, *JPod* also calls on readers to make a decision about what is *meaningful* versus *trivial*. The reader must therefore create meaning hierarchies on the fly, during the process of reading. In novels, these hierarchies are often already established; for example, readers may bring along, to a book, the vague sense that the actual text of a novel is more "meaningful" to them than its copyright page or back-cover synopsis. However, this hierarchy is disrupted in *JPod*, and the reader is compelled to gauge which material is significant to her comprehension, enjoyment, and/or analysis of the work. When the reader reaches the interstitial, two-and-a-half-page list of what begins as languages — "Afrikaans / Albanian / Amharic / Arabic" — and then morphs into something far more diverse — "Coleslaw" and "Danish (cherry)" among the 128 items on the list — she is prompted to consider whether the material is important to her reading experience and to act accordingly (85). She might choose to closely read all items on the list, to relate the list to the pages that surround it (perhaps flipping back and forth between pages), to skim the list for interesting inclusions, or to skip it and move on with the storyline a few pages later, among other options. The same process is likely catalyzed when the reader reaches the three-page-long list of television channels formatted rather haphazardly using different font sizes, indents, and arrangements on each page (180-82). These examples exaggerate the reality that readers face every day, of course, which is that readers already make the distinction between meaningful and trivial material all the time, whether they are working with print or digital media. They do this when they decide to read deeply versus skim, or when they scan a news feed for eye-catching content, or when they choose to stop reading a work that they are only part way through, or in various other circumstances. But what *JPod* does is make explicit the possibility and the reality of there being trivial or potentially meaningless material within a text the reader has been asked to invest in, both intellectually and, of course, financially. Not only, then, must the reader distinguish text from paratext

or core content from peripheral content, but, in the case of *JPod*, she is also asked to extract meaning from a set of data which itself confesses to not being consistently meaningful — a set of data that varies in its professed levels of arbitrariness, randomness, and calculation. Contrary, then, to Tate's suggestion that, in *JPod*, Coupland "chronicle[s] an era of simulation defined by a ceaseless and passively consumed flow of images" (167), *JPod* actually urges its reader to "wake up" from practices of passive consumption and to participate actively in constructing the meaning hierarchies that will shape the reading experience.

This process of determining what is meaningful versus trivial might be unexpected for readers who think of words within a novel as equally important, but it should come as no surprise for those who are familiar with adjusting their attention to different registers of digital content (e.g., sidebar advertisements, pop-ups, and e-mail spam). When users enter queries into search engines, they are tasked with confronting sometimes millions of results that may or may not be useful to them. When reading a Wikipedia article, users must make pointed decisions about which chunks of text are most meaningful to the goals at hand, and they may skip material in that process. When users view a celebrity's social media post, they might determine if it is "authentic" or if it is a paid advertisement manufactured to get consumers to buy products. *JPod* invites the reader to make these same sorts of judgements within the bounds of a medium and genre — print novels — that typically does not ask its reader to sift through spam to get to more immediately gratifying or readable content. As if to urge the reader to consider the novel a kind of digital text itself, *JPod* includes interstitial material that, for example, recalls the features of a YouTube video page ("332 of 438 comments" and bolded text that resembles hyperlinks [5]), explicitly names itself a digital text ("if you like being small (or average), then delete this email" [43]), or mimics a pop-up prompt directing the user to perform certain actions ("All new company passwords must contain at least one character, integer and symbol" [101]). As readers engage with this offset, de-contextualized, and often times rather nonsensical material, they are called upon to undertake an interpretive process akin to what Rodrigue calls screen reading, "a *design-oriented activity* [and] a meaning-making process that involves engagement with multimodal genres" (236). Screen reading turns readers into "*text designers*" who "construct meaning" via interactions embedded in their reading experi-

ence (Rodrigue 236). By presenting the reader with a variety of types of digital-style text, as in the examples above, *JPod* turns its print-novel reader into a kind of screen reader who "designs" the meaning of the text as she works through it. The novel thus orchestrates readers to employ "critical *digital* reading practices" in addition to marshalling the practices they might typically use for print novels (Rodrigue 236).

Of course, the sheer breadth of text types included in the interstitial material means the screen-reading process might not remain the same throughout the entire novel-reading experience, and the reader will inevitably need to vary her strategies as she encounters different kinds of text. After all, it is typical to approach linear, straightforward plots of realist novels in a different way than one might approach an email or advertisements on a website, and *JPod* includes both kinds of material. By presenting, every several pages, another arrangement or type of text — what Morris would call "genres" of digital content, such as "a tweet, a blog post, a Tumblr post, an online scholarly article, or a Facebook page" (127) — *JPod* invites the reader to continually "flip" reading strategies and thereby keeps her actively involved in self-reflexively assessing how she is approaching the book. The linear plot — especially because of its criss-crossing storylines following Ethan's family and friends' outlandish escapades — expects and requires sustained attention from the front to the back of the book, while the interstitial pages invite fleeting encounters, a quick skim, a lingering glance. The juxtaposition of the two kinds of material, text and paratext, is what delivers "genre awareness" to the reader: an "understand[ing] that there are similarities and differences among texts in the same multimodal genre" which "can help them determine how to best approach a text" (Rodrigue 244). For some, because of the unique interstitial interjections, approaching *JPod* might mean switching between what Morris calls hyper-reading and close reading: hyper-reading involves skimming, skipping, and selecting which material to focus on, while close reading involves a more comprehensive and deep attention paid to each aspect of a given passage or text. Although hyper-reading is usually "associated with digital and close reading with print," *JPod* invites its reader to use both practices (and any iterations that might fall in between) to comprehend the novel (Morris 126). In doing so, it brings to the fore the "incredible overlap between the reading strategies we use to read both print and digital texts" (Morris 126). *JPod* destabilizes, and

encourages the reader's experienced destabilization of, the perceived binary between print and digital reading by marshalling digital reading strategies toward comprehension of the print page.

Catalyzing the process of the reader flipping back and forth between different reading strategies, *JPod*'s interstitial material is especially important for its *interruptive* function. As mentioned, the reader, coming across mid-novel material that does not appear to be related to the plot, is faced with the choice of either reading the material right then and deciding, consciously or otherwise, how it relates to the story proper, or skipping the material with (or without) the intention of returning to it later. This frequent encounter inserts interruptions into the often-linear novel-reading process, potentially disrupting readers' attention, or at least drawing their attention away from the plot to other concentrations. These encounters orchestrate a staccatoed reading experience. Put differently, *JPod*'s interstitial material allows for "stops along the way" in the reading process. It embeds into the very form of the novel the tempo of reading "on the go" via a mobile device such as a cellphone. According to Jun Mizukawa, "attention is divided differently" between "on the go" reading versus "stationary reading" (68). The former, of course, is more popular now, in the recent historical context from which *JPod* emerges, given the accelerated culture (à la *Generation X*) of North America in the 2000s; the tempo of stationary reading, with its implicit and traditional connection to long stretches of still, uninterrupted time, "is no longer the only tempo that exists in contemporary everyday space" (Mizukawa 80). Contemporary reading tempos are instead mediated by how we are called to "look up, however briefly, to make sure not only that we are not missing our station, bus stop or destination but also not running into people, city structure, or objects that surround us"; thus "the tempo of our walking, stopping, and running in the urban space filled with public transportation networks, stores, restaurants, and city noise is incorporated in our reading" (Mizukawa 80). By incorporating this on-the-go tempo into the structure of the novel, *JPod* draws attention to how "the reading tempo typically deemed 'traditional' and 'proper' is itself nothing but a modern invention" (Mizukawa 74), the "sedimented effect[ ] of reading practices of the past century" (75), or a social construct in which different bodies (educational institutions, literary establishments, etc.) invest. *JPod* incorporates randomized pauses in main content into the body of a

paperback novel on which it wishes readers to spend their attention, and it presents interruption as an organizing feature of the contemporary reading experience. Against a literary context that might see on-the-go reading practices as inattentive or unfocused, *JPod*'s form invites the reader to see the value in interruption and distraction, or in the possibility of being pulled away from core content into the periphery. The novel therefore legitimizes "distracted" reading as a valid technique for comprehension and analysis.

The work that *JPod*'s reader must put in to undertake this comprehension and analysis — determining text from paratext, or meaningful content from trivial content, or switching between digital and print reading practices as she works through the book — is supplemented by the fact that even in its physical presence, *JPod* makes its reader work hard. Weighing in at over a pound, the 2007 Vintage Canada edition of *JPod* is strikingly hefty for a paperback novel. Approximately 6 x 8 x 1 inches, it is a book that takes up space, perhaps "defamiliariz[ing] the reader" who is used to paperback novels that look a bit different (Lainsbury 230). The book is no "crystal goblet" (Warde), no slender paperback designed for the reader to get pleasurably lost in the story as she mindlessly turns page after "invisible" page: it is a book that insists on its materiality as soon as the reader picks it up, a book that requires effort to hold and manoeuvre in accordance with the sometimes-atypical arrangement of the text on the page. Through its paratextual alterations in particular, *JPod* makes known that it is not reducible to an elusive, nebulous "text." For instance, the copyright page is printed so that one has to turn the book ninety degrees clockwise, or tilt one's head to the left, in order to easily read it. Further, the text on the inside of the front and back covers is a continuous narration, so that a reader who wishes to keep reading the prose on the inside front cover needs to flip all the way to the inside back cover in order to finish the stream-of-consciousness ramblings. *JPod* forces readers to physically manipulate the book in a way they might not be used to for novels, flipping from front to back and then front again before beginning the novel proper. Thus, the novel brings the bare reality of reading as physical effort to the reader's awareness, thereby activating her on a *bodily* level, and awakens her to the reality that the body is being used to create meaning in, say, the act of flipping pages and adjusting the book's angle. Dana Bădulescu notes the forgotten but obvious point here, which is that "we

literally read with our bodies"; expressed more elaborately, in the process of "reading, our body of flesh and the book's body of paper interact and engage in a rhythmic choreography" (140). The "sensory experiences associated with reading," therefore, "matter more than we might think" (148). All reading — even screen reading — involves the body: to access digital content, the eyes move, the links must be clicked or the webpages scrolled through, the surface of the device (phone, tablet, computer) is touched, keys perhaps pressed. For those who use screen readers to interact online, or for those who consume multimodal digital texts, the body is also engaged through the sense of hearing. In activating the reader on levels both intellectual and physical, then, *JPod* can be seen as a modified example of what Espen J. Aarseth deems ergodic literature: literature in which "nontrivial effort is required to allow the reader to traverse the text" (1), though Aarseth initially envisioned ergodic literature as works in which the reader could change the direction or outcome of the text, such as Marc Saporta's experimental deck-of-cards novel, which invites the reader to re-shuffle the deck and experience the story in different orders (Aarseth 10). *JPod* is not at the level of reader interaction necessitated by, say, a choose-your-own-adventure story, but it certainly requires reader effort (intellectual but, most pressingly here, also physical) to access its meanings.

If the summary of the discussion in this paper so far is that *JPod*'s paratextual disruptions (most prominently, the sticky relationship between paratext and text) work to create an active rather than passive "consumer" of the novel, this discussion is made all the more significant because *JPod*'s characters model, or at least seek, the same transformation. Within the first page of the story proper, it becomes clear that the jPodders' workspace is one of passive consumption and robotic movements: "The main corridor's muted plasma TVs blipped out the news and sports, while co-workers in long-sleeved blue and black T-shirts oompah-loompahed in and out of laminate-access doors, elevated walkways, staircases and elevators" (15). The reference to follow-the-leader-style "oompah-loompahing" combined with architectural features that dictate passage through space (e.g., corridors, walkways, and staircases) render this a workspace in which pre-scripted movements and behaviours unfold, almost unthinkingly (or group-thinkingly), against a backdrop of atmospheric media consumption, the muted TV "blipping" ephemeral content as employees walk by. The jPodders themselves

articulate variously this passive workaday existence. Ethan acknowledges his as "an industry that's increasingly more corporate and bland and soul-killing" (120), and Mark declares, at one point, that the jPodders are all "just clones working for the man" (157). Kaitlin, the newest of the bunch, writes in a document near the end of the novel that she and the others "accept that a corporation determines [their lives'] routines" (492): "You trawl for jokes or amusingly diversionary .wav files. You download music. A new project comes along, then endures a slow-motion smothering at the hands of meetings. All ideas feel still-born. The air smells like five hundred sheets of paper" (493). It would be easy for the jPodders to fall into a somnambulist state of being, moving between three-hour meetings (17), confronting seemingly endless streams of communication and content (e.g., "eighteen new emails and one phone message" [20]), and abiding by what Ethan describes as "the typical production and consumption cycles that help [them] survive [their] dismal, meaningless little lives" (161). But, instead, *JPod*'s characters undertake small acts of resistance to rewrite the scripts, so to speak, imposed upon the corporate subject under capitalism. Ethan and the others regularly engage in games, pranks, and conversations that fly in the face of the corporate drudgery that threatens to define their work lives. Ethan, for example, hangs "around the cafeteria, pretending to be busy, but actually playing Tetris" (49); he switches around the M and N keys on Kaitlin's keyboard, as a prank (44); and he later asks jPodders to write ads "sell[ing] themselves as if they were on eBay" (164). At one point, after jPod has been working for a full fifteen minutes straight, Cowboy instructs the pod to "take a minute-long break and blithely pimp for the tobacco industry," just to pass the time in a different way (78). To cure the boredom of mindless work, again, the jPodders "invent[ ] a cubicle game called Baffle" in which each person "sits in his or her cubicle as [they] toss a loaded stapler over the fabric wall baffles between [them]" (234). Much like the paratextual interruptions that characterize *JPod*'s form, these textual moments seem to symbolize characters' attempts to "wake up" from a potentially somnambulating existence.

More than just signals of character activation, though, the jPodders' office antics perhaps suggest a kind of anti-capitalist agenda that is also at work in Coupland's insistence on filling capitalist product space (i.e., pages) with frequently random, excessive, trivial, and even meaningless

content. Again, the relationship between text and paratext is significant here. After all, the jPodders themselves fill corporate time and space with their own time- and resource-wasting activities, creating "Living Cartoon Profiles" of themselves (33-38), Googling each other (136), and challenging each other to find the one non-prime number in a set of around eight thousand, simply for fun (245).[3] *JPod*'s interstitial content harkens back to these office antics and perhaps becomes another iteration of wasting corporate space and time: the spam of the print publication world. The front matter page filled to the gutters with only dollar signs (9), combined with the next page which merely repeats "ramen noodles" (10) over and over again, suggests that Coupland's text *wants* the reader to be aware of the value of a print page in this precarious publishing economy. These shout out to the reader that the pages are being, for lack of a better word, *wasted*. It is this sense of wastefulness, meaninglessness, that then compels the question: why are these pages here? Along with their interstitial counterparts, perhaps they serve as Coupland's stark rejection of — his "F-you" to — efficiency-based capitalist principles that typically determine book design for mass-produced paperback novels and that seek to determine the quotidian behaviours of the contemporary corporate subject (such as the jPodders). Front matter in particular reveals so clearly the economic contexts of a book, highlighting, as it does, information about authorship, copyright, and publication. However, in *JPod*, front matter is taken over in the name of whimsy, aesthetics, and triviality — much like the office workday is repurposed by the co-workers — and this hijacking constitutes a rejection of capitalist "logic."

Critics and reviewers of *JPod* have yet to thoroughly evaluate the meanings of the interstitial material on which this paper focuses, and when they do mention the material, it is never with respect to the ambiguous relationship between text and paratext in the novel. In one camp of the novel's reception, there are those, like Patrick Ness, who see the interstitial material as the equivalent of "padding." Assessing that the many pages "would all be tremendous fun in a Pop Art way if they weren't — like the rest of the novel — so lazily assembled,"[4] Ness is comforted that "it makes for a quick read because there are so many pages you can skip." In another camp, reviewers such as Dave Itzkoff express downright confusion about the purpose of this material: "I can't understand why Coupland felt the need to expend 41 pages

of 'JPod' reciting the first hundred thousand digits of pi, but I hope he won that bar bet." Others simply note the presence of the material without exploring it further, as in Emily Donaldson's observation that the novel is a "compendium" of other forms, or Matt Thorne's brief note of incredulity that there are "54 (!)" pages "filled with nothing but numbers." Some critics do not even note the presence of this material at all (e.g., Litt). The conclusion to Tate's monograph on Coupland, published the year after *JPod* was released, productively discusses the novel in some detail, but it does not reach far beyond interpreting the novel's interstitial material as "trademark" Coupland that formally mimics the chaotic conditions of the main character's life (164). Likewise, Grubisic's review observes that there is an "apparently random assortment of textual flotsam and jetsam" in the novel, "matter that's visible on any day to anyone who uses email, notices magazine ads, or opens their eyes" (155), but it does not make any interpretive leaps beyond such statements (partly, perhaps, because the book-review genre does not allow for expansive analysis).

Yet it seems to me that the interstitial material, and its relation to the text proper, amounts to more than the sum of these critics' remarks. It is my hope that this sustained study of possible paratexts in *JPod* will inaugurate a discussion of the novel that more comprehensively engages with what critics variously call the "spam" (Ness, Tate), the "expend[ed]" pages (Itzkoff), and the "white noise" (Adams) of the novel. In an intellectual climate that often sees reading print as somehow the passive counterpart to engaging more "actively" online, *JPod*'s text and paratexts trouble the reader's potential experience of this distinction. While Strehovec, for example, maintains that e-literature necessarily includes "complex algorithm[s]" that "demand[ ] [the reader] play a much more active role than the one she plays when reading printed texts" (52), and while he foregrounds "the reader's powerlessness to simply go and reach into the [print] text and manipulate it" (57), as she might do with e-literature, I worry that these kinds of comments overly simplify the complex reading practices that contemporary print literature such as *JPod* invites. On the other hand, there is the concern that reading in a digital context is likewise reduced to easy narratives about activity and passivity, engagement and disengagement: this type of reading is distracted and less focused, these narratives purport, or it leads to low levels of comprehension and retention (as in Barbara King's concern that

"students' embrace of devices even for 'good' purposes in the classroom may . . . interfere with learning"). In its very form, *JPod* combats these claims of stark difference between the print and the digital. It encourages readers to consider it a digital text; to actively construct meaning hierarchies that assess the relevancy of presented content; to marshal digital-reading practices alongside print-reading practices; to embrace and think about the implications of a distracted, mobile-reading tempo. And it does all this while also disallowing the reader from forgetting that it is an object, a product of print culture. *JPod* asks readers, then, to find meaning in the physicality of the text, in the work of flipping pages, in the physical angle we must adopt to read its front matter, and in the corporeal act of tracing our fingers along filled pages, looking for that one strange number among a hundred thousand digits of pi.

Notes

[1] Genette coined the term paratext in an earlier work entitled *Palimpsestes: La littérature au second degré* (1982), but only in his later publication was the concept theorized in detail.

[2] Foremost among those who have troubled the print/digital relationship is N. Katherine Hayles, who writes in her seminal *Writing Machines* (2002) that "the computational engines and artificial intelligences that produce simulations require sophisticated bases *in the real world*. The engineers who design these machines, the factory workers who build them, the software designers who write programs for them, and the technicians who install and maintain them have no illusions that physical reality has faded away" (6; emphasis added). Likewise, Vincente Luis Mora stresses that "all forms of electronic or traditional literature use computers in many of the steps of creation, design, correction and/or publication," making categorical differences between electronic and printed literature ambiguous. Paul Benzon is also skeptical of the popular impulse to over-emphasize the materiality of print and therefore de-materialize the digital, cautioning that "every purely digital entity — every stream, every file, every bit, every impulse — has as much materiality as any more conventionally physical media object, whether analog or digital, and indeed it would be a reductive mistake to suggest that digital culture at large is anything but resolutely material" (90). Scholars thus show persistently that the digital emerges from, depends on, and itself energizes the material.

[3] These "games" — finding the non-prime number among a pages-long set of prime numbers (245), or finding the one wrong digit in the first hundred thousand digits of pi (383), or finding the letter "O" (used to replace zero) inserted in a stream of 58,894 random numbers (407) — are presented in the book as-is, and thus the reader can choose to take part in them as well. In this respect, then, the readers' and characters' movement from passive to active is paralleled, as they both are called to engage in the same activities.

[4] I am struck by the words some critics have used to describe the interstitial material in *JPod*, especially those that replicate terms of capitalism and labour, such as Ness's "assembled" and his use of the qualifier "lazily" (recalling lazy versus productive subjects),

Itzkoff's "expend" (recalling expenditures), or Adam's assessment of Coupland's "laboured radicalism" (66). Summoning images of literal assembly lines, efficient (or not-so-efficient) workers, and manual labour in general, this language tries to understand Coupland's interstitial material through the lens of capitalist conditions of production. On one hand, the pattern might suggest an engagement with the novel's themes, but on the other hand, the pattern comes off as strangely contrary to how the interstitial material in the book actually reveals the "assembly-line" nature of print publication in its major disruption of paratextual convention. The nature I refer to here is one in which all the working "parts" in the assembly line of literary production combine to make products, like paperback novels, that continue to look the same.

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