Research Report: *Biblion: Frankenstein*

**Summary:**

*Frankenstein: The Afterlife of Shelley’s Circle* is an iPad app published by the New York Public Library’s *Biblion: The Boundless Library* collection. Part ebook, part interactive app and part museum exhibit, *Biblion*’s stated goal is “to show how themes present in classic works of literature...persist and continue to inform new works being created today.” The app, released in conjunction with the Library’s recent exhibition entitled “Shelley’s Ghost: The Afterlife of a Poet,” combines images of artifacts from the exhibition, articles discussing broader themes surrounding the work, video recordings and audio performances of Frankenstein, and an interactive sidebar that engages users by asking questions related to a given article’s themes. This multimedia production is a fascinating and somewhat provocative look at what happens when both the book and the museum are remediated simultaneously.

**Description:**

The *Biblion: Frankenstein* app has two different interfaces, depending on whether the user holds the iPad in portrait or landscape orientation. The app begins in portrait mode, with a visualizations of hundreds of different documents swirling together before coalescing into four main topics: Creation and Remix, Frankenstein, Outsiders and Shelley’s Ghost (*fig. 1*). Tapping on the image representing a topic enlarges that image and simultaneously brings up a short précis of the topic and a row of images behind the original that seem to fade into the distance. One can scroll through these images and, as each one comes into focus, the text beneath changes to provide a summary of the topic it represents. Tapping on the image again brings up the article, complete with media from the exhibit, suggested links to other, similar areas of the app and the option to respond to a question posed by Biblion (*fig. 2*). The content of these articles varies widely, ranging from a plot summary of *Frankenstein* with audio performances of key scenes, to interviews with the members of the Metropolitan Detention Center's reading group who read *Frankenstein* at their monthly meeting.

In addition to the articles, Biblion provides a feature entitled "Ask Biblion" that is located on the right-hand side of many, though not all, of the articles. In this area, the user is posed a question that is at least nominally related to the article and invited to read others responses as well as contribute her own (*fig. 3*). Also in this area is the share feature, which allows users to share individual articles via Twitter, Facebook or email.

If one flips the iPad to landscape orientation, the interface returns to the visualization of swirling documents that was seen first when the app launched. This time, however, the collections are labeled with their content and the user is invited to select the source documents and examine them more closely (*fig. 4*). Selecting, for example, Mary Shelley's handwritten draft of *Frankenstein* brings up a digitized image of the 1818 original text that the user can flip through from beginning to end (*fig. 5*). One can also tap on the button labeled transcript and the app will superimpose the text of the 1831 edition so the user can compare the changes from the original to the edited version (*fig. 6*). Other sources include Percy Bysshe Shelley's early poems along with albums and correspondance from those in the Shelleys' social circle, all of which are on display at the New York Public Library as part of the Shelley exhibit.
Figure 1: Main Page of *Biblion: Frankenstein*
FRANKENSTEIN’S BIRTHPLACE

Shelley drew a view of Lake Geneva in his Swiss notebook. Instead of his usual imaginary doodles, he sketched an actual scene—perhaps from a vantage point near his own house at Montsalvens, which looked across the lake to the Jura Mountains. Or, it might have been a view of the Snow Alps, drawn during a boating tour around the lake with Byron in June. “The mountains of Savoy,” Shelley wrote to his friend Thomas Love Peacock, “whose summits are bright with snow, descends in broken slopes to the lake; six high, the rocks were dark with pine forests, which become deeper and more immense, until the ice and snow mingle with the points of saluted rock that pierce the blue air.” The snowy summits, pine forests, torrents, and ravines of the Alps made a deep impression on Shelley and his imagination, which would soon be superimposed in his poem “Mont Blanc.”

Mary Shelley later alluded to this in Frankenstein as the scientist reencounters the Creature for the first time since he created it, spurring to Solomon’s island. “Frankenstein” was after all, the name she had given to the creature. The creature, she writes, “made his escape, and, after a long and severe struggle with the elements, got to the shores of the lake, and there found Shelley.”

SOURCE: Prologue to the 1831 Edition of Frankenstein

People today are perhaps more likely to read the novel Frankenstein as an e-book, which is somewhat ironic given that a major theme of the novel is technology run amok. As the monster comes to life, Victor Frankenstein says: “I had worked hard for nearly two years, for the sole purpose of infusing life into an inanimate body...” But now that I had finished, the beauty of the dream vanished, and breathless horror and disgust filled my heart.” Can we see e-books, now in their infancy, leading to the fulfillment of a dream—or starting down a path that leads to ultimate horror, the dream turned nightmare?

Shayne 3
It advanced from behind the mountains of Jura; and the thunder burst at once with frightful loudness from various quarters of the heavens. I remained, while the storm lasted, watching its progress with curiosity and delight. As I stood at the door, on a sudden I beheld a stream of fire issue from an old and beautiful oak, which stood about twenty yards from our house; and so soon as the dazzling light vanished, the oak had disappeared; and nothing remained but a blasted stump. When we visited it the next morning, we found the tree shattered in a singular manner. It was not splintered by the shock, but entirely reduced to thin ribands of wood. I never beheld any thing so utterly destroyed.

Before this I was not unacquainted with the more obvious laws of electricity. On this occasion a man of great research in natural philosophy was with us, and, excited by this catastrophe, he entered on the explanation of a theory which he had formed on the subject of electricity and galvanism, which was at once new and astonishing to me. All that he said threw greatly into the shade Cornelius Agrippa, Albertus Magnus, and Paracelsus, the lords of my imagination; but by some fatality the overthrow of these men disinclined me to pursue my accustomed studies. It seemed to me as if nothing would or could ever be known. All that had so long engaged my attention suddenly grew despicable. By one of those caprices of the mind, which we are perhaps most subject to in early youth, I at once gave up my former occupations; set down natural history and all its progeny as a deformed and abortive creation; and entertained the greatest disdain for a would-be science, which could never even step within the threshold of real knowledge. In this mood of mind I betook myself to the mathematics, and the branches of study appertaining to that science, as being built upon secure foundations, and so worthy of my consideration.

Thus strangely are our souls constructed, and by such slight ligaments are we bound to prosperity or ruin. When I look back, it seems to me as if this almost miraculous change of inclination and will was the immediate suggestion of the guardian angel of my life—the last effort made by the spirit of preservation to avert the storm that was even then hanging in the stars, and ready to envelope me. Her victory was announced by an unusual tranquillity and gladness of soul, which followed the relinquishing of my ancient and latterly tormenting studies. It was thus that I was to be taught to associate evil with their prosecution, happiness with their disregard.

It was a strong effort of the spirit of good; but it was ineffectual. Destiny was too potent, and her immutable laws had decreed my utter and terrible destruction.
Research Context:

The Bibliion: Frankenstein app situates itself squarely within the field that N. Katherine Hayles calls "Comparative Media Studies". This field, newly named if not new in practice, "provides a rubric within which the interests of print-based and digital humanities scholars can come together to explore synergies between print and digital media...highlighting the different kinds of reading practices, literacies and communities prominent in various media epochs".¹ The Biblion app is a paradigmatic example of combining print scholarship with digital presentation in a way that aims to make both more accessible and usable. It is the latest stage in a long conversation about the role of the digital book, though the term “book” may not be the most appropriate for an app like this one. The subtitle of the Biblion collection hints at this medial fuzziness. "The Boundless Library" evokes the idea of the library—the home for books—and the idea of something that is unbound, that lacks binding, that is manifestly not a book. Biblion: Frankenstein is another foray into defining the future of reading and asks scholars to explore a new way of engaging with texts. It also serves as a subtle reminder that the digital book, whatever it may be, will not wait around until we can identify what it is to instantiate itself.

Technical Analysis:

Biblion: Frankenstein was designed by Potion, a design and technology firm that builds custom iOS apps as well as public space interactive installations. This is the second app that the NYPL and Potion have produced together and, unlike the first one, which was centered around the 1939 World’s Fair in New York City, this app combines a specific textual object with the scholarly research, artifacts and information that has built up around it. Though the app is not an ebook, situating it within the discussion surrounding the ebook and digital book is a fruitful method for articulating what it actually is.

Structurally, the app resembles either a digital journal publication that has been meticulously coded for ease of mobile use or a digital museum exhibition, depending on the iPad’s orientation. This adds to the confusion around what sort of object it is; is it a clever way of integrating scholarly research and narrative into curated archives or an equally clever way of introducing artifacts into textual scholarship?

If the app is confronted primarily as a book—in portrait mode—then it seems to straddle an interesting line between being innovative and gimmicky. In terms of innovation, it makes good use of page space and combines scrolling-style navigation with images near the top of the page that change automatically as the user progresses through the article. There is no evidence of the page-turn animation or attempts to instantiate kitschy bookishness that Johanna Drucker derides in her article on the future of the book.² Yet the manner in which the app incorporates comments and invites responses is decidedly gimmicky. The questions have something of a suburban book club tone that often seems at odds with the content of the page. Though Biblion tries to keep the articles from sounding either too juvenile or too scholarly, the tone they took for what could have been a very useful discussion section severely curtails its utility by limiting it to a kitschy addition. Though Biblion: Frankenstein does not fall into the trap of imitating the outer

¹ Hayles, N. Katherine. How We Think. P. 7
² Drucker, Johanna. “The Virtual Codex from Page Space to e-Space.”
trappings of bookishness, it suffers precisely from being a new kind of book that is still unsure of its demographic. It therefore adopts “a little of everything” and, in doing so, is bound to frustrate certain users by its inclusiveness. In its defense, however, the app does a good job of keeping the additional features off to the side until they are wanted. The app sees itself as a new form of reading interface, one that tries to appeal to readers looking to quickly skim for interesting or amusing content as well as those looking for a more profound engagement with the text.

In landscape mode, the app has a far clearer purpose; its sole goal is to introduce the reader to the primary source documents that inform the research, media and discussion in the “digital book” section of the app. It is a digital museum, one that mimics the museum experience, with a short paragraph explaining the artifact’s significance and then a focus on the artifact itself. To make up for only representing the artifacts, rather than presenting them, the app allows the reader to page through the works that make up the collection on display in the New York Public Library. There are no extras here and, despite the fact that most of the artifacts are books, no page animations or options to discuss and share. In many ways, it feels like an entirely different app and, though having both interfaces available within the same app is incredibly helpful for switching back and forth between the source documents and the articles surrounding them, the absence of any deeper integration complicates the question of what this app is.

**Evaluation of Opportunities in Bookwork After New Media:**

*Biblion Frankenstein* is a fascinating example of the digital book/book app genre that is aimed at being innovative within very rigorous confines. It speaks to both Johanna Drucker and Joseph Esposito’s attempts to refigure a digital book that can move away from the trappings of a bookish exterior and perform its function in a new way. Also, by virtue of its existence as a finished app rather than as a conception or a prototype, it provides a platform to discuss what can and should be done with a digital book. Instead of wondering about the effects of certain additions, one can use them in *Biblion*. The app also fits in very well with Alan Liu’s formulation of bookishness in the digital age and his emphasis on the sidebar. *Biblion: Frankenstein* is yet another way to approach the question of what, exactly, is a book and serves as an interesting testing ground to determine the user’s own biases regarding the (boundless) boundaries of what I, at least, am willing to call the digital book.

**Citations and Further Resources:**


