The E-Books Identity Crises

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Introduction

Technology has changed and grown so rapidly over a short period of time, thereby changing the way we live, act and communicate. Technology has completely revolutionizes communication and according to researchers these changes can be divided up into three revolutionary stages. The first stage was the start of written communication, which was done by carving pictograms into stone. This however was to heavy to transfer thereby limiting the spread. The second revolutionary communication stage was when writing started to appear on paper, papyrus, clay and wax. Also in this stage the Gutenburg printing press was invented creating the start of mass communication. The last revolutionary communication stage is happening at this moment in time, where information is being spread like wild fire via controlled waves and electronic signals (communication, wiki). When examining these three stages in time it is clear that the main aspect, that the last revolutionary communication stage lacks, is a physical object. There is nothing there that can actually be seen, touched or felt, and we just have to trust that this abstract virtual world is helping us communicate better and more sufficiently in the real world. This virtual world has always been a hard thing to grasp, therefore there are often metaphors used within these virtual spaces that reflect physical objects. An example of this is the trashcan icon. By using these metaphors it narrows the gap between the virtual and the real world, thereby regaining peoples trust through recognition. Where we are seeing this metaphor very clearly is with the new e-books, which is continuing to increase in popularity as we speak. When looking at almost al e-book surrogates it is surprisingly clear that they all come accompanied by comparisons between familiar forms and their reinvented shape in an electronic context (Drucker, 2003, p. 1). This is limiting their potential and keeping them from developing on further.

The history of book development

The first two revolutionary communication stages date as far back as the ancient civilization when writing systems where developed. During this time nearly everything that could be written on, such as stone, clay, tree bark, metal sheets, was used for writing. In 1800BC alphabetic writing emerged in Egypt, words at first where not separated from each other and punctuation did not exist. Also, texts did not have a specific writing direction, it did not matter if it went from right to left or vice versa (history of books, wiki). Egyptians often wrote on a plant called papyrus, which is a thick paper-like material made by weaving the stems of the plant, then by pounding the woven sheet with a hammer, and then eventually these sheets were glued together to form a scroll. These so called “scrolls” became the first form of editable record keeping texts, and the first type of binding ever created. In East Asia these scrolls, whether made from papyrus, parchment or paper, became the dominant form of book in Hellenistic, Roman, Chinese and Hebrew cultures(history of books, wiki).

During the third century B.C.E Rivalry had been stirred up between the Pergamene and the Alexandrian libraries, which resulted in the suspension of the papyrus exports from Egypt (history of books, wiki).. This forced the Pergamenes to find another type of material that could replace the papyrus and thereby started using sheepskin. This however was far more expensive than papyrus and they had to start writing on both sides of the

paper for expense purposes. The Romans started to use similar precursors made of reusable wax-covered tablets of wood for taking notes and other informal writings (history of books, wiki)..

This created the start of the codex book, which is made from a standard-size set of bound leaves or pages fixed in a rigid sequence by being clasped or held on one side. This form was already discovered by the Roman poet, Martial, in the first century AD. However, only in the third century did it start to gain more popularity than the scroll, and during the 6th century it had completely replaced the scroll throughout the now Christianized Greco-Roman world. The codex has always been closely associated with the rise of Christianity, which used the format almost from the start for the Holy Bible (Drucker, 2004).

The codex book format has a lot more advantages than any other book format ever created. It is compact, has a long durability, it is an easy format to reference and economically it is a lot more sufficient due to the fact that both sides of the paper are being used. Also, the codex made it a lot more easier to organize books in the library because it had a stable spine on which the title of the book could be written. The scroll on the other hand created limited access to textual material that was in the unrolled area and it was nearly impossible to skim, scan or search the document (Drucker, 2004).

In today's society our whole perception of how a standard book looks like is fixated around this codex form, and with that in mind there have been many artists that have taken this idea to its limits. Book artists have not only experimented with different materials and textures of books, but have also experimented with different ways of navigating and interacting with them whilst still working within the limitations of its form (Drucker, 2004). A good example of such an artist book is that of OuLiPo writer Raymond Queneau. Johanna Drucker explains this example well in her lecture, 'The Virtual Codex from Page Space to E-space' (presented to the Syracuse University History of the Book Seminar, April 25, 2003) "The author literally cut the pages of his 1961 Gallimard publication, Cent Mille Milliard des Poemes, to provide access to the entire catalogue of lines within. The physical effect of hyper-linking through these cuts is dramatic. The page surface can be delved into, connecting it to the deep space of the volume. The lines can be turned. The work is recomposed and remade by each turning. The possibilities, though not endless, are of a significantly high number, a factor of the combinatic form" (Drucker, 2003, p. 15). This example shows how a book artist has been able to take this specific form and change it in such a way that it becomes interactive rather than a static object. A more recent example of how a book can be interactive is that of the ABC3D book created by Marion Bataille. It is a 3D pop-up book that shows all the letters in the alphabet in a very animated, playful way. The only way this book can be appreciated fully is having the actual book. This book could never be translated into an e-book or a movie because one needs the physical object to appreciate the actual interaction with the book.

The two examples given of artist books are both still working within the limitation of the

codex however there are also a lot of books that differ greatly in form. Examples of these are, polygons and fold-up works, boxes and accordion folds, scrolls, pop-up structures and tunnel books. To remain artist books rather than objects that look like books or sculpture works with a book reference to them, these works have to maintain a connection to the idea of the book, which is, a fixed sequence which provides access to its contents (or ideas) through some stable arrangement (Drucker, 2004, p.123), and this definition should be what people should have in mind when thinking of a book, and not the physical object itself.

Interaction design

The third communication revolution stage is happening at this moment in time. Communication today is done mostly on the Internet, which is this virtual abstract space rather than something physical and concrete. When looking back at the idea that a book is a fixed sequence, which provides access to its contents (or ideas) through some stable arrangement (Drucker, 2004, p.123), than web-pages in some way or another can also be considered 'books'. The only huge difference between web-pages and 'books' is that web-pages are continuously changing, and therefore are not fixed. There are however al lot of elements/metaphors within these web-pages that reflect elements used in actual physical books. For instance, scroll bars on the Internet are a direct translation of the scrolls used in the ancient civilization. Another example is Google. When searching something on Google, on the bottom of the page is always a list of numbers showing you how many more 'pages' of searched items are still to come. This idea of using pages sequentially and in a fixed sequence is adopted from the codex format. It is completely unnecessary, but still Google uses this display to give people the idea that it works like a book, or folder, and in that way they gain trust through recognition, by reflecting a physical object in this virtual space. The scroll might not have been the best solution in the real world, but in the virtual world it works, and makes more sense. So by comparing these two examples, the scroll bar and the Google page flipping system it is clear that the Internet is dealing with a conflict. Which is, should the Internet be designed in such a way that it works to its fullest potential in the way the medium allows it too, or, should the internet narrow the gap between the real world and the virtual world by adding metaphors that reflect physical objects so that people can gain trust through recognition? This conflict is exactly the struggle that interaction designers face daily. Designers today have to fully understand the way the human mind works and thinks, so that they can gain trust, but at the same time move forward. People today have started to trust the internet more and more and this has resulted in the internet being a world or space on its own, it still indeed uses metaphors to support certain things but as time precedes even those metaphors will probably disappear. The Internet has found its identity it is just a matter of time until it can completely let go of its ancestors.

The rise of the e-books

E-books on the other hand have not found their identity at all yet. An e-book, as defined by the Oxford Dictionary, is "an electronic version of a printed book which can be read on a personal computer or hand held device designed specifically for this purpose". E-books have become extremely popular in the last couple of years, but there have been

many downsides to them when looking at the way they are designed. All the surrogates, even the ones created right from the start, have been accompanied by comparisons between familiar forms and their reinvented shape in an electronic context (Drucker, 2003, p.1). This is not only extremely obvious when looking at the way in which they are designed but their title alone says enough, for instance; super-book, hyper-book or expanded-book. These titles show how these devices seem to have the need to acknowledge the historical importance of books and to create a link between their cultural 'real world' identity and these electronic surrogates (Drucker, 2003, p.1). Unlike the Internet where there are only a few metaphors used that reflect 'real world' physical object, the e-books entire identity has become a metaphor, and has become this literal electrical representation of what, to many, a book is. Internet has over the past few years won over a lot of trust, and people are accepting this new technology. Reading along these network structures has become a habit, to most people, just like browsing a newspaper (Drucker, 2004). The main reason for this is because it has finally established an identity on its own. Even though there are still metaphors used that portray physical objects, the main idea of what a webpage is has greatly been accepted and acknowledged thereby giving it the freedom to grow. The e-book however, being this new technological device has still not been able to establish this personal identity, and therefore is holding on to this physical object, the book. The most kitsch elements of physical books have been applied to the e-books, while the newer features, such as rapid refresh or time stamped updates, have not found a place within the interface yet (Drucker, 2003, p.2).

In a lot of ways this is a marketing strategy. According to the IBM research it became clear that readers "prefer features in electronic books that emulate paper book functions" (Drucker, 2003, p. 4), but the only reason this is the case is because they are not use to anything else, people still view books as being this physical object in a codex form, so of course they rather prefer these e-books to resemble actual books, because they have not been shown how it can work otherwise. Instead of designing the e-books to resemble the actual physical codex book itself, they should design them to fit the main idea instead, which again is, a fixed sequence, which provides access to its contents (or ideas) through some stable arrangement. Thereby giving the medium the freedom to work to its fullest potential and still remain a 'book'. There is no need for the cheesy page drape from a central gutter, this serves absolutely no purpose what so ever. As in paper formats, these serve not only for navigational purposes, but also to call attention to sections within larger argument (Drucker, 2003). Replacing this page drape in the e-book with a scroll function would be a lot more obvious because it then shows the reader the depth of the book as well as where within the book she is reading and how much is still to come (Drucker, 2003).

These marketing strategies go even further. They do not only make you think that these e-books are the same as actual physical books by making them look like them, but they are now also handling the e-books as if they are real books in the physical world. An example of how this is done is that of the Barnes & Nobels nook lend an e-book campaign. In this campaign the idea is that you can actually lend out your e-books to friends just like lending a real book. And in fact it works exactly the same, after purchasing the e-book

you can lend it out to a friend, the e-book will then disappear from your e-reader onto your friends e-reader for 14days and then be sent back to you afterwards. During this time you are not able to read that same book that you have just lend out. This whole concept is absolutely absurd, e-books are simply files that can be changed and copied infinitely. This gives the buyers a false idea that it is in fact just like a real book, and not this abstract file in this virtual space. Another example is that of Amazon, they had accidentally sold two publications, "George Orwell 1984" and "Animal farm" without having the rights for those books. This resulted in Amazon having to remove already sold e-books from customers' Kindle devices, and then refunding them (Amazon irony). This example shows that even though they are promoting and camouflaging these e-books to be actual books in reality they know they are just files that can be tampered with, which is completely different than an actual book in your own bookcase. Brainwashing people to believe something that is not true is wrong, hereby they are not only keeping them completely naive, but at the same time they are preventing them from understanding further innovations yet to come.

The reasons why these e-books are designed in such a way might not only be because of marketing reasons. Another reason can also be the hardware limitations of the surrogates. Most surrogates use, what is called, electronic-paper or electronic ink displays (e-paper, wiki). It is a display that has specifically been designed to literally mimic actual paper with ink on it. Electronic paper does not use a backlight to illuminate its pixels like an ordinary flat panel displays, instead it does not use artificial light at all only natural light. Also it is able to hold on to an image or text without electricity (e-paper, wiki). The major downfall to this electronic paper is that it takes some time to refresh the page, thereby making it necessary to chop books into pages like real codex books do so that the surrogate has time to load the text. Hereby making it impossible to have a scroll bar.

It is painfully clear that e-books are going through an identity crises. No matter if it is a marketing strategy or a hardware limitation it is obvious that the e-books have been designed wrong because they keep on holding on to the past rather than moving on forward. For the e-books to be able to become a thing on there own we have to start seeing them as something that works on its own. Electronic paper is holding back the e-books potential, it might mimic real paper in an amazing way but it is not allowing the e-book to work the way it should work.

Mag+

Mag+ is a corporate collaborative research project initiated by Bonnier R&D in the experience of reading magazines on handheld digital devices. This project should be used as an example of how e-books should eventually function and the potential they hold when breaking away from their physical book limitations. It is designed by BERG and gives a great glance into how magazines will develop in the digitalized future. They will continue to maintain their relaxed and cozy features while at the same time have the readers experience the exciting world of digital media (Arnall, 2009). The entire way of navigating through the magazine has been rethought out to fit the digital device. "We have chosen to layout the page elements that we find in magazines vertically. We find that

the metaphorical graphical page turning metaphor, that you see quite frequently in e-reader's are not terrible believable to us and they don't feel very honest to the form of the screen and when we look at successful digital reading experience such a e-mail or blogs, it seems more clearer that scrolling systems is more appropriate for what we are dealing with" (Arnall, 2009). This magazine allows you to literally interact with it creating this entire new experience of reading a magazine without falling back into metaphors of what a magazine is. It allows you to see movies, hear music, search the Internet, and save articles. It is an entire world on its own that has unbelievable possibilities. This magazine is a great example of what an e-book can become if we just let go of the past.

Conclusion

When we look back at the evolution of communication it is clear that Marshall McLuhan was correct when saying "The medium is the message" (McLuhan, 2003), because in all cases whether it was the pictograms paintied on stone, the scroll, the codex book and now also the internet the content has always changed in such a way that it fit into the medium in which it was displayed in. This however is not the case with the new e-book which in facts is not taking the message and transforming it into the medium but it has simply taken the old medium with the fitted content in there and literally placed the entire thing into the new medium. Thereby not creating a form or function on its own and making the ultimate graphical design useless. The e-books have huge potential to develop into something great, however the only way they are able to reach that level is if we start to see the difference between a physical book and an e-book. The only reason why we believe a book looks the way it looks like is because no one has shown us otherwise. For centuries the codex form has become the center piece of what a book is and we have learned to accept this as being the truth, but before that the scroll was the book and still we were able to let go of that idea and accept a new form for that definition. If it was possible than, than why would it not be possible now. We have already accepted the Internet for being what it is despite it being something abstract, therefore I believe the e-books will also eventually be accepted for what they are and not what they resembles, but this will only happen if they change their design drastically to fit the medium!

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