

An eBook is not a book is not a book

Roxana Theodorou, PhD

Head Librarian, Hellenic American University

A while back I started reading Gertrud Stein. Maybe I tried to embrace poetry a little late in life, however better late than never. The truth is that poetry is not an “obvious” thing, not always, so I tried to accompany my poetry books with several studies about them. And just like that, I stumbled upon *Sacred Emily* and the sentence “*Rose is a rose is a rose is a rose*”. That didn’t need any explaining. It was pretty obvious: things are what they are. But, it goes a little deeper than that. In Stein’s view, the sentence expresses the fact that simply using the name of a thing already invokes the imagery and emotions associated with it, an idea also intensively discussed in the problems of universal debate where Peter Abelard and others used the *rose* as an example concept. (Wikipedia, 2013)

And when I started contemplating on the future of the book and the eBook, Gertrude Stein and her roses came rushing back!

The future of the Book is one of the favorite discussions of our time – and our profession. Everyone, from publishers, to printers, to authors, to booksellers, to readers seem really upset about what future lies ahead! It is pretty understandable, of course. Publishing is a huge business that remained more or less unchanged for centuries. The format of the book, the means and methods of publication, the publishing genres, all remain warmly familiar.

But then, the Internet showed up and everything changed. All disruptive technologies do that, one way or another. You see, Internet is not just another invention, which brought up some changes in our lives. Internet changed the way we work, do business, communicate, think, act, react, teach and learn, spend our free time, our perception of property, personal space, the definition of friendship etc. Reading wasn’t going to be left unaffected, after all.

And, honestly it comes as a surprise, at least to me, that books kept resisting change for so long. Take the music industry as an example. Since the Internet became a huge bubble that so many of us got lost in it, mp3 downloading became one of the most popular online activities (along with chatting with strangers, playing in online casinos, and, of course, watching porn). The music industry reacted almost immediately and still tries to force limitations on what, essentially, is an illegal act.

But books, in their electronic format, have remained for the largest part immune to this trend. Publishers refused to release electronic versions of their books online. On the other hand eBook readers were, until recently, hard to use, bulky and unattractive. And reading a pdf file on a desktop computer can hardly be considered comfortable and relaxing. But then, a couple of inventions showed up that changed the publishing industry to its foundations.

First came the Kindle. Amazon released the first generation Kindle on November 19th 2007. The publicity given to the launch was huge, both from Amazon itself and the press. Several predictions were made as to how this new product would perform (Levy, 2007) (Anderson, 2007). In fact there were several very optimistic (from their point of view) articles on the subject. In fact, one of them, published in the Boston Globe, quoted predictions made by several field experts that the Kindle would probably sell out in 5 months' time (Johnson, 2007). In fact it sold out in 5.5 weeks (Patel, 2007). And remained out of stock for the next 5 months. And all that happened despite Amazon not selling Kindle first generation outside the US.

Amazon was not the first company to market an eReader (Sony, Bookeen, iRex Technologies, JinKe are just a few companies that have previously launched several eBook readers), but it certainly was the first company to offer the devices and their content, tied together in a seamless bundle. It was actually, for the first time, made easy to buy an electronic book and load it on your eBook reader. Of course, Amazon, being the largest book store worldwide, tried to use all of its leverage over publishers in order to convince them (or extort them) to produce electronic versions of their printed books, and overall succeeded, producing for the first time a large collection of electronic titles. Of course, many new and improved versions of the Kindle have come out since, but this is not supposed to be a detailed presentation on the history of eReading devices. The next big step as far as eBooks are concerned did not happen due to a dedicated device, but due to a gadget that probably changed the way we use computers overall. The iPad.

On April 3rd 2010 the first generation iPad was launched by Apple and during the first 80 days 3 million devices were sold (Apple, 2010). The iPad is a beautiful thing, which reinvented, or at least made way for, the market of mobile devices. Its operating system was so easy, pretty and straightforward, that even toddlers could easily learn to use it. It has a long battery life, is ultra-portable, and does more things than an eBook reader, making the buyer think this is buy

worth spending money on. Of course, many applications dedicated to eBooks quickly emerged, most notably, Kindle itself. Although Amazon and Apple had a fallout that prevented users of directly buying eBooks from inside the application, nonetheless, Kindle was (and continues to be) a great success. Additionally, the iPad had a beautiful screen –especially the later retina one–that made reading comfortable, even if it was not designed to be a dedicated eBook reader.

However, the game changer in this case was a new trend that emerged because of the iPad and its operating system. eBooks could now be designed and created as apps themselves and not a mere component of another program. The first eBook app that created a big buzz, and actually presented a new way of reading, viewing, or using an eBook, not in a theoretical way, but rather in a very successful, tasteful and meaningful implementation was, in my view, Alice for iPad. To make Alice for iPad, the designers found an incredibly old copy of Alice in Wonderland and scanned the illustrations (Stevens, 2010), cleaned them up in Photoshop, redrew the scenes and characters and added new illustrated objects that could move around the screen. Then they added virtual gravity and physics to the characters and objects. It was the first time this kind of technology was applied this way and the result was to top-gross the children's books in the iPad store.



(AtomicAntelope, 2010)

What AtomicAntelope did (the company behind Alice for iPad) was to try and transform a print book to software. Because that is what eBooks essentially are: Software¹.

We are so trapped by the name of the eBook, that we still view it as the electronic version of the printed book. What's in a name, you might ask. Quite a lot, indeed. To paraphrase Stein, a book is a book is a book is a book; a written or printed work consisting of pages glued or sewn together along one side and bound in covers (Oxford Dictionaries, 2013). Everyone feels comfortable using a book, we have learned that since our parents stated reading us fairy tales as infants. The book has had the same built, the same architecture, the same mechanics, even before Gutenberg, since the codex (Roberts, 1987), more than 2,000 years. The essence of what a book is supposed to look like has been engraved to our collective unconscious.

In that case, what is an eBook, then? According to Oxford Dictionaries (Oxford Dictionaries, 2013) is an electronic version of a printed book which can be read on a computer or a specifically designed handheld device. Wikipedia gives another definition: [...]a book-length publication in digital form, consisting of text, images, or both, and produced on, published through, and readable on computers or other electronic devices. Sometimes the equivalent of a conventional printed book, e-books can also be born digital (Wikipedia, 2013). Finally, Britannica, gives another definition: a digital file containing a body of text and images suitable for distributing electronically and displaying on-screen in a manner similar to a printed book. E-books can be created by converting a printer's source files to formats optimized for easy downloading and on-screen reading, or they can be drawn from a database or a set of text files that were not created solely for print (Encyclopaedia Britannica, 2013). There are many other definitions out there, and every one may vary a little. What all of them have in common however, is noting the close relation between the print book and the eBook.

And all of them are, partially, wrong. The eBook is not, nor should it be, the electronic version of a print book. This is like saying that the cinema is the visual equivalent of radio. And movies were made by taping actors sitting around a microphone, and reading their lines as audibly and persuasively as possible, without, however doing anything else.

The case of the eBooks is a first class embodiment of the famous McLuhan phrase "*The medium is the message*". What McLuhan meant with this was that a medium embeds itself in the message, by which the medium influences how the message is perceived. The potential of the medium, is also another aspect. By

¹ Software is any set of machine-readable instructions (most often, in the form of a computer program) that directs a computer's processor to perform specific operations (Wikipedia, 2013).

trying to faithfully transfer the print book in electronic format we are definitely missing some important features.

In the print world information was organized, spread out, and calculated in pages. A 400 pages book might have been a very long one, and many readers could have been deterred by its mere volume. As Chris Anderson, TED Director, put it: “Busy people can be daunted at the prospect of having to read a 300- or 400- page book” (Sattersten, 2011).

Electronic devices come in a lot of different sizes and the reader can increase and decrease the font size, making it impossible for the book to have a fixed page number. What is more important is that page number is *irrelevant*. What defines the final form of the book is the electronic “container” (Sattersten, 2011) and the personal preferences of the reader. Anderson proposes that instead of pages we use time needed to read a book, as a means to measure its length, and that measurement adopts to the reading speed of each reader. I do not know if that is the best way to actually measure books, but the most important fact is that eBooks can remove the fear of the publishers to deliver specific minimum pages counts (Sattersten, 2013). And that could possibly lead to the creation of many new kinds and forms of books, not any more constrained by length.

If we start viewing eBooks as software we will inevitably free them of the restrictions of their print legacy, and we will be able to take advantage of this – not so- new medium. The eBooks needs a device, dedicated or not, in order to be used. It is not constrained by physicality. There is only one master, from which, countless identical copies can be made, with no cost. Distribution can be done using several methods, downloading, streaming, or in DVDs. Access can be provided with several methods, as well, one-off sale, subscription, or open access. Readers can become authors, contributing to the content and eventually creating new version of the original, or entirely new works. eBooks have additional functionalities and enriched content with motion, sound, multimedia and interactivity.

There is, however, one particular genre of book that slowly evolves, and changes, but still remains essentially a book, and that is children’s books. As readers, children welcome variety and change. They have not yet got used to anything, so nothing really surprises them. They are used to trying hard to understand how things work (from spoons, to doorknobs, to television and iPads) so they do not easily give up. They are also very harsh critics; if they do not like something, they simply toss it aside, and never bother with it again.

Children’s books use interaction, color, music, interlinking, help buttons, and allow the reader to be a creator. In other words, the story is not only meant to be read solely in a linear fashion (although that is certainly possible), but rather the reader has the chance to follow different paths in the storyline, and in the work in general, exploring different outcomes.

Of course, children's books come in all shapes and sizes, and between the basic eBooks (i.e. digitized versions of print books), and books that look and feel more electronic games than books, there is a huge world of endless possibilities. Designers and publishers alike, are starting to take advantage of the open and "adventurous" nature of young readers, in order create more and more versatile publications. Apart from Alice, that has already been mentioned above, there numerous examples of successful re-inventions of the book.

"The Monster at the End of this Book", by Sesame Street, is an app that essentially recreates the print book balancing narration (or reading) with interaction, while totally respecting the essence of the original book. The child gets to act on what was previously just described in the print version of the book: untie knots, knock down brick walls, etc.

"A story before Bed" is another app for children that essentially, narrates bed time stories. The advantage of this particular eBook, is that allows the parents to record their voices reading the book, so the child can listen to them, instead of some professional narrator. At first glance that may seem easy and unimportant but, in a sense, the parents/narrators become artists themselves, diving into the text, making it their own, interpreting and enacting it in a personal and unique way.

"The Castle" is an "actionbook". The reader gets to wonder inside a village from the Middle ages, and while playing with the interface, exploring the streets, the castles and the houses, the app produces historical and educational information.

Finally, "Ann Frank" published by Penguin Books, is a new, interactive iPad take on Anne Frank's famous diary. "Anne Frank" has three main components – the diary, Story trails and Timeline. The diary itself is exactly as we know it, except it includes a series of links to illustrative content, such as photos, videos, maps and additional background information. For example, you can see a full 3D model of Anne Frank's home in Amsterdam, which helps to bring the story to life. The Story Trails section lets you delve into key aspects of the story, linking directly to excerpts of the diary with additional notes and narration on the highlighted segments. Similarly, Timeline takes you through an easy-to-follow calendar of key events in the Anne Frank story. There are actually dual timelines, featuring family images from Anne's life before the war, as well as historic wartime images from international archives accompanied by commentary on key events (Sawers, 2013).

A somehow related genre to children's books are comic books. Nowadays, of course, comic books are no more intended just for kids. On the contrary, they are extremely popular to readers well in their 20s and 30s, and at least a quarter of overall comic book readers are over 65 (Simba Information, 2010). Comic books (or graphic novels, if you prefer) have a very distinct form and means of

presenting information. This combination, this unconstrained blend of text and illustration, that sometimes feel all too static in the print environment, can be elevated, perfected in the digital environment. Of course, many applications have been created dedicated to comic book reading, (Comics by Comixology, Marvel Comics, IDW Comics, The Carrier, iVerse Comics, Verm etc), but most of them do not really add anything to the genre. In fact, the majority of them are dedicated apps to a certain publisher. However, some of them stand out.

Madefire, for example, is an application that turns comic books into Motion Books (as they call them). The book is transformed into an interactive application, which runs dynamically in mobile devices (mainly iPad and iPhone). Apart from motion, music and sounds can be added to create a more evocative environment. The end result however, does not resemble an animated movie, but remains true to the comic “book” feeling. Each panel is animated and projected subtly and individually, without interfering with the next, and this way the reader is allowed to dwell on the illustration longer, being able to focus on the details, without losing the coherence of storytelling.

Certainly, not all eBook apps are dedicated for younger users, or playful content; and this is proof that the medium is truly transforming itself. One particular eBook application that I think is particularly interesting is Papercut. Papercut is still at its experimental stages and includes three short stories by world famous authors. As the reader moves along the text, the application tries to transform simple reading into an interactive experience, automatically triggering relevant video, animation, image sequences, and sound content. All these “additions” to the text, however, are subtle enough so that do not become a nuisance or a distraction to the reader, but powerful enough to add emotion and depth to the narration.

Naturally, not all books can –or should- be turned into a fully functional eBook. Just as not all theatrical plays cannot be turned into a movie; they are robbed of their essence, they lose a part of their magic, and they may be full of bells and whistles, but empty of meaning. The god-old novel will not die; the written word will not wither. On the contrary. But other, new or “renovated” forms of creative expression are going to make an appearance, bloom and blossom, giving readers more options and not taking chances away from authors and publishers. And plain text creations, will still be authored and read, without that being the sole extent of authorship.

But the fact remains, eBook (in its full potential) is a disruptive innovation, and will, at some point, displace the print book. There will always be those of us who feel nostalgic about the past, and will always reminisce on the good old days, when all was simpler, better, easier. Much like the model T Ford put an end to the horse and buggy era, but, by no means, did it eliminate horses from the face of earth, so the eBook is going to replace the print book to a great extent, and change the way we handle the written word, both as creators and as consumers.

In essence the eBook is now what the printing press was for the 15th century. Before movable type, storytelling and writing existed and thrived, at least to the measure of the times. What the invention of Gutenberg actually did, is make the book so much easier to produce that became accessible to everyone, thus diminishing illiteracy and uncovering new recreational and scientific needs that eventually created new literary genres, like the novel, as we think of it today, scientific journals, broadsheets and newspapers, magazines etc. No-one can say today that the printing press ruined creativity. And, although, calligraphy may be a long lost art today, we do not really believe that turning back the clock to the early 15th century would somehow improve the publishing industry.

The bottom line is that we shouldn't so much worry about the extinction of a means, but rather the evolution of creativity. As typography gave birth to the novel, eBooks are the womb for new, yet unnamed, things.

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