

The Book – Past, Present, and Future: (r)Evolutionary (e)Books

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There are few inventions of more historical importance than the book. The book is a form and a format, a vessel filled with content, uniquely tailored to the human body.

Whether you are a teacher, student, librarian, writer, scientist, artist or technophobe, your familiar scholarly book environment is rapidly changing, whether you acknowledge it or not. For some in the academic community, the printed book remains the standard format for delivering information. For others, especially students, the book is a tangible symbol of all that is dated and arcane. Many of the students we educate are more comfortable accessing digital resources than traditional books. They even prefer reading from electronic devices. And, most significantly, studies demonstrate that this generation trusts “facts” delivered over the Internet more than information from printed texts.¹ This year’s survey of Holman Library’s English 111 instruction classes reveal that less than 14% of the students have had any previous library instruction.² Could there be a correlation? You betcha!

Now is also the time for academic institutions to reconsider their preconceptions of a library. Clifford Lynch, Executive Director of the Coalition for Networked Information, correctly states the new technologies may “promote a continual series of planned obsolescence for all types of content. Imagine having to replace one’s personal library every ten years due to planned and enforced technological obsolescence.”³ Still, according to a University of Virginia INTERQUEST report, “the road ahead is not as smooth as ‘digital missionaries’ predict nor as slippery as ‘traditional bibliophiles’ fear.”⁴

Exploring the book’s future is important not only to academics, but to all book owners and users. It is essential to understand that the latest electronic texts (etexts, ejournals, ebooks, etc.) are the latest forms in a marvelous evolutionary process. From the earliest oral traditions and wall paintings to the development of cuneiforms, ideograms, alphabets, calligraphy, papyri, parchment, paper, bindings and type, the book (or codex) as we know it, has been thousands of years in the making. We must consider electronic books from within this context. From Gutenberg

to Gates, cuneiform to compact disc, this multicultural and multidisciplinary field of book history has become "a particularly hot topic in the humanities and not just in the United States." ⁵

Ebooks have evolved from books lettered by hand, to those printed using wood blocks or moveable type, through paperbacks, artists books, audio books, hypertexts and various other digital formats before arriving at their current stage. Ebook reading devices did not spring from the mouth of Zeus, either, but resulted from advances in networked computers, software, and portable storage formats such as diskettes, compact disc, DVDs, compact flash, smart cards and memory sticks.

In order to explain these concepts to others, we prefer to reach back to a more ancient definition of the book as "word vessel" (i.e., the Dead Sea Scrolls). It is then easier to accept the digital book as an electronic content (or data) vessel. Many of us are accessing ebooks every day without even realizing it. Just because you're not reading a text purchased through Amazon's ebook division, using a child's LeapPad, or accessing one of Holman Library's 2000 netLibrary ebooks, doesn't mean it's not an electronic book or wasn't at some stage of its creation.

Many commercial ebook publishers, who merely replicate in digital form what is best presented in print, are most at fault for not recognizing the differences and the potential of the electronic format. The simple truth is that the printed book can never equal nor duplicate several distinct features inherent in electronic books. The best ebooks are accessible, available, current, dynamic, encyclopedic, fluid, inexpensive, linkable, portable, randomly accessed, searchable, spatial and much more. The electronic book is part of a great shift in perspectives affecting our academic culture, something I consider an aesthetic revolution. Most of us appreciate the concreteness, intimacy and beauty of printed texts. Ebooks offer a greater range of sensory experiences, cultivating this new aesthetic.

The illuminated light displayed through computer monitors is the 21st century equivalent to the stained glass of a gothic cathedral. No printed book can possibly match its' radiance. True ebooks provide multimedia content no printed text can offer. Comprehension and literacy are accomplished when aural, visual and verbal content reinforce each other.

As soon as a printed text is published, it is out-of-date. The content of an electronic text need not be fixed. Users can determine how narratives end, they can link to more recently updated Websites, and even have the text influenced by the number of viewers using the book.

Electronic books generally cost very little to produce, most, considerably less than their print equivalents. More than half of the works included in the *(r)Evolutionary (e)Books* exhibition series we organized were free over the Internet. The most expensive in CD-ROM format cost less than \$50.

The printed book's physicality occupies space. When the electronic reading device is turned off, the ebook literally disappears. This is the reason why our exhibitions are tied to the concept of a 1960s happening. One can either attend and interact with the ebooks within the exhibition timeframe or miss out on the "experience."

In the same way that television has not replaced the radio, ebooks will not replace the pbook (printed book). Instead, electronic books have helped clarify the unique nature of the printed book and confirmed the reasons why they have dominated the market until now. The unchanging text, tactility, permanence, low technology and portability of pbooks are valuable qualities.

The *(r)Evolutionary (e)Books* Model: Meeting an Important Need

Educational institutions, especially academic libraries, are seeking methods of integrating electronic formats into their collections and instructing their patrons in their use. Libraries need to be at the forefront of the new integration of reading, writing, creativity, and scholarship, examining the possibilities of new technologies.

On March 3, 2000, McKendree College's Holman Library hosted our first online exhibition. The *(r)Evolutionary (e)Books* model seeks to have participants never think of a book or a library in the same way, again, and to recognize the creative potential of the book in electronic form. The exhibited works explore significant issues such as the evolution of the book, the redefinition of the reading, writing and artmaking processes, literacy, preservation, the future of information delivery, and digital rights management.

Only a few steps are required to successfully host an online event similar to *(r)Evolutionary (e)Books*.

Select an exhibition theme. Think of the event more as a relaxed party atmosphere than a pretentious museum or gallery opening. A library exhibition should be different than one held at a for-profit venue.

Select a group of artists and/or special collection. What is unique about your library, institution or patrons? Whole displays could be developed around children's books, minority populations, a literary or artistic genre or a specific ebook device. For example, our events featured something for the entire family including a digital gallery using the library's computer monitors as frames to showcase electronic works from around the world. Many of the new ebook reading devices were made available for adults to examine, as well as ebooks aimed at children and young adult readers. We also included traditionally-framed artwork for those who did not wish to use computers.

Collect resource materials. Besides providing resources on the history of the book and libraries, research, purchase, and exhibit the best electronic books on your chosen theme. A selection of our favorite *(r)Evolutionary (e)Books* are listed at the end of this article. Does the publisher Octavo have any appropriate ebooks? Does Simon Biggs' *Babel* relate? Ebook publishers and related Internet Websites generate a wealth of promotional materials and samples. Ask for publishers' support and advice. It's to their benefit even if you need to criticize their publications.

Think long term and create an ongoing resource. McKendree College has hosted the Website related to our activities at http://faculty.mckendree.edu/william_harroff/ebe for the last two years. It is a valuable promotional tool, an educational resource for interested individuals and our inspiration for keeping up-to-date with changes in electronic publishing.

Publicize the event. By all means, talk to the media before and, hopefully, during the event. Education is our goal, after all! A well-reasoned, insightful, brief explanation of how libraries are successfully adapting to a changing digital environment makes a lasting impression on everyone.

Enjoy yourself. Exhibit ebooks you enjoy using and sharing with others. There is nothing like a passionate educator competently and enthusiastically demonstrating electronic books to make people feel comfortable and intrigued.

Why should libraries get involved in these efforts? They are generally better equipped technologically than most museums and galleries. Campuses supply faster Internet connections than most residences, businesses and private institutions. Most library staff are experienced with using new technologies effectively and can place the new book forms into their proper historical context. Libraries can and should regularly host a variety of exhibitions to redefine their physical environments and provide a gathering place for new audiences. Advanced technologies are also ripe for alternative programming and professional development to motivate library staffs, docents and end users. As we have proven repeatedly with *(r)Evolutionary (e)Books*, unique grant possibilities also exist that favor the library community to support such activities.

Enthusiastic responses to our events, such as these, have been gratifying, personally, but even more valuable to our institutions and divisions.

"The (R)evolutionary (E)Books show was a mind-expanding experience!"

"Before visiting I thought I knew what the "cutting edge" in books are. Wow was I wrong! Your exhibit opened my eyes to completely new possibilities. The concept of e-books has grown beyond my narrow definition."

"Thank you for allowing me to see books and words in a whole new way. Both of you are Revolutionaries."

"Wow! Wow! Wow! Wow! Wow! Wow! Wow! SUPER!"

"Thank you for such a wonderful, innovative, hands-on experience! I now have numerous ideas for my teaching, resources to share with my five year-old son, and outlets for personal creative expression. Your exhibit really vividly illustrates the Revolution we are all in the midst of, and most of us don't even realize that we are!"

"It was a great display - it showed so much work and thought and thoughtfulness. And of course creativity!"

Thanks for "thinking outside the box."

"Very informative— I did not realize how much technology could enhance our 'book' collection."

"So many new ideas! It is a lot to absorb. I think we'll have trouble keeping up with our grandchildren. Thanks for the peek into the future (and present for some)."

"Thanks for your love of learning and teaching. Time with you two has given us (kids and I) a whole new world to explore."

"Revolutionary, so many new concepts to think about."

"Mind boggling! Information in new formats/expression! Creativity. Wow!"

"Amazing!! Entertaining and Educational."

"What a surprise—I love it!"

"Wow! What an enlightening experience! Thank you for the graphics and the three dimensional objects of beauty, information and wonderment. My imagination has been more stimulated by such inputs than it has in a long while."

In the last few months, we have spoken to over a thousand educators, librarians, artists, and the general public. We are already scheduled to present exhibitions and workshops at the upcoming Midwest Chapter of the Guild of Bookworkers meeting (March 2002); the joint national conference of the Art Libraries Society of North America and the Art section of the American Library Association (April 2002); and Principia College (Summer & Fall 2001). We have also been asked to take various forms of the event to five other states and at least three other academic libraries in the St. Louis area. Tentative plans also include our metropolitan New York debut in the fall of 2002.

Top 10 (r)Evolutionary (e)Books

A Humument by Tom Phillips

<http://www.tomphillips.co.uk/humument/index.html>

Babel by Simon Biggs

<http://babel.uk.net/>

Grammatron by Mark Amerika

<http://www.grammatron.com/>

Lotus Blossom by Young-Hae Chang & Heavy Industries

http://www.yhchang.com/LOTUS_BLOSSOM.html

Spiral by Martin Wattenberg (with consulting from Steve Cannon)

<http://rhizome.org/spiral/1.php3?page=1>

The Order of Things by Ken Cockburn
Pocketbooks, 2000, \$11.95 ISBN 0748663010 (Mac & Windows)

Wild Life by Hamish Fulton
Pocketbooks, 2000, \$11.95 ISBN 0748662820 (Mac & Windows)

Scrutiny in the Great Round by Tennessee Rice Dixon & Jim Gasperini
Calliope Media, 1995, Not Currently Available, ISBN 1887701028(Windows)

Digital Griot by Betye Saar
Voyager, 1998, \$29.95, ISBN 1581250304 (Mac & Windows)

William Morris The Works Now Newly Imprinted by Geoffrey Chaucer
Octavo, 1998, \$50.00, (CDROM) ISBN 1-891788-19-1 (Mac & Windows)
Octavo, 1998, \$10.00, (PDF Downloadable) ISBN 1-891788-40-X

The Book of Urizen by William Blake
Octavo, 2001, \$19.00, (CD-ROM) ISBN 1-891788-31-0 (Mac & Windows)

Horae beatae Mariae ad usum Romanum
Octavo, 1999, \$30.00, (CD-ROM) ISBN 1-891788-25-6 (Mac & Windows)
Octavo, 1999, \$8.00, (PDF Downloadable) ISBN 1-891788-50-7

Patchwork Girl by Shelley Jackson
Eastgate Systems, 1995, \$19.95, ISBN 1884511236 (Mac & Windows)

Victory Garden by Stuart Moulthrop
Eastgate Systems, 1999, \$19.95, ISBN 1884511031 (Mac & Windows)

afternoon, a story by Michael Joyce
Eastgate Systems, 1999, \$19.95, ISBN 1884511015 (Mac & Windows)

William Harroff has been a book artist for almost twenty years, working almost exclusively in digital formats for the last seven years. His artwork is profiled in the current issue of *Afterimage*, one of the leading American book arts journals, and *Contemporary Impressions*. He has been the recipient of an NEA / Arts Midwest Visual Art fellowship, an NEA Regional Artists' Project grant, a Ragdale Foundation residency and top honors in a number of international art competitions. He also taught illustration for several years at Oskar Kokoschka's "School of Vision" in Salzburg, Austria. His work is included in collections throughout the world, including London's Victoria & Albert Museum, Chicago's Museum of Contemporary Art, and the New York Public Library. He has lectured on electronic bookworks at the University of Alabama, SUNY Plattsburgh, Florida State University, the University of Iowa, Auburn University and Clemson. Since 1997, he has served as the Reference & Information Technologies Librarian at McKendree College. He has also held faculty positions at Southern Illinois University at Edwardsville (1989 – 1996) and Oklahoma State University (1980 – 1983).

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Charlotte Johnson has been the Director of User Services at Southern Illinois University at Edwardsville's Lovejoy Library since 1984. Over the past several years, she has attended numerous electronic book conferences and helped introduce electronic books to academic libraries in Illinois. She has beta tested a number of electronic text services and ebook reading devices. She holds a B.S. in Art Education and an M.A. in Library Science from the University of Wisconsin – Madison and has been creating artist's books since the early 1970s. Her books have been exhibited in Ireland, Great Britain, Italy, Hungary, Lithuania and Austria, as well as at the Corcoran Gallery in Washington, D.C. As a hand papermaker and typographer, she has studied ancient texts and bookforms in Japan, Nepal, Turkey, Iran, Egypt and Russia. She has also taught papermaking and bookmaking classes at Washington University's Fine Art Institute.

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Endnotes

¹ Don Tapscott, Growing Up Digital: the Rise of the Net Generation (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1998).

² William Harroff, "Holman Library English 111 library instruction class surveys," survey results, McKendree College, 2001.

³ Clifford Lynch, "Electrifying the Book: Part 2." netconnect 4 (January 2000): 25.

⁴ INTERQUEST and the University of Virginia, Network, Screen and Page: The Future of Reading in a Digital Age, (Torrance, CA: The Electronic Document Systems Foundation, 1997), 18 Feb. 2001 <<http://www.xplor.org/pubs/edsf/network.cfm>>.

⁵ "The Society for the History of Authorship, Reading and Publishing," 18 Feb. 2001 <<http://www.sharpweb.org/intro.html>>.

