

What binds a book

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(pic 1, David Stairs)

David Stairs, Boundless, 1983, Drucker p. 177

The book you see here is ``Boundless'' by the American artist and graphic designer David Stairs. I took this example from Johanna Drucker's monography ``The Century of Artists' Books'' which is also an important theoretical reference for my talk. Stairs' piece is emblematic for the dialectics between the bound and the unbound book.

Binding and unbinding exist in it a fruitful paradox, a tension that nevertheless boils down to binding as the lowest common denominator of a book. A book, in other words, is almost anything bound together, or unbound in negative reference to the former. To be unbound, after all, does not mean to be boundless.

This is the spatial dimension of being bound, but there is also a temporal one. A book is a bunch of stuff bound so that it doesn't fall apart. Therefore, it can still be read in one, five or ten years later.

(pic 2, Dieter Roth)

Of course, there are exceptions of unstable books: telephone books, or autodestructive artists' books like those of Dieter Roth and Jan Voss that can be seen here in Amsterdam's Boekie Woekie store. But these, too, are exceptions proving the rule.

To which extent can this perspective be reconciled with the assumptions on the unbound book underlying this panel? Let me cite the panel abstract:

(pic 3, conference website)

``Online the book becomes part of a vast, interactive network of footnotes, endnotes, hyperlinks, social tags, geo-location search capabilities, animations, video and sound. It becomes an occasion for social annotations and collaborative communities of readers and authors.''

What seems to be described here is the web rather than the book. If this

would be a book, an e-book for example, you would likely not be able to read it five years later. Links would have broken, social tags been spammed, the geo-location programming interface would have changed, the codecs for the video and sound would have become obsolete, and it wouldn't work on the screen of your 2021 electronic device anyway.

(pic 4: Voyager Expanded Books)

This is exactly what happened with electronic literature before. 20 years ago, we heard exactly the same slogans: linking, multimedia, interactivity, networking. A prominent example were the Expanded Books by the company Voyager. Just as similar start-ups today are inspired by the launch of the iPad, Voyager back then was inspired by the launch of the Powerbook in 1991 and developed as Apple-specific software applications.

(pic 4: John Cayley, Book Unbound)

There were computer-literary HyperCard stacks such as John Cayley's 'Book Unbound' from 1995, multimedia books for CD-ROMs and the Shockwave plug-in, hyperfiction written in Storyspace, and many more. Hardly any of that is still physically readable at all.

A personal side-note: For me, this conference is a déjà-vu, because I joined the new media field in the 1990s with an academic background in a comparative literature, as an essayist on electronic literature. It was a thriving discourse back then, existed years before net art and even the web, had its own festivals, specialized literature departments in the U.S. and Europe, had dozens or even hundreds of hyperfiction and e-literature research books published, and still has its own academic body, the Electronic Literature Organization. Now, after almost 20 years, this field has mostly disappeared, and where it still exists - such as at its point of origin, Brown University in Rhode Island - it evolves around the same old debates and same few works as in the 1990s and early 2000s. footnote:[Master's thesis, 2011]

(pic 5, conference website)

To further quote the text for this panel:

``If connected to other information, is the book still a book? Do we herald the death of the individual author with the rise of collaborative writing? What role will editorial and technical standards play? While the printed book seems finite, is there room in our Order of the Book for works that never achieve closure, that remain in an unfolding

state?''

With all due respect, but one could mistake this for a literal quote from early hypertext media theory twenty years ago. In 1992, the literary scholar George Landow wrote on the first page of his seminal book *Hypertext*, drawing on Jacques Derrida and Roland Barthes, and on Ted Nelson and Andries van Dam:

(pic 6: Landow)

``All four, like many others who write on hypertext or literary theory, argue that we must abandon conceptual systems founded upon ideas of center, margin, hierarchy, and linearity and replace them with ones of multilinearity, nodes, links, and networks. Almost all parties to this paradigm shift, which marks a revolution in human thought, see electronic writing as a direct response to the strengths and weaknesses of the printed book''.

(Landow, *Hypertext*, 1992, 2f.)

Landow wrote this before knowing the World Wide Web, and before the first graphical web browser had been released. His book was a good prediction of the future just because it did not predict, like many others, a shift from the analog book to the digital hyperbook, but a shift from the printed book to the network, to what ultimately became the World Wide Web.

There was a quite similar development in audiovisual media: In the early 1990s, many theorists and practitioners predicted that film would become soon interactive and turn into virtual reality. What really happened is that film stayed linear, but interactive 3D audiovisuals found their medium in computer games. Games and films sometimes compete, sometimes they even converge, but for the most part they stay separate with each of them having its own particular qualities and own particular limitations. It's just the same with books and the web.

(pic 7: e-book, Kindle)

At the same time, an electronic book culture *has* emerged, but it is rather different from the one envisioned in the 1990s, and in the introductory text to this panel. It is embodied by the two commercial and anti-commercial extremes of Amazon's Kindle e-book store and [aaaaarg](http://aaaaarg.org) footnote:[<http://aaaaarg.org>], but both are similar in many respects: They

are
the text-cultural equivalent of iTunes and mp3 file sharing
respectively.

(pic 8: aaaarg)

The media history of digital music and audio is strikingly similar. In the 1990s and earlier, arts, humanities and computer science predicted that this music would be computer-generative, have interactive interfaces like those of Max and PD. But instead, people simply shared and collected simple audio files. We see same with electronic books. People swap plain vanilla PDF, ascii and epub files. So far, electronic books mean that the medium of the book has morphed from pre-medieval scroll to the bound codex, and now from the codex to the computer file footnote:[that can be arbitrarily formatted as simulated paginated codex or a scroll].

Just as the Powerbook in 1991, the iPad now makes critics and industry dream of interactive multimedia books just in the same way the same people dreamed of interactive multimedia books in the 1990s. I dare to predict that, once again, hardly anyone will buy them (except for niches like educational textbooks), and that because hardware and software updates, these kinds of books will become technically unreadable very fast. footnote:[The paper of the professional organization of German booksellers just ran a related opinion piece by Kolja Bed, rftig, and backs it up with economical concerns, <http://www.boersenblatt.net/442555> : ``Ich sehe eine Analogie zwischen den 'Multimedia-CD-ROM-Projekten', die in den spten 90ern gehypt wurden und den 'enhanced' E-Books. Problematisch sind heute wie damals die Produktionskosten, die schnell den Rahmen sprengen knnen.'']

But what is then a book? No definition is set in stone. yet the creation of the Web as a dynamic, up-to-date, ephemeral and unstable medium has reciprocally helped to solidify a notion of the book as a relatively stable, long-term medium. This all the more manifest in the fact that unstable, quickly obsoleted book genres such as telephone registers, technical documentation and city maps, and last not least journalism, have migrated from the printed page to the Web.

In the 1990s, the same seemed true for contemporary art: intermedia artists, working with unstable do-it-yourself media, first migrated from small press print publication to the web. But currently, the very opposite is happening, a massive boom of contemporary artists' books and zines, often as a counter-statement to the Internet and its commodified social media.

Yet even in their most experimental and unstable forms, books do not leave behind their material unity or binding. Johanna Drucker points out:

``In examining the way artists have interrogated the structure of the book, it is important to begin with the obvious but also profound realization that a book should be thought of as a whole. A book is an entity, to be reckoned with in its entirety'' (Drucker, 122)

(pic 10: Saporta)

If we quickly look at two classical examples of unbound literary books, Marc Saporta's ``Composition No. 1'' and Raymond Queneau's ``One Hundred Thousand Billion Poems'', we see how they both explode the corpus, but by doing so, evoke it ex negativo.

(pic 11: Queneau)

Even Saporta's novel, probably the most radically nonlinear one of all times, still is bound: through the envelope that holds its pages together, and the finite number of pages it contains. Paradoxically, the binding becomes even more accentuated in these two books.
footnote:[This is equally for the book ``Le Grand Desordre'' by the French lettrist Isidore Isou (1960), a box of various junk materials, Drucker, p. xxx]. Drucker writes:

(pic 12: drucker)

``To remain artists' books, rather than book-like objects or sculptural works with a book reference to them, these works have to maintain a connection to the idea of the book - to its basic form and function as the presentation of material in relation to a fixed sequence which provides access to its contents (or ideas) through some stable arrangement. Such a definition stretches elastically to reach around books which are card stacks, books which are solid pieces of bound material, and other books whose nature defies easy characterization''.
footnote:[Drucker, 122f. Her statement that ``All books are visual'', p. 197, needs to be contested though in a time of audiobooks and e-books that can alternatively read as braille or via text-to-speech software.]

[If one agrees that the notion of the book is intrinsically tied to that of

the ``stable arrangement'' of material in one item or unit, then it is obvious why the notion of electronic literature became problematic after the early 1990s: Especially in its American schools, it did not simply mean literary writing on the web, but the creation of one-entity works in analogy to the book: Hypercard stacks, Storyspace files, Macromedia director presentations/ Multimedia CD-ROMs, Flash applets etc. The crisis of this form of electronic literature has been intrinsically linked to the crisis and obsolescences of each of these file formats footnote:[See Montfort/Fruin, Acid-Free Bits, and Liu et.al., Born Again Bits, 2005]. The schools of electronic literature in, for example Germany and Russia, that simply understood themselves as writing on the Web and later moved to blogging, and eventually converged with columnist journalism.]

Perhaps surprisingly, Drucker's notion of the book as ``the presentation of material in relation to a fixed sequence which provides access to its contents (or ideas) through some stable arrangement'', with artists' books as the negative references to this norm, has its perfect equivalent in the technical specification of epub, the standard file format for electronic books:

(pic 13: epub)

``EPUB Publications are not limited to the linear ordering of their contents, nor do they preclude linking in arbitrary ways - just like the Web, EPUB Publications are built on hypertext - but the basic consumption and navigation can be reliably accomplished in a way that is not true for a set of HTML pages.''' footnote:[<http://idpf.org/epub/30/spec/epub30-overview.html>]

The codex, as a binding of diverse stuff within one whole, thus migrates into navigation structure: ``A key concept of EPUB is that a Publication consists of multiple resources that may be completely navigated and consumed by a person or program in some specific order'' footnote:[ibid.].

That means, e-books are not unbound books at all. If we were to juxtapose e-books to web sites, then e-books are

* offline media, self-contained documents without external links or embedding;

* work, in the case of epub, with a subset of HTML and CSS that does not require network connections, with a focus on accessibility;

* based on static text, and have audio, video and scripting capabilities only as extras, not as core features. The epub specification says that every e-book must remain readable and usable on readers that don't support them. footnote:[`Scripting consequently should be used only when essential to the User experience, since it greatly increases the likelihood that content will not be portable across all Reading Systems and creates barriers to accessibility and content reusability'', ibid.]

* are read-only documents (with no support for input forms etc.) footnote:[Bed, rftig, ibid.:

Schon bei einfachen EPUB-Dateien, die einen gewissen Anspruch an das Layout erf, llen sollen, besteht aktuell das Problem, dass f, r verschiedene Plattformen optimiert werden muss. Alternativ suche man vergn, gt nach dem kleinsten gemeinsamen Nenner..."]

In other words, ebooks are the textual siblings of mp3 files: digital media on a lowest common technological denominator, foregrounding portability, ease of use and sharing to complexity; predictability to complex audiovisuality, etc.

As a result, e-books are more restricted in their media richness and artistic design possibilities than print books. At the Piet Zwart Institute, we had a three months project on e-book-design with Master students. One of them, the graphic designer Megan Hoogenboom, tried to adapt Paul van Ostaijen's 1920s visual poem "boem paukenslag" to epub, with the following result:

(video: Megan Hoogenboom)

<http://www.flickr.com/photos/43096847@N07/5064758102/#/photos/43096847@N07/5064758102/lightbox/>

This visual design was only possible by using crude hacks. This e-book only works on one particular model of the Sony Reader, other devices won't have proper pagination or large fonts. Features like embedded fonts or large font sizes are possible with some readers and impossible with others, and totally depend on the way the manufacturer of a particular reader implements the standard.

(pic 14: werkplaats typografie)

There is, consequently, a paradoxical development: Media richness, multimediality, tactility has become the domain of print. Artists' books are becoming mainstream and the paradigm for the whole book publishing industry. They are now a graphic design genre, taught at

specialized schools such as Werkplaats Typografie in Arnhem. footnote:[In the recent past, publications like Dexter Sinister/dotdotdot and F.R. David have been indicators of the medium of artists' printed matter being taken over by graphic designers.] At the same time, it's a sure sign that print is moving from mainstream use to a boutique niche of material fetishism. What has emerged is an entropy of print: in the age of electronic publishing, all print books strive to become coffeetable books, often with warm, fuzzy, 'unbound' characteristics. In the fifth chapter of her book, Johanna Drucker investigates ``The Artist's Book as a Rare and/or Auratic Object'' footnote:[Drucker, 93]. Today, this is the formula for the print book as such: it is quickly becoming an auratic, yet desired item like vinyl LPs or analog photographs.

(pic 15: Pirate Bay)

Conversely, electronic books are striving towards the opposite: they are the cheap paperbacks of our time, anti-coffeetable books. E-books are books that you can't show off, like the Great Gatsby in his library of books that he never read. They are the non-auratic, often pirated stuff that you actually want to read, or at least to keyword search footnote:[This creates major problems for the publishing industry that sells a large amount its products to people who just shelve them]. This will unbind books in the same way that mp3 has unbound music. But this is not the kind of unbinding that was imagined in the interactive hypermedia visions of the 1990s.

.New media

[options="header"]

vision	technology	technology	popular culture
generative music	MAX, PD	mp3	recorded music
interactive film	VR	mp4, Youtube	digital video
hypermedia lit.	div.	txt, PDF, epub	e-books

.Use value

[options="header"]

expected benefits	adopted benefits
(programmed) interaction	sharing
rich media	portability
complexity	simplicity

| high production value

| low cost

