

What is  
a Book?



Kyle Vice, *What is a Book?*  
Process Documentation

Grad Design Studio I, Fall 2007,  
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# how did this *begin*?

I think it all began by talking about books. Books as we see them, books as we read them, books as we straddle book culture and digital culture.

*Then the questions:*

- What are the topics related to books?
- What are the functions of a book?
- Are websites books?
- Are Jane Fonda VHS workout videos books?
- Is a pickle a book?

And from this I began to argue, really strongly argue, for a continuum of book-ness which was comprised of aspects of usage, physicality, material, intention, and permanence.

This continuum was my way of dealing with the wide spectrum of systems and objects that exist and could conceivably be referred to as a book, or having the qualities of a book.

Kyle

What is  
a Book?

Is this a book? Why or why not?  
Or, is there anything interesting about this item?

Record your opinion here:

Yes, the View Master is a container of  
information and it does provide access  
to information - and in that way it has  
book functions - but the physicality and look  
of any type of page structure.

So it has a ~~low~~<sup>middle</sup> degree of bookness.

Multiple copies?  
1 copy?



# authority

See Also:  
Rise of the  
book. Why  
did this occur?

The journey from a continuum of book-ness to a video piece is not exactly linear. Through discussions with classmates and through examining what I thought to be traditional books two main themes emerged as my primary concerns: Authority & Semi-permanence. For me, these were the main reasons why books had risen to power. The ability to transmit a message to a large audience was first utilized by the established authorities of religion and government.

I also believe that materials were chosen which would allow for transcription by modern technology but would be able to be semi-permanent. At first handwriting and using pen on paper was the technology of the book, this then moved into printing with Gutenberg and later moved

into other forms of printing which made use of advancing technologies but still had a physical presence in order to have some degree of semi-permanence. Why did tablets or scrolls not persist as dominant means of communication? Tablets and scrolls are both fragile in nature compared to the codex. It is in this way that hard-bound books maintain a higher-degree of book-ness than paperback books: the hard cover exists as a protective measure that works in conjunction with quality paper to preserve the artifact of the book.

# book culture      digital culture

Author      ?  
=      Authority  
+      & Semi-Permanence

The semi-permanence of the book as an object has placed it in a position as the storage medium of choice for centuries. As we explore new digital media as storage devices for our information what happens to the notion of book

As we move forward what happens to our notion of book as authoritative media? Can digital media that remains ever-malleable and even less permanent be seen as an authoritative source? What, then, is the role of the new author

book  
Cuneiform  
Fragile - Break if dropped

Connection  
with  
Religion

on Vegetable dyes  
transferred to substrate (animal skin)

Serial

Single Density

lots of scrolls = Random Access

Wood + Wax

Tablet

- Codex (Plural Codices)

Connected at one side

Loose sheets

2 sides

Random Access

Religion

# a poem

How did I arrive at a poem as part of my answer to this question? What I was learning from the process was that there are many conflicting viewpoints on what exactly a book is, and I really didn't care about any of them. Sure that sounds callous, or maybe even irresponsible given the nature of the question asked. But I had purpose in not trying to provide a firm definition of what a book is.

To tell someone what a book is places you in immediate opposition to that person on the points where your definitions differ. To that end a definition must be pluralistic in order to fully address the nature of a thing – this can be difficult to swallow and difficult to express.

To ask someone a question about what they know, and in answering that question they discover a stance that they were unaware of you give them insight about themselves. To continue on this line of questioning they can gain insight about their world and possibly see their position in a new light.

Based on these assumptions I chose to present a story that asked many questions and explored a topic in a time of intense fluctuation and transition. In my questioning I ask that certain aspects be considered and I do illustrate what I perceive to be the dangers of one path which could be traveled, but my main purpose is to begin a dialogue.



# What Is a Book?

My words made real  
on long-dead trees  
in your hand moved

back, forth  
back, forth  
with nimble fingers  
familiar with  
the dog-eared tattered  
soldiers of this army  
beating down upon the world  
claiming truth, claiming knowledge  
claiming salvation

your words made real  
ever changing as you wish  
hidden from my grasp  
though visible to many eyes  
deny my hand, slip through my fingers  
like so many grains of sand

the sear guides me  
plays his magical pan-pipes  
exposing sand as sand  
and claiming to place it  
in my hand

you and I we make together  
but not through sound  
as we have for long  
but through sand  
meant to last longer

but can it last?  
that which can be  
seen and shaped by all  
yet held by none  
or can it only show where we all stand  
distinct entities from one moment  
to the next ever changing  
with no regard for what  
we were tomorrow?

I'm interested in issues of authorship, ownership of information as they relate to concepts of permanence and semi-permanence and how these notions have contributed to the rise of the book.

I am exploring these concepts in the form of a poem. The poem takes the viewpoint of the author – specifically the “book” author – and raise issues to consider: how society continues to straddle book culture and digital culture.

Through this I am attempting to find a diction that invokes the particularity of the book and of digital media. My typographic treatment, in my opinion, animation will be driven by the aspects of books and digital media.

I suppose I'm not really  
but want to solicit a response from  
viewers about the poem's  
and authorship/authorship.

Kyle Vice

October 15th, 2011  
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# type = image

The more I thought and discussed the look and feel of this piece, the more I became convinced that type should dominate the visuals. The unique voice of the poem, that of a book author, was integral to the concept. Using type seemed like the best way to maintain that voice.

Excessive photography or illustrations would have become the focal point and competed with the narrative as both type and image passed by at an ever-quickening pace.

Type, or at least words in some form, have been a constant throughout the various media of containing and transferring knowledge. So that is where my sketching began. Focusing on type, but beginning to pull in some of the physical attributes of books and unique qualities of the digital medium.



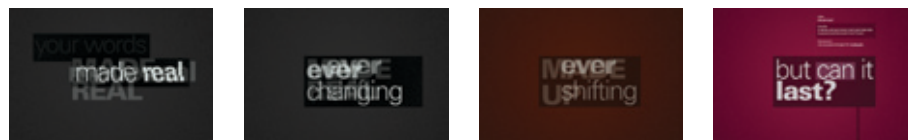
sketch of page ends in a digital context



voice 1



voice 2



voice 3

visual explorations of how to portray paper on screen

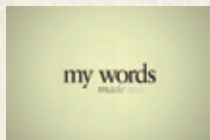
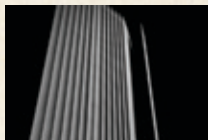
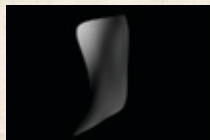
# turning the page

How could I portray the unique aspects of the traditional book on screen in a video? What was important to keep in this simulation? The feel of a page in your hand, how the page flutters when turned, the quality of the paper – all of these are defining aspects of the physical experience of a book.

In order to portray these qualities I did several studies using 3d rendering with fake wind, and warping the page manually. The control afforded by the manual warping won out over the simulated wind. Despite solving this issue the pages still appeared contrived and fake.

It became apparent at this stage that I would have to move beyond the stylized appearance established by my original sketches and move towards more literal visuals of the traditional book. I was also creating the new problem of how I would transition from the world of paper to the digital medium in the video.

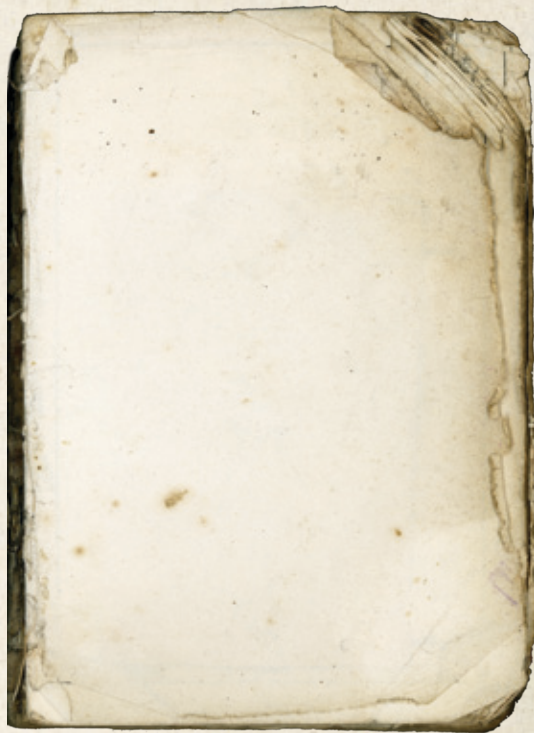




studies of simulated  
paper page movement



representing  
physical damage  
and degradation as  
a unique aspect of  
the traditional book  
experience

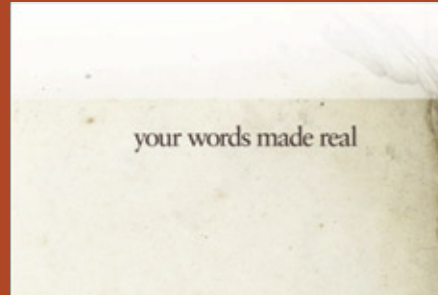


entering the digital realm

# moving . . . ?

The use of the scanner was the breakthrough which moved the story from the physical realm to the digital. From there, everything speeds up and the reader is bombarded by more information. As we move into the digital age, we are constantly filtering to decipher what is important within a sea of information.

Within the digital the rules are even beginning to change, with readers having even greater access to tools to make their own content. These shifts are not without their drawbacks, however, and the remainder of the poem explores the concerns that have been largely ignored as we progress forward into an increasingly digital age. The rapidly appearing and disappearing images and content carry the story along.



the breakthrough





the information increase



# what i learned

I learned that things are not as black and white as many of us would like to believe. I also learned that simple questions are often not as simple as they could be.

But more importantly, I learned the value of exploring a topic and developing strong messages. After reflecting on the different features of books and discussing these features with classmates I gained a new understanding of what a book could be. It was from this new understanding that I was able to develop a thoughtful response to what initially seemed like a simple question.



the video – one frame per second

