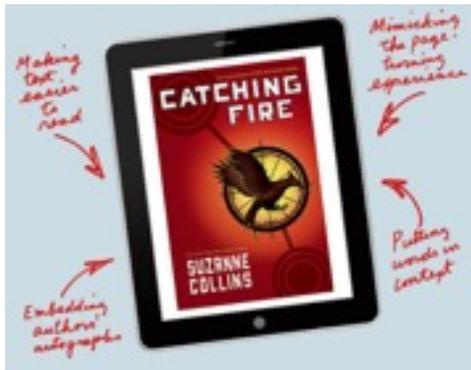


Out of Print, Maybe, but Not Out of Mind

<http://www.nytimes.com/2013/12/02/technology/e-books-hold-tight-to-features-of-their-print-predecessors.html>

By [DAVID STREITFELD](#) Published: December 1, 2013



SAN FRANCISCO — Books are dead. Long live the book.

Even as the universe of printed matter continues to shrivel, the book — or at least some of its best-known features — is showing remarkable staying power online. The idea is apparently embedded so deeply in the collective unconsciousness that no one can bear to leave it behind.

Amazon brags that on its latest e-reader, “[the pages are virtually indistinguishable from a physical book.](#)”¹ It recently introduced the [Page Flip](#)² feature, which mimics the act of skimming. Bookshelves in living rooms may be becoming a thing of the past, but order an e-book from iBooks and Apple promises it “downloads to your bookshelf” immediately.



Photo credit: Hiroko Masuike/The New York Times

Photo caption: “We pursued distractions and called them enhancements,” said Peter Meyers, author of a look at books’ digital transformations.

¹ http://phx.corporate-ir.net/phoenix.zhtml?c=176060&p=irol-newsArticle_pf&ID=1851497

² <http://www.wired.com/2013/09/amazon-kindle-paperwhite/>

Some functions of physical books that seem to have no digital place are nevertheless being retained. An author's autograph on a cherished title looked as if it would become a relic. But Apple just applied for a [patent](#)³ to embed autographs in electronic titles. Publishers still commission covers for e-books even though their function — to catch the roving eye in a crowded store — no longer exists.

What makes all this activity particularly striking is what is not happening. Some features may be getting a second life online, but efforts to reimagine the core experience of the book have stumbled. Dozens of publishing start-ups tried harnessing social reading apps or multimedia, but few caught on.

[Social Books](#),⁴ which let users leave public comments on particular passages and comment on passages selected by others, became Rethink Books and then faltered. Push Pop Press, whose avowed aim was to reimagine the book by mixing text, images, audio, video and interactive graphics, was acquired by Facebook in 2011 and heard from no more. [Copia](#),⁵ another highly publicized social reading platform, changed its business model to become a classroom learning tool.

The latest to stumble is Small Demons, which explores the interrelationship among books. Users who were struck by the Ziegfeld Follies in “The Great Gatsby,” for instance, could follow a link to the dancers' appearance in 67 other books. Small Demons said it would close this month without a new investor.

“A lot of these solutions were born out of a programmer's ability to do something rather than the reader's enthusiasm for things they need,” said Peter Meyers, author of “Breaking the Page,” a forthcoming look at the digital transformation of books. “We pursued distractions and called them enhancements.”

With the new era so slow to arrive, some experts in the future of the book seem to be getting a little weary of the topic.

Bob Stein, a pioneering digital innovator, [wrote recently that](#)⁶ “people often ask me to expound on the ‘future of the book.’” Since Mr. Stein is founder of [the Institute for the Future of the Book](#)⁷, one might think he would expect and even welcome this. He does not. “Frankly,” he wrote, “I can't stand the question.”

There is even a movement of sorts proclaiming that the most innovative delivery mechanisms for stories is happening not online, but in physical books. Its manifesto is printed on the cover of a

³ <http://1.usa.gov/19tGoXa>

⁴ bits.blogs.nytimes.com/2010/11/11/social-books-hopes-to-make-e-reading-communal/?_r=0

⁵ <http://www.thecopia.com/home/index.html>

⁶ <http://futureofthebook.org/blog/>

⁷ <http://www.futureofthebook.org/>

new volume, “[Fully Booked: Ink on Paper: Design & Concepts for New Publications](#)⁸,” mocking the notion of the Internet as the latest thing. “The Internet is not dead,” the cover proclaims. “Digital will not disappear. Print will not kill the web. It’s easy to forget that when physical books were invented, news websites ignored them, and then laughed at them as a niche pursuit for geeks.”

Books have come full circle. For much of the 20th century, they were regarded as one of the triumphs of design: simple to use, cheap to produce, nearly indestructible, highly portable, energy-efficient. They were the best means of transmitting knowledge the human race had ever known.

Then came the Internet. Books suddenly seemed in need of an overhaul.

“The physical book had become a pretty limited thing, dead to design outside of its cover,” said Peter Brantley, who runs [Books in Browsers](#),⁹ a technology conference in San Francisco. “Then all the constraints were gone.”

The notion that books require too much time to read dates back, at least, to midcentury entrepreneurial operations like Reader’s Digest and CliffsNotes, which offered up predigested texts. So some start-ups chose a basic approach: Take a text and break it up.

Safari Flow, a service from Safari Books, offers chapters of technical manuals for a \$29 monthly subscription fee. Inkling does the same with more consumer-oriented titles like cookbooks. If you want only the chapter on pasta, you can buy it for \$4.99 instead of having to buy the whole book.

[Citia](#)¹⁰ is a New York start-up with a much more ambitious approach. Working in collaboration with an author, Citia editors take a nonfiction book and reorganize its ideas onto digital cards that can be read on different devices and sent through social networks.

“The ability to commit 10 or 15 hours to a book is going to be an increasingly fraught decision,” said Mr. Meyers, who came across Citia in the course of his research and found it so intriguing that he became its vice president for editorial and content innovation. “So we need ways to liberate the ideas trapped inside them.”

One of the first books given the Citia treatment was Kevin Kelly’s “What Technology Wants.” Material directly from the book is in quotation marks and the author is referred to in the third person, which lends a somewhat academic distance to the summaries. Sections of the book are summarized on one card, then the reader can drill down into subsections on cards hidden underneath.

⁸ <http://www.amazon.com/Fully-Booked-Design-Concepts-Publications/dp/3899554647>

⁹ <http://bib.archive.org/>

¹⁰ <https://citia.com/content/title/citia>

The author liked the result. “I was stunned by the amount of work Citia did,” Mr. Kelly said. “They wrote a digest of the entire book, idea by idea.”

And yet, he wrote “What Technology Wants” to present his ideas. If they were going to be reorganized by someone else, what was the point of writing the original book? Maybe he should have written the book on cards in the first place.

The very thoroughness of the Citia approach might be discouraging other authors from signing up. Since its debut in the spring of 2012, Citia has done cards for only four books. It recently branched out into other media with track notes for Snoop Lion, the rapper formerly known as Snoop Dogg, and is negotiating with advertising and talent agencies, financial service firms and consumer product companies.

“All companies are becoming media companies,” Mr. Meyers said. “They all need to tell stories about their products.”

What to label these stories is another question. The Internet by its nature breaks down borders and unfreezes text. Put a book online and set it free to grow and shrink with new arguments, be broken up and reassembled as readers demand, and it might be only nostalgia that calls it by its old name.

Some formats, after all, simply outlive their need. CD-ROMs — compact discs that contained multimedia applications — were thought to herald the future of storytelling, but that business model did not survive the rise of the web. Video arcades disappeared when home computers became sophisticated gaming platforms.

“We will continue to recognize books as books as they migrate to the Internet, but our understanding of storytelling will inevitably expand,” Mr. Brantley said. Among the presentations at Books in Browsers this fall: “A Book Isn’t a Book Isn’t a Book” and “The Death of the Reader.”

Much of the design innovation at the moment, Mr. Brantley believes, is not coming from publishers, who must still wrestle with delivering both digital and physical books. Instead it is being developed by a tech community that “doesn’t think about stories as the end product. Instead, they think about storytelling platforms that will enable new forms of both authoring and reading.”

He cited the enormous success of [Wattpad](http://Wattpad.com),¹¹ a Canadian start-up that advertises itself as the world’s largest storytelling community. There are 10 million stories on the site. That is enough to fill a million — for lack of a better term — books.

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¹¹ www.wattpad.com/