

**Designing Novels for a Visual Audience: Font Psychology, Digital
Text, and the Value of Printed Books**

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**A thesis submitted to the SUNY New Paltz Honors Program
under the degree of Graphic Design**

May 2020

Abstract

In early book design, printed text was defined by production demands and economic pressures. The standard of book design that most people are familiar with reflects traditional needs for communication. Now that modern society has evolved beyond the need for printed text and relies primarily on digital media to receive information, book design must reach a new standard of artistic and personal value to remain relevant. This paper analyzes the history of printed books and their transition from a primary source of information into an art form, as well as the differences between digital and printed texts, font psychology, and the necessity of defining print and digital reading as separate experiences. The primary outcome of this study is a redesign of the classic novel *Jane Eyre* by Charlotte Brontë that highlights the central moments of the novel in a way that is visually appealing and more understandable to a large audience.

Keywords: Graphic Design, book design, font psychology, digital text, printed text

Designing Novels for a Visual Audience: Font Psychology,
Digital Text, and the Value of Printed Books

The last two decades have resulted in a transformation in the way that people read and process information. For thousands of years printed text has been the standard form of both entertainment and mass communication, particularly with printed books. Not only were books a source of entertainment and a reference for worlds that existed outside of what the reader has experienced, they could also offer specialized information and resources for those studying specific topics or trying to achieve a higher education. They were a means for advancing one's knowledge of the world and were one of the most affordable and easily accessible methods of learning and communicating.

With the advancement of media technology in the early 20th century, these methods of learning began to shift. People were starting to rely on radio and television as their primary news outlets, being faster and more efficient and delivering current events about the world. Yet even with the creation of digital media and news outlets, books were still a popular form of storytelling. It was the beginning of the 21st century that saw a more complete reliance on digital media for all the subjects that printed text once covered. The internet quickly became the world's main source for quick news, information, and communication. New forms of entertainment began to take over the storytelling role of printed books as people were able to quickly access any form of content they wanted at any moment.

With digital media fully taking over as the main source for what printed books once offered, it would be reasonable to say that books have become obsolete. And yet they still exist,

are still in production, and are treasured by many. Some people attribute this to the nostalgia that books possess; it was not too long ago that books were still the main form of storytelling, and many people still enjoy the authenticity that they offer. But there is another reason why books stay in our circulation, and it is a reason that should be considered in the future of creating printed text. Both the creation and final product of printed books has artistic value on a level that digital media does not achieve. This is not to say that digital media is not also an art form, as is evident through film and production. But printed text offers a level of craft has yet to be achieved by digital media.

As technology continues to evolve, it is important that we change our perception and definition of books to separate them from digital media. Not only is it important for readers to begin viewing printed books differently, it is vital for book designers as well. For printed books to maintain their relevance, it is important that designers take book design to a higher level of artistry and craft to give books their own new and unique purpose. This development and artistic process is something that I have been conducting for several months; I have researched what makes text more interesting and engaging to teenage and adult audiences as well as book design ideas and tactics, and have presented this research as a fully redesigned version of the novel *Jane Eyre* by Charlotte Brontë. The following information and articles are what have guided me through this design process with the goal of redesigning a classic novel in a way that is more appealing and understandable, encouraging audiences to further value the content and artistic qualities of literature.

To better understand how book design can be altered to meet the needs of a changing world, it is important to know why original book design standards were created and how they met the needs of a very different society. In the early days of book design, printed text was

defined by production demands and economic pressures (Werner). By using purchased cases of fonts, printers would carefully typeset the pages of a book and assemble them according to the requirements of the commissioner and the audience. Before 1501, printed books were designed to look like other familiar books, such as bibles (Werner). By designing books in a way that people were accustomed to seeing, audiences had an easier time understanding the material they were reading. Yet as books became more accessible to audiences in the following years, printers became more versatile with their designs, making them according to audience needs and the changing standards of printed text. Despite this, the economic pressures of printed text often limited their designs; paper was very expensive and would not be replaced if the printer were to make a mistake, resulting in several different versions of the same text. New technology in the following centuries would make this method of printing obsolete, yet the traditional layouts and typefaces of printed text during this time are still upheld in modern reproductions.

The fact that modern printed books uphold some of the standards of text printed centuries ago is not to say that the style of printed books has not evolved significantly. The Gutenberg Bible, one of Europe's first major mass-produced books, is an excellent example of this. To a modern-day individual looking at an example of the original Gutenberg Bible, it appears unreadable. Text is tightly condensed and is printed in Blackletter, a thick and elaborate form of lettering that evolved in Western Europe throughout the twelfth century. To many people in modern society, this text would appear to blend together due to how thick and decorative the letters are. But to those reading the Gutenberg Bible at the time that it was printed, this was not the case. Upon viewing the first edition of the Gutenberg Bible, Italian author Enea Silvio Bartolomeo Piccolomini wrote to Cardinal Juan Carvajal stating "The script was very neat and

legible, not at all difficult to follow — your grace would be able to read it without effort, and indeed without glasses” (Dundon).

The positive reviews on the legibility of the original Gutenberg Bible represents how the way we process printed text has changed over several centuries. While book design has remained relatively consistent over the most recent centuries, it is necessary that these design standards change in order to better capture an audience’s attention in the modern era.

There are several examples of book design throughout history that challenge traditional design standards. One significant example is *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gentleman* by Laurence Sterne, an 18th century novel that is uniquely visual in both its content and design for its time. The book’s content reflects the thoughts of both the writer and the reader which are enhanced through creative visual elements; purposely torn pages, scratched lines, and bold arrows are some of the features that make this book more of a visual reading experience. Since its original publication, this book has been reproduced in over 120 different editions. While some of the uniqueness of the original version was lost as it continued to be reproduced, more recent editions have recaptured its visual elements through digital design and new printing technology.

Works like *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gentleman* were unique for their time; they challenged the standards of print media and demonstrated the impact of visual storytelling. Much of print media, even today, is supported mainly by text. But when visual elements are introduced to enhance text, it may result in the audience having a better understanding of the content. British graphic designer Charlotte Sheridan exemplifies this through her redesign of *Sense and Sensibility* by Jane Austen. This redesign alters the original design of the novel “for a new generation of visually aware readers” (Dundon). Charlotte uses

several visual methods to enhance the content and characters of the novel, such as alternating paperstocks and changing the typeface for the two main characters to reflect their personalities. She also uses culture context as part of her design, linking this redesign to the society in which it was originally published.

One of the main focuses of modern book design, particularly in redesigning classic novels, is establishing a better connection between the reader and the content. Classic novels often convey content that is still relevant to modern society but are difficult to understand due to their archaic language or different cultural perceptions. By using redesign processes like Sheridan's, book designers can remove the barriers between language and culture so that readers can better connect with the content of classic texts.

For designers to enhance the content of printed text, it is important to understand the basics of what makes type legible. Centuries of rules on typographic fundamentals have outlined what is necessary to create legible, professional text. According to typographer and author Robert Bringhurst, good printed text must be somewhat transparent. "Typography must often draw attention to itself before it will be read. Yet in order to be read, it must relinquish the attention it has drawn" (Bringhurst 17). Type is something that must at least be perceived by the reader, but to be read for a long period of time it cannot draw too much attention. A variety of processes and typographic terminology are used to make sure that the size, weight, and spacing between lines and letters of type are legible and comfortable for the reader. As noted by the previous example of the Gutenberg Bible, these processes evolve over time as cultural norms change. They are also relevant to the sort of text they pertain to; for instance, a children's book is likely to feature different text than a scientific journal article. These differences, as well as

several others that have been recorded in studies on mood and information recall, are based on current findings in font psychology.

Font psychology is a broad term that involves the use of a particular font to produce a desired effect on the reader. Its use can vary from decorative display text in posters or cards to the longform text used in academic journals. Research psychologist Nick Kolenda breaks down the topic in *The Psychology of Fonts*, describing the particular traits we subconsciously attribute to certain fonts and how they can best be used in marketing strategies. Along with the emotional impact that certain fonts have on readers (for example, many would perceive a font like Curlz to be fun and lighthearted, whereas Impact is bold and commanding), font choice is essential in marketing and advertising in order to best convey a product to an audience. For instance, a serif font is more commonly used in printed text following the theory that serifs are easier to read in print. Sans-serif fonts are more commonly used in digital text, given that screens display information through a pixelated grid that make serifs harder to view (Kolenda). These are general guidelines, but the rules on serif vs. sans-serif fonts often vary based on personal preference.

Kolenda's *The Psychology of Fonts* also explains how we evaluate fonts either positively or negatively based on their connection to the context. If the meaning we subconsciously attribute to a font connects to its context then we evaluate it positively, whereas if the meaning does not connect to its context, we evaluate it negatively (Kolenda). This fact is important to remember in book design, particularly from a more artistic angle; readers are likely to develop a positive association with the text if the font used connects to its context.

Font psychology is also a prominent factor in how readers understand longform text in more academic contexts. *The Influence of Font Type on Information Recall* (2005), a study

conducted through the University of Northern Iowa, featured a group of college students who were given a one-page text to read and then asked to recall specific points about the text. Different sections of students were given different styles of text with variations in spacing and serif or sans-serif fonts. The results found that the difference between serif and sans-serif fonts was significant; there was a 9% increase in information recall amongst the participants who read the serif text. However, the results of the spacing were not significant.

This study is an example of the theory that serif fonts are easier to read as printed text. While many designers and educators already believe this to be true, the study does indicate that this could be due to its participants already being comfortable with seeing printed text using serif fonts. Serif fonts are standard for most novels, textbooks, and other printed materials, and we may have an easier time reading them as printed text after being exposed to them so frequently.

Reflecting on the results, the study notes that “knowledge of the perceptions of the aesthetic qualities of various font types may be useful to graphic designers in the development of a wide range of written materials” (Gasser et al. 187). Graphic designers are aware of the importance of font choice and that certain fonts can create unique perceptions or reactions in viewers. Yet the idea that font choice can affect memory and understanding of material from an academic perspective is not something that is commonly explored. Knowing what makes text more understandable is useful in book design, particularly when considering how to redesign traditional novels.

Aside from the basics of font psychology and finding ways to help readers better understand text, one of the biggest influences in the need for redesigning novels is the rise of digital media. Contrary to popular belief that the social media of the past decade is what has caused a decline in reading, reading for fun has actually been in decline since the 1980s

(Toohey). Television and internet influence has impacted most people's enjoyment of reading and created a new outlet for more immediate entertainment. Furthermore, novels are generally more intimidating than other forms of entertainment. Long blocks of text are less friendly and eye-catching than the graphics of digital media. Digital media has evolved to compliment the fast-paced culture of modern society, causing publishers and the book design industry to rethink how modern book design should change. Beyond the general appeal of digital media and graphics over printed text, digital sources have also changed how we read and engage in text. "Redefining reading: the impact of digital communication media" by Naomi Baron explores how, in recent years, many people have begun to engage in a different reading process for digital texts, such as skimming for specific information, which has changed the way in which we read printed text as well. Despite the usual preference of digital texts over printed, this article notes how people still prefer printed text for longform or educational reading because these texts allow for better concentration (Baron).

Given how the rise of digital sources has changed how we read text, it would be beneficial to change printed text to reflect this reading process. Highlighting specific moments of important text or lines that contribute to readers' understanding of the story could result in less intimidation, especially when it comes to reading long texts. As stated in the previous article, people still prefer printed text for materials like novels or textbooks as opposed to digital text despite the shift to digital media. The personal journey of author Craig Mod documents his shift from reading printed to digital text, eventually realizing that he prefers the comfort of printed text. The release of the Kindle in 2007 made digital reading more accessible, allowing readers to access hundreds of digital novels on one platform. Mod fully embraces the use of the Kindle between 2009 and 2013, using it for all his regular reading and noting the advantages of how it

can be taken everywhere. Eventually he realizes that the Kindle lacks the charm and personality of printed books. He states how it is easy to forget about the material on a Kindle, or to only read the material once and never return to it, whereas books have more visual qualities to them that allow the user to remember the experience of reading them as well as their content. The combination of printed books' physical design and the charm of traditional reading eventually turns Mod back to printed media ("Future Reading").

In another one of his articles, "Stab a Book, the Book Won't Die," Mod describes how and why the value of printed books still exists in an age of digital media. He refers to technology such as television, the internet, and smartphones as "attention monsters," or services that are specifically designed to keep users engaged and re-engaged ("Stab a Book, the Book Won't Die"). These services are in direct competition with books, as they provide infinite amounts of information and entertainment whereas what books can provide is finite. Yet most people still prefer reading physical books to digital ones. One of the reasons Mod lists is due to how we perceive physical books as having more value when they are priced relatively the same, or even cheaper, than digital books. Another important reason is the simplicity behind physical books; physical books do not contain "contracts," as Mod refers to them. Unlike digital sources and media, they do not operate on users continuing to engage with them. They exist only to benefit the reader and do not come with any additional intrusions, such as apps on an e-reading device ("Stab a Book, the Book Won't Die"). In an age in which many people have unknowingly begun to live their entire lives online, the simplicity of books is one of their greatest strengths.

The simplicity of printed books compared to digital books is more appealing to most readers, but the process of encouraging others to read and enjoy their experience is made difficult

by the attention that digital media takes up. So long as devices and services that successfully hold people's attention exist, they are typically going to be more favorable to others than reading printed, longform text. That is why it is important to redefine the reading process and traditional book design. As Naomi Baron's article states, people currently engage in a different form of reading due to their relatively new process of skimming text for information caused by digital reading. Instead of trying to combat this by forcing people to read in a way they are not accustomed to, book designers and publishers can use their skills to redesign traditional books.

Redesigning books to adhere to modern interests would include using the same methods of attention-grabbing that digital media uses; color, large text, and imagery would both be of more visual interest to people who don't frequently read and help them to better understand the content if it were related to the book's subject. Visual cues are especially helpful in better understanding content, particularly for visual learners.

The inclusion of these details in book design would categorize the process as more of an art form. Many designers today would argue that book design is an art form; there is a level of craft and artistry necessary in order to create a physical book, and combining traditional book design with these new creative elements could better establish book design as its own art form. Furthermore, allowing readers to understand books as an art form could give them a greater appreciation of their history and content.

To put this into practice, I began my own redesign process of Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre*. Given the intimidating length and archaic language in this novel, I wanted to make it more understandable for a wide audience, including students, as well as more visually appealing. I began breaking down the text to highlight some of the more important moments that defined the

plot. After determining the colors and typefaces I wanted to use, I assigned them to specific characters based on their personalities and development throughout the text. Additionally, I included footnotes for sections of the text that could be better explained in modern terms, such as allusions and outdated standards. Combined with other design elements, such as full-page spreads and a cover design, I fully redesigned *Jane Eyre* to be more visually engaging and to provide readers with a better understanding of the text.





Using design methods similar to this process of redesigning *Jane Eyre*, book designers can change the way in which we view both books and the reading process. By adhering to the standards of what makes printed text easily readable as determined by font psychology, designers

can establish text that is more comfortable for readers. Through also introducing more artistic elements such as color and imagery to books, these may make for a more enjoyable reading experience for modern individuals. By having designers reconsider how they view and design novels, they may encourage others to further value the content and artistic qualities of literature.

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