

NEW NARRATIVE FORMS IN THE DIGITAL AGE:  
THE EMERGENCE OF ENHANCED E-BOOKS

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## New Narrative Forms in the Digital Age: The Emergence of Enhanced E-Books

On the time scale of the 450-year history of the printed book, the digital book is not just a work in progress, it is still in its embryonic stage.<sup>1</sup>

[T]he twenty-first century product must, more than ever before, respond to a changing technology and a changing reader.<sup>2</sup>

Since its rise at the end of the 17th and the beginning of the 18th century, the novel has continually responded to historical, cultural, and media influences. In the first decade of the 21st century, emerging technologies such as e-readers, iPads, and tablets have entered the book market and threaten to undermine the status of the printed book at large. Will we be reading electronic books on digital devices or is the printed novel still up-to-date? Umberto Eco and Jean Claude Carrière have already discussed whether the printed book will disappear and finally die as a result of the Internet in a volume whose title is symptomatic of the whole debate: *This is Not the End of the Book: A Conversation Curated by Jean-Philippe de Tonnac*. According to Umberto Eco:

[O]ne of two things will happen: either the book will continue to be the medium for reading, or its replacement will resemble what the book has always been, even before the invention of the printing press. Alterations to the book-as-object have modified neither its function nor its grammar for more than 500 years. The book is like the spoon, scissors, the hammer, the wheel. Once invented, it cannot be improved.<sup>3</sup>

With reference to Eco's statement, this interview will examine the situation of the contemporary book market as characterized by the coexistence of two worlds: the traditional printed book and the electronic book. Even if printed books still define the market, the share of e-books has increased steadily since their introduction. This development has far-reaching consequences for literature as a whole.

In particular, the emergence of enhanced e-books has changed not only the topics that are dealt with in contemporary fiction, but also the production, distribution, and reception of novels. Whereas traditional e-books display the text in a pure digital form

and are read linearly, enhanced e-books are characterized by the integration of additional content, such as images, animated effects, music, videos, and websites. Reading in the 21st century is therefore becoming increasingly interactive and multimedia-based.

In retrospect, it was the app “Alice for the iPad” by Atomic Antelope that kicked off multimedia productions of literature. Published in 2010 by the English journalist Chris Stevens, the app adapts illustrations taken from an old copy of *Alice in Wonderland* into a 52-page story for the iPad. Integrated into the story are twenty animated scenes triggered by the iPad’s accelerometer, which senses the movement and velocity (e. g. shaking or stirring) of the digital device. What followed was an enormous media response, over half a million downloads, and a kind of Gold Rush frenzy in many publishing houses. In the United States, as well as in Germany, publishing houses, start-ups, and authors started to experiment with the new technological possibilities of transforming a book’s content into digital formats. Most of these early projects were not financially profitable, however, and were unable to keep up with the success of “Alice for the iPad.”

Now, in 2016, the heyday of enhanced and standard e-books is being followed by a phase of stagnation (with the exception of enhanced children’s books), while good old printed books are still in demand. This development raises questions for literary studies, as well as for publishing houses, authors, and readers.

**Ute Nöth (UN)** graduated from Leipzig University of Applied Sciences and is a freelance consultant and project manager. She develops enhanced e-books and apps and discusses the impact of technological changes on the book industry in her articles and talks. She is the founder of the eBookCamp, which has taken place in Hamburg since 2011.

**Anna Weigel (AW)** is a PhD candidate in English and American Literary Studies at Justus Liebig University Giessen (Germany) and the University of Helsinki (Finland). Her dissertation, “Fictions of the Internet,” explores how contemporary novels respond to the influence of new media.

## **Interview**

**AW: Ute Nöth, it is undeniable that we are facing a paradigm shift from print to digital reading and publishing. Whereas many literary scholars feared the death of the printed book at the beginning of the 21st century, it now seems that the electronic book will not completely replace its printed counterpart. How has the book market developed in the last few years? Is the printed book still in a state of emergency?**

UN: The book market has witnessed profound changes in the last few years. The publishing industry has undergone a rapid digitalization of the whole publishing process. Book data is now stored in a neutral XML format and can be released immediately as either an e-book or a printed copy. However, the digitalization of reading in Germany hasn't really kept up, contrary to initial expectations. In comparison to other sectors, ninety percent of everything we produce digitally is consumed in an analog format. Even if a majority of readers preferred digital reading, it would not be a threat for the book itself — if you consider a book to be a long, linear text. This discussion — that is, whether the emergence of the e-book threatened the printed book — went on for a long time. In my opinion, it was the wrong discussion. It's not e-books that are pushing printed books into a state of emergency. The book as such, whether printed or digital, has to compete more than ever for attention. The so-called 'attention economy' is becoming significant. And the question is: How can the book gain ground in the fight for our ever-more-limited attention? Does an e-book have qualities that can make reading more attractive in comparison to other media usages?

**AW: Since its emergence, the e-book has undergone many changes. How would you describe the status of the e-book in 2016?**

UN: Over the past 20 years, there have been many attempts to establish e-books on the market, from the Data Discman to the Rocket e-book. Finally, in 2010, what had been perceived as a kind of meandering PR stunt actually became reality: e-books accounted for significant share of publishers' sales. According to the market report "Buch und Buchhandel in Zahlen," e-books accounted for 4.3% of sales in Germany in 2014 — considerably less than predicted. Despite the often contradictory results of many surveys, it's clear that e-book sales have reached a plateau. We can't speak about

an increasing trend towards the digital book anymore. I think that the target audience who sees a clear advantage in e-books is satisfied, so it's gotten difficult to attract a new readership. More importantly, it's been found that e-book readers read differently and, especially, consume different genres. It's mainly popular fiction that's being read on e-readers, and the price of e-books is one of the big things in their favor. Many customers prefer free or very cheap e-books, often self-published, so they don't participate in the book industry's traditional value chain.

**AW: You not only design and coordinate fiction and non-fiction digital projects for publishing houses, but also organize the annual eBookCamp with your team.**

**What are your main objectives?**

UN: The eBook Camp is currently organizing its sixth conference on the topic. From the very beginning, we were concerned with the continuous adaptation process of the book industry to the requirements of digital reading. Whereas the participants of the first eBookCamp in 2010 were looking to acquire a basic knowledge of the issues as quickly as possible, and trying to come to terms with the societal implications of digital reading, we're now able to discuss a number of detailed questions at a high level. Since the e-book has become a part of publishing houses' standard business, the question is no longer 'if' but 'how.' Moreover, our initial euphoria — or frustration, depending on who you ask — has become more realistic.

**AW: Generally speaking, digital reading means that readers buy a digital copy of the printed book — with the exception of the so-called 'enhanced' or 'enriched' e-books. What are the characteristics of enhanced e-books, and can books that integrate images, music, and videos still be regarded as 'proper' books?**

UN: An enhanced e-book is a digital text, enriched with additional multimedia content or functions in such a way that this content is triggered by the reader's activity. So reading turns into a highly individual and dynamic activity, as the reader is able to unlock information on different levels. A conventional e-book — which is sometimes also called a 'plain' e-book for reasons of clarity and comprehensibility — is static and text-based. By contrast, an enhanced e-book can be accessed and experienced in various ways. This is made possible by inline enhancements like pop-ups, the integration of audio, media, and links, but also by the synchronization of text and audio through

media overlays. Interactivity is important as well: by providing the e-book with a ‘memory,’ you can integrate multiple choice tests, forms to be filled out, and complex animated effects.

At the same time, given so many options, it becomes difficult to make clear-cut distinctions between the different forms. At what level of enhancement is an e-book no longer a book? It gets even more complex if we consider things like apps and so-called ‘longform’ online journalism, like Paul Ford’s ‘What is Code?’, alongside standard ePub releases. What is a game, what is a book, what is a website? These forms can no longer be so clearly separated. When it comes to books, I’d argue for a pragmatic approach, which is also what’s used in the industry. According to the regulations of German book price-fixing, products are designated books when they ‘reproduce or substitute [books] and can generally be regarded as typical [products] of publishing or bookselling.’ With enhanced e-books, it’s important what form the content is transmitted in. If the text is predominant, it counts as a book — though, of course, the reader might see things differently.

**AW: In 2013, the bestselling American author Marisha Pessl developed an app for her novel *Night Film* in cooperation with her publisher (Hutchinson). Readers can read the thriller as a traditional printed novel or e-book, and may access additional material via a smartphone app. By scanning a recurring image in the novel, the reader gets access to audio-visual material in the form of music, pictures, photographs, interviews, and short video sequences. Would it not have been easier to publish the additional material as part of an enhanced e-book? What, from your practical point of view, would you say is the difference between an enhanced e-book and an app?**

UN: I can see why the publisher made that decision. There are a number of limitations for the enhancement of a classical e-book, most importantly, in this case, the restrictions on volume. Files bigger than normal e-books are, as a rule, not accepted by e-book platforms. So the publisher probably opted to make the extensive material accessible via app. This leads me to the difference between enhanced e-books and apps, which primarily has to do with functional range and the level of interactivity.

An enhanced e-book is nothing but a classical e-book that uses the possibilities of the format to their full extent. Classical as well as enhanced e-books are based on the

open ePub standard which — and this is important — allows for a linear usage of the content. In an enhanced e-book, multimedia and interactive elements are integrated into the linear structure provided by the ePub standards. Enhanced e-books are displayed via reading software installed on the electronic device, i. e. they adapt dynamically to the given reader and software.

By contrast, an app based on a book offers the reader a broader range of interaction. Apps make it possible to narrate a story, not only in a linear, but also in a very complex way. This is possible because apps run independently as stand-alone software, and their developers can draw on a full range of functionality, whereas enhanced e-books, by comparison, are much more limited. Other differences between the two formats have to do with the price, the selling platform, the development costs, and the necessary hard- and software.

**AW: The reader of such multimedia books dives into a story world which is not only based on text, but also made up of images, music, and videos. Reading novels is a cultural technique that one has to acquire step by step. What do you think, are such multimedia novels as Pessl's *Night Film* easier to comprehend, or do they challenge the reader even more than a standard novel?**

UN: It's probably too early to say. In my opinion, these are relevant scientific questions which need to be approached interdisciplinarily from both cognitive science and literary studies. Listening to music, looking at pictures, and watching videos — enhanced e-books appeal to different senses than 'normal' reading does. On the one hand, audiovisual enhancements can help to build up tension, on the other hand, they may influence and limit the reader's imagination. It is certainly the case that the reader of enhanced e-books has a more active role. Instead of following the text sentence by sentence, the consumer of multimedia and interactive novels has to decide continuously how far he or she wants to dive into, or branch out from, the story with the help of different narrative modes. Whereas some narrative interruptions are rather subtle, others are explicit. The question is whether the enhanced content interferes with the reader's sense of illusion, or whether it reduces the distance between author and reader. When I think of an extreme example — like the German author Andreas Winkelmann, who decided to blur the boundaries between fact and fiction in his multimedia narrative

project *Deathbook* by making himself, the author, a part of the plot — then I see the great potential of enhancements, not to destroy the reader’s illusion, but to intensify it.

**AW: Does the publisher add these audio-visual enhancements afterwards, or are they designed by the author while writing the book? What influence would that have on the author’s concept for the work?**

UN: In order to make sure that the enhancements work, not just as distracting appendages, but as an essential part of the book’s artistic concept, it is of course ideal if the author thinks about multiple narrative layers from the beginning. But the reality is often different, and many enhancements are only added afterwards. There are several reasons for that: fixed production cycles in publishing houses, for one thing, but also, not many authors are able and willing to compose such a multidimensional work. I myself don’t know of many German examples that are based on the author’s original concept; Andreas Winkelmann, Sebastian Fitzek or Karl Olsberg come to mind.

Producing an enhanced e-book is very demanding for an author — they need not only a detailed knowledge of technology and interactive storytelling, but also a complex narrative approach to a new understanding of the author’s role. Understandably, there are not many such universal geniuses who can manage all that, to say nothing of the huge amount of time involved. I could imagine there being more artists’ collectives or project teams who would work together on large concepts, similar to game developers or film crews, to support the author.

**AW: You mentioned Andreas Winkelmann and his innovative enhanced e-book project *Deathbook* (2013). While writing his novel, the German bestselling author was already planning the interactive elements. What is special about this book project is that the author is the protagonist of his own thriller. Moreover, he integrates new media into the plot: for example, Winkelmann searches on his real Facebook page for the murderer. After registering on the *Deathbook* website, the readers of his novel might receive letters, e-mails, text messages, and even calls from the *Deathbook* killer. In this way, fiction and reality are intentionally blurred. Are genres like thriller and mysteries particularly suited to enhanced e-books because the reader can act as a detective on the Internet, or are historical fiction and romances also imaginable in an enriched form?**

UN: The genres you mentioned are definitely well suited to the enhanced e-book format, but historical novel — and any literature based on complex narrative worlds — could be as well. In any work where the reader feels that they want to know more about the plot, enhancements can convey a certain atmosphere, through music, background sounds, images, or video sequences.

**AW: Could you please give some examples of enhanced (e-)books that were successful?**

UN: Success is a question of the perspective. On the American book market, *Cathy's Book: If Found Call (650) 266-8233* from 2006 and the two sequels, *Cathy's Key* (2008) and *Cathy's Ring* (2009), were quite popular. Young adult novels work with alternate reality games elements and offer numerous possibilities for reader interaction. You can, for instance, call the protagonist Cathy on her phone and leave her a message, or you can visit her Flickr site. There's also an iPhone app and three websites that feature additional material and interactive content such as images, chats, videos, and games.

In Germany, *Deathbook* got a lot of media attention in 2013. Yet, Rowohlt Verlag pulled the interactive e-book version from the market in the fall of 2015. The decision was based on economic considerations; the cost of the necessary technical updates were higher than the revenues they could expect a year and a half after the book's first appearance.

Furthermore, I transformed Claudia Weiss's novel *Schandweib* into an enhanced e-book with the publishing house Hoffman and Campe. In 2011, we won the *iBookstore Rewind* competition in the category 'Best Book + Extra,' which was one of the important milestones of this early phase. It's a historical novel, set in Hamburg about three hundred years ago, and is based on a true story. We take the readers to the locations mentioned in the novel, offer them to access background information in scanned files, and provide authentic songs from the time. An interactive map lets you switch between the historical and the current setting of the book. Many readers were fascinated by the new reading experience, but unfortunately, costs were too high compared to sales.

**AW: It's interesting that these examples are all from a few years ago. Is it true that since 2015 there have not been any noteworthy publications in Germany?**

UN: That's correct. There are still ambitious interactive and multimedia publications in non-fiction, educational, and children's books, but that's not the case with fiction. Actually, German publishers were very reluctant to publish e-books in 2015, and the number of new releases was negligible. Instead, many publishers have focussed on e-book-only imprints, e-series, and shorter forms.

**AW: Could the reason for the stagnation be that enhanced e-books are expensive and technically complex to produce? What are the constraints of this format, from your point of view?**

UN: The main constraints are the high costs and the small profit, neither of which are likely to improve in the foreseeable future. But there are other reasons as well. The big e-book vendors try to secure permanent customers for their own devices by launching island systems which decode the ePub formats differently. So it's complicated to produce a universal file for all systems, everything from KF7 to iBooks. To optimize the individual possibilities of each format, the publishers would have to create separate e-books for each platform, which would mean investing an enormous effort into software development and technical support. Another issue is that classic e-ink-readers can support multimedia content only to a very limited extent, if at all. The target audience for enhanced e-books are people who read on tablets, so the potential audience is small and fragmented from the outset. Moreover, many readers are not familiar with the term 'enhanced e-book,' which undoubtedly has something to do with the fact that the big e-book vendors don't promote interactive e-books as a separate category. Even if a customer already knows what the term means, it's extremely difficult to them find new publications, partly because e-books are rarely reviewed in traditional media. This might be because no one feels able to evaluate them, or because it's not clear who should be doing this in the first place. Finally, one has to consider that, in the time it takes an author to develop an enhanced e-book, they could have earned comparatively more money by writing a conventional novel.

**AW: Have we reached a turning point with enhanced e-books? How, and especially what, do you think we are going to read in the next few years?**

UN: Sometimes I have the impression that enhanced e-books are in a state of what Paul Virilio calls 'frantic stagnation,' a listless state that arises after a period of accelerated

technological change. In any case, it's true that despite continuous technological innovation, enhanced e-books are no longer being produced. Initially, many experts were euphoric about the new narrative dimensions e-books could offer, but the current situation feels more disillusioned and helpless. Everyone is convinced that digitalization is going to change literature — but how? The experiments of the last few years have not been able to shed any light on the question of if and how a broader audience of readers of new digital forms can be won. So I suppose we have reached a turning point, which, however, might end up showing that, even though value chains in publishing and portable media are evolving at a breakneck pace, 'reading' may simply continue to mean what it has meant for the last several hundred years: getting immersed in a linear story with no 'media breaks.'

**AW: Ute Nöth, thank you very much for the interview.**

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## Endnotes

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