The Tablet Book 7

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Is There a Text in this Tablet?

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Introduction

More and more people all over the world are reading on tablets. In 2013, 44% of Danes owned a tablet,[1] and were doing all or part of their reading on their new devices. Cultural commentators such as Gomez (2008) and scholars such as Piper (2012) have been quick to explore how the digital revolution is changing the media ecology and how changes in the materiality of media have always shaped the way we read. An often-missing dimension in much of the literature about e-reading is the point of view of the readers

themselves: how do regular readers experience e-reading? How do they feel it is similar and different from paper reading?

Investigating the experience of readers was the motivation behind our conducting a multi-method empirical study about new e-reading practices in 2012, which forms the basis for this chapter. Our enquiry focused on the changes in the reading situation brought about by the widespread adoption of tablet reading devices (mainly iPad and Kindle in our study). Here we concentrate on the issue of how the new communities of tablet readers relate to their texts, as attitudes towards the value and use of texts are changing, generating questions of ownership, unstableness and authenticity.

We approach the subject from a literary theory/cultural studies perspective, contrasting the insights obtained in the analysis of our in-depth interviews with readers with relevant theories of electronic textuality. The title of this chapter was inspired by Stanley Fish's famous 1980 book, *Is There a Text in This Class?,* which argued that communities of readers determined the expectations, habits and interpretive strategies available to each individual. In the same vein, we wanted to interrogate the idea of text that our e-readers share, to see what affordances it allows for and how it plays with the actual evidence of use/reading reported by the same readers.

A Note on Method

Our 2012 study comprised a quantitative questionnaire, qualitative interviews with ten selected readers, observations, usability tests and other content analyses of documents, websites, articles, literature and press releases. Our initial hypothesis was that describing tablet reading as a practice would be facilitated by using book reading as benchmark. Readers would find it easier to reflect about their new experience by comparing it with the old.

Our starting point was the survey, a quantitative questionnaire about tablet reading practices that yielded 105 responses. It was aimed at gathering information about the characteristics of the tablet reading population so that afterwards we could make a selection of respondents for in-depth interviews. A link to the survey was posted on our university website, published in several Facebook tablet-interest groups and also sent to several important public libraries in different Danish regions. The interviewees were thus self-selected, as people with an interest in tablet reading as well as a certain e-reading experience.[2]

In a month, 105 people had responded to the survey, and from those we selected ten to conduct in-depth face to face interviews. At the moment of initiating our research (February 2012), there existed no precise data about the demographics of Danish tablet owners and readers, so we developed our own selection parameters based on other statistics[3] that describe reading populations in the Nordic countries. We strove for a slightly higher female representation (6 female to 4 male) in accordance with the given statistics, which indicate that around 25% of all men and 40% of all women (an average of all Nordic countries) read daily. We also chose varied income levels and different degrees of expertise pertaining to the adoption of new technologies.[4] The interviews were conducted at the IT University of Copenhagen in the period between 30 March to 25 June, 2012. The average interview lasted around one hour of talk focused on tablet reading practices. We used an open question guide that allowed interviewees to steer the conversation and focus on their areas of interest. Later we transcribed all interviews and analyzed them.

A rich number of topics emerged in our analysis (about the materiality of the experience, interaction and usability, the cognitive engagement with

texts, the relations between readers and readers and authors, etc.). Our focus in this chapter is the nature of the electronic text as conceptualized by readers. We have translated all quotes in this chapter from Danish to English; when referring to interviewees' statements, "i" refers to the interviewee number, and the second figure to the page of the transcription where the quote can be found; thus "i3, 5" means: interviewee 3, page 5.

Some of the related results of the study concerned with the materiality of the new reading praxis have been published already (Tosca and Pedersen: "Tablets and the New Materialities of Reading", 2014) or are awaiting publication (Tosca: "Dreaming of eReading Futures", forthcoming). In these articles, we have described how the dichotomy of tablet/electronic text dominates our interviewees' discussion. It is a dual object that foments contradictory associations and meanings. On the one hand, our readers are fascinated by the endless capacity and portability of the tablets themselves, those hard closed objects that are as closely linked to our persons as our bank accounts. Tablets are not single texts, but whole libraries. The reading platform becomes a network connected to the world instead of a fixed inscription of a particular text. This is both immensely valuable (the most used adjectives in relation to tablets were "smart" and "genial"; it was also "the most practical thing ever") and slightly awe-inspiring ("it is an incredible invention, nearly magical; it saves time, space and the Amazon forest, wow!" (i1,7).

On the other hand, as we detail in our two other articles, the incorporeal nature of electronic texts bothers our interviewees. They report accessing content in the same way (with the same degree of concentration and engrossment in the act of reading), but they miss a lot of material features in the electronic reading experience: spatial memory, annotation, displaying

their books in a shelf or the possibility of lending them out to friends, (Tosca & Pedersen, 2014; Tosca, 2013)

In what follows, we introduce the concept of "electronic text", and then we present the results of our analysis, with a focus on the nature of the new (tablet) electronic text as characterized by its readers.

Electronic (Tablet) Text

The Oxford dictionary doesn´t have an entry for electronic text, or e-text, but it does define "e-book" as: "an electronic version of a printed book which can be read on a computer or a specifically designed handheld device". Our interviewees not only read books in their tablets, but also short stories, new "tablet genres,"[5] articles in PDF and even personal documents, so we decided to use the more general "e-text" to refer to the content of tablet reading, because it comprises all these different forms. Electronic text as we understand it would thus be text read on a tablet (or a computer), (that is, not printed), regardless of the way it was conceived. Some e-texts are electronic versions of previously existing printed texts, and others are created specially for the electronic platform.

In the 1990s, academic discussions about electronic text centered around the new possibilities of the networked form, mostly within the paradigm of hypertext (Bolter, 1991; Joyce, 1995; and Landow, 1992) or cybertext (Aarseth, 1997). Even though these early works had a strong focus on writing, they are all concerned with the new kinds of reading that the digital form will afford. Their pioneering work fuelled the interest of many more scholars, who have since worked with interactive formats of various kinds. One landmark was the foundation of the Electronic Literature organization in 1999, whose website defines electronic literature thus: "Electronic

literature, or e-lit, refers to works with important literary aspects that take advantage of the capabilities and contexts provided by the stand-alone or networked computer"[6] (emphasis their own). Katherine Hayles comments on this definition and expands its implications in her well known *Electronic Literature: New Horizons for the Literary,* where she writes that "electronic text remains distinct from print in that it literally cannot be accessed until it is performed by properly executed code" (Hayles, 2008, p.5).

From the beginning, many electronic texts scholars shared an optimism around the new textual form, that was hailed as a liberator from the tyranny of linear formats. There was at the time a desire for change, as summarized in this quote: "We are faced with a medium that promises to increase the dynamic nature of reading exponentially with texts that actually, physically change from reading to reading, with a range of choices and reading decisions that seem to offer readers an autonomy undreamed of in their experiences of print narratives." (Douglas, 1992, p. 140)

But even though electronic literature flourishes still as a minor but lively genre[7], it has not become mainstream by any means, so the medium revolution hasn't happened yet. Douglas' networked, multi-threaded text that takes advantage of the capabilities of the computer has nothing to do with the content of our current tablets. Most tablet owners have never heard of *Afternoon* or kinetic poetry. For them, electronic text equals the last Stephen King blockbuster or a free Jane Austen PDF downloaded from the web.

At a first glance, these two interpretations of the concept of electronic text have little to do with each other, but we compare them here because the emergence of electronic literature in the 1990s was often associated

with a discourse of instability and fragmentation that resonates with the experience of electronic (tablet) text reported by the readers we interviewed.

One of the most lucid approaches to the new kind of text was Jay Bolter´s *Writing Space,* which introduced the idea of a fragmented book, mostly thinking of hypertext. His book also has lengthy sections about the history of writing as a technology, and how the formats that we take for granted today are the product of many years of evolution. In this context, his sharp characterization of electronic text as a disruptive force in the history of writing technologies is very useful to our purposes, as he is very aware of the strangeness introduced by the immateriality of electronic text: "an electronic text is not a physical artifact" (1991, p. 7). Getting used to the ghostly words on a screen is difficult for those raised in the late age of print, be they writers or readers, because "we have come more and more to anthropomorphize books, to regard each book as a little person with a name, a place (in the library) and a bibliographic life of its own" (Bolter, 1991, p. 86).

For tablet readers, the individual, anthropomorphized books should nearly be a thing of the past, as they do indeed interact with electronic, non-physical text on a daily basis. However, they miss the feel and weight of the paper books, and worry about a world without shelves, even though they declare themselves ready for the immaterial text: "the (printed) books around us, it is just nostalgic (...) we have to leave them behind and go into the books, the contents, that is what is important, right?" (i10, 14). Our interviews are rich in sentences like this, near declarations of alliance with the new formats, uttered with a share of anxiety, often looking to the interviewer for reassurance.

Our readers show a wish to interact with essence only, a desire for abstraction and a belief in the innate superiority of content over form, "the important thing is the text, we just have to get used to it" (i6, 9); "you can't turn back time, there are so many things happening right now, this is just a little bit of it... all the other media we use today... you have to adapt and hop on the bandwagon, right?" (I2, I I). Most respondents refuse to characterize the new kind of (electronic) text as anything special or different, "the context is the same; this contains just more books but the words are the same" (i3, 3), or "I don´t read them differently, my memory and comprehension are as they always are" (i7, 5). For them, the hardware (tablet) is obviously the new thing, but when asked directly about the e-text, the most common response is that the content is "the same," and it shouldn´t matter much if it is printed in a book or shining on a screen. However, throughout the interviews, e-text is implicitly characterized in various ways that relate to the textual re-configurations proposed by George Landow in his seminal work, *Hypertext,* from 1992, as we will see below.

Landow dedicates chapter 3 of his book to the topic of "Reconfiguring the Text". In its *Hypertext 3.0* version (from 2006), this chapter begins as a dream that reminds us of Vannevar Bush´s genial vision of the Memex: "in some distant, or not so-distant, future all individual texts will electronically link to one another, thus creating metatexts and metametatexts of a kind only partly imaginable at present (…)" (Landow 2006, 69).

In one way, those times are here already, as all texts are accessible and downloadable from our tablets. But they are not meaningfully connected to each other in the way both Bush and Landow longed for, which was a sort of digital manifestation of the abstract intertextuality inherent

to any text. The existing hypertexts examined by Landow look more like a classical edition of a literary text, with paratexts built around it (a dictionary, illustrative images or links to encyclopedic information about places, people and literary movements). The status of the classical text is in Landow's book challenged by fragmentation (the destruction of the classical linear structure of texts, the loss of sequentiality), the inclusion of visual elements, dispersion (text linking to texts by other authors), and the multiplicity of beginnings and endings (among other things) (Landow 2006, p. 69-124). What these qualities share with the electronic (tablet) text of our study is a sense of instability, of something escaping control.

Landow proposes the idea of a general "weakening of the boundaries of the text" (2006, p. 116), and we would like to take this as a starting point for the analysis of our empirical material. Electronic (tablet) texts are unstable, but not for the same reasons envisioned by Landow (and having to do with hypertext), but for others that we will explore below, inspired by his theoretical endeavour of explaining how the text is reconfigured. What is electronic (tablet) text like?

E-Text is immaterial

We can touch the tablet, "the cold machine" (i10,12), feel the lean design of its buttons. We can put it in our bags, hold it in our hands and feel its weight. We can connect its plug in the socket, and wait for electricity to power it. "It does look like a book" (i8, 10), but this same comparison contains the idea that if it *looks like* something, it cannot *be* that something, in this case a book. "There is something cold over the tablet, indeed, but you need to get into the text, that´s the important thing. To remember that it is a tool, a tool to get to the information. If you can abstract from the fact that it is not as pleasant an object as the book, then all the rest is

better" (I10, 14) But what is all the rest? It remains curiously undefined. The tablet is always something else, an empty receptacle of texts.

We cannot touch the e-texts. In printed books, the text is forever fixed to the physical pages, and even though print text is also an abstraction that has to *become* in the act of reading, just like e-text, it does exist in a material form. It has merged with the book that holds it. By contrast, we can see e-texts through the screen, but they are not the screen. They are fickle, change at every touch of our fingers and sometimes we have to look hard at them to make sure that was really the page we had got to. Readers report a moment of mistrust when turning the tablet on, until the text appears; "you have to get used to it, there is the text, and touching it is not possible, I cannot relate to it just with my hand, I am not yet used to flipping my wrist, it´s still a clumsy gesture" (i4, 8). With no physical reference of how long you have gotten into the book (no pages between your hands, no donkey´s ear), how to be sure that the machine remembers and displays the correct page? Of course we know the machine knows, but turning it on makes the world of the text suddenly appear from out of nowhere, and we jump into it without a warning, doubtful as to its reality, "I have no sense of orientation and basically just have to learn to trust the screen" (i5, 9).

We buy the texts, we download them and readers flinch at the prices, think that e-books are too expensive because "you cannot have them on your shelf anyway" (i7,2) Their immateriality is an obstacle to successful sales. All of our interviewees said that they paid for all downloads (they refuse to download pirate content), but that they feel slightly taken advantage of. The prices are too high as compared to the prices of physical books; even though, they try to understand: "we probably just have to learn to

think of a digital download as a physical thing, but it will take a whole society change because things you can touch and feel obviously seem more valuable" (i5, 6).

The untouchable e-texts disappear from our conscience as soon as we have read them. They are not displayed on our physical shelf, reminding us of their presence and the feelings they evoked when we read them. When asked directly, most of our readers believe that when they have bought an electronic text, they "have it for ever" (i3, 4), and haven´t given a thought to the possibility of formats becoming obsolete that could make their texts unreadable for future machines. But others are even not sure of what the electronic text is, some are not really sure if they own them, even though they have paid for them: "I bought it myself, so I own it, don´t I?" (i2,2). Many of the interviews contained subtle clues that owning an electronic text is not the same as owning a physical book, as exemplified here: "if it is something I want to own, then I buy the book, because then I have something material to touch, right?" (i9,4) So if they *really* want to own it, they have to buy the physical version. As with several other topics, the reader asks the interviewer for reassurance in this matter. The immaterial text is water between their fingers, as one put it, "I forget which titles I have bought unless I get the proper book" (i7, 8).

None of our readers would ever dream of throwing a physical book away, they store old books in the attic or pass them on to friends or charities. On the other hand, deleting an immaterial file doesn´t seem so problematic; one can always "get rid of a document, press 'delete'" (i4, I I) Most e-readers like to have a big collection of e-books in their tablets, but an accidental deletion is no catastrophe (a few of them didn´t even know they could recover the book from the cloud). One reader was even more extreme:

"when I am done with a text, I delete it, then I get a new one. Or I could have it in there, there is after all a lot of space. (…) I delete them when I am done with them, so it is over" (i1, 8) What is over? We wonder about this desire to establish a distance with the electronic book, which was shared by quite a few of our interviewees. Is it a form of awkwardness or simply a sense of completion? When one finishes a print book, it can be neatly put away on a shelf, but here, there is no shelf. If it stays in the machine, the finished books are clumped together with the books that are waiting to be read. We want to put a read text away, to mark it as read, "it is over".

In one sense, however, the electronic text is very enduring. If our machine malfunctions and eventually ceases to work, the texts are not lost. They reside in an invisible cloud (or whatever each particular storage system is called) from which we can download them again to our new machine, forever mirror images of themselves.

E-Text is variable

Reading in a tablet has two levels of interaction: the machine/hardware and the text. Our interviewers were at ease with their machines, and showed proficiency demonstrating various features. Most of them talked knowledgeably about the different ways of turning pages, and about how it takes some time to unlearn the habit of leafing and to convert the act of either clicking or swiping into a natural movement. Once learned, the new habit becomes natural, because it is so effortless: "it is easy to turn the pages, you just touch it slightly with your finger and it turns" (i1,1)

Once the basic tablet interaction is in place, the text has to be acquired (bought or downloaded), which in some cases involves cumbersome conversions in order to show specific formats across different hardware.

Users are not excessively bothered by this, they accept that interacting with digital devices is an endless dance of upgrading, converting and re-configuring.

Maybe because of this predisposition to variation, several of our users enjoy experimenting with the font size, the display in one or several columns, the intensity of the light and other formal properties of the text. "I can have it as I want it, I can change it, I like it" (i1,5). Some tweak this very often, searching for the best combination, convinced that there are some perfect settings out there which they just haven´t found yet. Text can also be read aloud in certain brands of tablet, and some of our readers use this function when they want to change the mode of stimuli, "it allows the brain to disconnect and I get information using other senses" (i3,2).

This ever-changing text that can be small or big, read or listened to, is fluid, is malleable. It grows and shrinks as we change fonts, but the readers screen of reference stays the same, and they report a feeling of getting lost in the text. None of our readers was able to explain what "location"[8] was in the e-texts they were reading. Is it a shifting percentage? Why does it "stay at the same number for pages and pages on end so that it indicates nothing"? (i1,6). Worse than that, most of them couldn´t find their way around in a tablet text. The lack of the physical book and the impossibility of leafing meant that they couldn´t go back and find passages of interest as every screen sort of stands alone in a spatial vacuum, crushing all that came before it and hiding everything behind it. Our readers knew of the different built-in aids to orient themselves in the text (bookmarks, index, listings) but they were not very good at using them, and most fumbled randomly with their tablets when asked to demonstrate a search for a passage: "see… you can go back to the list, or whatever… if I say "go to" (she clicks) so I

can choose a page, and then I get it (…) but of course it is hard, you don't know where to find… (…) (gives up) It would be easier with a physical book" (i2, 3).

The electronic text described by Bolter and Landow was variable in other, more fundamental ways by, for example, offering different reading paths through a story, and even different beginnings and endings. The e-texts our readers read in their tablets are not so adventurous, and the wildest formal experimentation they know is the use of multimedia in texts such as the novel *Chopsticks,* by Jessica Anthony and Rodrigo Corral (which can incidentally also be bought as a printed paperback). Old hypertext and electronic text were variable in their *essence;* modern tablet e-text is variable in its *appearance*, but the substance stays the same. It is just harder to get to and hold on to.

The tablet screen lets us into the world of the text, but it presents it in a flat way that keeps us out, preventing us from looking behind it. We cannot even superimpose screens as we do with our computer windows. Reading an e-book is like driving through a tunnel surrounded by fog. Electronic (tablet) texts carry no sense of place.

E-Text and paratexts

One fundamental difference between printed text and electronic (tablet) text is that each single book doesn´t exist in isolation, but that it is a part of a network of connections at several levels. The first one is the "library" or collection of texts downloaded by a user: "everything is synchronized with the cloud. That is, if I read in my phone and turn it off, when I come home I can pick up this (the iPad) and I can continue where I left off, because it is synchronized. Amazon knows what they are doing" (i1,4).

Most readers know that their library is stored somewhere else apart from their machines, and also that "the cloud" keeps track of what they have read so that it is possible to synchronize across multiple devices. Something else that can be updated on the fly is the annotations made by each reader: "I make marks, I underline and then there is this function to see your highlights and bookmarks" (i3,3). Readers can even see the highlights of other readers while they are reading the book, or afterwards. This can be turned on or off at will. Some of our readers reported liking it because it made them feel that they were not reading alone, knowing what others had highlighted. This way a book reaches out to the other readers of the same book, putting the e-text at the centre of a network of readings that can add a dialogic dimension to the whole experience of reading.

Tablets also have dictionaries incorporated, which help with reading when the text is foreign, like this Danish reader who enjoys English books: "I need to search a word around 3-4 times per page. Because it is a colourful language, a beautiful language, this way I learn, right?" (i1,2) The dictionary is not a heavy book that has to be fetched from the other end of the room any more: "finding the words immediately doesn´t interrupt reading in the same way" (i3,2). Dictionary and e-text are integrated in a seamless way, and this way, each text contains immediate doors to all definitions in the language it is written in.

Tablets also facilitate access to paratexts such as indexes and even summaries or sample chapters, so that readers can peruse them before deciding if they want to buy the book (i3.1). Sometimes the samples come automatically, as gifts on special occasions (such as an advent calendar made of short texts from a known publisher) or as an add-on when buying another book. This is generally seen positively, although two of the interviewees talked about

the samples as if they were "parasites" attached to whatever text one is buying, "they come in through the back door, stealing my attention" (i2,6), their only purpose to make them buy other e-books. The parasites open the door to yet other texts that become networked with the acquired one. It is a materialization of intertextuality, only the connections are not based in the texts contents, but on a taste algorithm. Control is, once more, denied the reader, "it is actually nearly always things I am not interested in" (i6,5).

E-Text anytime, anywhere... more of everything

All our interviewees reported reading more since they had started using their tablets. Most keep many e-texts in their machines, some are bought, and other are freely downloaded. Many complain of there being many print books that are impossible to get in an electronic version, but generally they are quite good at filling their machines with e-texts. Most are enthusiastic about acquiring books, and some even go in downloading sprees of the free classics even though they acknowledge that they don't have time to read them (i2,7).

There is a general feeling that "you don´t need to be so selective" with e-text, because the effort involved in acquiring it is very small (i4,9), so most readers end up having more books that they can read. Building a library is a source of joy and pride, despite Bolter's doubts: "In the age of print the library itself became the replacement for Victor Hugo´s cathedral: (…) There is nothing monumental about an electronic library" (Bolter, 1991, p. 101) It might not be monumental, but an electronic library is anyway an object of desire in a way that many bibliophiles will recognize. Most of our interviewees were enthusiastic about the possibility of having many books in the tablet, "the fact that there isn´t a physical limit to what I can have in my tablet, it is fantastic to be able to have books by the thousands" (i6,10),

but also about the fact that books could be downloaded any time. They would never ever again want something and not be able to get it: "I haven´t yet experienced the situation of being bored in Northern Norway and suddenly feeling like I have to read something, for example Jane Austen, (…). But as I said, I take it with me just in case". (i3,8). Just in case. Now they can be sure they will never lack a book to read.

This increased availability has meant that some of our interviewees have developed a voracious reading appetite, they consume texts quickly because "you don´t need to understand when you read literature (…) you can do it for the experience in itself, run it through like that" (i7,7).

E-Text for me, for you, for all

As introduced above, a direct consequence of our e-texts being networked in such an intense way is the possibility of getting involved in various forms of social reading. The most basic is to see what other readers have highlighted, which can be done "directly in the text in the case of *Amazon Kindle* or using applications like *Readmill*" (i5, 1). One interviewee puts it like this: unlike other media, books are difficult to enjoy with people, "it is hard to sit and read a book together" (i5,3), but the communities where one can see what the others have highlighted are a nice solution, a bridge to other readers, "a book with a lot of highlights is more fun to read than one with none" (i5, 1).

These loose "communities" give also readers the opportunity of discussing their favourite books with other like-minded people, which is especially important when one´s tastes aren´t mainstream; also because "you cannot lend your tablet to your friends as you would do with a good paperback you had discovered" (i7,4).

Some readers don't wish to be specially connected. An interviewee mentions the fact that a good feature of the tablet is that it allows us to hide what we are reading from those around us, for example in the train. "There are some books which we don´t want to exhibit in our shelf" (i3, 10), and private reading is a good thing. But in truth, there could be nothing less private that tablet reading. None of our interviewees commented on the fact that the publishers selling them the books and the owners of the social reading applications know exactly what books they have bought, when they have read them and at what speed, and even the notes and paratexts that have been built around them. Networking around our books is very much out of our control.

Conclusion: e-texts as simulations

We started this chapter by introducing the idea of electronic text (Bolter, 1991; Landow, 1992), which was very much about fragmentation and reconfigurations of meaning and content. We then characterized the idea of electronic (tablet) text shared by the readers we had interviewed in our empirical study and found it to be *immaterial, variable, networked* (both with paratexts and other readers), and *abundant* (we carry and read more). Both Bolter and Landow's electronic text and our tablet e-text are ruptures with the classical tradition of linear text printed in unique volumes, the first because of its content, the second because of its form.

Tablet readers keep on insisting that this new form doesn't bother them, but on second inspection, we have found evidence that the changes brought about by e-text (immateriality, variability, network) deeply upset them, "you don´t have an overview anymore, you don´t control the reading situation" (i5,12), "I can never find my way in these e-books"

(i2,5). This lack of control, combined with the doubts about ownership as presented above, suggest a feeling of disempowerment of these readers, something that is in sharp contrast with their enthusiastic appreciation of the machines and their praise of qualities such as portability, accessibility, and the abundance of texts.

All our readers were more comfortable with print books, but many explain this as a mere result of habit, as in the quote from above: "the (printed) books around us, it is just nostalgic (...) we have to leave it behind and go into the texts, the contents, that is what is important, isnt it?" (i 10, 14) This doesn´t mean that those who maintain that they become just as engrossed in an electronic text are lying, "I can disappear inside an e-book" (i2, 12). However, the status of the e-text, as understood by the readers we interviewed is not the same as that of a book, it is less real, in their own words. Six of our interviewees had what could be called Freudian slips at several places during the interviews, calling the print books "real books", as opposed to e-books. This happened even when the comparison was in favour of the e-book, such as in "the tablet is more comfortable than the real...er... the real book" (i3,8). As we quoted above, an e-text "looks like a book" (i8,10) but it isn´t.

To elucidate why this distinction might be important, we would like to turn to the idea of affordance, as it was repurposed for human–computer interaction (HCI) by Donald Norman in *The Design of Everyday Things:*[9] "the term *affordance* refers to the perceived and actual properties of the thing, primarily those fundamental properties that determine just how the thing could possibly be used. [...] Affordances provide strong clues to the operations of things. Plates are for pushing. Knobs are for turning" (Norman 1988, p. 9).

The affordances of the tablet as an object itself are clearly identified as advantageous: portable, light, smart, etc. but we can certainly also talk about the affordances of non-physical things, such as interfaces, or electronic texts. In this case, the electronic text eludes its readers... what are the affordances of an immaterial, variable, networked text? A text that is not *really* a text and cannot therefore be trusted? It keeps being conceptualized in the negative by its readers: it is unstable, because it doesn't always have the same form and it is not permanently inscribed in a book (thus merging with its platform and adopting its affordances); it occupies a vacuum. It can be read (which is an affordance of any kind of text), but it is not a book, and thus it cannot be held, displayed and loved in the same way. We argue that something that is unreal, unstable, immaterial, and variable can only ever be a supplement, a substitute that we turn to only in cases in which the real item, the book, is disadvantageous, such as travelling or commuting or when we have no more room for books in our physical shelves. Tablets are still very much "the cold machine" (i10,12), and the limitations of e-text mostly evoke nostalgia for what is lost.

It is tempting to speculate as to how this new ungraspability of e-texts will affect the way we read, remember and build knowledge. Historians of reading, such as Guglielmo Cavallo and Roger Chartier have shown how pivotal shifts in our reading habits (like the adoption of silent reading) deeply impact the way of acquiring knowledge and the general cultural climate of the West (Chartier 1997). Saint Isidoro believed that silent book reading aided memory, because the speaker could retain more information as he didn't have to concentrate on reading aloud and wasn´t distracted by the sound of his own voice (Chartier 1997, p. 142). Surely these new variable e-texts will also have an impact in how we remember and use information? Will information be quickly accessed and forgotten? Or, in a

positive vein, will the fact that each individual can carry thousands of texts with them aid the development of culture, creativity and invention?

It is important to insist that the affordances of tablets are not only about us being able to swipe, turn pages and read. The very act of sitting down to read also evokes the materiality of books, building our expectations up in ways that imbue the e-text reading experience with a poignant sense of loss. We don´t know if tablet reading will take over completely or if it will continue to coexist with book reading, so that readers still will turn to print books when trying to make sense of their e-books. We don´t know if the unreal status of e-text is a consequence of its novelty, of electronic reading being a form in its infancy, or if it is going to be a permanent feature of the e-reading experience.

In any case, electronic (tablet) text, lacking in authenticity, has become a *simulation* in Baudrillard's sense, something in place of the real thing, doing the function of the real thing. For him, this false positioning is dangerous; he writes: "to simulate is not simply to feign... feigning or dissimulation leaves the reality intact... whereas simulation threatens the difference between 'true' and 'false,' between 'real' and 'imaginary' (Baudrillard, 1983, p.5) The anxieties that we have identified in our analysis have to do with a loss of control over the text, and an unease about texts and platforms not being merged (with an unequivocal set of affordances) as in the case of print books. These anxieties are verbalized in the comparisons that oppose e-texts to "real books", where tablets, despite their wonderful features, are still the runner-ups. But what is the danger here? What could possibly happen if our community of readers reached the point where they didn´t remember what it was like to hold a printed book, to read a text materialized in a single object, to have a sense of place and authenticity?

What is lost if the e-text becomes the only standard? Will reading become a superficial consumer activity or will it develop an authenticity of its own, maybe a networked system of connections such as the one dreamt of by Vannevar Bush?

We are not sure that the answer lies in the apocalyptic or the integrated extremes, in Umberto Eco's words (1965), but somewhere in between, and maybe Walter Benjamin can help to explain this. Talking about authenticity, it is nearly inevitable to conceptualize our electronic (tablet) texts in terms of a lack of *aura*, as Benjamin defined it in his essay "The Work of Art in The Age of Mechanical Reproduction" (1936). The e-text is a reproduced copy of a copy of a copy, the original too far away to count for anything. Even the experience of reading this e-text in a tablet is a simulation, having lost the flavour of the real experience.

Relating to an object devoid of aura might provoke a sense of detachment in the reader, avoiding the ritualistic aesthetics of older times and the blind adoration of the genius author. This could be interpreted positively; if readers have less "respect" for texts and their authors, they might become more critical readers, more willing themselves to write something and make it public, to enter a democratic dialogue this way. It could also be interpreted negatively; with readers that progressively care less and only look for easy entertainment. In both cases, the possibility for change is there, at least for a while.

Notes

1. Data from *Danske Medier.* Available at: http://danskemedier.dk/nyhed/smartphones-og-tablets-stadig-mere-udbredte-blandt-danskere/ (accessed 1 December 2014)
2. We don´t see this as problematic, since our aim was to describe the

experience of reading in tablets as such, and not to tie it in to any particular sociocultural indicators. Although we are of course aware that the aesthetic

3. TNS Atlas Intermedia, 2012, TNS Gallup Group. Book reading: Daily use by sex and age 2012 (per cent). (Available at: http://nordicom.gu.se/sv/mediefakta/mediestatistik) reading experience of middle to high-middle class Danes is not universal. But our subjects are not particularly regarded as "Danes" or "men/women" but as readers engaging with a new technology.

4. In this we were inspired by the classic model by Rogers (1962), and created our own parameters in order to describe the adoption categories. It must be said that we only used the first three categories of *innovators, early adopters*, and *early majority,* since we considered that the development and spread of this technology is at its early stage and the categories of *late majority* and *laggards* cannot be said to exist yet. Even the early majority idea could be problematic if we were taking a measure of the whole population. For example, in 2012, 20% of Danes owned a tablet (which can be used for reading), and only 5% owned an e-reader that was not also a multifunction tablet (Danmarks Statistik, Available at: http://www.dst.dk/pukora/epub/upload/17443/itanv.pdf). So we look at how the majority of current users relate to their technology, not the majority of the total population.

5. This refers to works created specifically for tablets and whose length is usually shorter than an novel and longer than a short story, a sort of electronic novella, like the ones called "singles" published by Danish company Zetland.

6. Available at: http://eliterature.org/what-is-e-lit/

7. See the Electronic Literature Organization website for references: http://eliterature.org/

8. *Location* is Kindle´s "digital answer to page numbers" (from the Kindle Manual). it is a number that indicates how far one has read in a book, but

it doesn't correspond to pages in a printed book, to avoid changes when fonts are resized. It is a numerical measure of the total extension of a book based on bytes of data.
9. In his later work, Norman distinguishes between real and perceived affordances, but that disctinction is not relevant for this discussion.

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