Joshua Zhang

Professor David Stern

Gened 1090: What is a Book?

6 May 2025

The Odyssey of Dreams

Introduction and Purpose

Throughout history, the formal definition of a book has varied across cultures and intellectual traditions worldwide. Famously, the question of "What is a book?" was directly addressed by Kant's 1797 book: *The Metaphysics of Morals*. Within the book, Kant declares, "On the one hand, a book is an 'opus mechanism,' a material object that has been produced by a mechanical art… On the other hand, a book is a text addressed to the public by its author or by the publisher" (Chartier, Stallybrass 188). Similarly, within the context of this class, we find that scholars such as Roger Chartier and Peter Stallybrass ultimately align with Kant's dual definition, emphasizing that a book exists both as a physical artifact and as an intellectual work shaped by the author's intentions and the public's interpretations.

Acknowledging Chartier and Stallybrass' definition, I approach the creation of my book with careful attention to its physical attributes, authorial purpose, and public reception. To start my book's conception, we define the intention behind my book. My book is driven by two primary aims: to secure remembrance and to generate profit. To achieve this, my book blends historical reverence and dynamic digital design to cement my personal legacy, while maximizing value extraction from readers eager for self-improvement.

Historical Context and Situation / Book Medium Inspiration

After declaring clear authorial motives, I seek to define the historical time period and context in which this book will be situated in. As one of said book's primary objectives is maximizing monetization, this book must naturally be positioned in the modern era — present day time. As for the form of the book's medium, when considering the frequent use and convenience of 21st-century technological innovations such as supercomputers and smartphones compared to traditional books, I conclude that this project must be produced electronically to maximize consumer engagement and, proceeding, monetary extraction. This medium choice inherently allows us to achieve greater success toward our two primary goals and was thus chosen.

As for the specific layout and design of the e-book, I draw inspiration from Alan Kay's visionary 1970s concept of the Dynabook. In the 1970s, Kay theorized a portable, personal computing device that would transform books from static objects into "instantiated" experiences — dynamic, interactive digital artifacts that users could copy, personalize, and "own" without damaging the originals. Notably, this personalization feature is especially critical toward book enticement as humans are shown to naturally "like to permute and play with what they own" (Schnapp 384). Additionally, he envisioned allowing users to "instantiate" books after paying a fee as well. As a whole, according to Kay, the Dynabook promised "to exceed print in its speed, flexibility, and storage capabilities" and offered "new means of access, proliferation, and exchange on the scale of a personal, hand-held device rather than a room-sized computer" (Schnapp 384).

Building off of Kay's aspirations and with 21st century technologies, my book's layout is also a portable, personal computing device that allows for users to personalize their copies through dynamic, interactive artifacts. Specifically, my book takes the form of a large language model, that writes itself through a series of questions and prompts based on the user's input. Said dynamic medium offers continuous content generation and personalization, allowing each user to shape their book's trajectory according to their individual needs and responses. In order to facilitate this customization, I implemented a Google login system, enabling users to access their personalized book wherever they are. Thus, my book's layout and design blends historical inspiration with modern technology to deliver the uniquely interactive and adaptable reading experience users innately desire. Most importantly, the personalization feature of the design not only draws readers toward the book, but also inherently spreads my name through association as its author, amplifying the project's remembrance objective.

While I was ultimately unable to implement this feature directly in the current prototype, I also envisioned using a subscription-based system (such as Stripe) to monetize access to the book over time, further aligning the project with its second primary goal of profit generation.

Methods of User Engagement and Remembrance

After proving how my book's medium will drive us toward the set goals, I will now proceed to rationalize particular attributes added to the book and how they each respectively help achieve our goals.

Book Content

First, allow us to pivot and analyze what I have selected for the book's content and the rationale behind it. The content of my book first drew inspiration from *Family Guy*'s Brian Griffin and his satirical self-help book *Wish It, Want It, Do It*. Griffin's book — famously written in under four hours to capitalize (and succeed in capitalizing in both the real and television world, ironically enough) and mock the American public's appetite for formulaic self-improvement — reveals a hard truth about global audience engagement: a large mass of people are eager for self-improvement and are satisfied by filling in the blanks of their own improvement journey books. Intuitively, by using the same content, I hope to reach the same audience as well. This content sets the groundwork for how I am able to position my book as both a vessel of profit extraction and a tool for establishing a lasting legacy, as I become revered for "improving" people's lives, even when the substance comes largely from their own contributions and not my efforts.

While I initially planned to replicate Griffin's content verbatim, I quickly realized that this approach would undermine my claim to authorship and tarnish my legacy as an act of fraud. More importantly, this early plan lacked the dynamism I wanted to achieve, as outlined in my earlier discussion of digital interactivity. Luckily, I bridged this conceptual gap after engaging with Peter Stallybrass' *Shakespeare's Desk*. Within his essay, Stallybrass reminds us that authorship has never been a matter of pure originality. As he writes, "Shakespeare was no more the origin of his plays than he was of his voice" (Stallybrass 4). As per Stallybrass, Shakespeare's work emerged from a cacophony of borrowed plots, recycled language, adapted props, and collaborative revisions. What ultimately made Shakespeare labeled a genius was his

skill in curating, reorganizing, and amplifying what already existed in present society. Inspired by this model, my book does likewise with Griffin's book, blending algorithmic prompts, user responses, and self-help frameworks into an interactive system. In doing so, I have not only created a successful self-help book parallel to Griffin's, but an infinite, dynamic one when combining it with Dynabook concepts. Thus, I should have successfully created a book prompt that is able to maximize legacy and money, through the heroics of helping improve readers' lives and sales made by the subscription capability. Parallel to Griffin, my book is given a cheesy name as well: *The Odyssey of Dreams*.

Biblical Features

Next, I aspired to elevate my book's cultural and symbolic status. This logic was inspired by Erik Kwakkel's *Decoding the Material Book*, where said book reminded us that medieval books were not just vehicles for words but meaningful physical objects made with intent for particular purposes. As stated by Kwakkel, "Medieval readers were well aware that the physical appearance of a book reflected its status, authority, and intended use" (Kwakkel 61). This statement remains true to this day as collector's books, first-edition books, and rare bibles and books in general are all still highly valued by bibliophiles and readers altogether. Notably, I incorporated features commonly found in wealthy-owned and distinguished Bibles, similar to those we had the privilege of viewing in class and section. These included red, blue, and gold fonts to signify passage importance, bolded section headers, high-quality parchment textures, decorated initial caps, and marginalia with varied combinations of red, blue, and gold fonts, and bold and italicized text to vocalize the fabricated takeaways of earlier, previous celebrity readers — all designed to visually elevate the book's authority and cultural prestige. Additionally, since

the book's content is partially satirical, the inclusion of positive marginalia takeaways helps

reestablish and sustain reader engagement.

By digitally mimicking these design choices, I positioned this book to be on the same

exalted cultural level as esteemed religious works, signaling to readers that they are engaging

with something elevated and worthy of reverence. In doing so, I not only enhance the visual

appeal of the book, but also reinforce the book's remembrance goal. By associating my name

with the visual language of religious works, I amplify my personal legacy and ensure that my

authorship is remembered alongside the aesthetic of said text. Of course, raising appeal would

also inherently lead to sales as well.

Book Cover

Finally, to ensure the longevity of my name and legacy, I took direct inspiration from the

publication strategies employed in Shakespeare's *First Folio*. As detailed by the Folger

Shakespeare Library, Shakespeare's colleagues John Heminge and Henry Condell compiled the

First Folio in 1623, seven years after his death. They included an engraved portrait of

Shakespeare and tributes to honor his memory and establish his literary presence within history

(Folger Shakespeare Library). The effect of this was monumentally successful as Shakespeare's

image and works were solidified into history and continue to be respected to this day. Likewise, I

placed a large, AI-generated image of myself at the front of the book to immediately establish

authorial prominence. Following this, I included a short written tribute commemorating my life's

achievements on the first page. Inspired by Heminge and Condell's thought processes, my book

similarly attempts to convert authorial presence into historical permanence, guaranteeing that

readers not only engage with the content and improve themselves but also remember the creator behind it.

Conclusion

In conclusion, through inspirations of Kant, Chartier, and Stallybrass' definitions of a book, Kay's Dynabook theories, Griffin's satirical genius writing, Stallybrass' opinions on Shakespeare, and Shakespeare et al.'s work and tactics, *The Odyssey of Dreams* ultimately amalgamates historical tradition, technological innovation, and purposeful design traits to attempt to fulfill its twin primary goals of profit and remembrance.

Last Regards

In the event you were wondering where *Wish It, Want It, Do It* came from:

https://www.imdb.com/title/tt1759063/

Thank you as well for your patience as well! This class was so much fun and spectacular to take!

<u>Sources</u>

1. Chartier, Roger, and Peter Stallybrass. "What Is a Book?" *The Cambridge Companion to Textual Scholarship*, edited by Neil Fraistat and Julia Flanders, Cambridge University Press, 2013, pp. 188–206.

2. Schnapp, Jeffrey. "Books Transformed." *The Oxford Illustrated History of the Book*, edited by James Raven, Oxford University Press, 2020, pp. 369–93.

3. Stallybrass, Peter. "Shakespeare's Desk: The Materiality of Authorship."

4. Kwakkel, Erik. "Decoding the Material Book: Cultural Residue in Medieval Manuscripts." *The Medieval Manuscript Book: Cultural Approaches*, edited by Michael Johnston and Michael Van Dussen, Cambridge University Press, 2015, pp. 60–76.

5. Folger Shakespeare Library. "First Folio." *Folger Shakespeare Library*, https://www.folger.edu/explore/shakespeare-in-print/first-folio/.