

I Slightly Judge Others by Their Bookshelves

BY BARBARA DEWILDE

Ed.Note: This article was originally published on Barbara deWilde's blog and has been modified slightly for this forum.

WhatTheBook.org is an interactive poll Tony Chu and I designed to provide a space for people to display their feelings about the changing form of books. The site was created in conjunction with the AIGA “50 Books/ 50 Covers of 2010” exhibition, an annual showcase of the best in book design. Visitors select AGREE or DISAGREE to seven statements that relate to the function of physical books and ebooks in various scenarios that touch their lives. The statements are as follows:

I silently judge people by their bookshelves.

I would love to be picked up in a bookstore.

A book has made me so angry I've thrown it against the wall.

I would never give an ebook as a gift.

Decorating with books is perverse.

The Internet is as important as sex.

I want to own nothing.

A virtual book is added to a shelf to register the response. In the gallery of the National Design Center in New York, I designed an actual 12-foot-wide bookshelf with fellow grad student Michael Yap, where visitors respond to the same statements by shelving a physical book: red books for AGREE and black books for DISAGREE. The data is collected over time and the shelf gets reset after it can hold no more books.

Without question the most difficult part of designing the gallery exhibition and interaction was writing the statements. I worked with Paul Pangaro, my professor at SVA where I'm earning an MFA in interaction design, to gather a list of attributes that a successful statement would possess. First, each needed to be simple but not obvious. Second, the content had to touch upon physicality and its effect on functionality within James Bridle's temporal model of the book. In his model, the book is first an advertisement, next a reading experience and finally a souvenir. Printed books work well at all points along the timeline. Ebooks, however, make lousy advertisements, so-so reading experiences and terrible souvenirs. Still, with technology digital books will evolve and improve. Ebooks are more easily distributed, written and published. They are the future of the industry and yet people have mixed feelings about the change. The “50 Books/50 Covers” exhibition and WhatTheBook.org try to capture the excitement as well as the unease surrounding this topic and to display it as a means of opening up a conversation.

At the end of the interaction on WhatTheBook.org there is a prompt to write a new definition of “book.” Once submitted, the definition can be read and shared. In the gallery, a large chalkboard provides a place for new definitions to be written, edited and displayed as well. The website feeds definitions to the gallery at the beginning of the day. Today we have collected nearly 1,500 book definitions on the website. The exhibit is open through the end of April, but WhatTheBook.org will remain online through the end of 2012. The second phase of the project will be to analyze the data and share it. You can read the definitions by filling out the form and submitting a definition or by going directly to WhatTheBook.org/definition. Your ideas for sharing, preserving or displaying the data are welcome.

[HOME](#)

[PAGE 1](#)

[PAGE 2](#)

[PAGE 3](#)

[PAGE 4](#)

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