

Adapting Blog Readers for Multitouch

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Abstract

The biggest challenge for multitouch blog reader apps is that they ignore often desired features found in dedicated longform devices such as e-readers and most importantly, paper books. This means that current apps fail to fully utilize touch gestures, opting to recycle point and click interaction found in their web-based counterparts rather than capitalizing on similar dynamic touch interaction found in books and e-readers.

1 Introduction

In a 2006 letter to Oprah, Harper Lee, of *To Kill A Mockingbird* fame, wrote, “Can you imagine curling up in bed to read a computer? Weeping for Anna Karenina and being terrified by Hannibal Lecter, entering the heart of darkness with Mistah Kurtz, having Holden Caulfield ring you up—some things should happen on soft pages, not cold metal.” [1] In an age of boundless information with technology emerging to support “book-like” reading, we see similar sentiments cropping up. Current avenues of reading for an increasingly younger population are shortform, which is historically read on cold metal. The most intuitive devices we have that “compliment” reading are designed around the way writing is presented on the web: short, sweet and to the point. Many objections to the interaction styles and design that surround shortform writing for book-sized devices are concerned with the fact that they radically depart from the intimacy of reading a book. Untangling these emotionally charged views is difficult, but at the heart of the issue lies unfamiliar interaction with shortform content. Blog reader type apps fail to fully utilize touch gestures, opting to recycle point and click interaction found in their web-based counterparts rather than capitalizing on similar dynamic touch interaction found in books and e-readers.

2 Related Issues and Context

As discussed above there are three major areas from which scrutiny about modern reading devices come from. One debate is “shortform writing vs. longform writing”, which is in

part what Lee talking about in the initial quote. This issue is what motivates the other two, and is not necessarily addressable by altering an interaction style. Books inherently carry a story which communicates value and sparks the imagination, and for the past thousand-odd years, this has been the primary source through which we interact with written content. Reading is no longer synonymous with the longform, nor the book, and the seeming departure of a cherished meaning from the most frequently consumed written work urks many people.

The evolution of reading devices from dedicated devices such as the paper book and e-Reader to multifunction devices (laptop computers, iPads, etc.) serves as the “jumping-off” point for the issue at hand. Multifunction devices that simulate touch currently have the potential to bear the most likeliness to books, and mainly support shortform content. This is representative of the dilemma of Lee and many others, that interaction on reading-centric apps is focused on supporting the shortform. So, this begs the question: can we match or exceed the interaction style of the paper book or dedicated e-reader to create a more meaningful reading experience with shortform content?

Multitouch devices have the ability to mimic books, but unfortunately, much of the design borrowed for reading apps are from devices non-conducive to touch, such as older e-Readers and web-based RSS readers. Apps like Flipboard represent growing trend to provide a user with unique content and a friendly interface, preserving some of the sacred “meaning only found in books.” IxD research says we can push this design further.

3 Design Implementation

Joan Vinall-Cox explains in her article “Moving from Paper to E-Book Reading” that, “The reading that occurs when people scan Web pages or engage with social media requires massively different eye-pattern movements and intake-and-response habits than the reading of books. [On the other hand], the reading of books requires eyes moving only from left to right (for English), sustained attention, and the ability to follow the author’s (hopefully well-written) train of thought: A different set of reading habits than on websites...” Despite her personal use of a multitouch e-reader, Vinall-Cox feels that the set of gestures provided by the app are disingenuous, either in performance or in congruency to “reading response” habits. She elaborates on her e-reader’s highlighting function, where she is able to select text and copy it to a collection of quotes. In order to complete this action, she must complete many steps besides the initial gesture of highlighting. Selecting the highlighter from a toolbar, choosing what collection to file the quote in, and validating the selection are all steps that Vinall-Cox felt remove the reader from the immersion of the content.

This does not only happen with dedicated longform devices, but in fact is most pervasive in shortform reading on the web or in apps. Multitouch does much in the way of (potentially) eliminating a cluttered interface of buttons and entry fields, mirroring the simplicity of paper, and yet blog reader apps still rely on these interaction methods for

navigation and content discovery. Content sharing and saving are often represented on a toolbar as “+” and “Save”. Discovery and article selection are always represented in a list. As Jesse Burstyn comments, “While not necessarily the most efficient, techniques such as folding and flipping pages are ingrained gestures that are lost with this new medium.” (Burstyn) Clearly, a reconciliation of features is needed.

In our design, we were able to distill the primary features of the top three blog reader apps and modify them according to current IxD research with attention to promoting a more pleasurable reading experience. In the three apps, Newsify, Feedly and Flipboard, we found that there were four main areas of focus: Article and Post Navigation, Content Discovery, Content Saving or Clipping, and Sharing.

In the following sections, we will present these areas and tell how they were addressed in the three apps, making sure to include challenges and barriers to entry. Then, we will show and elaborate on our research-backed implementation of the areas within our design. Justification of the mockups in the greater context of interaction design will be given in section 4.

3.1 Navigation

3.1.1 Article Navigation

To begin with an obvious difference between typical multifunction and dedicated reading interfaces, in the former, text is typically laid out in a vertical arrangement. The arrangement of the text necessitates a downward scrolling, where in dedicated longform apps and devices, pages are usually flipped horizontally. In all three apps, the vertical scroll is upheld, with the notable exception of Flipboard, who implements a wall-calendar like “flipping” of the article. Flicking up folds half of the screen to reveal the next “page” of the article.

In Jesse Burstyn’s analysis of navigation implementations in e-readers, he says the following: “In many cases, these [navigational] motions [in books] were so automatic that partial or even complete page flipping occurred prematurely; gaining subtle peek of the contents on the next page. Contrast this with existing e-book readers where navigating between pages is an intentional act of pressing a dedicated directional button” (Burstyn 4371). In attempts to solve this issue, Burstyn altered the shape of his proposed device. Yoon et. al. was able to implement a similar navigational technique, opting for a flat screen with the ability to flip through pages quickly or “peek” at the next.

Through the research, it is apparent that the sought after difference between paper and “cold metal” concerning navigation of a single piece of writing, is the ability to rifle/skim through pages quickly or peek and return to the previous pages. In our design, we chose to utilize a full flipping animation to promote “peeking”, where the user physically pulls the page back, horizontally. To promote quick “rifling” through a longer article, the user can pull left to right with three fingers, skipping three pages at a time, while still being

able to peek at their contents.

3.1.2 Post Navigation

The other main type of navigation between the apps is where the user selects their article to read. Strikingly similar to web based RSS readers, these views were comprised of a list, with Newsify being the most cluttered. Feedly opts for a single column list, including (like the others) the title, a photo and small excerpt of an article, which then needs to be selected by a user. Alternatives for navigating through a collection of text are not usually found within longform devices. The closest counterpart would be a table of contents or search function in an e-Reader.

Regardless of the interface, writing is often divided into sections and those sections are made easily accessible by a representation as a list. Because there is not necessarily any issue with this design, we reiterated it in our layout. Combining the features from Feedly (not cluttered, endless list) and Flipboard (large list items) in our design allows the user to quickly find an article to read, with a full width list, large excerpts and minimal clutter. Endless vertical scrolling allows the user to skip large parts of the list which was deemed desirable in the previous section .

3.2 Content Discovery

All of the apps presented interesting ways to discover new content, which was then featured on the “post navigation” list. Feedly and Flipboard present the user with a Twitter-like hashtag system, where the user indicates via text input, interests or selects categories that they might be interested in. In dedicated devices similar linkage to other resources would only be found in a index or bibliography. Even then, the resources would be restricted to the subject matter contained in the work.

Mitigating text input and an “index-like” list were our primary concerns in our design. In Veras et al’s “Interaction for Reading Comprehension on Mobile Devices”, the researchers proposed a tool that would highlight words in an article corresponding to that user’s vocabulary. They saw this feature as conducive to breaking down an intimidating wall of text. A similar feature developed by Tashman and Edwards allows the user to highlight and save words in hopes of increasing vocabulary.

In our design, we thought that the act of accessing new content should be developed in a similar vein, where the user is able to indicate words that corresponds to their interests. This is done inside the article view with a pinch gesture on the specific word or phrase. The user can also “zoom” or reverse pinch to negate words and indicate topics they do not want represented in their recommended reading.

3.3 Saving

The equivalent to “dog-earing” a page in multitouch blog readers is when a user adds a post or article to a personal “collection”. They are then able to access the article or text clipping at any time. A feature unique to Flipboard is that this collection optionally becomes public as a “Magazine”. In the article view, this action is usually represented by a “Bookmark button”.

Dog earing specifically was brought up again and again as a hallmark feature of books. Rosner et al make the following observation about bookmarking: “Changing material properties of objects can take advantage of our tactile memory, or subtly draw attention to an object, helping people find information more easily. [A developer should] provide ways for users to temporarily alter the physical medium of an interface.” (Rosner 3407) The corollary to the dog ear in shortform is the bookmark. Our gesture-centric implementation of bookmarking reiterates the dog ear, dragging with one finger from the top right to save a page and with two fingers to save an article.

3.4 Sharing

Flipboard’s “Magazine” represents a community-centric way to share reading lists with the added option of exporting an article or the list as a whole to social media. Feedly and Newsify opt for a “Share with [social media, email]” button. Content sharing is a function unique to multifunction devices. In our design, we sought to mimic Flipboard in merging the bookmark and share functions. Every dog ear a user makes is saved to their collection, and similar to Flipboard’s magazine that saved content is then made public. Direct social media sharing of an article or quote removes from the immersion of the material, so we sought to design a hands off way to share.

4 Design Justifications

Our main concerns in developing our layout were: restoring simplicity in the all views (esp. reading views), combating any removal from content immersion, and restoring touch-centric interaction found in paper books.

Pages in a book have what is referred to in interaction design as a “natural mapping”. Initially, we were concerned that restoring simplicity in the interface would lead to a lack of affordances. Many recent, more “cutting-edge”, multitouch apps are guilty of this, for example, employing hidden sidebars accessible only with swipe left and right gestures. Hiding is a fantastic way to institute simplicity, but hidden features require a tutorial, and thus a learning curve. Books are intuitive enough to be simple and easy to use as a result of their natural mapping. In the article navigation and saving features, we mimicked common features from books such as dog-earing and page flipping. Retaining the natural mapping of books mitigates many of the complaints concerning the usability of “cold metal”.

We were able to enforce simplicity within the app by automating many of the repetitive tasks, such as sharing and content discovery. In Flipboard, Feedly and especially Newsify, simplicity in these actions seemed to be directly correlated to the amount of error-proneness. For example, sharing with Feedly requires the user to select from several social networks in a small menu, login to the selected social media account, select what to share, and then actually post the message to their account. Conversely, in the initial setup of Flipboard, the user is able to select once which networks to share their magazine with. We sought a similar implementation in our app, with our dog-earing feature.

Added simplicity takes place in our removal of many input fields, mainly in the area of content discovery. The slight addition of any input fields would automatically conflict with the natural mapping of the book, as it is a passive object. The pinch in and out feature lets the user “actively read” while not removing them from the immersion of the content. A positive effect of reinterpreting many features to better represent a multitouch interaction style is that gestures also enforce consistency.

References

- [1] Harper Lee, *Some things should happen on soft pages, not cold metal*. November 2014. URL: <http://www.lettersofnote.com/2012/10/some-things-should-happen-on-soft-pages.html>.