

Process isn't everything. Toward a new practice. (0323)

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Paper

Within any creative arts discipline it is possible, even desirable, to privilege the process of making over a manifestation of the central idea of a work as received by an audience. The nature of teaching the creative process works to this end too; in a seminar setting, it is necessary to support students across a range of expertise, developing work at their own pace and as such, the method of making (sketching, development, experimentation, technique in all its forms) can become the whole conversation, rather than providing a clearer view of the final iteration.

The subsequent danger of this approach to an artist/educator is that one's own work can become laboured. Spend five years supporting and developing in this manner, and it is inevitable that something transfers back into personal practice.

What REACT offers, almost as a subtext within the programme's overarching aims of invigorating the creative and academic sectors, is an opportunity to reestablish a working practice built on speed, iteration and an outcome that has to be achieved in a short space of time.

Our project - an address to the potential of merging the physical qualities of the book with a digitally adjacent layer of storytelling - was born of five years postdoctoral writing and research, a practice in book design and digital narrative and a collaboration with an artist specialising in experiential, participative media works. We chose to work with established writers - Neil Gaiman and Nick Harkaway - in order to reframe and present the work in literary terms and guarantee a writer's rigour within a piece of work that risked foregrounding technology and novelty over a good story.

Henry Jenkins attends to the transformative potential of a medium's earliest years, suggesting 'artists enjoy a freedom to experiment that may be constrained by the conventions and routines imposed when production techniques are established'¹. REACT's core framework (3 months from concept to delivery) embodies a hothouse in which those early years are cultivated and fed by peer review, iterative development and public exposure. The theme of the funding call we answered; Books and Print; necessitated embracing the unknown and exploring 'what could be' quickly, driving toward a conclusion without the safety net of a two year programme of R&D, scaffolded by published papers, research symposia and a slow, reflexive development. REACT implicitly asked that those five years prior to funding award had been well spent, that our preparation was genuine and the proposed piece of work was, in fact, the next step in an evolution of idea and form that grew from a sustained practice, in both material work and conventional research. It also asked us to make the work public from the outset. Reflective blogs, longer articles, all of which opened the work up to critique before we'd had chance to work out what it might be. In every way, REACT asked us to jump off a cliff.

¹ Thorburn, David & Jenkins, Henry (2004) Rethinking Media Change. MIT Press. London. p6

We were ambitious in our aims for the project - These Pages Fall Like Ash offered the chance to make work that demonstrated what we thought digital could bring to books. We were determined to provide a tangible answer to Craig Mod's question:

“..publishers, writers, readers and software-makers have concerned themselves with shoehorning the old-media image of a book into new media. Everyone asks, ‘How do we change books to read them digitally?’ But the more interesting question is, ‘How does digital change books?’ And, similarly, ‘How does digital change the authorship process?’”

We wanted to challenge the orthodoxy of digital and publishing being the eBook; a market-driven response to opportunity and technology; and the enhanced eBook; the same response augmented with video, animation and little or no understanding of the relationship between form and content, or platform and writing. All of this arose from a genuine desire to provoke a response in publishing, from writers and thinkers to an ‘establishment’ of five monolithic publishing houses haphazardly stumbling toward a poorly distributed and designed future. In many ways, the status of Bristol as not-London simultaneously helped and hindered our ambition. It was remarked (well after the successful conclusion of the REACT Books and Print Programme) that the publishing press had failed to notice we’d finished the works we were making. Their expectation being that R&D takes years, not months, and a piece of work announced at the London Book Fair’s Digital Minds Symposium (in April 2013) would appear at some distant date, not two weeks hence. Conversely, without the expectation of an interested media or trade body, we were free to make decisions based on rapid iteration, audience testing and practical considerations about story, structure, materiality and experience design. We retained the form of the book as a core object by which an audience would read our work, and broke that form by removing the narrative from its pages, requiring each reader to physically traverse the city in order to read a digitally distributed serial story.

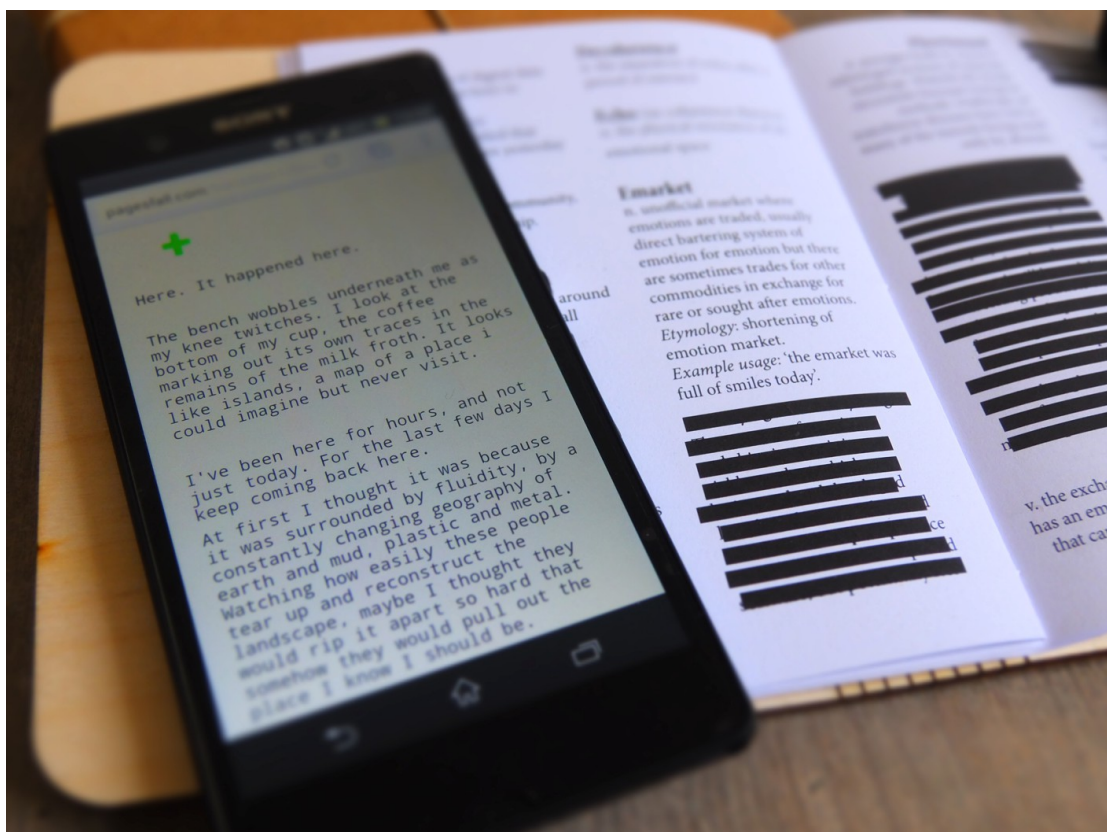


Figure 1: these pages fall like ash

These decisions arose in a non-contiguous process of design and writing. Conversations produced insights that had to be applied to an emerging project in an unstructured, make-it-up-as-you-go-along manner. In effect, this exchange of knowledge, facilitated by a funding Council's largesse, became the antithesis of conventional Knowledge Exchange. There was no plan, minimal opportunities for properly documented experiments, and an emphasis on trust and instinct. At the close of the three months though, we had a testable prototype to answer Mod's question, documentation of every conversation - digital, physical, audio and unplanned alike - and an audience who not only responded to the project, but bought every copy we made available.

Whether *These Pages Fall Like Ash* succeeded in shaking publishing to the core is almost immaterial. What remains valuable to this academic is the impact REACT had on a creative practice and research career. By making something new, visibly and publicly but built on a history of research, we worked in the shadow of Alain Robbe-Grillet's manifesto, *Towards a New Novel*:

'though we are accused of being theoreticians, it's just the opposite - we don't know what a novel, a real novel, ought to be; all we know is that the novel of today will be what we make it, today, and that our job is not to cultivate its resemblance to what existed yesterday, but to move further on'³

REACT was lightning in a bottle. Impossible to hold, and harder to repeat. Regardless, lessons learned from the experience; in trust, rapid prototyping, minimum viability, fearlessness, open discourse and a willingness to say 'yes' rather than 'maybe'; have reinvigorated my practice and my teaching and will do so for years to come.

³ Robbe-Grillet, Alain (1965). *Snapshots & Towards a New Novel*. Calder & Boyars Ltd. London. p136