The Rare e-Vent: Concepts of Rarity and Scarcity in e-Books

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Abstract

This paper questions the concept of rarity in electronic publishing. It begins by outlining traditional criteria for a book to achieve the valued status of rarity and asks whether they can be applied to electronic books. After deconstructing common assumptions about this form of publishing, it suggests several ways in which an e-book can be considered rare. The essay concludes that the value of a rare book extends beyond supply-and-demand. Above all, the essay is an appeal for more research to be conducted in this area of study.

Introduction

The buzz in Canadian publishing at the end of last year was the story of the 2010 Scotiabank Giller Prize winner, Johannah Skibsrud’s *The Sentimentalists*. While much of the excitement was over the novel itself, many were interested in the scarcity of Gaspereau Press’s edition of the book. Gaspereau, a small Nova Scotia printing house, is known for its small runs of high-quality, aesthetically fine-tuned books (Patch, 2010). Less than a week after Skibsrud was announced as the winner, copies of the book had sold out and the pressure was on Gaspereau to meet the demand for more. At this point, sales of the e-book skyrocketed - despite the fact that it was only available through the Kobo store. On November 12, 2010, just three days after the winner was announced, the *Toronto Star* reported: “Though Kobo declined to release hard sales information, *The Sentimentalists* has sold 10 times as many copies since winning the Giller as it did in its entire run before that, said Michael Tamblyn, executive vice-president of content, sales and merchandising with Kobo” (Patch, 2010). As the author and publishers scrambled to find a solution to the hard copy shortage, the electronic edition had an advantage that no hard copy publisher can possibly offer - an unlimited supply of copies.

Stories such as this lead us to think critically about the state of books and publishing today. This essay makes no attempt to argue that electronic book sales will force printed books out of the industry any time soon, but it is true that we live at a transitional point between two technologies. E-books have yet to meet the expectations of some early twenty-first-century industry prophets, but they have...
certainly become a permanent fixture in publishing. This story shows that one of the greatest advantages of publishing books electronically is the high product yield. In the case of *The Sentimentalists*, this was invaluable at a point when demand was high and the physical supply ran out. Additionally, it draws attention to the value added to the Gaspereau edition not only by the novel’s prestige, but also (and perhaps more importantly) by the scarcity of available copies. Thus, the editions of this novel stand on opposite ends of the spectrum - the printed book rare and the electronic book incalculable. These considerations lead us to an important question about electronic publishing that has yet to be thoroughly investigated: is there, or will there ever be, such a thing as a rare electronic book?

**Rare and Valuable**

In order to answer this question, we must first understand how a book comes to be designated as rare. If the electronic book is evaluated according to these standards we will see whether they are an appropriate measure of rarity, or whether different technology warrants a different means of evaluation. The criteria for determining the rarity of printed books and manuscripts have been established for centuries; clearly, at the advent of the codex, all books were rare. As the development of print technology and other factors brought more books into the world, rarity became an important aspect of value. In 1732, Johann Vogt published a list of five considerations for a book’s rarity (Grace, n.d.). Kevin Grace, Head Archivist at the University of Cincinnati, cited one of Vogt’s considerations:

The perceptive book mind knows these constant principles of rarity: that, manuscripts and books before 1500 will always be rare; that, books by classical authors by the leading presses of the 16th century will always be rare; that, books of Martin Luther and his contemporaries, and Bibles printed before 1545 will always be rare; that, books printed in remote lands will always be rare; that, uncensored books of obscene and depraved authors will always be rare; that, books that have been banned or burned will always be rare; that, the few remaining copies of books that have perished or remain in the hands of few individuals will always be rare; that, controversial books about government and religious leaders will always be rare; that, books printed in very limited numbers will always be rare; that, very large, oversized books will always be rare; that, very small or miniature books will always be rare.

While scholars today may not agree with every type of book on the list, many are still considered rare nearly three centuries later. What is evident from this list is that the value of a rare book can depend on many different factors.

Modern criteria for rare books confirm this lesson. In a brief guide to this subject, the Rare Books and Manuscripts section [RBMS] of the Association of College and Research Libraries (2006) states, “In simple terms, books achieve a degree of rarity only when demand exceeds supply.” More importantly, they indicate that, “a book known to exist in only a few copies may have significant monetary value if collectors prize it […]” However, a book without important text or distinguishing physical characteristics is likely to have little economic value, no matter how few copies survive” (RBMS, 2006). The fact that scarcity is only one characteristic of a valuable rare book is echoed in the Online Dictionary for Library and Information Science.
According to the ODLIS (n.d.), a rare book is one that is “so difficult to find that only a few copies are known to antiquarian booksellers. Those that do exist seldom appear on the market and are consequently coveted. Rare books are often valuable, but not all highly valuable books are rare.” With all of these definitions in mind, it can be concluded that the value of a rare book is found when demand vastly exceeds the supply, but also if it holds some intellectual or social value or has some valued physical characteristic.

The question is, then, can we apply these standards to electronic books? Upon first thought, the answer is no; electronic publishing has made the concept of a rare book impossible. With stories like that of The Sentimentalists, it seems that we’ve entered a world in which electronic books are the solution to our out-of-stock problem. Electronic books cannot be rare and valuable in the same way as physical books because: a) supply and demand are no longer the determining economic factors, and b) electronic books are in infinite supply. In The Long Tail: Why the Future of Business is Selling Less of More, Chris Anderson (2006), editor-in-chief of Wired Magazine, argued that digital technology and the Web have moved us from an economy of scarcity to an economy of abundance. In other words, the economy is no longer based on producing a supply to meet the perceived demand. Books are just one of the industries in which this is evident. While Anderson’s argument hinges on the diversification of products offered online - which is not entirely relevant to the current discussion - he depended largely on the assumption that products such as books are all available online in infinite supply and without geographical limits. This is what he called the “economy of abundance,” writing, “We are entering the era of effectively infinite shelf space. Two of the main scarcity functions of traditional economics - the marginal costs of manufacturing and distribution - are trending to zero in Long Tail markets of digital goods, where bits can be copied and transmitted at almost no cost at all” (p. 144). Publishers can make more books available than ever before, because the cost of production is no longer (or will soon no longer be) weighed against the perceived demand.

The visions of publishers and booksellers point to this idea. When Amazon released the Kindle e-reader, CEO Jeff Bezos announced:

Our vision is that you should be able to read any book in any language that’s ever been printed, whether it’s in print or out of print, and you should be able to buy and get that book downloaded to your Kindle in less than 60 seconds. (as cited in Striphas, 2009, p. 20)

Though Anderson hinted at it, he did not discuss the fact that when an e-book is purchased, there is no decrease in supply. Instead, he quoted Thomas Jefferson, who wrote, “He who receives an idea from me, receives instruction himself without lessening mine; as he who lights his taper at mine, receives light without darkening mine” (as cited in C. Anderson, 2006, p.145). The same goes for an electronic book; an individual can download an e-book without taking it away from anyone else. Like fire, the digital content of electronic books is infinitely reproducible.

As we have seen thus far, basic ideas about the so-called Digital Age are rife with assumption. We must analyze these assertions about electronic publishing if they
are to hold weight in this discussion. Upon further examination, it becomes clear that electronic publishing does not measure up to these claims. This paper will attempt to discredit three common assumptions. The first is that the supply of electronic books exceeds the perceived demand. The second is that the cost of electronic publishing at this point in time is much lower than print publishing. The third is that electronic books can be infinitely reproduced and made universally available. These assumptions cannot hold up against research into the actual state of electronic publishing. Additionally, what is revealed is that each of these assumptions reduces the concept of rarity to supply and access. We must not forget that rare books hold some value outside of supply and demand. Only with that understanding can we begin to conceptualize rarity in terms appropriate to electronic books. Unfortunately, research on this subject is extremely limited. This essay is, in part, an appeal for more academic energy to be invested in the concept of rare and valuable books in electronic publishing. For the time being, we will do our best with the available information.

Common Assumptions

Infinite Supply

The assumption that supply now exceeds demand is in many cases unfounded. In Books in the Digital Age, Thompson (2005) identified scale as one of the ways in which content providers can add value to their content and wrote, “The internet economy is an economy of scale - it offers the possibility of providing access to collections of material which are extensive and comprehensive, of providing a range of choice and depth which is simply not possible in most physical collections” (p. 319). He agreed, however, that publishers of electronic books have failed in recent years by not following the demand of consumers in terms of what content to make available. He explained:

It is not quantity alone which is valued, but rather quantity that is perceived as relevant to what the user wants and needs - what we could call pertinent scalability... intermediaries that set about aggregating large quantities of content while paying relatively little attention to what end users actually wanted would soon find that quantity alone does not suffice. (p. 319)

Though this was written six years ago - a significant amount of time in regards to the speed of technological innovation and implementation - there is current evidence that publishers may not be meeting the demands of the e-book consumer.

In November 2010, the if:book blog (a project by the Institute for the Future of the Book) drew attention to a new site called Lost Book Sales (Stein, 2010). This website was established as a platform for consumers to document instances in which they intended or attempted to purchase a book but either did not or could not. The submission form allows users to name the book, publisher, their region, the preferred format, the reason for the lost sale, and what they did instead of purchasing the book. As a completely coincidental example of submissions, The Long Tail appears as one of the earliest lost digital sales mentioned on the site. The Australian submitter, who cited the reason for the lost sale as “not available in region,” commented, “definitely hilarious, as certainly will be selling less of this given it is georestricted” (Tyson, 2010,
p.54). While this is perhaps not hilarious, one does wonder if Anderson is aware that his book is not available digitally in some parts of the world. Although this site has only been online for a few months, it does show that readers in various parts of the world express a lack of availability of desired titles in digital format. As of March 2011, there are 1457 documented lost sales. A brief perusal of the site shows that the preferred format in the majority of documented lost sales was digital, as opposed to audio books, hardbacks, or various formats of paperbacks. The two main reasons cited for the lost sale (aside from price) were that the title was not available digitally in the user’s region or the title was not available in the user’s preferred digital format.

Martin and Tian (2010) commented on the limited choices for end users in Books, Bytes and Business: The Promise of Digital Publishing. They indicated claims that “the current supply chain is a reflection of the use of new technology by book publishers . . . to limit reader choice and to move product rather than engage with consumers” (Martin & Tian, 2010, p. 136). Thus, it is evident that supply has yet to meet or exceed demand for e-book titles.

**Lower Cost of Production**

A common second misconception about the proliferation of electronic books is that because the cost of production is assumed to be lower than physical books, cost is no longer considered a factor in the decision of whether to make and distribute a given title. This seems to be a rather common assumption. Thompson (2005) wrote: In the dream vision of electronic content delivery, publishers could bypass most if not all of the intermediaries in the traditional book supply chain and supply content either directly to the end user through their own website or via an online e-tailer. The costs associated with producing, storing and shipping physical books would be eliminated and the problem of returns would disappear. (pp. 315–316)

The important consideration here is the phrase, “In the dream vision of electronic content delivery.” Despite the suggestions that costs are lower in electronic publishing, these visions have yet to be reified. Martin and Tian (2010) wrote of the implied potential for “disintermediation,” the removal of players or processes from the publishing chain (p. 135). They were quick, however, to explain that the reality is to the contrary. They wrote, “In the event, the outcome has frequently been the opposite of what was expected, that is to say, it has resulted in reintermidiation rather than disintermediation” (Martin & Tian, 2010, p. 135). In other words, web operations have led to the addition of participants in the publishing chain. Therefore, the dematerialization of the publishing process has yet to drastically reduce costs.

When Thompson was writing his account of the so-called digital revolution in 2005, e-books had drastically failed to meet the sales expectations of publishers and technologists. One reason for this, he wrote, was the question of price. He explained: The savings involved in delivering book content in electronic formats were not as great as some of the early champions of ebooks had suggested—all the development costs were still there, as were the royalties, the marketing costs, the publisher’s overheads, etc. But this does not go down well with consumers, for whom the perceived value of an ebook is significantly lower than that of a print book. (Thompson, 2005, p. 317)
This perception is echoed in the submissions to the *Lost Book Sales* web page. Price was the main reason listed for not purchasing e-books. Submitted comments all stated either that they had a set price they would pay for an e-book, or that they refused to pay more for an e-book than the paper copy.

In February of last year, a *New York Times* article investigated the actual costs of publishing e-books vs. printed books. The article stated:

Publishers... say consumers exaggerate the savings and have developed unrealistic expectations about how low the prices of e-books can go. Yes, they say, printing costs may vanish, but a raft of expenses that apply to all books, like overhead, marketing and royalties, are still in effect. (Motoko, 2010)

The article then went on to compare the costs and profits for publishers in regards to both e-books and printed books. Motoko (2010) estimated that for a hardcover book sold for $26, a publisher is left with less than four dollars profit. For an electronic book sold for $12.99 the publisher made a profit of between $4.50 and $5.50 before overhead costs. Thus, it appears as if publishers make more money from e-book sales. However, Motoko (2010) added, “publishers point out that e-books still represent a small sliver of total sales, from 3 to 5 percent.” This means that publishers are still paying for the costs associated with print publishing, because that is where most of their revenue originates. The costs of e-book production will not be revolutionarily lower than those of print books for quite a while.

**Universal Access**

A third assumption in electronic publishing is that once a book is made available electronically, it is available universally in unlimited supply. Part of this comes from the idea that the Internet has revolutionized access. While libraries and bookstores are limited spatially and temporally, the Internet is, for some, a new frontier where information can be accessed at any time from any location. In reality, availability is still constrained by geographical boundaries, proprietary hardware and formats, and digital rights management. Thompson (2005) wrote that ease of access is one of the best means of adding value to digital content; however, if customers cannot access content because of technological barriers, that value is lost.

These barriers are manifest in several ways. As we have already seen with the *Lost Book Sales* website, titles that are available electronically may not be globally available. It seems that an even greater limit to access is the proprietary governing of formats, which limits access to many titles to those readers who have the required technological capability to access the files. Thompson (2005) explained the issue of formats: “There is a bewildering array of proprietary formats which are not interchangeable across different reading devices. This is confusing and off-putting for consumers, who may be inclined to wait until a standardized format emerges before investing in something that may be eclipsed by technological change” (p. 316). *The Sentimentalists* can be used to illustrate the problem with format. It has already been said that when physical copies of the novel were unavailable, readers could purchase it digitally from Kobo. Additionally, Amazon released a Kindle version on November
Kobo (2010) actually provides the option of downloading their books in open formats such as ePub, so for the purposes of this argument, imagine that Amazon was the first publisher to offer the book digitally. Amazon (2010) only offers the title in Kindle format. If an individual does not own a Kindle reader, he or she can download Kindle reading software for free. However, if this person’s computer, phone, or other device does not meet system requirements, they will not be able to read the Kindle version of the book. This is where we can see how standardization facilitates access. Martin and Tian write, “In many ways, standardization remains the Holy Grail, with widespread adoption of the ePub format seen as enabling a free choice of hardware” (2010, p. 71). In reality, customers could access the coveted text without purchasing a Kindle reader or downloading the application. They were able to purchase the book from Kobo in ePub format and read it using any number of freely available ePub reading applications or web sites.

Digital rights management also prevents electronic books from being universally accessed and, in many cases, prevents them from being copied. The ODLIS provides a useful definition of digital rights management (DRM):

A system of information technology components . . . and services designed to distribute and control the rights to intellectual property created or reproduced in digital form for distribution online or via other digital media, in conjunction with corresponding law, policy, and business models. DRM systems typically use data encryption, digital watermarks, user plug-ins, and other methods to prevent content from being distributed in violation of copyright. (ODLIS, n.d.)

Striphas (2009) discussed several types of DRM, including: electronic documents that degrade over time; “time-limit license[s]” requiring purchase of further viewing rights after a set amount of time; and capping the number of authorized page views (pp. 41–2). DRM controls such as this make it so that e-books are in many cases more difficult to copy and share than printed books. Ars Technica blogger Nate Anderson (2009) explained that there is an expressed desire by consumers for electronic books to “complete the emulation of the physical world.” Readers want to be able to use an electronic book in the same way as a physical book. Martin and Tian (2010) suggest that DRM can decrease the value of digital content for publishers. They write, “It is clear that material that is somehow locked-in is inherently less valuable than that which is more openly available” (Martin & Tian, 2010, p. 212). Thus, the assumption that electronically published books have the inherent value of universal access is also shown to be unfounded.

Conceptualizing Rarity

The discussion thus far has been directed at some of the common misconceptions about the abundance of, and ability to copy electronic books. Once these are shown to be false, we can see how electronic books could come to be considered rare books. While many believe that electronic books are universally available in an unlimited supply that can be duplicated at will, we have seen that the reality is much different. At the very least, it is clear that electronic books can be rare if access is restricted to certain consumers under prescribed terms. This provides a
necessary starting point for conceptualizing rare electronic books, but we must not forget that the value of a rare book extends beyond that point.

One way of conceptualizing rarity with electronic texts is through the obsolescence of technology. Much of this discussion has pointed to scarcity in terms of the inability to access a text. The fewer instances of the functioning technology required to access an electronic text, the fewer copies of the text are available. Striphase touched on the concept of technological obsolescence, arguing that in our society obsolescence is intentional. He identified two types of obsolescence - planned and controlled. Controlled obsolescence relates to the way in which digital rights management strategies make a text obsolete by designing a technology so that it will inevitably fail. Striphase (2009) wrote, “Controlled obsolescence... turns the cliché ‘failure is not an option’ on its head... This is certainly the case with time-limited and disappearing e-books, whose programming undermines whatever permanence the notion of ownership might once have implied” (p. 182). Planned obsolescence is the type of obsolescence that contributes to the rarity of electronic texts. Striphase (2009) explained:

[This type of obsolescence] consists of the deliberate malfunctioning of consumer goods within a given period of time and of the regular release of new styles into consumer markets. (Think of the mountains of discarded personal computers that now reside permanently in landfills because their processors and hard drives can’t accommodate software released even just a few years ago). (pp. 181–182)

Digital technology is perhaps the fastest-moving in this regard; it seems that even the most innovative technology becomes outdated within a year or two.

One of the most striking examples of an obsolete electronic text is the digital version of the *Domesday Book*, a project of the BBC in 1986. An article from the Observer (2002) explained, “It was meant to be a showcase for Britain’s electronic prowess - a computer-based, multimedia version of the Domesday Book. But 16 years after it was created, the £2.5 million BBC Domesday Project has achieved an unexpected and unwelcome status: it is now unreadable. The special computers developed to play the 12in video discs of text, photographs, maps and archive footage of British life are - quite simply - obsolete” (McKie & Thorpe). The irony of this example is that the physical text of the *Domesday Book*, a book rare and valuable, is still accessible nearly a thousand years after its creation. Thus, the two textual forms are juxtaposed quite nicely. Though electronic texts are not at risk of deterioration or destruction by traditional physical threats such as mold or bookworms, they are perhaps more susceptible to the effects of time. McKie and Thorpe (2002) continue:

In the past few decades, computers, scanners, cassettes, videos, CDs, minidiscs and floppy disks have been used to replace the written word. Yet in just a few short years these digital versions have started to degrade. . . . Betamax video players, 8in and 5in computer disks, and eight-track music cartridges have all become redundant, making it impossible to access records stored on them. (para. 4)

This obsolescence is one way to think about rare electronic books, but there are others that better illustrate how the value of a book is assigned.
Perhaps the best way of thinking about value and rare books is to consider those that are designed to be rare and valuable. Artists’ books and limited editions are clear examples in the print world, but these can also occur in electronic publishing. Striphas (2009) provided an example of an electronic book that was designed to be rare and valuable. The book, Agrippa (A Book of the Dead), produced by William Gibson in 1992, was designed for one reading only. Striphas (2009) wrote:

Agrippa was a hybrid work consisting of digital/electronic text encoded on a three-and-a-half-inch computer disk and a collection of printed materials, all contained within a high-tech package designed to degenerate upon exposure to air and visible light. The disk contained not only the story of Agrippa . . . but encryption algorithms designed to ensure that the digital text would disappear as the text scrolled down the computer screen for the first and only time. (p. 41)

This book was clearly meant to be valued. Like a fragile old book, Agrippa was intended to be read with care. Handling with haste inevitably led to loss of the text, and loss of value. This is only one example of a book designed to be rare, but it leads us to think about others that challenge traditional concepts of rarity in books. We must isolate what it is we value about rare books, and apply it to today’s emerging electronic texts.

**Conclusion**

This is the challenge for book historians and rare book librarians of the digital age. While electronic books may not be rare in the same way as physical texts, the methods by which we determine rarity are still applicable. If anything, we can be certain that the issue of obsolete technology will challenge the long-term preservation of electronic texts. Rare books librarians have investigated, and will continue to investigate, methods of digital preservation that will ensure the longevity of scarce and socially valuable information. While the physical format has changed, the mission remains the same. Additionally, these librarians, as well as scholars concerned with the history and future of the book, must devote more study to the issue of value in books. At this moment, the research is extremely sparse. Not only will this information be academically valuable, but it will ensure the preservation of our valuable cultural heritage.

**References**


