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A Thesis submitted to the Faculty of the College of Imaging Arts and Sciences in candidacy for the degree of Master of Fine Arts in Computer Graphics Design

Designing Compelling Interfaces: An exploration of the artist book and how its unique interactive experience can influence the graphical user interface.

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Abstract

Traditional art forms have contributed greatly to the interactive design industry and many designers still gain inspiration from painting, carving, weaving, photography, and other various arts. The artist book, which is a fairly new art form, is a mixture of old and new concepts but different from other art forms in that part of the viewer's experience is made up by physically interacting with the book. To draw a modern day comparison, this interaction of the viewer to the book, is similar to the interaction of a user to a flash site.

The goal of this interactive project is to compare two art forms, the artist book to the flash site, and from said comparison, gain insight and inspiration from the user's experience of the two. By first interacting with the artists' books that I have created, and then through exploration of the flash site that emulates them, users will have the chance to compare the two experiences and decide which is more compelling. Exploring an artist book will give users a glimpse of a unique type of communication. In an age where computers, television, and books are the main avenue of information, the online artist book is a refreshing and intimate way of connecting people to ideas and allowing them to also experience those ideas.

Keywords: interactive, experience, exploratory, artist book

Acknowledgments

A huge thank you to my thesis advisors, Chris Jackson, Chris Petescia, and Kari Horowicz. These are the people who have helped me concept my ideas, narrow them down to a manageable project, and encouraged me along the way.

Chris Jackson is a respected professor in the MFA Computer of Fine Arts program at RIT. He is patient with his students, and is always willing to lend a helping hand. He has guided me through the learning process of understanding Actionscript 3.0 and has continuously helped me solve any bugs that the Adobe Flash application threw my way.

Chris Petescia is a very talented web designer and developer. He thoroughly grasps the online user experience, graphical user interface, and have given me constructive criticism throughout the making of my project. Not only that, but he was a constant source of encouragement along the way.

Kari Horowicz is RIT's own artists' books expert on campus. She is the Art and Photography Librarian and very well rounded in the arts. It was she who gave me access to the artists' books archives that RIT holds and allowed me to study them multiple times throughout the making of my own artists' books. She was enthusiastic from the moment I humbly asked her to be one of my advisors and proved to be a valuable resource.

Finally, I would like to add that my husband, Chris Boncha, was also a constant source of motivation and inspiration. He helped me work through programming logic multiple times and was a wonderful teacher. This thesis project could not have been completed with out the help and support from everyone listed and I am extremely thankful to them all.

Introduction & Idea

My first introduction to artists' books came in a Fine Arts Photography class when the teacher walked our class over to the RIT Library. Little did I know that Kari Horowicz, the Art and Photography Librarian, was waiting to present us with a wide range of rare books that would change my outlook on the fine arts forever. Books have always held a dear place in my heart, but it was not until that day that I truly knew what could happen when artists, ideas, and books collided. They were beautiful creations that captured my imagination immediately. Much in the same way that Flash and Actionscript would later on in my graduate school career.

When I was attempting to establish a solid idea for my thesis, I first thought I should do something very technical, and with a lot of instructional multimedia concepts. I turned to my pipeline project, which was a self proposed project I had done the Spring quarter of my first year in the MFA Computer Graphics Design program. It was all about words, definitions, and how a persons range of vocabulary might determine their social class in society. It was a very interesting topic to me, but I failed to find a way to scale down the idea into a workable one year thesis size. After a failed Thesis Proposal Defense, I went back to the drawing board and began to once again brainstorm an idea that was worthy and interesting.

This thesis explores the possible interactive design solutions for graphical user interfaces by studying the unique art form of the artist book, taking into consideration the fact that certain artist books are not meant to educate or inform but rather, to evoke an emotion or tell a visual story. This thesis will focus on the experience of the artist book and how one could translate that experience to an online environment while also effectively conveying a message. Could a graphical user interface produce the same user experience that an artist book provides; the action of turning pages and moving through a story with the same elements in mind - such as pop up images, hidden messages, or the value of physical materials used?

Research

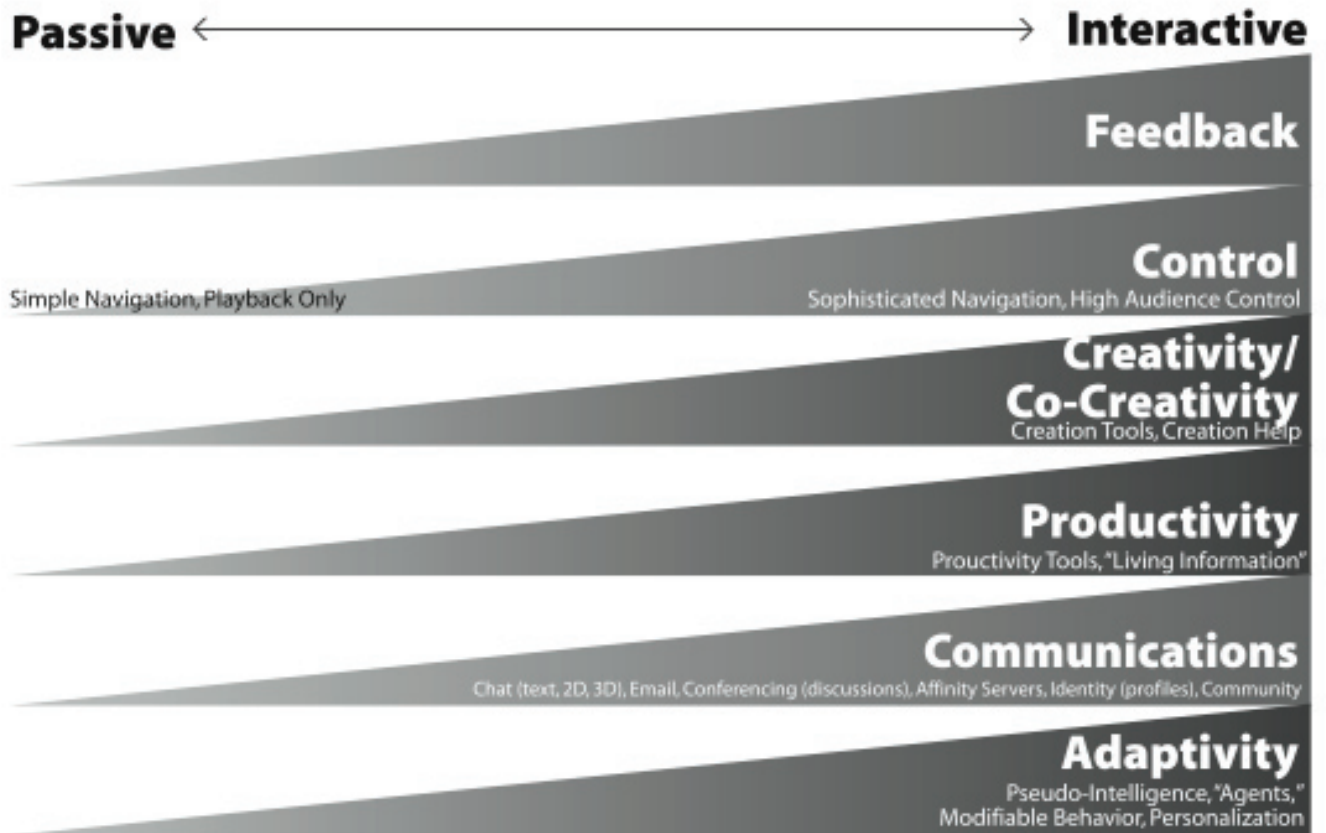
This sections outlines the books, online articles, and artists' books that I used for research and inspiration throughout this thesis project.

“Information Interaction Design: A Unified Field Theory of Design”

This article is featured in the book Information Design edited by Bob Jacobson and published by the MIT press. This article is about Information Interaction Design which is a combination of Information Design, Interaction Design, and Sensorial Design. Content and the display of information is key, but all elements are considered in order to created a valuable experience for the user. He writes specifically about interaction design as an “ancient art and new technology” (Shedroff, 2) which refers to the art of story telling that spans back to the time before written history, and current new media interaction design. He also writes that information design is ultimately about the consumer's experience.

What struck me the most about this article was the description of each of the categories, Information Design, Interaction Design, and Sensorial Design, and how they so closely relate to what book artists achieve when an artist book is created. Information Design is the organization of complex details and data. Graphic Designers and Print Designers are trained to do this, but a lot of book artists do it unconsciously. Part of what makes an artist book great is the artist's ability to think through the content and arrange it in a worthwhile and comprehensible way. Another part that makes artists' books great is there ability to get a message across or an emotion stirred within the viewer when the content is ignored and the materials and aesthetics are embraced. Drawing a comparison from the Nathon Shedroff article, this would be considered part of the interaction design category within the Information Interaction Design Process.

Interaction Design is the idea of giving users/viewers/consumers a “good experience.” For example, if you think of the person you know who tells the best stories at a social gathering, or an inspirational speaker, or your favorite actor, in each of these instances the person you are thinking of is an Interaction Designer. These are the people that craft compelling experiences and I believe that book artists also fall in this group.



Comparison Chart, pg 10 Shedroff

The chart below is taken directly from Shedroff's article showing the difference between passive and interactive experiences. An example of a passive experience would be listening to the radio, an example of an interactive experience would be painting. In one situation, the user of a radio is simply a listener, in another situation, there is a person creating, imagining, personalizing, and controlling. Painting can also be used to tell a story by the user, whereas all the radio user can do is listen. Shedroff further explains "The difference that defines interactivity can include the amount of control the audience has over the tools, pace, or content; the amount of choice this control offers; and the ability to use the tool or content to be productive or to create." (Shedroff, 10)

An artist book, depending on the type and how much exploring the user can do with it, could be argued to be fairly passive. In my experience I have seen books that could go either way and even then, there is a barrier that allows the user to go no farther. In my project, I have taken books that would be considered to the middle and further to the left of the chart above and placed them on the right side by creating online experiences for them and making them more exploratory than they started out being.

The Century of Artists' Books

In the preface, the author writes that this book was initially written ten years ago because there was seen a need for critical work in the field of artists' books. She acknowledges the benefits of the Web as a space for people to come together and communicate about this field (there are also many book artists who have blogs, and there is even one artist book e-journal). An interesting quote from Holland Cotter in the introduction of this book, "Ultimately, though, the value of this book lies not in what it feels like and looks like, but in what it does. It is an interactive thing; it generates blessings, absorbs devotion; its political and intellectual uses are fluid and open-ended. As such, it may have something in common with Drucker's notion of the artist's book as a conceptual or performative space, a dynamic arena of perceptual interaction." (Drucker, xiv) The fact that Cotter quoted an artist book as an "interactive thing" made me realize during this research process that this concept of creating an online experience for something meant to be held and touched was going to be successful.

Something that has been a source of debate has been the question: what makes an artist book, an artist book? Scrap booking has become mainstream, along with other forms of collage and art like the altered book, so for the novice, it may be difficult to understand how to set an artist book apart from the others. On pages two and three of the first chapter the author, Johanna Drucker, explains that "there is no simple definition that can describe an artist book." (Drucker, 2-3) But suggests it all started with "livre d'artiste" which are books illustrated by artists that started occurring around 1890. The vibe from Drucker's thoughts on this topic make it evident that there is no real definition.

In my mind, an artist book is an innovative form. Something unique beyond simply flipping pages and reading text. The content can be self-explorative, or historical, or fiction but does not have to have a beginning, middle, and end with character development. It is something worth exploring and experiencing that evokes strong emotion. I think of it like fine art, but with interactions. Painters don't invite you to explore their canvas, you have to look at it from afar and ponder. Book artists welcome the company.

In the introduction of The Century of Artists' Books, Holland Cotter explains, "Some of these [artist] books are made for reading, some for looking; some for touching; many for all three. In content, they

range from political statements, to formal meditations, to personal fantasies. ... they are also visually wild, inscrutable, and weird.” (Drucker, xiv) This is a good way of setting apart this genre from the rest, by describing what it contains and how it might look as opposed to a solid description and set boundaries.

This book was excellent at providing a critical eye and intellectual thinking about artists’ books. In Chapter three, Drucker takes her readers on a fascinating journey of seemingly boring books, such as a phone book and a blank notebook. These are the books that she claims set the stage for the artists’ books to come. She argues that every book prepares its reader for a journey, with its style, its weight, the feel of the pages, and the size. If you think about a phone book and the sheer amount of information inside, the heaviness and size of it becomes the indicator to a reader that it isn’t something that could read through in one sitting. A blank notebook is so pristine and beckoning, and even a leather photo album sets up the viewer for a certain experience. The classic and high class leather cover, the thick white pages that seem to keep memories crisp and unforgettable.

When I designed and created the physical versions of my artist books, I tried to keep these factors into consideration, the feel of cover, the ultimate look and style, thickness of pages, approachability of the book. I believe I was successful with the first book I created, the flip book. The third book, the tunnel style, was harder because of its construction and because I created it at the same time as I was making the digital version.

Cover to Cover: The Artist’s Book in Perspective

This book takes an interesting perspective. The first chapter starts off with a review of 20th century artist art history starting with the year 1911 and Georges Braque, a cubist painter. The author seems to imply that artists’ books began to emerge with the artists that first starting using words and poems in their art. Each chapter is written by a different author and all seem to be more focused on the use of words as an art form than the making or critiquing of the artist book itself. Another theme running throughout is the idea of visual story - no matter if the visuals are nonsense sentences, or fine art photography. The actual book itself presented in an unusual layout, with text that is hard to read and words that seem to jump out at you from the page.

“The Growth of Artist Books: Exploration and Clarification” by Gwen Miller

There has been a growing interest and education of artist books in the last 10 years and this thesis attempts to explain the mystery. One of the top reasons the author lists is “a role of digital technology” (Miller, 1). Like many other areas of knowledge that the public would not have been able to easily find out about in the past, the computer has been a gateway for information on this topic. For example, a person who wanted to find out the old methods of weaving would be forced to either to go the library and look it up or find someone who weaves. With the age of technology, came the age of information and the answer is only ever a mouse click away. Digital technology has allowed fans, critics, and book artists alike across the globe to have a place of common ground and because of this, a person no longer needs their local library or to know an artist formerly in order to become familiar with an artist book. This is not an ideal way of being introduced to the genre but it does give a good starting point and a way for a person to see the difference between a regular book, piece of art, and an artist book. Something else that a computer adds to the mix is another medium for book artists to express themselves and to communicate with their readers. One of my goals was to bring these beautiful works of physical art to the online realm and to gain inspiration from doing so, maybe not making a successful replica — but perhaps discovering a new way of expressing oneself online that traditional book artists could embrace in the future.

But, as Keith Smith, a well known book artist points out “ ‘[The computer] is just a tool to say something. If the artist does not have anything to say, or does not have the courage to speak, they rely on technology for pretty, but vacuous images.’ ” (Miller, 179) Had I the chance to start over with this project, I would use a professional book artist’s work and not attempt to make my own works. It would take the pressure of making a compelling artist book off of my shoulders, and I would be able to better focus on the computer programming and online interactions.

Another great quote from Miller’s paper is “In this digital era our daily lives have become disengaged from touch. Creating or reading an artists’ book brings alive the sense of touch, the tooth of a paper, the softness of fine leather, the creasing of a page, the texture of an emboss.” (Miller, 187) This is one of the reasons I became fascinated with book art to begin with — the level of satisfaction a person gets from looking and playing with art as opposed to clicking and staring at it on the screen is incomparable. To

bridge the gap, I attempted to create a beautiful online environment in which the user was so entranced with the exploratory project, that the flash replica became almost indistinguishable to the real enjoyment of the physical artist books.

Carol Schwartzott: Emily Dickinson : 14 poems : on nature

Since Kari Horowicz was on my committee, I had the privilege of viewing many different artists' books up close and personal. My time viewing, exploring, and studying these rare books were instrumental in my visualization and conceptualization of this thesis project.

This book was one of the first artists' books I had encountered over four years ago. The structure is not unique, it actually resembles a book you would pull off of your libraries shelf, but the second you open it, your thinking becomes altered. The content is poems and the style is serene, you are introduced to a water colored pastel landscape and little pockets of hidden dried flowers. The style is always what stood out to me with this book, and was the main style inspiration for the first artist book I made. The paint and the colors add a lot to the poems and give them more meaning; the overall experience is consequentially enhanced.

Karen Chance : 'Parallax'

The structure of this book significantly enhances the content and allows the reader a new perspective on the subject matter. It is an accordion style artist book and there are two story lines, one on the inside of the book and one on the outside of the book. Both stories take place on a subway ride. One is from a heterosexual male perspective about a homosexual male, and the other is from a homosexual male perspective about a heterosexual male. This is a shining example of how the artist book brings something unique to the table, not only with the third perspective of the reader, but with the way the first two perspectives are visually side by side. It is not just a paragraph of words that the author is writing, or a scene that the artist is painting — it is the timeline-like visual comparison that makes the story so stunning and vivid.

The first book that I made for my project was not a traditional accordion, but it was a spin-off sort of flip book structure. The reason for doing this was because I wanted to keep the viewer interested by

having unexpected page turns. In the early observations of the physical artists' books, person after person rushed through the second artist book I had made without a second thought — hardly going back to explore it. One of the reasons I think this occurred was because of its simplistic structure next to the more compelling flip book, and in consequence I made another book based on a tunnel style.

Elizabeth McDevitt, Julie Chen : 'Octopus'

'Octopus' is an example of a tunnel style artist book. It takes a distinct makeup and uses it to tell a poem about an octopus in the murky depths of the ocean. In this case, I believe the framework really adds to the onlookers experience by creating an atmosphere of dark water and waves. With most books of this style, the viewer is usually forced to either crouch down and look through the book while it is opened on a table, or to stand on a chair with the book opened toward the ceiling.

After observing so many negative reactions to the structure of the second book I made, this style proved to be a good path to take. After creating the tunnel book for this project and seeing people interact with it, I remain convinced that it was the correct course to take.

The Physical Books

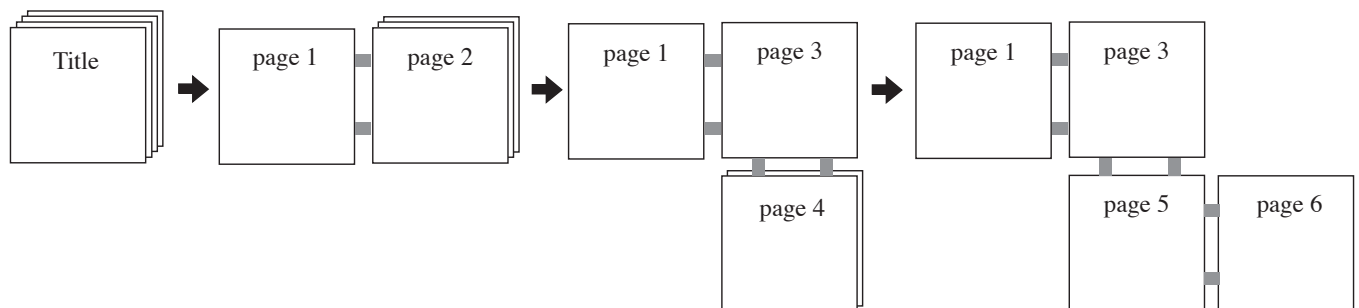
This section outlines the process by which I created my artists' books and the reasoning behind the Flash project's overall flow and layout.

Book One

When I first started brainstorming the type, style, and aesthetic that I wanted to achieve with the artist books, I had a lot of ideas, but what I lacked was time. Some artists take a year just to create one of their own books, and since I changed my thesis concept, I had less than ten weeks (the winter school quarter) to concept and build two for my project. I did manage to create two beautiful pieces of art - but ended up only using one, for reasons that I will explain in the "User Research" section. The two styles of artists' books that I *initially* chose were a variation on the flip book, and an accordion style.

What I refer to as a "flip book" has separated pages held together with ribbon. Once a viewer starts looking and flipping pages, more pages are revealed in an unorthodox manner. Below is a simple diagram of what I am referring to.

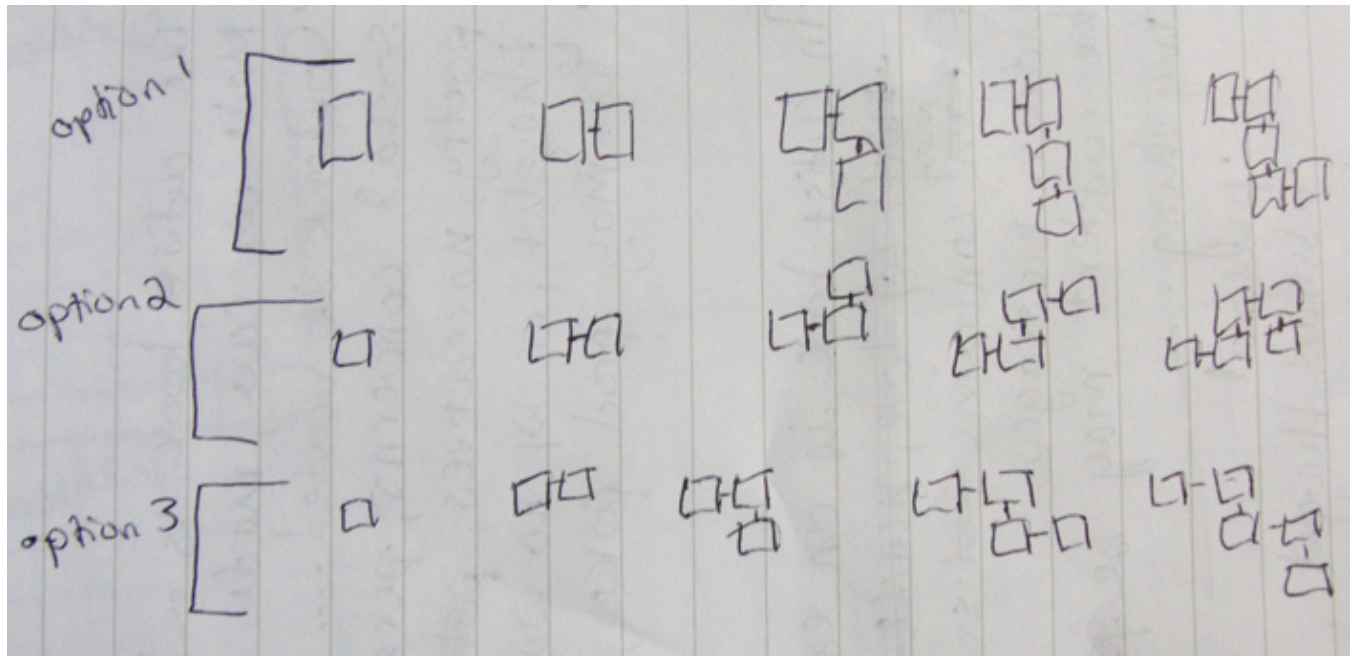
I decided to go in this direction because there is first a fixed path that a viewer must use in order to open



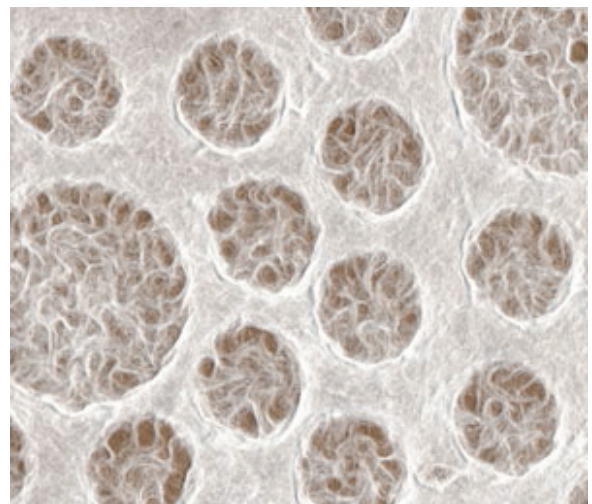
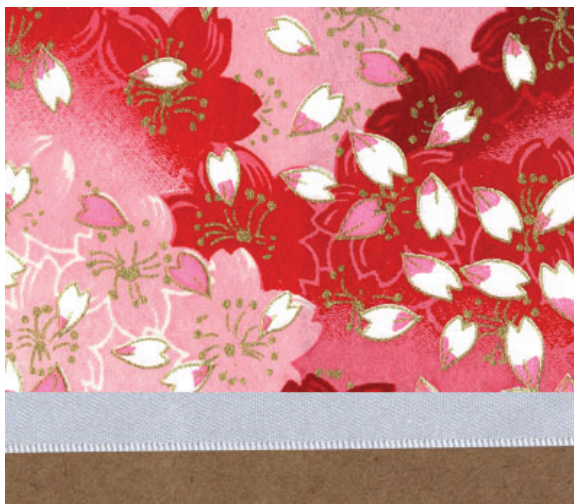
and reveal all of the pages, but, in the end the viewer is left to explore as he or she pleases. Some people may spend a lot of time looking at the pages initially, one by one, until all are revealed. Usually, in this instance, the person quickly closes the book and is done with their experience. In another scenario, a viewer goes through the initial pages very quickly until all are revealed and then they may spend a lot of time exploring each in their own order, jumping from page one to five to three and so on. These two different scenarios gave me the confident feeling that I could design a layout in multiple ways for the online version, and in other words, I was not stuck with forcing a user down a fixed path — I could

make the flow of the project exclusively exploratory if I chose to do so.

There were a few different orientations and layouts I was considering for book one. Below is a rough sketch of my earlier ideas. As I was sketching and conceiving, it was obvious that I should keep the structure as simple as possible while at the same time making the experience unique and surprising.



The next step in this process was choosing materials and putting it all together. What I did not want to do was rope myself into a corner by choosing to make two blue books with the same materials, or books that looked like they were made by the same artist. I wanted two different looks and book one ended up being the more traditional of the two. Materials that I used include handmade Japanese paper, rice paper, ribbons, and many other standard heavy weight papers.

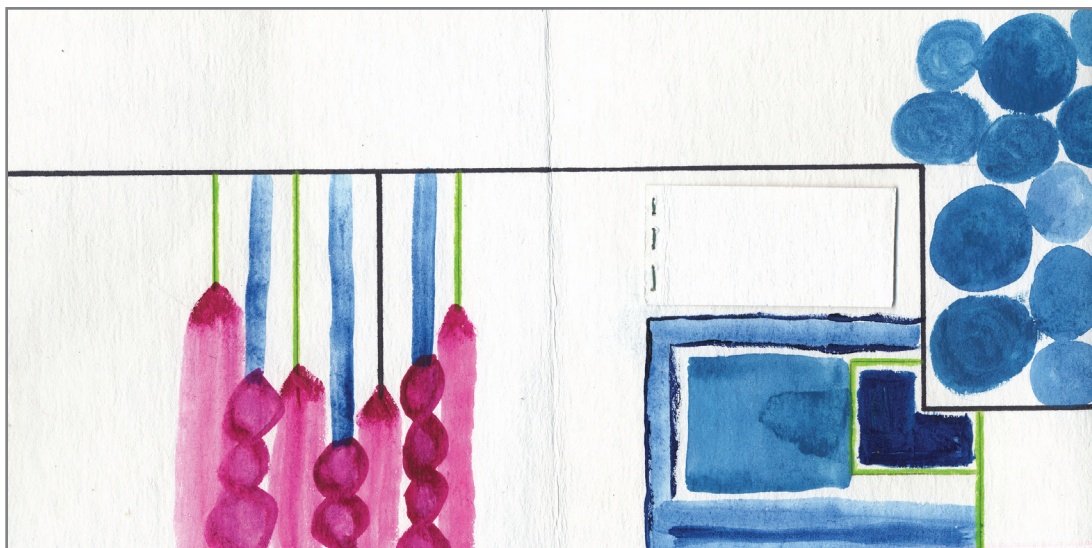


Since I was more interested in the aesthetic and structure of the book, I did not decide on content until my materials were chosen. I did this, because I knew the best topic to choose would be something gender neutral and non controversial. The subject matter became “What is an Artist Book?”. During the user testing of the physical books, it became apparent that the subject matter was a wise choice. It made the idea of my project more clear to the participants in the usability study and it was one less item I had to explain before they started looking at the books.

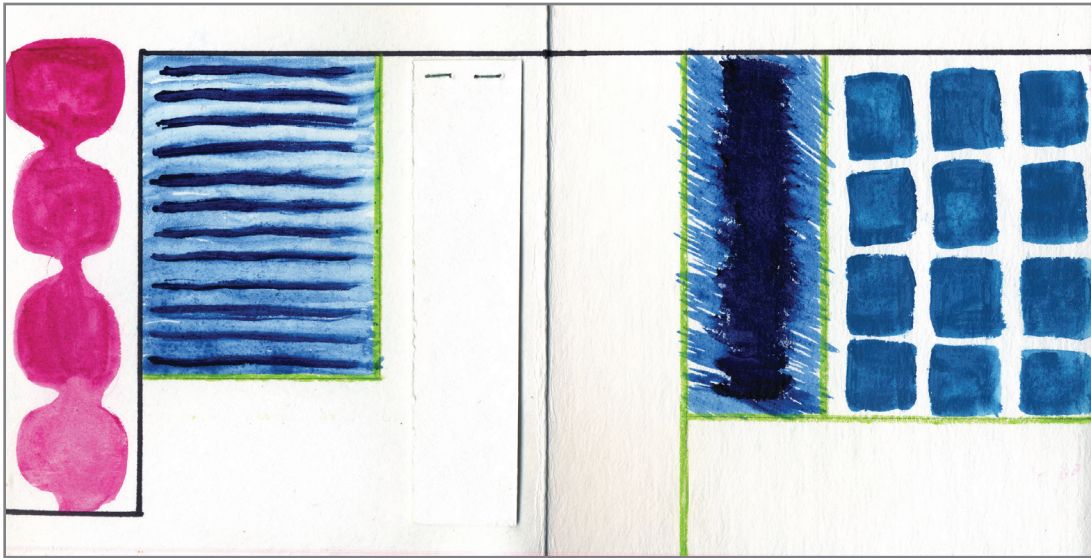
Book Two

The second artist book I created was a simple accordion style book. I wanted the aesthetic and experience to be very different from the first. There are no words, only water colors, shapes, and symbols. The colors are very vibrant, bright blues, pinks, and purples. After the user testing, many people decided the shapes were Interior Design inspired, but that was not my intention.

The reasoning for allowing no words in this book comes from a desire of simplicity and focusing on experience and emotional design. For instance, I thought if a viewer could relate to the shapes and colors and become emotionally attached, the experience would be better. But, on the flip side, if a viewer did not enjoy the simplicity and it reminded him, or her, of a negative emotion the outcome would be a less favorable experience. Either way, the book would be successful in my mind and for the purposes of this project. The ultimate goal was to have the user experience *something*, whether good or bad, and to



page one, page two



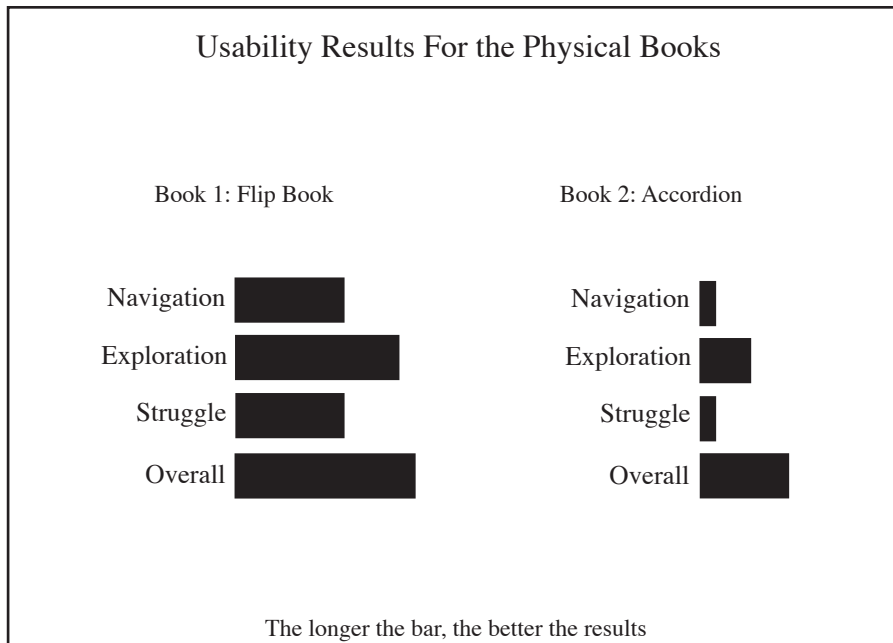
page five, page six

compare that experience with the online version. If the experience did turn out to be bad, perhaps the online version would redeem itself. Above are some pictures of the final accordion book's individual pages.

Usability Study and Research

After successfully creating two books, I decided to record observations of different types of people viewing them. The methodology behind this study was based on the free flowing thought processes of the participants. Before allowing a participant to see the first book, I asked them to think out loud whatever should come into their head pertaining to the book, its aesthetic quality, the way it was built, or if it reminded them of anything. For some people, this was a hard task so they said little but I still had the chance to observe. Above is a chart to illustrate the data I collected.

The bar graph shows book one being a huge success in all areas. It received great reviews with the exploration and the overall concept categories. It was also the book that more people were enthusiastic about and more willing to explore multiple times. These results shocked me at first. My assumption was, after creating both and critiquing them from my own point of view, book two was just as likely, or more, to receive great reviews. It was abstract and open ended in nature because of its limited content and simple painted forms. But, I was a person who was very familiar with artist books and enjoyed art in general. The participants were overwhelmingly not familiar with artist books and within the context of book two, the emotion most associated with "simple" was childlike and that had negative connotations.



There were some interesting findings that showed even though a viewer had trouble with the navigation of book one, that did not necessarily mean they disliked their endeavors figuring it out, or were so frustrated that they gave up completely. After under three seconds of struggle or with no help, everyone was able to navigate successfully to the end of book one and expressed only good emotion toward it when they were finished. On the contrary, with book two, the navigation was so simple and everyone navigated through it so well, that it took away from their overall experience.

The amount of struggle that the viewers had with understanding the content of the books in general was also intriguing. With book one, there were some people who didn't read the title of book because it was folded and tied with a string. It was the first interaction of the book, and about half of the people missed it, consequently being left in the dark about what book one was about. But, even though they did not connect the dots with the content, the majority enjoyed the content and exploration of book one better than the comparatively boring and easy to understand book two.

These findings indicated that I should rethink book two. It was not something I was very willing to do at first and it made my time schedule for completing this project much tighter but it was a chance I was willing to take. In the end, after this new book and its online experience was complete, I believe it added only good to the overall project's success.

Book Two Out, Book Three In

The new book that replaced book two was a tunnel book with a botanical theme. The content was still simplistic, but not so to the point where the viewer was supposed to make up their own story. The only words in book are in a paragraph on the last page and are very similar to book one's content. Both have descriptions of what an artist book is, or could be. This veered slightly away from my original plan of creating two distinct books that do not relate to one another in any way, but I had a purpose. Since most participants in the usability study struggled to some degree with the content in book one, instead of keeping book two unrelated from it, I gave it the same meaning. In this way, even though the structures and styles differ, a person could see a connection between the two that allowed them to exist in the same environment. You can view book one and book three in their finished states in the appendix.

The Interactive Environment

This section outlines the process by which I conceptualized, designed, and coded the online experience for the physical artist books.

Home Page

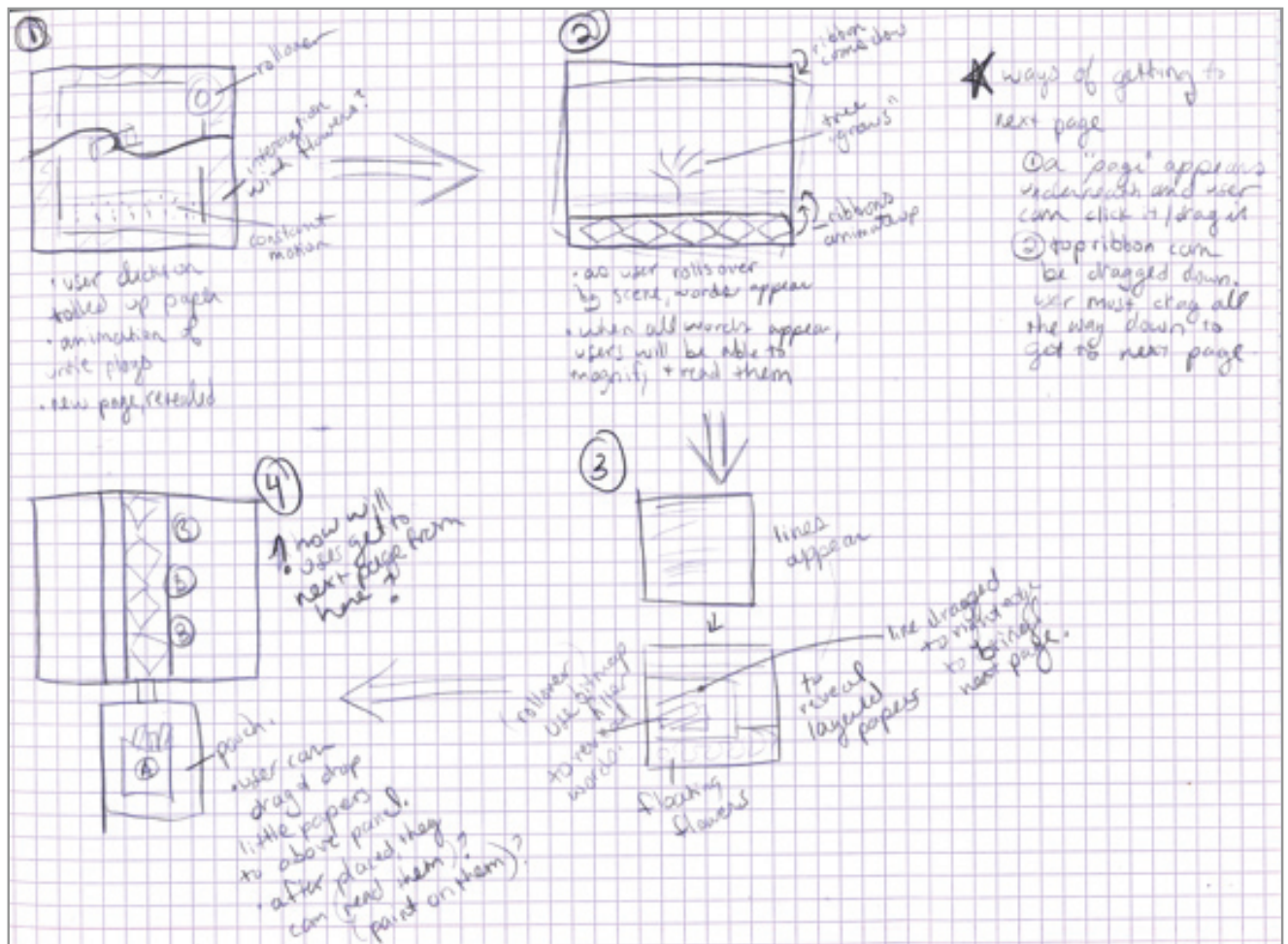
The physical books usability study helped my thought process tremendously when it came time to conceptualize and design the flow of the online environment. In the same way that I conducted the usability study, I wanted to present the online viewers with two books and two clearly different paths to take. The home page shows the two representations of the artist books as the primary information. The secondary information on the page includes the “About” and “Credits” sections as well as the icons for the music and the dots.

The dots deserve to be recognized for exactly what they are, beautiful, meaningless interactions. There are twenty four dots overlapping one another above the title in what a web designer might call “the header area” of the home page. When a user clicks on one, an identical dot (to the one the user clicked) falls, bounces off of the imaginary ground, and rolls off the page. As well as having the two books represented on the home page, I wanted subtle animations and interactions taking place. There are visual elements, like the title tag, swaying as if by the wind, but I wanted something more than visual. Something that could add to the user’s experience but not give the experience away. In other words, if someone were to go to the home page, click directly on one of the books and not take a second look at the dots, that person would not be missing out on anything per say, but if they were to explore and discover the dots on their own — I wanted them to have a blast and walk away with a better experience. During the Computer Graphics Design MFA Thesis Show, where I showcased both my physical books and the online environment, I observed that my thought process and hopes for the dots were both correct and successful. While those who did not discover the dots interactions walked away with a good experience, those who did discover them came back to view the project a second, or third time.

Book One

When starting to conceptualize the interactions for the books, my focus lay primarily on book one because it was more hands on than the tunnel book. The interactions that the participants lingered on or came back

to in book one gave me the ideas for the pushing the online version to a different level. For example, I have an area of hanging paper circles that dangle on ribbon against one of the pages. Every person in the study stopped and examined them for prolonged periods of time. In the online version, the dots are able to be dragged and can be placed in any order or pattern on the page. This was one of the ways I tried to have the online version more compelling and customizable for the user. Another example is the tree design on page one of book one. It is a static image that cannot be moved or manipulated in the physical book. When I reworked it in the interactive environment, the user is first presented with a tree trunk and must roll over the part where the branches would be in order to see the tree grow and come to life. At the same time, the user is non-consciously drawing flowers around the branches. In the end, it becomes something the user has personally created. Kari Horowicz encouraged me to make more interactions like the tree in the interactive version so that the user could draw more and personalize the online books. It is something that you just can't do with real artist books and working it in to the online version made them more captivating than the physical books.



The sketch shows my early thought process and concepts for the main interactions of book one. In steps three and four you can also see the ideas for combining a couple of pages into one in order to maximize the exploration of content. The goal was three interactions per page.

Book Three

The concepts for the tunnel book were simpler since I knew beforehand the technology was going to limit the interactions somewhat. The tunnel book plays with the idea of depth and uses it to its advantage. The direction that I took utilized Adobe After Effects to mimic a 3D environment and placed that file within the main Adobe Flash project. Thanks to Chris Jackson book, [Flash + After Effects](#), this was a relatively easy task to figure out. The highlight of the online version became the idea that the user could feel like they were walking through the book, and controlling their walk to some extent. As they “walked” further and further the pages of the book would start to grow around them. At the end of the book, and after walking through all of the pages, the “finish line” would be a paragraph of text that read, “Artist books are an exciting form of art. There are many types, many styles, and many artists that create these books. The structure and highly stylized form and content are what make these books stand out. My favorite part though, has to be the artists who create them and allow the viewer to interact with their creations.”

Overall Visual Style

One of the main goals for the online environment was to make it look as if you could touch the materials being represented on the screen. The vibrancy of the dots, the softness of the rice paper, and the textures of all the elements were key in making the visual style an elegant and sophisticated portrayal of the artist books. I used as many scanned materials as I could in order to have a realistic depiction on the screen, and for what I refer to as the “filler” elements, like the title’s tag background, the hanging bells, or the main white textured background of the project, I used Photoshop techniques and pictures that I had took from a free stock photo web site. Another way that I implemented the tactile and hand drawn style was to use fonts that looked like they were hand drawn.

Development

Adobe Flash Actionscript 3.0 was the key technology and application behind this project. There were others used to lesser degrees, such as Adobe After Effects and HTML/CSS web development. Using

Actionscript allowed me to organize my code in classes and debug easier. One of my main goals was to keep the code as simple, modular, and commented as possible. Keeping these things in mind, it would be easy to add more functions and understand what I had done coming back to the code two or more months later. But with all good intentions, there is usually always an exception.

As I explained in the earlier section about my visual design, the dots idea on my home page was a meaningless interaction but the one that I started my project off by coding first. It proved to be a more difficult challenge than I had anticipated. There are over 70 dots that had to be organized in some fashion and stored for retrieval by Flash. The answer to this was storing the dots as “.png” files in a folder next to the main flash file. Then I used XML as a bridge between where the images sat in the folder and where they needed to get to in the Flash project. Actionscript is what I used to “build” the bridge and this is where the challenge lay. In a well organized and highly complex Flash project there is a main Actionscript file called the “document class”. This acts as a manager for all of the other lesser “grunt worker” classes and an example of a “grunt worker” would be the dots. The manager only cares about controlling the dots and not about what their names are, or how they are getting their job done. In my Flash project, because I am using XML and an external folder to store all of the dot images, this became problematic and my “manager” ended up knowing intimately what the dots names are, where they eat and sleep, and how many pets they have. In the end, there was no great solution but that doesn’t mean this part of the code didn’t work or isn’t well done. But, it was a challenge and in the end, the code worked its magic. The dots are still my favorite part of the project.

A code challenge that I did find an excellent solution to was the art work that I wanted to use in the Flash project. Normally, one might import the art directly into Flash but this bogs down the processing time and makes the final Flash file size enormous. Instead, what I did was make individual mini Flash projects for each page in book one. These also had all of the subsequent code that handled that pages interactions bundled neatly in its own individual file. I then imported that file into the main Flash project and controlled the pages directly and individually from the document class. It dramatically reduced the final Flash project’s file size and was overall a great answer to a complicated problem.

Focus Group Study

During my final Thesis Proposal presentation, I handed out a questionnaire to my peers who attended and asked them the following key questions about my project.

1. Are you familiar with artist books?
2. Is there an art form you use for inspiration other than the computer or digital art?
3. How well do you think I have captured the tactile nature of the books in the visual appearance of my site on a scale of one to ten (ten being the best)?
4. Comments/Suggestions/Critique about the visual appearance.
5. Comments/Suggestions/Critique about the interactions.

I received a lot of excellent feedback that went beyond the questions that I had asked. Some of the comments that I ended up incorporating into my project included building more drawing functionality in, adding background music, and keeping the dots a non-obvious interaction.

Thesis Show

My thesis project was on exhibit at the Computer Graphics Design MFA Thesis Show of Spring 2008. The date was May 24th and it was held in the Computer Graphics Design MFA lab in building seven of the Rochester Institute of Technology. I also had my project on exhibit during the first annual RIT Imagine Festival on May 3rd, 2008 in the Wallace Library.

Conclusion

In my original thesis statement, the idea was to compare two forms of art and allow users to choose for themselves which is more compelling. Discovering new sources of inspiration and new ways of expression online was also a goal. I feel that I have successfully met this criteria with my project in a number of ways. By forcing myself to practice the art and thought process of fine arts and then rebuilding and rethinking that art for the online environment was an extremely gratifying task, both to me as the artist/designer and for those who interacted with it. I also would not be able to make that sort of claim for the users had I not done usability testing throughout the project. Overwhelmingly, I observed that the people who interacted with the fullness of my project (both the physical books, and the online environment) enjoyed the interactive project to a greater degree. The dynamic content and ability to draw and recreate the pages of the books in the online setting had a huge impact on each user's

experience, no matter what age or background.

From a designer and developer's perspective, there will always be things that could be done better and that will never change. What matters to me, is the excitement I stirred up within the people who viewed my project. I introduced a world of artist books to those who had never known it existed, and I hope, also an interactive world that could be used to create wonderful experiences.

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Appendix

Book one, title page



Book one, page one & two



Book one, page one, three & four



Book one, page one, three, five & six



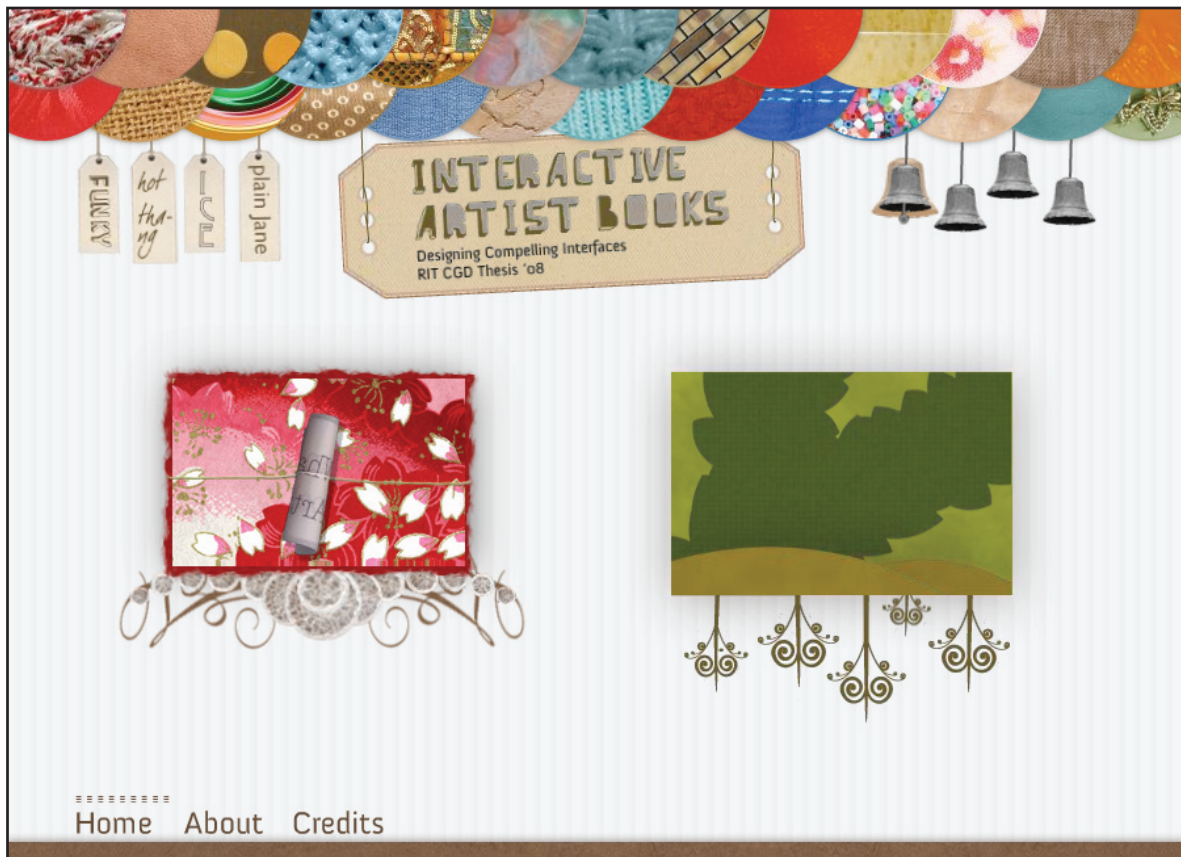
Book three, side view



Book three, top view



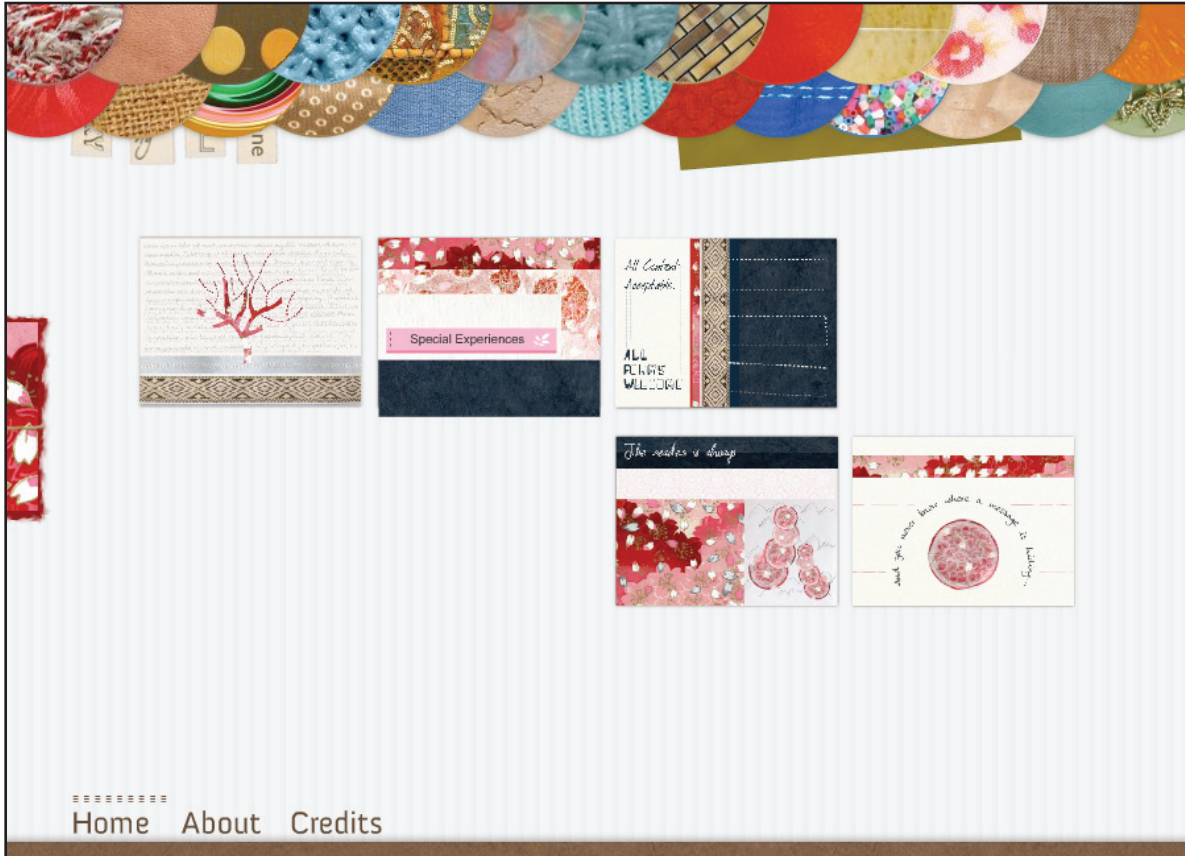
Interactive Environment, Home Page



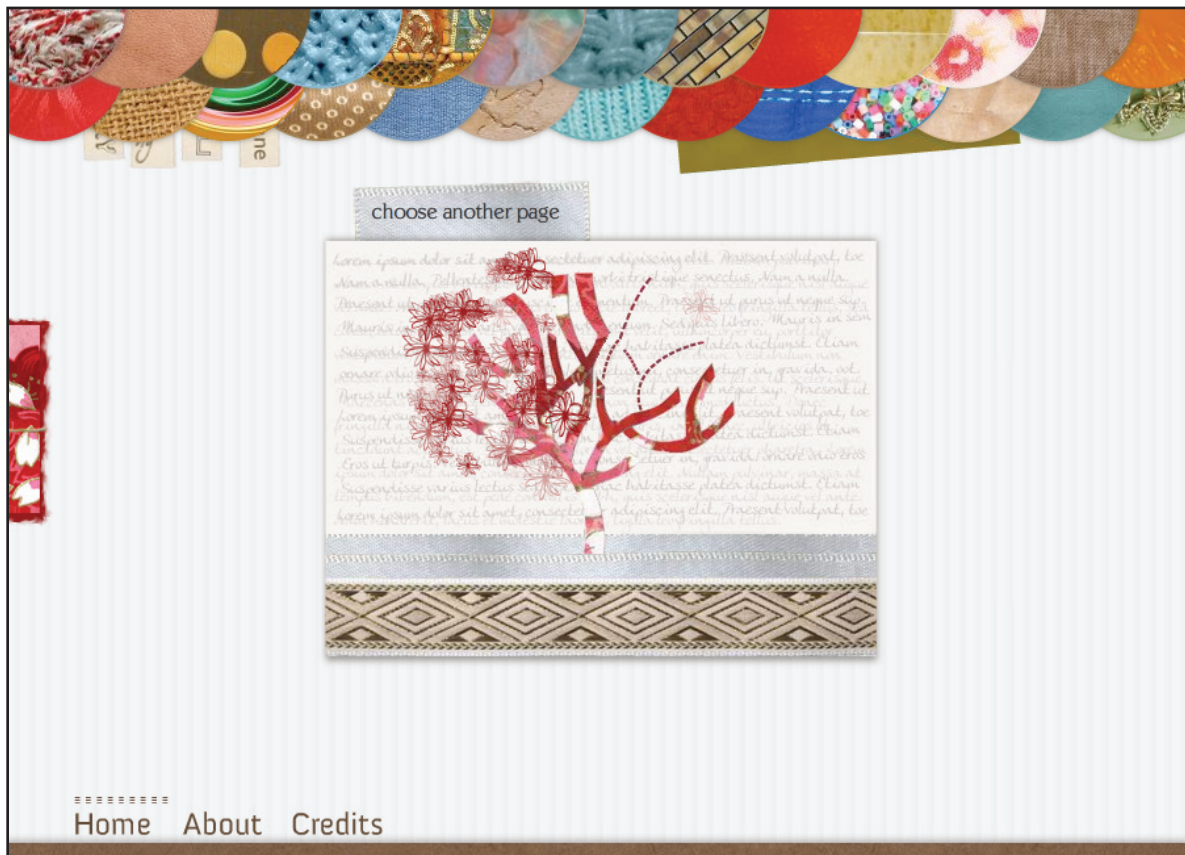
Interactive Environment, About Section



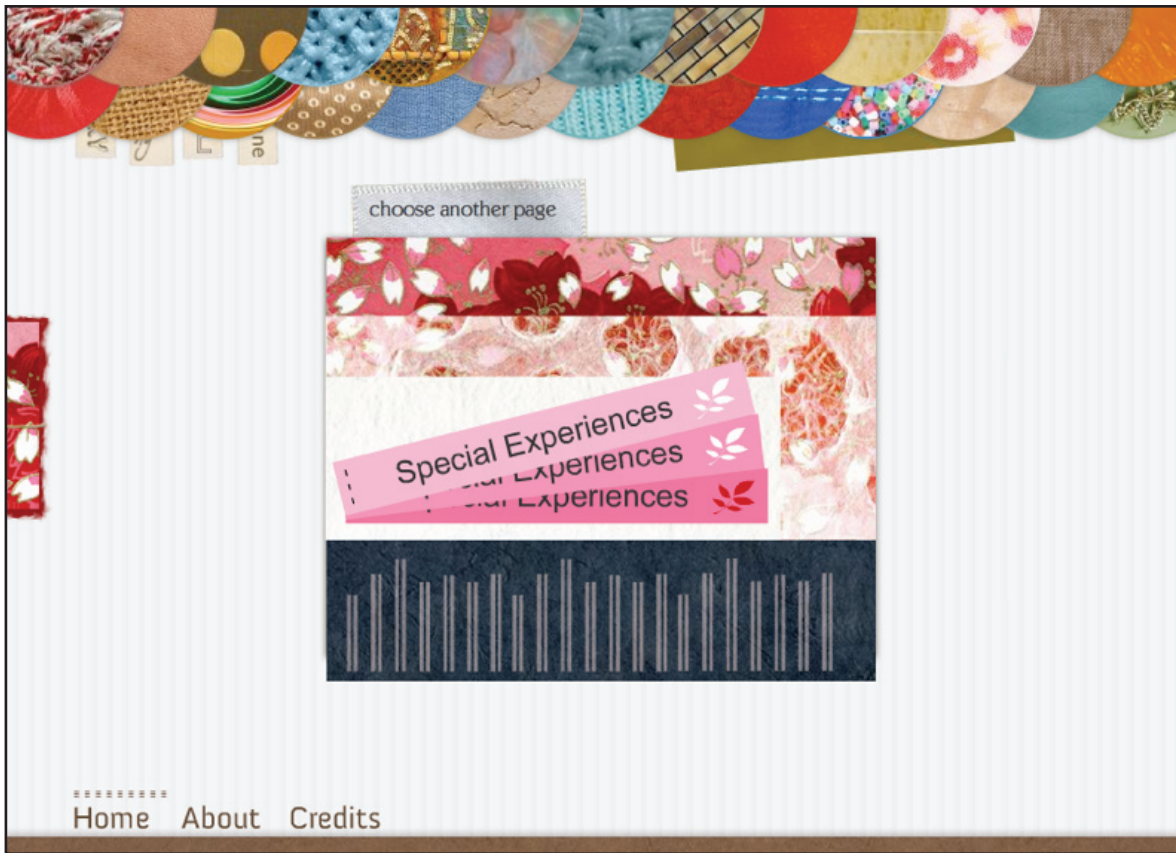
Interactive Environment, Book one (all pages)



Interactive Environment, Book one (page one)



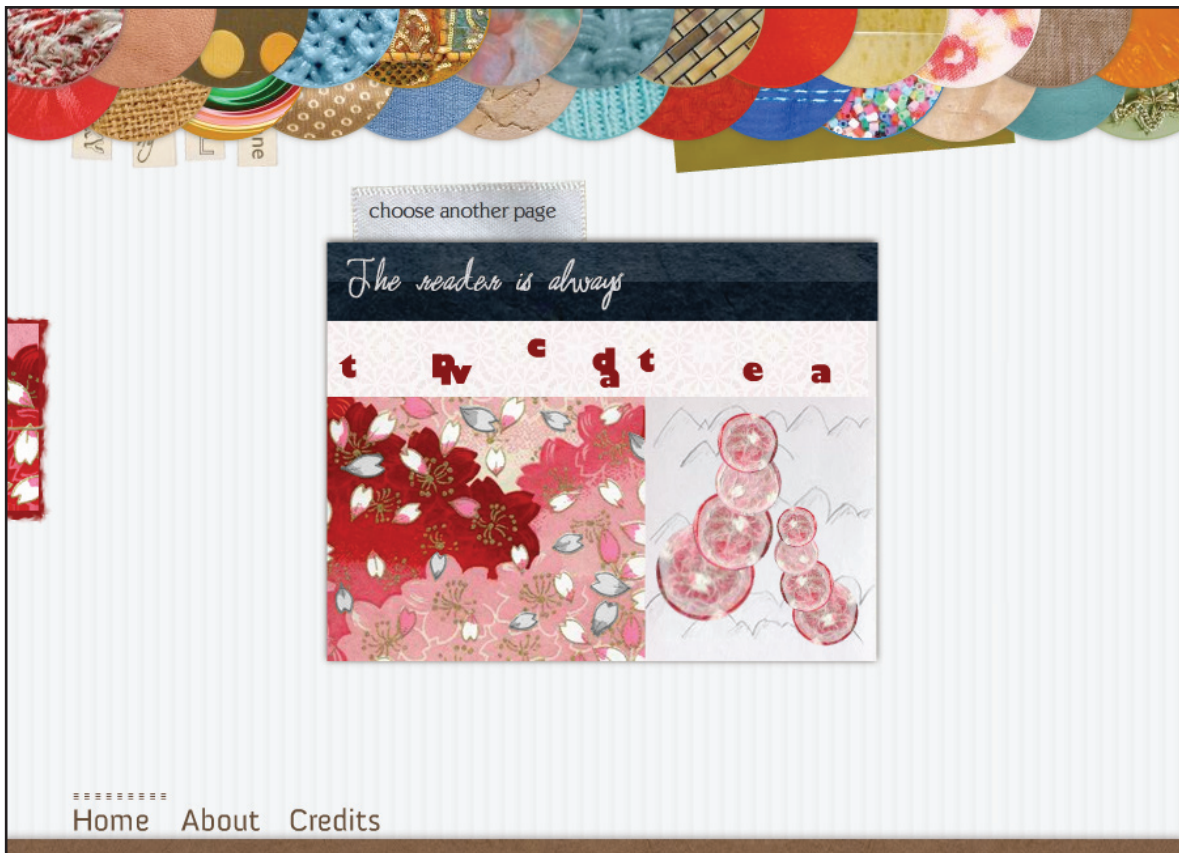
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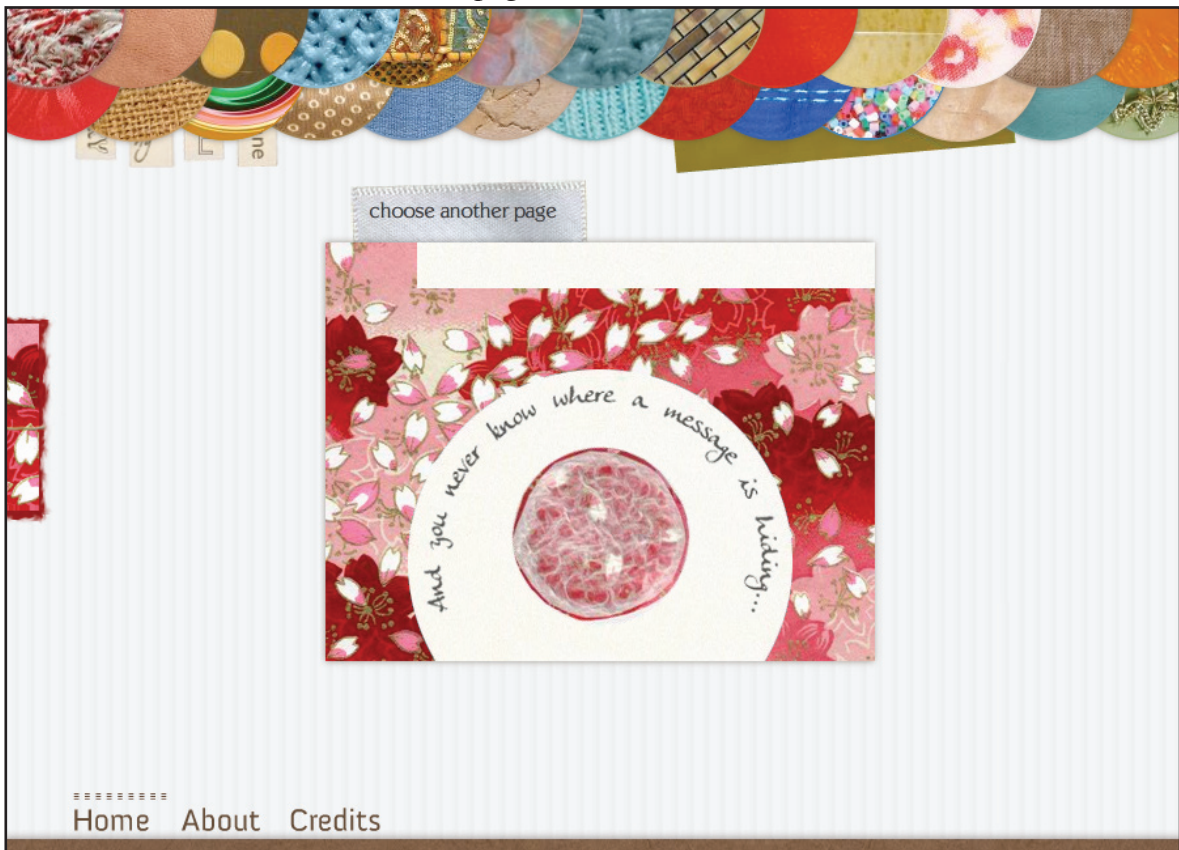
Interactive Environment, Book one (page three)



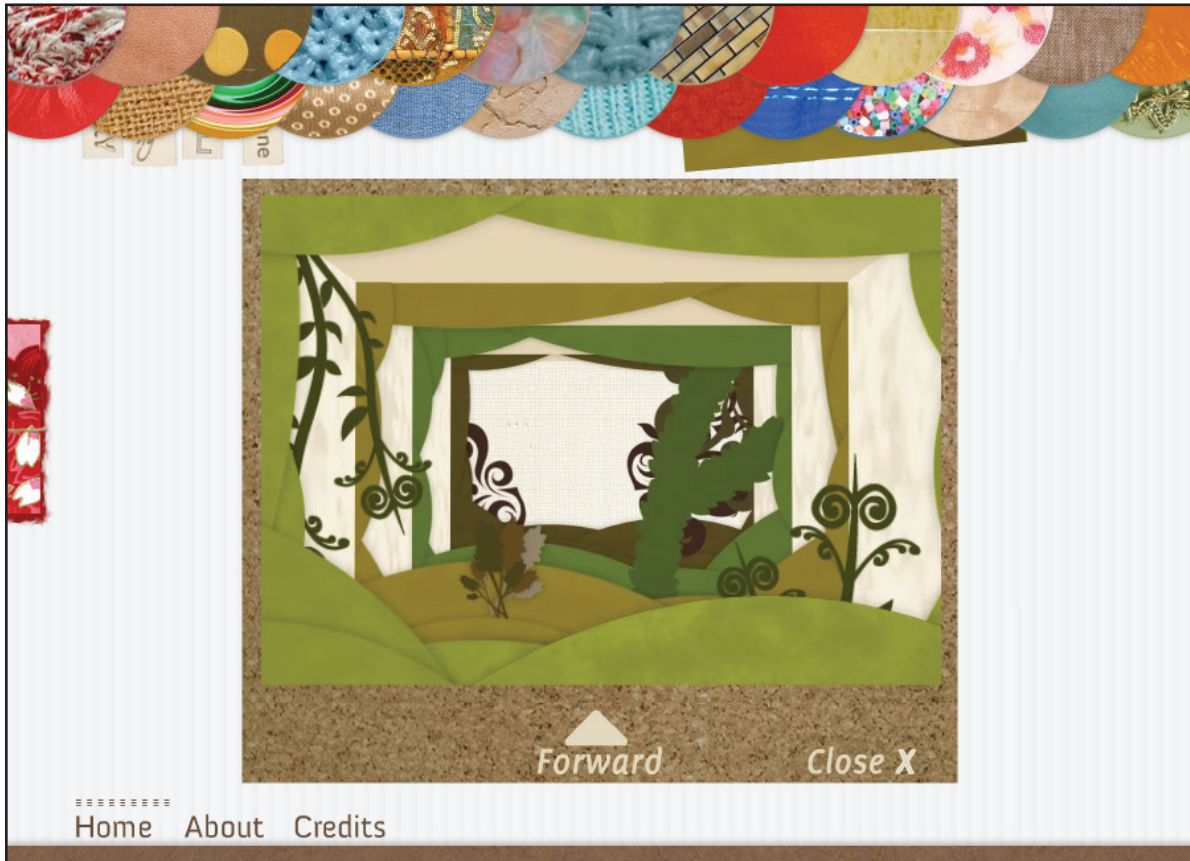
Interactive Environment, Book one (page four)



Interactive Environment, Book one (page five)



Interactive Environment, Book two (initial view)



Interactive Environment, Book two (half way through)



Colors and textures play a big role.

Artist Books are an exciting form of **ART**.

There are many **TYPES**, many **STYLES**, and many *artists that create* these books.

The **STRUCTURE** and **highly stylized** form & content *is what makes these books stand out.*

MY FAVORITE PART, THOUGH, has to be that the artists who creates them **allows the viewer** *to interact with their creations.*

Forward Close X

Home About Credits

Example of focus group feedback

Alison Boncha
alisonboncha.com/thesisblog/
Designing Compelling Interfaces: An exploration of the artist book and how its unique interactive experience can influence the graphical user interface.

Are you familiar with artist books? Y (If yes, say how)

Is there an art form you use for inspiration other than the computer and digital art?
(Painting, sculpture, theatre, ect?)

Zakka
(~~Japan~~
Japanese term)

How well do you think I have captured the tactile nature of books in the visual appearance of my site?
(not at all) 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 10 (very well)

Comments/suggestions/critique about the visual appearance?

I love it.

I love hand-made stuff.

Not everyone will have the chance to see the physical artist book in person. So I have different ideas from others? Cause I don't think it would be necessary to make it more fancy on ~~technical~~ technical part. I would love to see more "hand-made" feeling in your site.

Comments/suggestions/critique about the interactions? (Do you have a favorite?)

Go back to the first thought. Because artist book is such unique and only. If other people could look and feel the beauty of artist book, ^{or more people (not just one person)} that would be awesome!

Thesis Proposal for the Master of Fine Arts Degree

Rochester Institute of Technology
College of Imaging Arts and Sciences
School of Design
Computer Graphics Design

Designing Compelling Interfaces: An exploration of the artist book and how its unique interactive experience can influence the graphical user interface.

Submitted by: Alison Boncha

Date: November 4, 2008

Thesis Committee Approval:

Chief Adviser: Associate Professor Chris Jackson, Computer Graphics Design



Signature of Chief Adviser

11/12/07

Date

Associate Adviser: Visiting Professor Chris Petescia, Computer Graphics Design

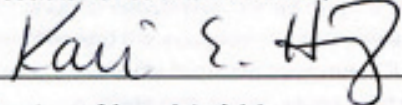


Signature of Associate Adviser

11/9/07

Date

Associate Adviser: Kari Horowicz, RIT Art and Photography Librarian




Signature of Associate Adviser

11/9/07

Date

School of Design Chairperson Approval:

Chairperson, School of Design: Patti Lachance



Signature of Chairperson

1.7.08

Date

Thesis Proposal for the Master of Fine Arts Degree

Designing Compelling Interfaces: An exploration of the artist book and how its unique interactive experience can influence the graphical user interface.

by Alison Boncha

Problem Statement

This thesis will explore the possible interactive design solutions for graphical user interfaces by studying the unique art form of the artist book, taking into consideration the fact that certain artists' books are not meant to educate or inform but rather, to evoke an emotion or tell a visual story. This thesis will focus on the experience of the artist book and how one could translate that experience to an online environment while also effectively conveying a message. Could a graphical user interface produce the same user experience that an artist book provides; the action of turning pages and moving through a story with the same elements in mind - such as pop up images, hidden messages, or the value of physical materials used?

Background

Graphical user interfaces (GUI) allow people to interact with computers and glean information from web pages. In the early days of the web, there was not much artistic freedom but more recently, with the advent and acceptance of certain web developments such as Cascading Style Sheets, JavaScript, and Adobe Flash, GUI's have now had the room to grow more artistically and there are many designers and design companies that are breaking the mold and stepping out of the box when it comes to displaying information for their clients, particularly when the Adobe Flash application is used effectively. These creative minds are not only displaying information in a visually appealing manner, they are creating interesting experiences for the user as well.

Artist books are not much different when compared to online experiences. In both cases, there is a message or an emotion to communicate, and also in both cases, the user is invited to interact with what they are presented with. Holland Cotter, an art critic of the New York Times writes, "Books are created for one-on-one interaction. They are, by nature, forms of privacy. There is no way, short of censorship, for an outside observer to monitor or control the intimate encounters they offer and the education they provide." (Drucker, xii) Thinking about books in this way, there is a striking similarity between them and GUI's. Both are forms of designed information even though one form is made with paper, string, and paint and the other is made with digital art and code. Both yearn to tell a story and provide the user with an experience that will be remembered.

Nathan Shedroff, who is an experience design expert, believes that the disciplines whose sole purpose

is to create experiences for people, no matter if it is theatre, music, art, or interactive media — should study one another and find out what it is that makes each so interesting for the audience to endure. The process of studying artists books and translating that knowledge to a GUI could prove to be beneficial to the field of computer graphics design not only from a stylistic perspective, but an experiential perspective as well.

Scope

This thesis will explore the possibilities of what artists's books concepts could contribute to graphical user interfaces. More specifically, web pages and flash sites that usually host informational content and data about a particular topic. The visual quality of artists' books, along with the unique layout, formats, and structures will be documented and used as a guide for the thesis project design and layout.

The content for this project will mainly consist of information about artists' books, including a brief history, current happenings in this field to date, techniques, and a couple of classic books that might have shaped this art form. Information design and usability concepts will also be taken into consideration so as not to get lost in the "artist book metaphor" and to keep the user in mind above all.

Literature Survey

"Information Interaction Design: A Unified Field Theory of Design"

<http://www.nathan.com/thoughts/unified/>

Nathan Shedroff

This article is also a chapter in the book Information Design edited by Bob Jacobson and published by the MIT press. This article is about Information Interaction Design which is a combination of Information Design, Interaction Design, and Sensorial Design. Content and the display of information is key, but all elements are considered to create a valuable experience for the user. He writes specifically about interaction design as an "ancient art and new technology" which refers to the art of story telling that spans back to the time before written history and current new media interaction design. He also writes that information design is ultimately about the consumer's experience.

The Century of Artists Books

Johanna Drucker

Granary Books, Inc.

In the preface, the author writes that this book was initially written ten years ago because there was seen a need for critical work in the field of artists' books. She acknowledges the benefits of the Web as a space for people to come together and communicate about this field (and there are also many book artists' who have blogs, and there is even one artist book e-journal). An interesting quote from Holland Cotter in the introduction of this book, "Ultimately, though, the value of this book lies not in what it feels like and looks like, but in what it does. It is an interactive thing; it generates blessings, absorbs devotion; its political and intellectual uses are fluid and open-ended. As such, it may have something in common with Drucker's notion of the artist's book as a conceptual or performative space, a dynamic arena of perceptual interaction." (xiv) This book proves to be very beneficial to this thesis because of its critical look at books in many different ways, "the book as visual form", and "the book as conceptual space (performance and exhibition)" are just a couple of the chapters in this book.

Cover to Cover: The Artist's Book in Perspective

Rob Perree

NAI Publishers

This book takes an interesting perspective. The first chapter starts off with a run down of art history starting with the year 1911 with Georges Braque, the cubist painter. The author seems to imply that artists' book began to emerge with the artists that first starting using words and poems in their art. Each chapter is written by a different author and all seem to be more focused on the use of words as an art form than the making or critiquing of the artist book itself. Another theme running throughout is the idea of visual story - no matter if the visuals are nonsense sentences, or fine art photography. The actual book itself presented in an unusual layout - with text that is hard to read and words that seem to jump out at you from the page. This might be a good example of an artist book gone awry as far as getting the message across is concerned.

Methodology

First and foremost, the concept of "interaction design" will be researched, as well as other terms such as "visual design" and "multimedia design". This is necessary in order to understand the importance of user interface design across the disciplines. A checklist of usability requirements will be made based on this

study and kept with me at all times while designing this thesis project. Along with this research will be the exploration of artists' books that the RIT archive has available (which is an extensive collection of rare works). I will also consider and research the current artistic fad happening in web design and Flash sites. By examining and setting up user testing on the current designs and interfaces on the web, I will be able to understand where these designs are most effective, or ineffective. This will be based on how well the message was understood by the target audience and also how the experience was received. Then, I will be able to start designing the interface for my own project based on the stylistic and experience based processes that book artists' employ. After conducting preliminary user testing on my proposed interface, I will then begin to create it using the Adobe Flash application.

The design style that will be used will come directly from the inspiration of artists' books. This will include the use of collage that includes both digital and handmade elements (original art scanned into PhotoShop). The user will be able to manipulate certain elements in order to reveal hidden messages and other artwork. For example, on the home page of many web designs, there is static art in the header and on the edges of the page - I hope to utilize this type of art so that it will become an interactive experience that the user will be able to discover on his/her own. What will be revealed will not be pertinent to the main information and content of the site, which will mainly be details about artists' books (brief history, facts, book examples) - but it will provide a meaningful experience that enhances the user's visit. The thought is that playing, exploring, and discovering elements adds to a user's visit, and this is the reason I believe artists' books are so powerful.

With these stylistic elements in mind, the main content will be a brief history of artists' books, and a few main artists and their contributions to this art form. From the main content section, there will be another section that attempts to mimic two popular techniques used in this field - one might be a tunnel style book, and the other might be an accordion style. The content of these sections is still under consideration, but whatever the content becomes, I will create a physical artist book for my peers to interact with and compare to the attempted online mimic.

Limitations

The design and creation must fit within the time constraint of 15 weeks. Another issue will be scaling down the initial ideas and concepts into a manageable project for the allotted time while also considering my own technical abilities with the Adobe Flash application and ActionScript 3. Obviously, a computer screen can not be folded or manipulated in the same sense that a book might be, so creating a experience similar to an artist book but applying it to the medium intended will be a challenge, but not impossible.

Implications of the Research

The impact I hope to capture with the successful completion of my thesis project will be a greater understanding of human to computer interactions when the experiences are based on artists' books. By educating and exposing myself to this art form that has similar goals to a graphical user interface, I am optimistic that other interactive designers will also see the benefit of learning about similar disciplines in order to enhance the online user interface even further.

Peer Review

There are numerous competitions I could enter such as HOW Magazine's Annual Interactive Design Awards, and the Communication Arts Interactive Competition. I would like to also ask Kari Horowicz, who is the RIT libraries Art and Photography librarian to sponsor this project by setting up a mini exhibit in the library. The exhibit might include my project, as well some samples of artists' books to raise student awareness of this unique art form and to expose my project as well.