The Word E-Book Should Be Replaced With CodeX

E-reading is a fundamentally different experience than curling up with a paper book.

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When's the last time you sat down to read a book for several hours? Or even one hour? We are both card-carrying humanities scholars, but even we can barely scrape 15 minutes together for sustained engagement with a text. And yet humans are reading now more than ever when you think about the billions of hours we collectively spend on email, Facebook, Twitter, texting, sexting, and reading illicit things online. This is more than just information overload: When we change how we read, we are changing our brains. Researchers have proposed that we play out literary scenarios with mirror neurons and fire up complex, full-brain patterns of activity when asked to practice "close reading," in contrast to the patterns associated with reading for pleasure.

Neurological effects, different types of media, totally new reading habits—just a few reasons why e-reading is a fundamentally different experience than curling up with a dead-tree book. Print books are a highly refined technology that

isn't going anywhere soon, but there are ways in which the digital is superior to the old-fangled, and vice versa: They're horses of different colors.

And yet publishers keep trying to re-create the print experience online, with the faux wood of the iOS bookstore and the fake page-turning animations on many e-readers. It's time for that to end. We need to embrace digital reading as its own medium, not just a book under glass. That means imagining a new language for reading as an experience, starting with a new word to use instead of *book*.

It's still no easy trick to figure out a name for this thing, though. At the Frankfurt Book Fair last week, we acted as ringmasters for a crack team of novelists, journalists, and publishers conducting a gonzo experiment in the future of publishing. Our project, Sprint Beyond the Book, aimed to upend the publishing industry's centuries-old model for book production. We wrote in public, on the crowded and noisy floor of the fair. We moved from concept to final product in just 72 hours. We crowdsourced the writing, featuring dozens of contributions collected through our website. We shot and embedded videos throughout. We're even giving the thing away for free. But despite our pretensions to renegade chic, we couldn't stop returning to the word *book* to talk about what we were building. (Disclosure: We work for Arizona State University; ASU is a partner with **Slate** and the New America Foundation in Future Tense. Sprint Beyond the Book is part of a research project funded by Intel Labs.)

The fact is that every other name we came up with sounded boring or silly. *Text* was a strong early contender—after all, it's used by humanities geeks like us to refer to everything from political speeches and Hungarian rap lyrics to recipes for gumbo. Sadly, it's totally misleading: We're hurtling toward a future in which reading means making decisions, watching videos, writing back, and getting lost in vast virtual spaces. *Book system* is too stodgy (as are *reading system*, *platform*, and *service*) and doesn't even get rid of the word *book*. We gleefully entertained and discarded many bad ideas like *graphies*. Some of us liked *plat*, a shortening of *platform* that sounds like something out of a Golden Age

science fiction story, but the more we said it, the more it sounded like a comic book sound effect for something gross.

Rather than grope forward, we decided to look back. With some trepidation, we would like to nominate *codex*, a word with a rich history that most of us don't know anything about. *Codex*, derived from the Latin *caudex* (meaning "trunk of a tree") even happens to contain the English word *code*, which will be central to the future of reading in a variety of ways. The things we'll be reading in the future will not only involve a lot of programming; they'll also require readers to decode complex, multilayered experiences and encode their own ideas as contributions in a variety of creative ways. Since standard printed books are technically codices, we propose (with significantly more trepidation) to distinguish our variant with one of those annoying midword capitals: *codeX*, to remind us that these new things involve experience, experimentation, expostulation … you know, all those X things.

This also works nicely because it reminds us of the X-Men and the X Games: We see the future of reading as an arena with the social dynamics of competition and play, scoring points and showing off, rather than a LeVar Burton rainbow of love and generosity. (Twitter works like this now, as a performance space where we're all more or less openly vying for the award for "most clever person on the Internet this minute.") Books have always been potent weapons in the cultural battlefield for prestige and distinction, and they won't magically turn into utopian spaces anytime soon. At the risk of sounding too academic, we think the X highlights the jousting and (hopefully friendly) conflict inherent to digital reading.

From social reading platforms like Medium to digital pop-up books like 2012's *Between Page and Screen*, we're already building the future of reading, and there's no going back. So let's agree on a new term and stop pretending these utterly new ways of reading are anything like the singular and lovely experience of thumbing through a printed book.