

The residual concepts of production vs. the emergent cultures of distribution in publishing

David Blakesley

Abstract

Who wins? The base or the superstructure? I'm not a Marxist per se, but I've lived this struggle for some time as a writer and publisher. In this essay, adapted from my TUG'22 keynote presentation, I describe my efforts to change or adapt the democratized tools of production to produce new forms of writing, which ultimately led to an ongoing battle with the dominant cultures of production in the world of publishing.

I'll narrate two case studies. One focuses on the writing and production of an innovative, if not disruptive, textbook in the ultra-conservative textbook industry. The second tells the ongoing story of an interloping publishing company (Parlor Press) that reveals the central challenge of *distribution* for both writers and publishers, from typesetting (print) to transformation (digital).

L^AT_EX developers and users, take note! The return of the nonbreaking space and soft return is nigh!

1 Some background

I'm the Campbell Chair in Technical Communication and Professor of English at Clemson. I also direct the PhD program in Rhetorics, Communication, and Information Design. That's my day job. My night job is as the founder and publisher of Parlor Press, a scholarly publishing company I launched in 2002. Originally, Parlor Press was created to publish just one book, a collection of letters exchanged between Kenneth Burke and William Rueckert, two people I've written about in my own scholarship.

One thing led to another, and now we've published 350 books in a variety of formats, from print to multimedia ebooks, and have eighteen book series, most in the humanities. I'm the only employee. I do hire some freelance editors now and then to help. Series editors help with development and acquisition, but I'm largely responsible for production, design, distribution, and marketing. And then there's shipping, metadata, customer relations, author support, a Shopify website, accounting, and more. I know. It sounds impossible, but I have learned over time to be efficient.

2 Opening questions and definitions

Who wins in the world of publishing? The base or the superstructure? I'm not a Marxist per se, but

I've lived this struggle for some time as a writer and publisher. In this essay, which I've adapted from my presentation at TUG 2022 (available online via tug.org/1/tug22-video), I describe my efforts to change or adapt the democratized tools of production to produce new forms of writing, which ultimately led to an ongoing battle with the dominant cultures of production in the world of publishing.

I'll narrate two case studies. One focuses on the writing and production of an innovative, if not disruptive, textbook in the ultra-conservative textbook industry. The second tells the ongoing story of an interloping publishing company (Parlor Press) that reveals the central challenge of distribution for both writers and publishers, from typesetting (print) to transformation (digital).

I want to begin with some terms that I've used to try to explain what I do and understand how it has changed over time. The struggle for me has been with the culture of publishing. Here are some definitions of these key terms that help me understand my academic and publishing existence, with a few examples. I've always found Raymond Williams helpful, particularly his essay from *New Left Review*, "Base and Superstructure in Marxist Cultural Theory", from which I draw the definitions below. I provide the definition and then a visual example.

The base "The base' is the real social existence of man. 'The base' is the real relations of production corresponding to a stage of the development of material productive forces. 'The base' is a mode of production at a particular stage of its development." (Williams)



Figure 1: The base in publishing. These are just a few of the means of production.

The superstructure "The superstructure consists of the cultural and economic forces that both reflect and maintain the material base, the mode of production. The superstructure is of a secondary order and symbolic." (Williams)

Hegemony "Hegemony is the expression of power, an ideological force that dominates social, cultural, and economic life and thus stabilizes the base, the modes of production." (Williams)

Example: The lingering hegemony of print. The superstructure supports print production and discourages challenges to the status quo.

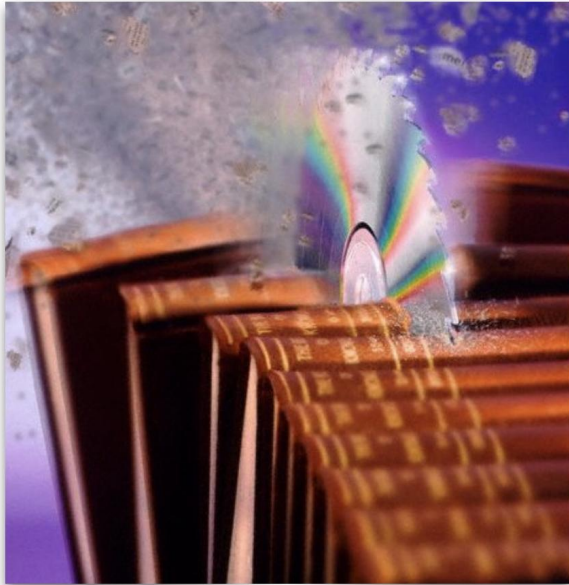


Figure 2: CD-ROM ebook destroys printed books. (Image by Chuck Savage. RF Corbis Collection. Getty Images.)

Dominant culture “The modes of incorporation are of great social significance, and incidentally in our kind of society have considerable economic significance. The educational institutions are usually the main agencies of the transmission of an effective dominant culture, and this is now a major economic as well as cultural activity; indeed it is both in the same moment.” (Williams)

According to Williams, we can identify at least three cultural forces at work in any given social formation, such as publishing. The dominant culture of publishing is powerful, ubiquitous, largely impenetrable, persistent, and largely invisible.

Residual culture “The meanings and values which cannot be verified or cannot be expressed in the terms of the dominant culture, are nevertheless lived and practised on the basis of the residue-cultural as well as social-of some previous social formation.” (Williams)

Residual culture is persistent, a hanger-on, and in some cases never disappears. The status quo has great momentum. Most academics feel its effects daily and especially if you try to change anything.

Emergent culture “New meanings and values, new practices, new significances and experiences, are continually being created. But there is then a much earlier attempt to incorporate them, just because they are part — and yet not part — of effective contemporary practice.” (Williams)

Emergent culture is where I prefer to live. It is the future. The problem, said William Gibson, is that the future is already here, but it’s just not evenly distributed yet. Much of my work as a writer and a publisher is to distribute the future, which sounds rather idealistic, I suppose.

Here’s a nice example of residual and emergent cultures in contest.

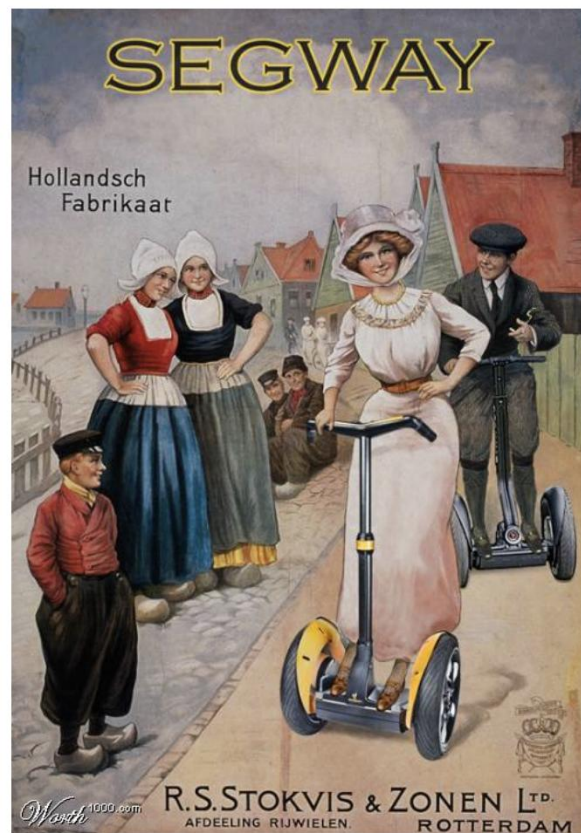


Figure 3: Residual and emergent cultures battle for power and attention. Was the Segway an invention or a cultural composition? (Image courtesy worth1000.com.)

3 Case study 1: Writing in the digital age

My first case focuses on my work as an author. I’ve written a textbook that has appeared in multiple editions, their covers shown in Figure 4.

These covers illustrate what changed over a period of about four years of work. The one on the left (*The Thomson Handbook*) was created by the publisher with absolutely no consultation with the



Figure 4: The covers of the first and second editions of the author’s writing handbook, published by Cengage (2009 and 2012).

authors and having little, if any, visual relationship with the content of the book. A bunch of dots with words in them. The cover on the right, is much different. I chose it and persuaded the publisher to go with it. Here’s the caption on the inside front cover:

Is a flower born digital? Macoto Murayama’s are. Using his sketchpad, camera, microscope, and 3D rendering software, this artist joins technology with the craft of photography to help us see the natural world in a brand-new way.

Can a writing handbook help students encounter the digital world in a brand-new way? Only if it joins the art of writing with the technology for enhancing it. Blakesley and Hoogeveen’s *Writing*—finally, a rhetorical handbook for students born digital.

Of note here is that from the first to the second edition we see a shift from the publisher at the center of the production process in the direction of the author, who suddenly has some say in the means of production.

Figure 5 shows an interior spread. The visual content is primary, with the textual content functioning like an illumination. The full version of the first edition came in at 1,300 pages. Can you imagine writing, designing, and producing that?

It was critical for me to create (invent) in the design space, with the images and text in close proximity. The images and text converse with one another. MS Word doesn’t do well with images and text together, so I composed much of the book in InDesign (CS2, here, about fifteen years ago). Figure 6 shows a screenshot of my workspace, designing what was called a research spread. Once composed, I produce a PDF to share with the publisher so that designers would see what I had in mind.

David Blakesley



Figure 5: The innovative design of *Writing: A Manual for the Digital Age* transforms the principles of the illuminated manuscript. Here, the (usually) primary text has been moved to the margins, with the visual content and illustrations occupying the center of attention on the inside.

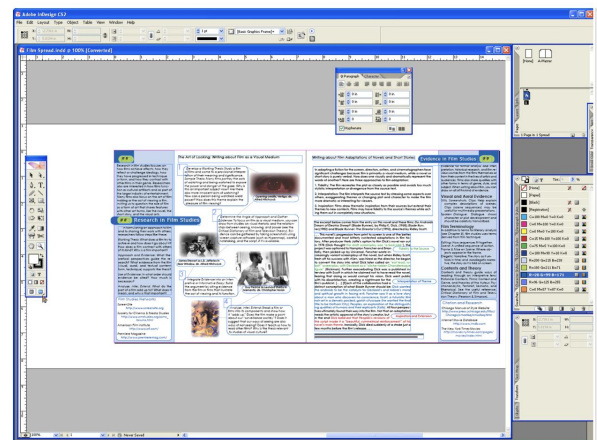


Figure 6: Composing in the design/production space as an author. The image shows the Adobe InDesign workspace.

Then I had to retrofit the document so that I could share the content in a Word file because that’s how the publisher’s book designers were prepared to receive new content. Images were submitted as separate files. The 1,300 page book translated into a 7,000 page Word document, about a three-foot tall stack of paper (Figure 7).

Figure 8 shows what the finished version looked like in the first edition. Pretty nice! By the time we got to the second edition, I had persuaded the publisher (now Cengage) to produce all of the content in InCopy—a shared workspace version of InDesign. Cengage did not agree overnight. The dominant and residual cultures of textbook publishing kept authors a long way from the means of production. This new workflow changed that.

I’m sure this case wasn’t a precipitating cause, but within a couple of years, the dominant culture of textbook publishing changed rather dramatically,

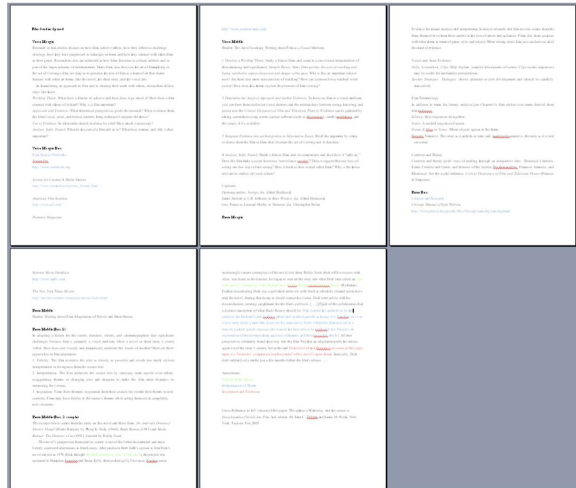


Figure 7: The InDesign document had to be disassembled into a Word document and sent separately with the images. A PDF file showed the layout.



Figure 9: The publishing life cycle.

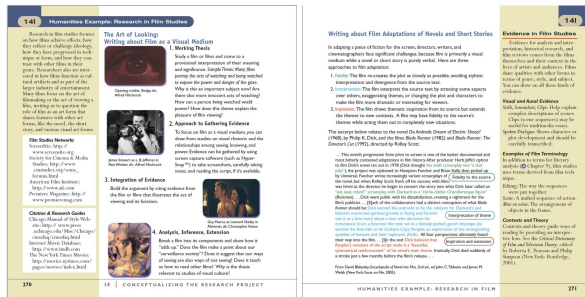


Figure 8: The interior spread as reassembled by the publisher’s contracted production designer.

mostly due to economic forces (students stopped buying new textbooks, opting for rentals or nothing). Textbook companies are largely now content managers and distributors, with authors relegated to the margin, working on modules that can be redistributed across platforms. The textbook companies make their money with ancillaries. The base, where authors had a vital role in the means of production (invention), gives way to the superstructural forces of data management.

4 Case study 2: Publishing in the digital age

At different moments in the emergence of publishing, the power of different stages over the others rises and falls. For example, it used to be the case that marketing drove everything. In scholarly publishing around the turn of the twenty-first century, marketing and marketability started to compromise the whole process. Authors had to be well known, writing about popular and timely topics in books that would sell

to more than libraries. Outside peer review took a back seat to evaluations by the marketing team.

With the emergence of new formats, like EPUB and MOBI, the stress on production processes increased, which in turn meant that the desire for efficiency started to compromise production values. Amazon’s Kindle promised to make books much cheaper to read, almost overnight, but the means of production couldn’t keep up. Take the example of the first publication of Allen Ginsberg’s *Howl*, which Amazon touted with much fanfare. However, the Kindle format (MOBI, a sort of simplified and proprietary version of EPUB) could not easily handle line spacing, line breaks, or stanza breaks (Figure 10). Some expertise in the conversion of print to EPUB or MOBI was suddenly required.

What people were saying

“I tweeted my frustration. Others did too. What does this say for eBooks if we can’t get basic things like formatting right? Why create such hullabaloo around this digital release if you hadn’t properly checked formatting on every device? Why is it that publishing sits so far outside the norms of what is required to launch something digital?”

— Callie Miller, *The Lit Life*, 7 Oct 2010, www.litlifela.com/counterbalance/2010/10/html-ebook-formatting-nonsense.html

Some of the responses to Callie Miller’s blog post are shown in Figure 11.

Parlor Press has published a lot of poetry, more than seventy titles so far (Figure 12). Originally, none of them was available in EPUB or Kindle format. I knew that we had to eventually convert all of our books to EPUB. So what were my options? I could

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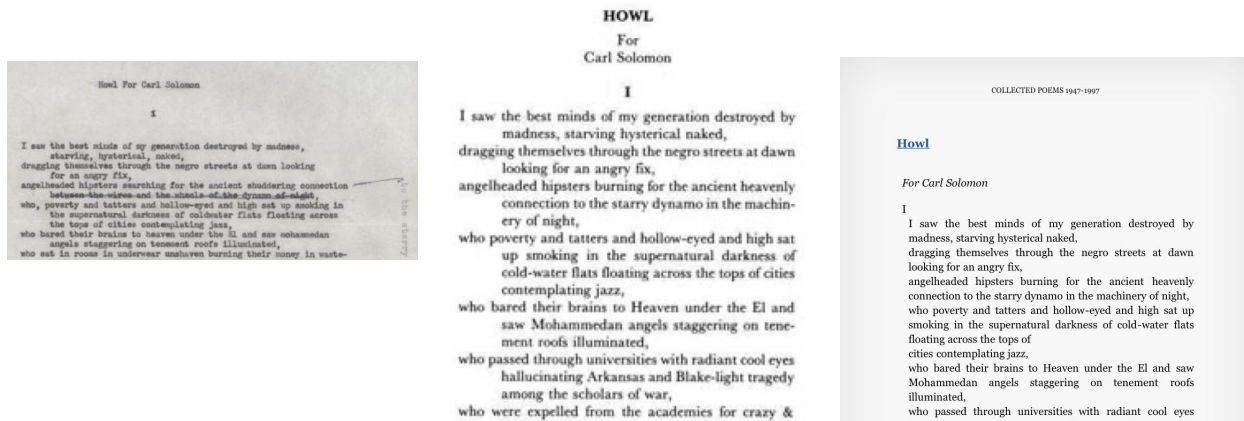


Figure 10: The original typed manuscript of *Howl* (left), the print edition (middle), and the MOBI (Kindle) edition (right).

Jim Welke says:
 October 6, 2010 at 2:14 pm

What a drag. Such laziness. The problem could easily be addressed by adding line breaks and tabs. Somebody just didn't bother.

(I've written lots of code, in lots of languages, and formatting text is one of those hassles you must deal with to please the humans who end up reading it...and paying for it!)

(And if the above indents don't appear, then this comment form stripped out my line breaks and spaces, same as the Kindle!)

Cheers,
 Jim

I.A.M. says:
 October 6, 2010 at 5:17 pm

Enforcing indentations, tabs, hanging indents, and the like is nigh-on impossible to accomplish in anything other than an Adobe PDF (which is best considered a photocopy of a book, because the text doesn't 're-flow' to fit the screen dimensions). As has Natasha October, I've tried to protect typographic fidelity to original layouts and been skunked every time. Maintaining 'centred text' sometimes is a challenge.

Uloipo and Poetry rely heavily on a word being in a particular spot in relation to another line or word when read, and e-readers are incapable of maintaining that due to the text size control the user has, as well as the fact that various units' typefaces will take up a different line space than another's.

As much as I continue to make books available in electronic formats, the printed editions continue to be made available along side of them due to a variety of reasons that guarantee that printed books will continue to be created for decades to come. Electronic books are an alternate binding, not a replacement for all printed books.

Craig Morgan Teicher says:
 October 6, 2010 at 4:56 pm

Troy: Line breaks in poetry aren't "formatting," they're an essential part of how the text communicates. That said, I know that may not mean much to casual readers, but I wish it did.

Natasha, as you say, this is exactly the issue that has most poetry publishers nervous about e-books. I wish we could devote some tech time to it and find a solution.

Figure 11: Response to the original Kindle version of *Howl*.

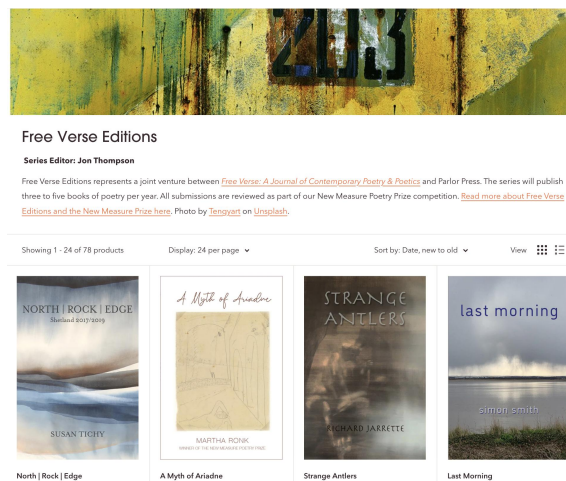


Figure 12: Some sample Parlor Press poetry titles. See parlorpress.com/collections.

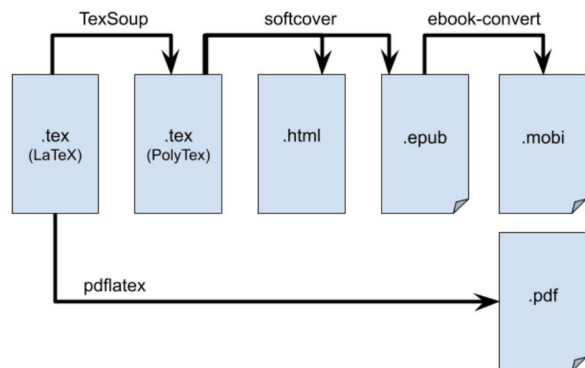


Figure 13: Ivan Savov's diagram of the L^AT_EX conversion process to multiple platforms. From Minireference blog: Starting a Revolution in the Textbook Industry, minireference.com/blog/generating-epub-from-latex.

pay Ingram, for example, to convert our backlist (now 350 titles), but at \$200 or more a pop, we're talking about \$70,000 or more to cover the conversion cost. Yikes. I tend to be a DIY person, know a little bit about coding, and have worked with open source projects like Drupal since its beginnings.

I had heard of L^AT_EX, but it looked quite daunting (Figure 13). Michael Hartl described the process in excruciating detail in the manual for his Softcover system (manual.softcover.io), when the source material includes math: The real challenge is producing EPUB and MOBI output. The process was to:

- (1) create a self-contained HTML page with embedded math,
- (2) include the amazing MathJax JavaScript library, configured to render math as SVG images,
- (3) then hit the page with the headless PhantomJS browser to force MathJax to render the math (including any equation numbers) as SVGs,
- (4) extract self-contained SVGs from the rendered pages, and
- (5) use Inkscape to convert the SVGs to PNGs for inclusion in EPUB and MOBI books.

Easy, right? In fact, no—it was excruciating and required excessive amounts of profanity to achieve. But it's done, so ha. Piece of cake! I had to think about the conversion process in terms that were more familiar (Figure 14).

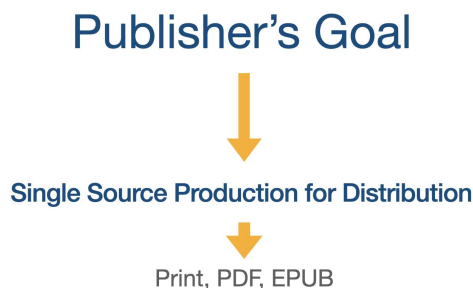


Figure 14: The challenge from the publisher's perspective.

I have to work with authors, and there's no reason why they shouldn't be aware that what and how they write should not to some extent reflect the means of production. Few writers worry about that, however, and do what the word processor encourages them to do (namely, format and design with abandon). Publishers force the issue, however, and ask authors to prepare manuscripts in very particular ways, most of which authors ignore. Production changes/affects invention/authoring. This was a lesson I learned from my textbook. Now, however, I realized that distribution should affect/change authorship as well. (Figures 15 and 16.)



Figure 15: Publishers work with authors to help them prepare submissions for production.

The hegemony of spaces, tabs, and hard returns preserves the status quo of production as governed by residual and dominant cultures and embedded not just in software but in the socialized practices of the people. The nonbreaking space and soft return are elements of the emergent culture. Word processors and even keyboards encourage people to use spaces, tabs, and returns for line and paragraph spacing, regardless of the target format.

Authors, especially poets, need to understand how and why distribution changes their art. We have heard a lot lately about how much the supply chain is vulnerable to disruptive forces. So it has been with the emergence of new distribution lines and the new formats they deliver, like EPUB and MOBI.

Figure 17 shows the directions I now give our poets. They don't like it, but poets care about how their words are displayed. It matters, and makes a difference, even if subtle, for what their poetry means.

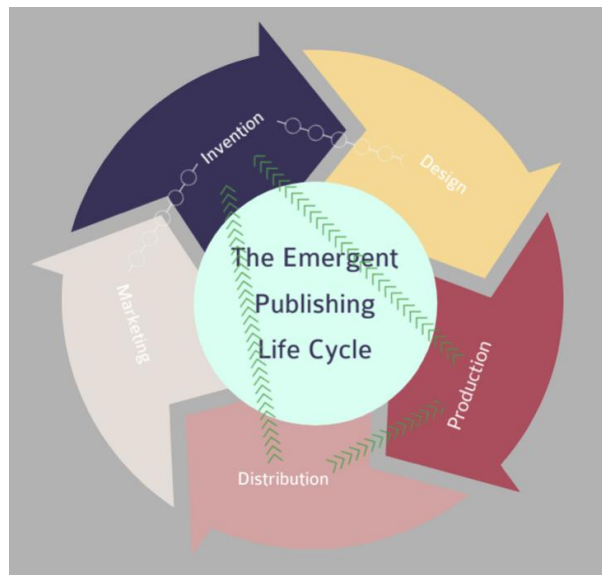


Figure 16: The lines of influence start to reach across the stages of the means of production.

Distribution → **Invention**

Additional Considerations for Poets
 Authors of books of poetry should follow these guidelines where applicable. Line breaks, stanza breaks, and poem boundaries merit special care because they affect the appearance of layout across formats, from print to ebook. All Parlor Press books are published simultaneously in multiple formats; following these guidelines will ensure that poems display in all of them as expected.

So that you can see all formatting marks (like hard and soft returns, spaces and nonbreaking spaces), we recommend using Word's Show/Hide button to reveal all formatting marks. The button is normally on the home toolbar and looks like the paragraph symbol shown here.

Show/Hide Button

- *Single space* throughout.
- Do not use Tabs for anything, anywhere.
- *Line breaks*: use a hard Return (Enter key) at the end of the line. The line length in the final printed book will normally allow for about 63 characters (with spaces). Kerning can be applied for slightly longer lines. For lines with more than 70 characters, we will have to use an indented second line.
- *Stanza breaks*: use a **soft return** to create additional space between stanzas or sections. In Word, you can create a soft return with the **Shift+Enter** keystroke (Mac or Windows).
- *Poem boundaries*: because poems may sometimes run over multiple pages, it is helpful for you to include a manual page break at the end of the poem. In Word, insert a page break with the **Ctrl+Enter** key combination (Windows) or **Command+Return** (Mac) or choose Insert > Break > Page Break (Mac or Windows).
- *Layout of the line*: if you need to indent the start of a line or create extra space between words, use “nonbreaking spaces” (not spaces or tabs) to indent. Using nonbreaking spaces is critical because all books will be converted to ePub format for publication as ebooks. All multiple spaces, returns, or (any) tabs are ignored in that format. **To make a nonbreaking space, use CTRL-Shift-space** (Mac or Windows).

Figure 17: The directions for poets in the Parlor Press Author’s Guide 2022.

So they are willing, much more so than authors of monographs.

The invention process of the author and the production process of the publisher has changed (Figure 18).

The screenshots in Figure 19 show three images of production. Authors originally used spaces, tabs, and multiple hard returns to manage their layout, which could be replicated in InDesign easily. However, to produce a properly formatted EPUB, you must use nonbreaking spaces and soft returns to manage line layout and stanza breaks. Figure 20

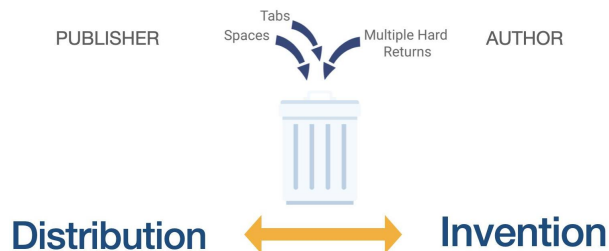


Figure 18: Distribution changes invention and production.

shows how the single-source now manifests in print and EPUB.

The problem was that all of our backlist titles had not been composed with the final platform in mind. Converting seventy poetry titles at four hours per book meant 280 hours of work (seven weeks!). Now, however, we produce an EPUB in ten minutes using the version prepared for print/EPUB simultaneously as a single source.

The work required to convert a backlist designed for print is substantial, particularly for a publisher like Parlor Press, which runs on a shoestring budget with no full-time employees. The democratization of production and digital printing technologies that made desktop publishing possible have led to new challenges at new stages of the publishing cycle. For the near future of publishing, the residual and dominant cultures of production must be reimagined in light of the emergent culture of distribution. Once that happens, the process of single-source development for multiple formats will be free and easy :).

5 References

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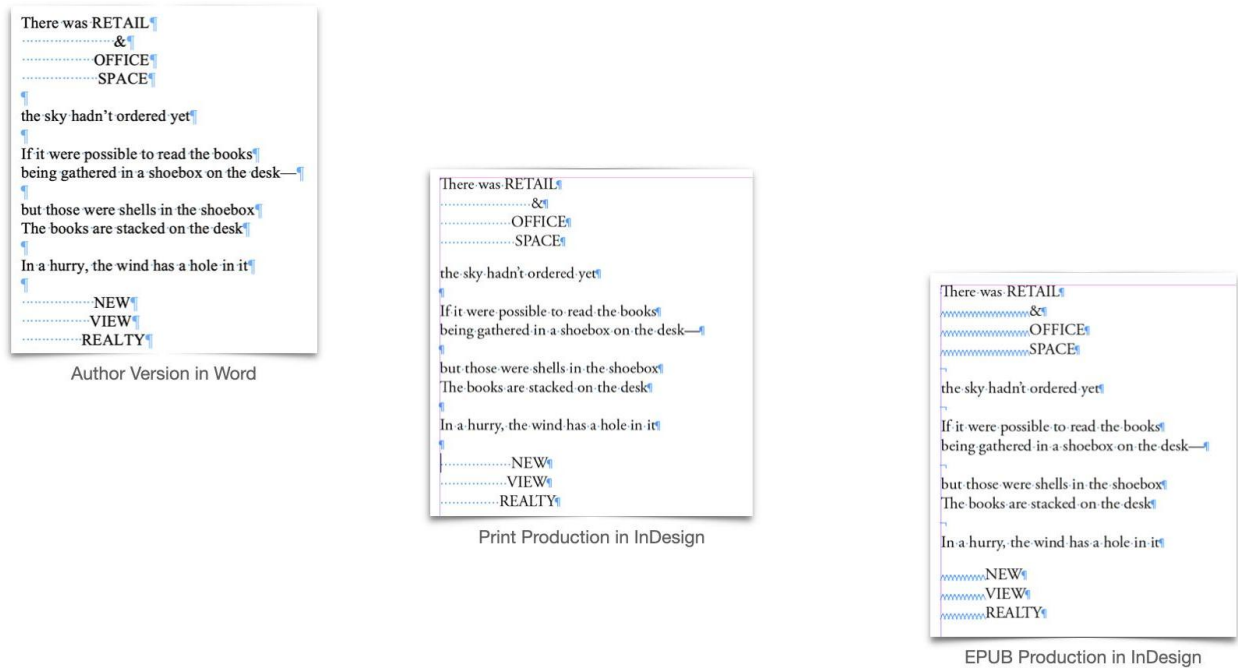


Figure 19: Some examples, moving from the author through the production process, with EPUB now a target as well as print and PDF.

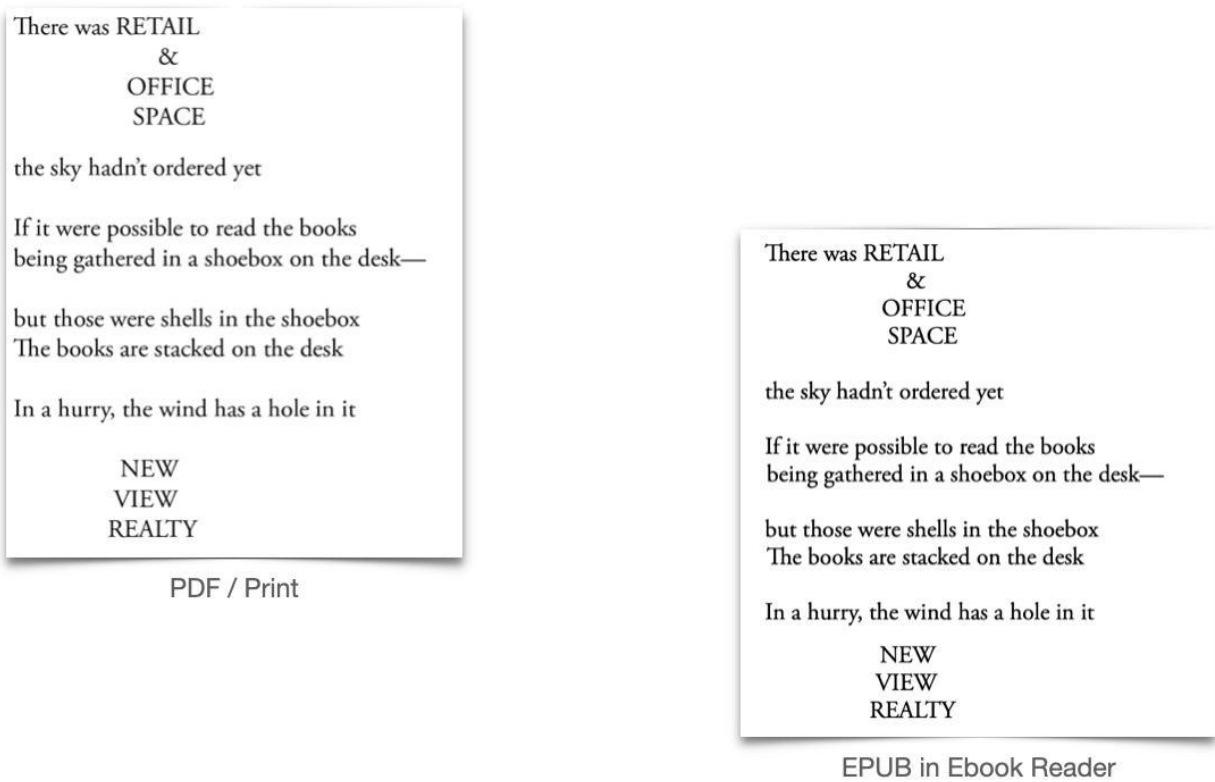


Figure 20: Output in print and EPUB are virtually identical once the tools of composition change.

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