

## The Scroll and the Codex: Two Different Views on Ebooks

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Due to the rather unique collection in our library and our location, we depend pretty heavily on electronic journals and ebooks. I am dealing with a lot of problems with pdf ebooks for research at the moment, and I also read a lot of fiction (Mobipocket and an old Palm T|X at the moment) in ebook format, and I'm struck at the differences.

We are at a transition period in how we consume information, and it appears that we have simply carried forward the information access issues that existed at the turn of the last millenium.

I'm talking, of course, about the scroll and the codex. A scroll is a single long sheet with words printed from top to bottom. A codex is a book as we would recognize one. I'm dealing with both in interfaces optimized for the scroll.

PDF ebooks have been particularly difficult to deal with. To have the text at a readable level, you have to zoom in significantly. This puts the top and bottom of the page outside of the viewing window of most modern computer screens, especially with the standard 17 inch screens at most workplaces. AJAXy interfaces like Library Press Display make even less sense on small screens. This is because our standard screens work best with an internet-pages, which imitate a scroll. The small screen on my palm T|X suffers from the same problem, however using the Mobipocket reader converts everything into a scroll.

The scroll is fine for end-to-end reading. It has it's own built in bookmarking feature. However, it is useless for reference purposes. The codex is great for reference purposes. It bookmarks well, but not as good as the scroll. It's more portable and durable than a scroll. Why are we forcing something so revolutionary and different, viz the electronic book, into these two formats? Using PDF files, which force a codex form on a scroll, or plain text/mobipocket/EPUB files which roll out like a scroll, but suffer from a serious lack of precision in layout and destroy the benefits of the codex.

So, what's the solution? I'm just a librarian, not a software engineer. Stick with the format that fits. Scroll-type ebooks are great for novels. Forced-codex PDF files are good for making sure that the text and pictures look good when they're printed out (and very little else).

Paper books still have a pretty good advantage over both despite the weight and size problems. We still don't have a format for printed words out there that takes the advantage away from the evolutionary, revolutionary, incredible paper book.