



Gutenberg, God, and the Devil's Plug-In: Lessons about Digital Publishing from the Famous Printer's Failed Killer App

Quentin Schultze

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This is the story of Johannes Gutenberg's failure at the one thing he most wanted to invent—a killer app that would transform his movable-type printing press into a powerful graphics machine. Gutenberg was really a paranoid and perfectionistic inventor who lacked a workable business plan. Even though history now shows he truly invented the technology for movable-type (or letterpress) printing, Gutenberg failed to appreciate how printed books would increasingly differ from handwritten manuscripts.

Gutenberg's failure to turn his technology into a profitable business is a case study in poor audience research, stunning entrepreneurial incompetence, and technological tunnel vision. Imagine Steve Jobs blowing it with Apple after prototyping the first Mac. It was that bad.

Contrary to what Jeff Jarvis argues in "Gutenberg the Geek," Gutenberg's problem was not cash flow or equity structure. Gutenberg went bankrupt trying to produce an unnecessary plug-in because of his commitment to the monastic vision of manuscripts as God-pleasing works of art. He was like an InDesign pro today who simply can't stand what the Kindle and ePub plugins do to his or her wonderful print designs. Except Gutenberg worried not just about aesthetics per se, but also about honoring God through beautiful books.

Ironically, Gutenberg just about invented the very plug-in he needed, but dissatisfied with it, he discarded it in his shop. Then his employees used it to print graphics for the "devil's playbook."

Gutenberg wrongly saw mass printing as a publishing tool rather than as a dynamic medium with changing users. If he were inventing today with the same limited mind-set, he would be trying to perfect e-books by making them exactly like printed books in style, format, and overall artistic design.

Both print and digital publishing have bright futures. But authors and publishers need to understand the emerging markets, changing reading practices, and evolving media technologies. This story of Gutenberg's failure helps authors, publishers, book designers, and high-tech entrepreneurs understand what's really at stake in today's digital revolution.

Author Quentin J. Schultze, PhD, is a well-published communication scholar, media historian, theologian, and sociologist who holds the Arthur H. DeKruyter Chair at Calvin College in Grand Rapids, Michigan. He founded the new field of "servant communication." He speaks widely to professional groups.

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