

# Manual Manuals: Media Reflexivity in Reading Through Tangible Artifacts

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## ABSTRACT

Reading is a manual activity. The touch hands are ever-present: holding, turning, pointing, scrolling, clicking and scribbling are physical practices that engross people in the printed word. The project “AIME Tiles” began by thinking about how systems of ideas can be translated into hybrid physical-concept tools. Further, the project attempts to resituate the scholarly activity of reading *as a practice* with its own material culture and media affordances. AIME Tiles, their design intent and construction are described as a modest sketch of tactile tools for scholarship— game pieces for playing with ideas while reading.

## Author Keywords

Tactile; reading; scholarship; publishing.

## ACM Classification Keywords

H.5.m. Information interfaces and presentation: Misc.

## MANUAL(LY) READING

The history of manual and mnemonic instruments accompanying reading is both rarefied and intriguing. The English word “manual” refers both things done with one’s hands, as well as a media-literary form for instruction. Scholarship, and reading more generally, has moved from being the sole purvey of a privileged and divinely ordained social strata (royalty and the clergy), first into the lives of courtiers and university scholars and then as a popular pursuit of professional and working classes. Designing materials for the development, support and augmentation of reading follow this expansion.

The prayer bead is a technology of reading and recitation which appears in many forms. Although there is a presumed first intent of these wooden and seed-based strings of elements to help the devotee remember a sequence of tasks, names or expressions their significance as ornamental and ritual devices for announcing (to oneself and to others) the kinds of thinking or reading taking place becomes an at least as important function. The cognitive benefit of not having to remember sequence in the recitation of a prayer or reading, are thought to ‘free the mind’ toward meditation or revelation on larger ideas and broader problems. (In

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Islamic traditions, a 99-bead “misbaha” is used, corresponding to the Names of God in Islam, while in Christian traditions “rosary” beads are used to count recitations of prayers).

The material-cultural history of reading is likewise populated by a host of devices for optical amelioration. Starting in the 1<sup>st</sup> Century, monks and scribes suffering from presbyopia used reading stones as magnifying glasses, proto-eyeglasses. Made of beryllium or quartz, the form and significance of these stones went far beyond optical magnification. These smooth, polished, tactile objects were cherished by the men who’s task it was to elucidate the sacred, esoteric texts. Reading stones were themselves indubitably imbued with individualized interpretative powers.

There are subtler effects of reading-with-artifacts related directly to tactility. These align with Sonneveld’s [9] conclusions. “Touching an object appears as a factor in calming somebody and enhancing concentration.” [4] Touch would also seem to lead to more intimate experiences, and more sensuous, embodied relations to knowledge. “Our sense of touch tells us whether we can trust the thing or not, whether it is valuable.” [4] Haptic-attention, for Benjamin, underpins modern experience more broadly, through “Tactile appropriation”. [1]

The AIME Tiles prototype extends the material history of loops, reading rulers, books stands and other sensible rubrics for hands and bodies in the act of reading. It develops a tactile-manual analog to a conceptual framework laid down by Bruno Latour in “An Inquiry Into Modes of Existence.” [5] With this, it opposes homogenization of the material cultural of reading into samey ‘platforms’ and tablets. Be it through the uniformity of print-on-demand volumes, the devaluation of unique editions, the glassy and glossy encapsulation of reading experiences via the Kindle or iPad—the manual and tactile experience of reading at present reinforce tendencies toward tactile and haptic senses as “mediocre conductor[s] of thought.” [6] Latour’s intellectual project, as a history and actuality of how veracity and knowledge are derived from human and non-human interactions seems particularly appropriate fodder for the sketch.

## MEDIA REFLEXIVITY IN READING

The ascension of digital literature [2] as an area of hybrid media and technology research, helps to develop a sense that the substrates and ‘media’ of information greatly

influence the overall experiential message or ‘content’ conveyed (see K. Hayles [3]). These are fruitful reflections on media forms and content that highlight the longstanding presence and potential of physical tools for thinking.

The book is a medium that has for over half a millennium served as our primary knowledge transduction artifact. In communities purporting toward knowledge (particularly in the Humanities), it remains an artifact and talisman so powerful and ubiquitous, that it goes largely unnoticed. This inattention to, and invariability of, media forms has grave repercussions for the possibility of alternative, new forms of knowledge creation and archiving. Those steeped in philosophical and literary traditions seldom have occasion to reflect on the media-specificity of the forms in which they traffic. Readers have less media-specific criticality Hayles has called for through “comparative media studies.” [3] Traditional humanities seem in perennial shock where media-reflexivity is concerned: “You mean this is a *book* I’ve been reading all along?!”

AIME Tiles, a resolutely material tool set, rekindle tactility in relation to a specific theoretical framework. This brings the mediations taking place in learning, thinking and scholarship to the fore. With it we try to remind ourselves how “thinking is a practice,” [8] full of process and artifact.

#### THE AIME TILES

The AIME Tiles are an implementation of a design for the manipulation of ideas from Bruno Latour’s 2013 AIME project [5]. Each of the 15 ‘modes’ presented is a domain of human activity with its own truth conditions and practices (e.g.: “[POL]” refers to politics). A laser-cut hexagonal wooden tile was created for each of these modes, which reveal themselves best relationally—that is, in relation to other modes. As a use-example, having two tiles in-hand while reading through the volume, reinforces which are being held in relief within the text (Figure 1).



Figure 1 - The AIME Tiles as used in reading.

The AIME Tiles therefore act as ‘Scrabble Tiles’ for the modes of existence in the book to be used as mnemonic and conceptual tools while undertaking close-readings of the volume. The pieces are laser-cut from a textural, wood-

grained plank, with etched characters intended to be felt as much as seen. The pieces are provided to readers in a small canvas bag, which also provides comforting and sensual feedback (Figure 2). Each piece, and each set of 15 pieces is hand-sanded, prepared and bagged, creating a poetic, tactile counterpart to the AIME online digital-humanities project and its published monograph.



Figure 2 - The AIME Tiles as produced and given to readers.

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