

YouVersion's Bible App: The role of design in digitally mediated religious experience

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When I look at an elaborate Torah, an illuminated manuscript, or a gilded Bible, it is obvious to me how their producers designed the physical books to convey the sacred reverence intended toward them; entire websites are devoted to analyzing their different bindings, leather, inks, typefaces, colors, and sizes (Bertrand). When I look at a religious iPhone app, I do not at first see the same connection; it is tempting to see it as neutral mechanism for communicating a static message. However, when we dive further into the birth of such an application, the process proves to be far from neutral or static. The religious text in this case may be represented in pixels rather than pages, but it is indeed just as much a designed object as any illuminated manuscript. Endless design decisions go into the creation and refinement of an app - even a holy one.

Rather than examine the many philosophical implications of the existence of digital scripture, I will focus primarily on the design decisions that contribute to one product in particular: YouVersion's extremely popular Bible App. I will identify common questions of mobile user experience and user interface design, and consider YouVersion's decisions in each space. These include questions surrounding user definition, data collection and application, visual language, behavioral change, interaction and social engagement. This exploration will shed light on both the history and the future of the Bible's role as a religious object, especially as it is designed for specific outcomes. In many ways, the design of the app is very much influenced by the history of the paper Bible, but in other ways the design itself has power to challenge and influence the future of the Bible.

What is the role of design?

The role of a designer in a product team is ultimately to control a customer's user experience, making decisions from the very broad philosophical level to the very detailed visual level. Desmet's "Framework of Product Experience" defines that user experience as:

The entire set of affects that is elicited by the interaction between a user and a product, including the degree to which all our senses are gratified (aesthetic experience), the meanings we attach to the product (experience of meaning), and the feelings and emotions that are elicited (emotional experience).

Our senses, meanings, and emotions may at first seem like extremely personal responses, but they are often highly influenced by the decisions of another individual or team of designers. When the product we are engaged with is, for instance, Instagram or a favorite briefcase, we may expect it to be designed to elicit certain responses; it is perhaps unsurprising to think that the color and shape of a ceramic mug were chosen by a Pottery Barn employee to encourage feelings of elegance or playfulness. We may not, however, expect that same level of human control over our experience of the Bible.

While the YouVersion app is certainly not the first version of the Bible to be adapted to the assumed needs of its readers, it is among the first to have a dedicated designer whose purpose is to optimize user experiences of it. This man's name is Andy Knight. He shared his perspective with me during an interview about how the nature of the Bible affects his design decisions (Knight). I will include his perspective within five aspects of user experience, and compare it to both paper Bibles and secular apps.

1. Users

The first step in the design of a conventional product is to identify a target user group, including assumed demographic, lifestyle, problems, and channels of discovery ("Heuristic Evaluation"). YouVersion is an evangelical organization, and part of their mission is to "make the Bible accessible and engaging to as many people as possible" (Knight). In this respect they have been enormously successful, by 2013 reaching over 124 million users around the world. This poses an interesting design challenge. One user may be a devout seminary student in Harlem, while another is reading the Bible for the first time in Thailand. Both church leaders and their congregations may use the app, whether Catholic, Baptist, or Presbyterian. They may be young and tech-savvy or older and uncomfortable with their new smartphones. They could be reading anywhere they bring their phones or tablets.

The problem of crafting a Bible for all these different demographics and contexts is hardly new. Hundreds of translations of the Bible exist, not only for language differences, but also for doctrinal and physical preferences. Special Bibles exist for students, for Catholics, for

children and missionaries. One translation of the Bible called *The Message*, for instance, was fully translated into idiomatic (“contemporary”) English in 2002 to resonate with the needs of contemporary users (Peterson). The same person may also use two Bibles in different situations, perhaps a study Bible and a pocket Bible. A chapter of Colleen McDannell’s book *Material Christianity* entitled “The Bible in the Victorian Home” points out that in nineteenth-century America, it was common for a family to own two Bibles, one small and one large (McDannell 71), designed for different contexts of use: one (the “family Bible”) for communal reading, and one for individual reading.

The range of Bible users and uses is not very different in YouVersion’s app; however, the app designers strive to accommodate all of those people and situations in a single product. The app is able to address some of these differences the way paper Bibles have, featuring 1000 different versions of the Bible from which users can choose; users can read and listen to it in over 700 languages, making the Bible accessible to many more populations (“And the 1,000th...”).

The user challenge Knight struggles with most is the variation in the users’ existing relationships with the Bible and Christianity. As an evangelical app, YouVersion aims to engage as many “biblical novices” as possible, and draw them into more regular Bible use; however, YouVersion must also satisfy the more in-depth needs of an already frequent reader. Knight discussed some of the specific ways he addresses the problem.

For novice users, he focuses on the first-time experience, and some of the more digestible features like the “verse of the day” that appears when you open the app. For these potentially first-time Bible readers, Knight also took part in a decision to influence the order in which they experience the books of the scripture. In previous versions, when one clicked the “Read” button in the menu, the first chapter of Genesis would appear, just as if a paper Bible was opened to the first page. Now, the same button will take a reader directly to the book of John. Knight says, “When it went straight to Genesis, people would drop off. Now you start off in the book of John because we felt it was a better jumping off point for new users.”

While there is no rule dictating where one must begin reading the Bible, here a person is making that decision for millions of others, with a specific goal in mind. In contrast, it is nearly unheard of for a paper Bible to place the New Testament before the Old Testament; of the top ten Bibles sold in the United States, all place the books in the same order, beginning with Genesis (“CBA Best Sellers”). Knight’s mission may be to “benefit Christians everywhere,” but it is still important to consider the ethical implications of a medium that affords him so much power.

2. Data

In his discussion of the “Read” feature, Knight touches on the use of data in decision-making. He elaborates on this by saying, “We are passionate about data. We give data a seat at the table when we make decisions, and we have to keep in balance.” Much of current user-

centered design is highly data-driven, relying on tools like “A/B tests” (experiments that compare two randomized variations) and aggregated user data to make decisions about features, aesthetics and marketing (Moreno). YouVersion goes beyond tracking basic stats like downloads and “bounce rates” (percentages of users who exit after the one screen); they also track passage highlights, notes, plan completion rates, IP addresses, and other usage patterns to inform their designs. Slate contributor Ariel Bogle writes, “In the same way that Amazon uses data to suggest books its users might like, YouVersion wants to understand the common attributes and habits of groups who use the app regularly and make alterations to encourage readers to return more often.”

This year, they even published an infographic displaying information such as the most highlighted passages and most read chapters in the Bible (“Our Year...”).

Although YouVersion is a not-for-profit organization and the app is free, it is estimated to be worth about \$200 million, according to venture capitalist Jules Malz (Bogle). Bogle attributes this estimation specifically to the data that YouVersion can collect from over 120 million users and to the fact that the Christian retail market is extremely valuable. Never in history has so much been known about the private behaviors of a religious group. That knowledge feeds back into the Bible App (and potentially other products).

3. Visual Language

In the past, most major shifts in the history of the book were driven by religion. New forms of the book like the codex were designed specifically for the needs of, in the West, Christians (Ackroyd 65) and in China, Buddhists (Kieschnick 180). Most famously, moveable type was first used to print Bibles, and other books followed practices set mostly by printed scriptures. In the West, the Bible was largely able to define the visual language of all books.

This is not the case with the transition from the page to the screen. The smart phone and touch screen were not invented specifically for religious use. Although the Bible App launched the first day the App Store opened in 2007, the forms of apps and mobile devices have not been notably shaped by its existence; rather, over the years, the Bible App has been shaped by the visual language already native to mobile devices. As Apple and Microsoft release new mobile operating systems, YouVersion responds with new versions of the app that match in visual style, and sometimes features, to the most recent OS (*YouVersion Blog*).

In the evolution from Bible App for iPhone Version 1 to Version 5, we can see the emergence of flat design, “card” interfaces, and recognizable iconography such as the “hamburger” menu. Many of these changes are derived from wider trends visible in mobile and web design, especially reflected in Apple iOS 7. This contributes to more than just visual appeal; it is essential for usability that interfaces and icons are familiar and natural to the user (“Heuristic Evaluation”). Going a step further, some design elements are enforced and limited by operating systems, such as the blue navigation bar from the original iOS.

Furthermore, apps like YouVersion have no control over the physical design of the mechanical device itself. Publishers have always had some degree of influence over the size and materials used to produce a Bible. For example, in the nineteenth century, “producers focused on championing their Bible’s physical quality,” (McDannell 91). Now, while YouVersion has almost full control of the content of their application, they have no control over the decisions made by Apple or Samsung in the design of the physical device on which the Bible is read.

4. Behavior Change

The latest release of YouVersion Bible App, Version 5, emphasizes social engagement. Users are encouraged to participate in Bible plans with their friends, to share their highlights with others in a Facebook-like newsfeed, and ask for prayer via the app’s new features. The app also connects to social media for evangelism and community-building through status updates and hashtags like “#PrepareForEaster.”

When I spoke to Knight about this shift, he seemed to depart from the commitment to data-driven decisions he had expressed earlier. In this case, he hoped to change the behavior of users, to move them from extremely private relationships with their Bibles to more communal ones. “If there a way we are trying to revolutionize the Bible right now, it is getting people to use it in a more socially connected way,” he said. Until this point, the mobility and customization of the Bible on a mobile phone has lent itself to individual Bible study, a trend that he claims has its roots in the Reformation. Knight emphasizes that the Bible was once a primarily communal book: “It was oral before it was paper. Most people thought of the Bible as something that their priest read to them every week, and then the printing press came along and it all changed” (Knight).

Rather than aiming to drive more customer traffic, this particular goal is based on an ideological mission. Equally interesting, this mission is aimed at returning the Bible to a role it once held in history. Knight continues:

Paul wrote letters to the whole church, and the pastor elder would teach the scriptures to them. In the last 100 years, people are wanting to do Bible study on their own. It’s personal private time, but I think we should be getting back to the heart of what God would want, not things you do by yourself.

As I compared Knight’s decisions to those that a designer might make in a commercial, secular application, this mission stood out as one of the biggest differences. This app gives YouVersion and LifeChurch an unprecedented platform to change the Bible in a way that matches their doctrines.

Rather than serving users something they will automatically like, YouVersion is actively trying to change the behavior of millions of users and fundamentally influence the way they think about their use of their holy book. To accomplish this, the design team is employing

some of the behavioral psychology techniques that they have applied to increase user engagement in the past. These techniques include strategically-planned notifications, emails, and progress indicators, which have proved extremely useful in encouraging users to stay on track with their reading plans (*YouVersion blog*). However, each user currently has an average of only 1.5 friends on the app, suggesting that Knight's vision of the app as a means to increase interaction between readers of the Bible may prove difficult (Knight).

5. Interaction Architecture

If social use of the Bible app does indeed take off, users will find that they are limited to 150 friends. YouVersion explains the limitation on their blog: "Limiting your YouVersion friendships to people you know well fosters an environment for honest conversations and shared discoveries among trusted friends." This is a choice in architecture that can restrict and shape a user's options for customized use; it does not require a user's agreement to the rule, but rather builds norms through the options physically available.

Just as a physical space like a lecture hall can determine what activities are possible within its walls, so too can the code of an application dictate how its users can interact with that medium. Lawrence Lessig writes about code as an architecture that "constrains" participants to a set of behaviors and thus enables certain norms to arise (Lessig 124). In her book *Cybertypes: Race, Ethnicity, and Identity on the Internet*, Lisa Nakamura describes a concept called "menu-driven identity" that explores the effects of defined options for interaction online.

In the Bible app, the choices on the "menu" can define the users' interaction with the Bible. For example, unlike in a paper book, YouVersion users can search for specific content or navigate the books of the Bible alphabetically; like in a paper Bible, they can highlight passages and take notes. As suggested by Nakamura, these menu options tell users what should be done, and they are specific design decisions that should not be taken for granted.

The Whole World in His Hands

By holding responsibility for these decisions, Andy Knight and designers like him have immense power over the future of Bible use. Through user definition, data collection, visual language, behavior change, and interaction architecture, he is able to influence a user's experience of the message of the Bible itself, rather than the physical object that contains it. This is not a first in history; St. Jerome, for example, held the responsibility of translating the Bible from Greek to Latin in the first century, and some today still struggle with the authority of his decisions. Today's technology designers represent another force in the story of the Bible as it moves forward with new and rapidly changing technologies.

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