

The Letters by Vincent van Gogh: Silently Painting Letters Across Screens

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1 Introduction

In 2009 *Vincent Van Gogh: The Letters* was published by the Van Gogh Museum and the Huygens Institute. It was released both in book-form, and as a digital edition. In this paper we will predominantly be focusing on the digital edition. We will be looking at what aims the project had, what approach it took to meet them, and to what extent it was successful at this.

In the description of the resource only explicit aims were given for the content of the edition, while in digital editions also the layout and functionality are important. We thus also wanted to scrutinize these. Therefore, instead of going just by the explicit aims, we have posed a set of implicit, and possible aims for the layout and functionality of the digital edition as well.

First we will explain the limits of this paper, the choice of resource, and the distinctions we make in this paper. Then a description of the site, its parts, and the book will be given. Finally we will discuss of the aims of the project, and to what extent they are met. Both explicit, implicit, and possible aims are discussed.

1.1 Constraints and Limits

We will only be looking at a single resource: *Vincent Van Gogh: The Letters*. We limit ourselves in this way in order to be able to do a more in-depth analysis. And while we refer to the need for annotation-possibilities here and there, in this paper we will be giving less attention to it, because we have argued for it already in our previous paper.

For accessing the site we generally used a laptop with an 18 inch screen, running a

standard, unextended (no plugins), Javascript enabled browser (Firefox 3.5.x) using it's default settings (default fonts & font-sizes). However in some select instances we also used an EEE PC Netbook (running the same version of Firefox), and a HTC Hero mobile device running the Android Browser (version 1.3.x).

1.2 Choice of Resource

We chose to look at *The Letters* resource, and not at another, for several reasons. First of all it is a relatively small and simple resource, which can be discussed within the scope of this paper. Secondly it is typical of digital editions, in that it publishes works of a specific kind and topic, and is an edition which both appeared in book-form, and digitally. This twofold form allows us to juxtapose the relative attention given to the book-publication and the digital edition. Fourthly, it is a very recent edition. It was only released in 2009, and uses the latest web-technologies, such as AJAX (Asynchronous Javascript And XML) and TEI (Text Encoding Initiative) XML. A minor factor is, in addition, that your authors mother-tongue is Dutch, and he thus was able to read most original letters.

1.3 The Division of Publication

Books usually contain text, have a certain fixed, standard layout, and allow one to flip pages, underline words, and so on. While these seem to be natural properties of publications, they appear to be quite a contingent mix when an attempt is made to transpose them to another medium. In digital publications, the content, the layout, and the functionality can be conceptually and computationally sep-

arated.

Where each of these properties are set and stored is an important factor for how they work out. In a book the content and layout are fixed at the moment of publication, and all books have the same functionality. In addition both the functionality and the layout (which especially for academic books is very sober and basic) are standardized by tradition, and universally the same for books.

Contrary, websites store their content centrally, can be updated at any time, and offer a bewildering diversity of layouts and functionality. On top of this, in many digital publications both layout and functionality don't receive much attention, or are even totally neglected. In this paper, we will not follow this tendency, and look at, and criticise, all three aspects. In table 1 you can see a schematic overview.

Table 1: *Content, layout and functionality for books and websites*

Aspect	Book	Site
Storage	Local	Central
Content	Fixed	Updatable
Layout	Fixed	Semi-Fixed
Functionality	Standard	Non-standard

2 Description

Now a detailed description of *The Letters* website will be given. This section is mostly about the layout, though a few comments on the functionality are also given. It starts with the main-page, then will be going into the reading-pages of normal letters, followed by a short description of the book-edition, and a description of the architecture of the website.

2.1 Main Page

The main page is a rather plain, calm-blue page, showing at the top a series of menus in different colours. Below that, with ample space between items, are shown three links. The first, and biggest says '*View all 902 letters*

from and to Van Gogh...' and links to the letters. The other two are titled '*Exhibition: Van Gogh's letters: The artist speaks*' and '*Book edition*'. The latter is showing a picture of 6 volumes, one of which opened (see figure 1).

If we follow the link to the exhibition, we arrive at the website of the Van Gogh Museum in Amsterdam. At this museum an exposition of the same letters is currently going on. Both websites use the same set of colours and box-based layout, though the placement of the boxes is slightly different. This is not surprising given that the Van Gogh Museum is the main sponsor of the edition.

Back at *The Letters* website, the links at the top are categorized in boxes. The leftmost box shows links to the letters; by period, correspondent, place, and with sketches. The second box shows a search field, and a link to advanced search, and search results. The two arrows behind the search-box presumably need to be clicked in order to start a search (alternatively enter can be pressed), and the '*search results*' link does not work, and is only highlighted after a search has been done. Advanced search offers a lot of options, such as searching notes separately, searching for Bible references, selecting letters by, or to, Van Gogh, and various sort options. The last two menu-boxes link to extensive background-information on Van Gogh, resp. the edition. This includes a concordance on the correspondents.

2.2 Reading Letters

If we click on the leftmost menu-box, say letters by period, then click '*2. London*', and select the first letter ('*To Theo Van Gogh. London, Friday, 13 June 1873*'), we land at the '*Quick Guide*', not the letter. A link is provided to the letter, but at the top it states: '*...we would like to give you a very brief overview of [the site and] its features...*'. What is explained is the same what is shown if one continues to read the letter (see figure 2): The screen consists of three columns. The first and last offer different views of the letter, while the second column contains further informa-

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Vincent van Gogh <i>The Letters</i>	by period by correspondent by place with sketches	Search <input type="text" value="keyword or number(s)"/> >> Advanced search Search results	Van Gogh as a letter-writer Correspondents Biographical & historical context Publication history	About this edition Chronology Concordance, lists, bibliography Book edition
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Edited by Leo Jansen, Hans Luijten and Nienke Bakker

View all 902 letters from and to Van Gogh, richly annotated and illustrated, with new transcriptions and translations

[Quick Guide >>>](#)

Exhibition

Van Gogh's letters

The artist speaks

09.10.2009-03.01.2010

Book edition





Version: October 2009

Figure 1: Main page of *Vincent Van Gogh: The Letters*.

tion about the letter.

The columns showing the letter both have a set of tabs. These tabs allow one to select what is shown in their column. The options are: original text, '+line endings', facsimile, translation, notes and artworks. Clicking original text shows what you would expect, while the '+line endings' shows the text with its original line-breaks, and numbered lines. Then the facsimile and (English) translation are again what you'd expect (one can also zoom in on the facsimile). Notes shows the various explanatory notes to the text, and artworks shows any art-works referred to in the letter.

In addition, a feature is explained, which is unusual for the web. Namely, if one has a wide enough screen, one can add panels to the right of the three columns already there (max. 2 additional ones). On the normal laptop I have enough screen-space to add a fourth column, and this allows me to see the original old-Dutch text, the English translation, and the facsimile at the same time. An additional handy thing is that it remembers in a browser-

cookie what each panel shows. On the small EEE-PC however, I can barely see the three columns, and on even smaller screens, such as the HTC Hero mobile, only one column is visible at the same time.

2.3 Book

At the bottom of each page, a picture of an opened book, with next to it 'See the books' is shown. The printed edition consists of six books and contains transcriptions and English translations of all the letters. It runs for 2,500 pages, and contains 4,300 illustrations of paintings referred to by Van Gogh. The set costs a hefty 395 Euro, but received hundreds of lyrical reviews. Curiously enough however, all reviews I had a look at, only mention the website in passing, if at all. While at the website all that is available in the book, and more (the equivalent of an additional 6 volumes of content) is available for free.

2.4 Architecture

The web-edition is built using Ruby, a modern, high-level programming language, sim-

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Vincent van Gogh
The Letters

by period
by correspondent
by place
with sketches

Search
keyword or number(s) >>
Advanced search
Search results

Van Gogh as a letter-writer
Correspondents
Biographical & historical context
Publication history

About this edition
Chronology
Concordance, lists, bibliography
Book edition

009 009 011 001 004 003 RM01 688 576 010 015 « 008 | 010 »

To Theo van Gogh. London, Friday, 13 June 1873. SEARCH THIS LETTER
PRINT

original text

+ line endings

facsimile

translation

notes

artworks

009
Br. 1990: 009 | CL: 9
From: Vincent van Gogh
To: Theo van Gogh
Date: London, Friday, 13 June 1873
[more...](#)

009
Londen 13 Juni 1873.

Waarde Theo,
Je zult wel verlangen om wat van mij te hooren, en ik wil je dus niet langer op een brief laten wachten.– 1

Van huis hoorde ik dat je tegenwoordig bij den Hr. Schmidt in huis zijt & dat Pa bij je is geweest. Ik hoop van harte dat dit je beter zal bevallen dan je vorige kosthuis & twijfel daar ook niet aan. 2
Schrijf mij eens spoedig, ik verlang daar zeer naar & vertel mij eens hoe je 1v:2 nu je dag doorbrengt &c. Schrijf mij ook vooral eens wat je al zoo voor schilderijen gezien hebt in den laatsten tijd & ook of er wat nieuws in etsen of lithographiën is uitgekomen. Je moet mij daar maar goed van op de hoogte houden, want in dat genre zie ik hier niet veel, daar de zaak hier alleen magazijn is.– 3

Het gaat mij, de omstandigheden in aanmerking genomen, zeer goed.–

Ik heb een kosthuis gekregen waar het mij voorloopig zeer goed bevalt. 4 Er zijn nog 3 Duitschers in huis die veel van muziek houden & zelf piano spelen & zingen, wat de avonden 1v:3 heel gezellig maakt. Ik heb het hier niet zoo druk als in den Haag, daar ik maar van s'morgens 9 tot s'avonds 6 uur in de zaak behoeft te zijn & Zaturdags reeds om 4 uur gedaan heb.– Ik woon in eene der voorsteden van Londen, waar het betrekkelijk stil is, het heeft wel iets van Tilburg, 5 of zoo.–

Te Parijs had ik zeer prettige dagen & heb zoo als je denken kunt veel genoten van al het moois dat ik op de tentoonstelling 6 & in de Louvre & Luxembourg 7 gezien heb.– De zaak te Parijs is prachtig & veel grooter dan ik mij had voorgesteld.– Vooral de Place de l'Opéra.– 8

Het is hier zeer duur leven, in mijn kosthuis verwoon 1r:4 ik 18 shillings per week behalve de wasch & ik moet dan nog in de stad eten.– 9

Il. zondag ben ik met Mr. Obach, mijn chef, 10 naar buiten geweest, naar Boxhill, dat is een hoogen heuvel (zoowat 6 uur van L.), 11 gedeeltelijk krijt & begroeid met palm, en aan de eene zijde een bosch van hooge eikenboomen. Het land is hier prachtig mooi, heel iets anders dan Holland of België.– Overal ziet men prachtige parken met hooge boomen & heesters. Men gaat daar in wandelen. Met de Pinksterdagen 12 heb ik ook een mooie toer gemaakt met die Duitschers, maar die heeren verteeren zeer veel geld & in het vervolg zal ik niet meer met hen uitgaan.–

Het deed mij genoegen van Pa te hooren dat het met Oom H. redelijk gaat. Wil hem & Tante hartelijk van mij groeten 13 & het een en ander van mij vertellen.– Zeg ook de Hr. Schmidt & Eduard 14 van mij goeden dag & schrijf mij eens spoedig. Adieu, heb het goed.

Vincent.

mijn adres is:
care of Messrs Goupil & C^o
17 Southampton Street
Strand
London.

top ↑

Figure 2: Reading a letter: English translation and original Dutch text.

ilar to Python and Lisp. Nevertheless most of the sites content consists of static html, and image files stored on simple file-servers. This static content was pre-generated using a Ruby script. Images were resized using ImageMagick, an Open Source program for batch-processing images, while the .html files were generated from TEI XML representations of the letters. Some non-standard tags were added to the 400+ TEI tags, and a dedicated DTD (Document Type Definition) was created for *The Letters*.

A second Ruby-script functions as a web-server, providing the search-results and the autocompletion for text-fields. For the search-index it uses the Open Source Lucene Search-engine. Client-side then, javascript is used to render the GSV-based image-viewer, and for generating and fulfilling the AJAX requests for specific page-elements, such as the views of the letters. The images, the static html-files, and the web-server each reside on their own dedicated server (three in total), and are mirrored for reliability and performance.

3 Specific Aims: Content

The project explicitly states its aims. They are fourfold. First of all (1) it wants to be the definite resource on Vincent Van Goghs letters. This is an oft seen aim for (digital) resources. Secondly (2) it wants to provide a study-edition, targeting at international academics. Thirdly (3) it wants to be fidel to the original letters: It wants to present them as Van Gogh had intended them. And finally (4) it wants to make them accessible to modern readers.

3.1 Meeting them

The Letters is a digital edition. And this allows it to publish more material than would be economically viable in book-form. And this also makes it updateable. Fourteen previously published letters could not be accessed for re-translation, and 550 letters to Van Gogh, and 290 from him, are known to exist, but have never been found. Now if one or more of these letters will re-appear in the future, the content

of the website could easily be updated (easier than books already on shelves). This, besides the 15 years of research and translation that went into it, makes it likely to (1) indeed be the definite resource on Van Goghs letters for a long time to come.

It seems also to be succeeding at the aim of providing a study-edition for international academics (2). Not only do all letters come with the best possible English translations, but the original Dutch and French texts, as well as facsimiles are provided on the website. These same features, as well as the very literal translations, and minimizing the changes to punctuation, make (3) it stay close to Van Goghs own words. Lastly, the extensive annotation with historical information, and the explication of Dutch cultural customs, makes it also meet the accessibility aim (4).

4 Implicit Aims: Layout and Functionality

The aims discussed so far are all content-related. Them being met, and this being all there is to it, would have been fine if it were just a book-edition, as in that case the layout and functionality would be largely predetermined. But it is not. It is a digital edition, and the resources description remains surprisingly silent about aims relating to layout and functionality (a bit about performance is all there is). Illustrative is also that the whole description of the web-edition and web-related remarks together, is a mere 700 words long. Comparatively, the text devoted to only punctuation and spelling is almost seven times as long. Part of this might be explained by the fact that the text for the book-edition was copied over onto the web-edition, for which then an additional 700 words were written. It also may be that requirements were specified for the web-edition, but that these have never been published. But in either case this suggests a lack of attention, and it forces us to pose implicit aims for the layout and functionality.

The first implicit aim (1) would be pleasantness to the eye, e.g. a sensible layout. The

second (2) is a minimum standard of usability. It especially should be consistent and not confusing. Another possible aim could be for it to provide at least the same functionality as the book-edition (3), such as reasonable performance and linear readability. Additionally, typical website functionality (4) such as search, hypertext and printing could be expected, as well as it to be readable across operating systems and devices (5).

4.1 Meeting them

As can be judged from the screenshots in section 2, the layout (1) is fine. The usability (2), however, is less good. First of all there is the unresponsive 'search results' link at the top, but there are more problems. When reading letters it is not really obvious how to go to the next letter, which should be basic functionality akin to flipping the pages of a book (3). Going to the next letter, nevertheless can be done by clicking on the numbers in the upper right corner, but this is not where one would expect it, as after reading a letter one would be at the bottom of the page. Also one cannot annotate the pages, or place bookmarks in an easy way (though the last few letters you read are linked from the top and most browsers provide this functionality themselves). The book is thus still better at offering book-like features.

Then, among the web-specific features (4), search is by far the best. There is a simple, Google-style, searchbox in which one can enter anything and get a sensible response, as well as more advanced search (see section 2.1). Hypertext is used both in the form of menus to browse the letters by period, correspondent, and place, and as links to other letters, correspondents referred to, and for showing notes. But besides these basics, it is not used extensively. Printing, lastly is possible, and even a specific print-link is provided at the top, but it does a less good job than the default print preview offered by Firefox. And as interoperability is concerned, the site works both on the large laptop (with more columns, a nice feature), on the EEE PC, and on the

mobile device. No problems there.

While most (apart from book-like features) of the implicit aims are met, the reading-experience on the site is not particularly good. The constant going back and forth while browsing letters, and the still semi-fixed, non-standard layout and functionality, make it less good than it should, or could have been.

5 Possible Aims: As We May Read

The internet is different from the web. It is a network for transferring data, and thus much more generic than the browser-webserver, client-server architecture that websites provide. Imagine being able to view, and store Van Goghs letters in a variety of reader-programs and devices, allowing you to have the same, standard or personalized, functionality, such as the same way of flipping pages across many texts. Imagine being able to start reading on one device at home, and to continue reading on another on the train, seamlessly. Imagine scribbling in the margins, and dragging out quotations, notes and footnotes, all automatically linked to their source-text, and being able to do this across multiple devices; and all this without links breaking or slow, erratic performance. Imagine sharing annotations with peers, receiving real-time notification of their responding remarks and comments, and them instantly receiving any updates you make to your writings.

All this; distributed storage, combinable content, flexible layouts, and personalized functionality, is already technically possible. It just has not been done yet. But in order to make digital editions enter the same league as books, let alone to make them surpass books for the average humanist, this, or something like it, has to be done.

5.1 Meeting them

The Letters is built as a website, which means that as far as the end-user is concerned, the content, layout and functionality are bundled together in a single blob that the browser presents to them. Though resizing the page is possible, and adding an extra panel, that's

Table 2: *Content, layout and functionality for books, websites and the internet*

Aspect	Book	Site	Internet
Storage	Local	Central	Distributed
Content	Fixed	Updatable	Combinable
Layout	Fixed	Semi-Fixed	Flexible
Functionality	Standard	Non-standard	Personalized

it. The position of the letters and the functionality of the site is fixed. It is as if, at each browser-request, the letters are painted across the screen. And however beautifully this may have been done, Van Goghs letters are not truly accessible as text. To make the text available, and not just the page, content should be separately from layout and functionality.

For this a flexible, cross-device TEI-reader should be developed. Doing this is understandably not the task of a project such as *The Letters*, as its explicit aims only were to create a new, faithful, authoritative edition of Van Goghs letters. But imagine how great it would have been if such a reader had already been available. Creating the TEI XML edition would then have been enough. Instead, *The Letters* project now had to develop its own publishing infrastructure (including ensuring performance), site-design, and (non-standard) navigation functionality.

While building a site might have been an interesting project for the *Huygens Institute*, a nice diversion from working on/managing an edition for the *Van Gogh Museum*, and a way to be creative for its developers, combining content, layout and functionality will always result in a duplication of effort and a less satisfying end-product. It simply does not receive the undivided attention required. Which, in case of *The Letters*, is illustrated by the fact that no (published) aims were set for the sites layout and functionality.

In addition, the case for needing something unique is also not very strong for *The Letters*. The only unusual feature of the site is showing the different views of the letters side-by-side. All other features rely on stan-

dard XML-hypertext. And this side-by-side showing of notes/pages is something that can be generalized, as it will be useful for many projects. And as a matter of fact it has been generalized already. In the forties and sixties systems were designed which supported it: both Vannevar Bushes Memex design, and Ted Nelsons Xanadu included side-by-side-views of two or more related texts.

However, given the limited nature of the project, it is at least a good thing that *The Letters* has a set of TEI-source-texts. And for a start these should be made available, so that if suitable reader software were built by another project, it could be used with *The Letters*.

6 Conclusion

To conclude, *The Letters* met its explicit aims and most of the implicit aims we posed, except for mimicking the most important features of a book. This makes *The Letters*, given its limitations, a fine web-resource, presenting superior content. The possible aims of separating content from layout and functionality, however, were only met to the very small extent of having the TEI source-files needed for meeting them in the future.

Until a suitable TEI-reader has been built, most digital editions will probably still take the form of websites. Websites whose developers will be — being without explicit guidelines — silently painting letters across screens. And just maybe the next Van Gogh is one of these unrecognized artists, making use of this window of opportunity.

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