

The Short Story Dispenser Is Staying Physical In A Virtual Book Industry



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A Short Story Dispenser at work.

The future of the publishing industry is, increasingly, virtual. This week, news broke that one of the final bastions of print publishers — Fortune 500 company Barnes and Noble, Inc. — has abruptly laid off 1,800 full-time employees. Amazon's dominance over the book world seems uncrackable, and everyone's e-readers can fit more books on them anyway.

But one innovation has broken new ground for voracious readers who prefer their next story stay in the physical realm. The [Short Story Dispenser](#), which made a splash last month at CES 2018, is a kiosk designed to spit out a receipt-like scroll of eco-friendly paper holding a short story matching your specifications. You just need to tell the dispenser whether you'd prefer a 1-minute, 3-minute, or 5-minute read, and you'll get a free story to pass the time while you wait for a train or in line at a theme park.

[Short Edition](#), a French startup founded in 2011, are the minds behind the machine. The storytelling startup has built an online literary community of independent authors — over 14,000 authors have submitted stories. Short Edition's platform holds over 100,000 short stories, which have together garnered over 18 million reads.

I chatted with Short Edition's Caroline de Cuverville to learn more. First thing's first: Yes, the dispenser was modeled after exactly what you'd think it was. "We were inspired by snack vending machines while taking a break from work," Caroline tells me. "We are editors by trade and thought 'why not create a machine that would spit out stories instead of chocolate?' We wanted to show that short stories have a place throughout the day, to be consumed via different mediums. It was a crazy idea maybe but within a week we fabricated a prototype and the Short Story Dispenser was born."

I'm as wary of the Internet of Things — which shortens to IoT and is a catch-all tech term for internet-connected smart devices — as anyone. No one needs a wine bottle with a [touchscreen](#) or an elevator that locks up when [the internet is out](#), and for one reason: We already have perfectly good versions of those things. But the appeal of the Short Story Dispenser lies in its ability to delight users with a unique experience. In fact, when the team studied feedback from their users, three keywords surfaced: Attractive, simple, and original.

"We took the design very seriously," Caroline says, "as the objective was two-fold: make it stand-out & get noticed while fitting harmoniously into our customers' decor. We used an outside design consultant to perfect the solid (cannot knock it over), sleek (polished/want to touch it), and components that could be customized for the clients' visual identity."

The Short Story Dispenser isn't just a short-lived gimmick, either: It will continue rolling out into new locations across 2018. "We have a lot of demand for an outdoor version which should be ready in six months for theme parks, outdoor business parks, swimming pools, etc.," Caroline explains. The company will also continue making a name for itself in the United States through other means, she goes on. "After our first installed base in North America with 20 dispensers, our objective is to pursue development while including more and more American authors in our catalog base by launching writing contests in the U.S. This is what we have already begun with Penn State University and Edmonton in Canada."

As many internet pundits have noted, the rise of the internet era has triggered a shift towards instant gratification and a reduction in attention spans. Regardless of whether your own attention span is better or [worse than the average goldfish's](#), most of today's teenagers likely consume more YouTube videos than physical books. There's nothing wrong with form following function, and it may be time to welcome a new type of way to tell stories. Hey, no one's saying the novel has to go anywhere, but when you're killing three minutes before the L train shows up, you're probably not going to reach for Dostoyevsky.