

When Codex Meets Network: Toward an Ideal Smartbook

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“Understanding the future of reading and writing will mean learning to read the future, and learning to write the future”

The experience of using a book in the classical, codex form – more than 1000 years old – is far from “broken.” However it is ripe for evolutionary enhancement. A cambrian explosion of forms is underway, offering new software, hardware, appliances, systems and networks that seek to extend and enhance the pleasure, power and utility of reading. But which of these forms, if any, promises the ideal combination of qualities and functions?

Hardware ebooks offer several strengths including numerous titles in one light package, rapid delivery of texts purchased online, some free ebooks for download, and potentially lower environmental impact than paper books. But the pleasure of the user experience, and rates of adoption, continue to be held back by strict hardware dependency along with proprietary standards and DRM that result in uncertain future access, obstacles to sharing, and little or no used book market.

Readers want and need qualities like persistence and reliability. Many people enjoy reading physical books because they last and don’t break. Still their more recent expectations, whetted by the tapestry of Web 2.0 possibilities, lean increasingly toward user-generated content, including collaborative co-creation. People increasingly want and expect to work independently and/or together in developing, expressing and sharing ideas as well as simply reading official or commercial publications. Yet some ebook systems don’t even permit, let alone encourage, original content creation and dissemination.

Soft readers offer more flexibility, more access to open standards, and they more clearly point to what the Institute for the Future of the Book (IFB) calls the “network book.” IFB’s Ben Vershbow has said ““It’s... possible that defining the networked book as a new species within the genus “book” sows the seeds of its own eventual obsolescence.... But that strikes me as too deterministic.... As with the evolution of biological life, things tend to mutate and split into parallel trajectories. The book... may indeed be headed for gradual decline, but we believe the network has the potential to keep it in play far longer than the techno-determinists might think.”*

Can design thinking and strategic foresight be leveraged toward a greater interpenetration of physical and digital book forms? Is it possible to marry the codex with the network? Can we aspire to increase pleasure, utility, sustainability, and evolvability in the same design gesture? We believe these goals are both desirable and feasible.

This poster presentation briefly surveys the field before outlining an argument and a conceptual solution for a “smartbook” format that leverages machine-readable tags and persistent URL space to address the

issues raised. Our vision offers a synthesis of attributes, for it is first and foremost meant to be readable, providing the pleasure of a physical, codex book. At the same time it is fully searchable, with the utility of electronic text, and “smart” in that it heavily leverages the intelligence of the network.