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ATG Interviews Mike Morgan

President, Morgan & Claypool Publishers

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ATG: Tell us about Morgan & Claypool? ( Opportunites in electronic publishing)

MM: Joel Claypool and I formed the company to develop the publishing concept that we are now launching as Synthesis: The Digital Library of Engineering and Computer Science. The original idea was Joel's, born out of his many years of experience in engineering book publishing, especially handbook publishing. His insight was that on-line content delivery presented the opportunity to deliver book-like information in a way that would be much more valuable to R&D (research and development) engineers and scientists than traditional print monographs and handbooks. Information could be presented online in shorter, more focused “chunks” that would better fit the scope of their interest, could be available on demand and could be updated more often than traditional book publishing allows. We thought that this was a powerful idea and that both readers and authors would see its potential. A few months before we began talking I had decided to leave Morgan Kaufmann to take a sabbatical and was just beginning to think about what would be interesting to do. This seemed like a great opportunity that would be unique, interesting and offer something of real value to the engineering and science communities. We did some exploratory market research, were encouraged by the results and founded the company in late 2002.

ATG: Tell Us About Synthesis: How did you develop this new format?

MM: We think of Synthesis as one of the first examples of a new generation of publications that are “born digital” and are not direct conversions of existing print models. In our case, we’ve taken ideas from on-line journal publishing and ideas from book publishing and combined them into something new.

Basically, Synthesis is a digital library of original documents on research and development in engineering and computer science. The general architecture and functionality of the library incorporates much of what has been learned over the last 10 years of online journal delivery: sophisticated authentication, search, live linking to references using CrossRef, personalization features, etc. Our platform and delivery vendor, Atypion, has state of the art functionality and also hosts the major journal products from Blackwell, University of California Press, Annual Reviews and several other publishers.

What is most unique is the content. The fundamental document on Synthesis is the “lecture,” which is a 50-100 page “syntheszing” presentation of an important research area, technique or method. Lectures can be thought of as short books or long review or tutorial articles. We believe that this 50-100 page document is a very suitable vehicle for presenting advanced engineering and computer science information. Their modest length allows presentations of topics that are more focused and specific than books but also allows an author to provide more depth than permitted by typical journal article length constraints.

Another key idea in Synthesis is timeliness. Because of the digital format and workflow and the focused length of the document, Synthesis lectures can be written and published quickly and updated frequently. This means that Synthesis can present lectures on topics that are newer and more volatile than is appropriate for books. This presents the potential to close an important gap in the communication of engineering and science research between the very specific, very translatory focus of a research article and the great breadth and maturity necessary for a 300 page print book on a mature subject.

ATG: Tell us more about the gap.

MM: There is a gap in the computer science and engineering literature between the research journal article and the tutorial book. Research journal articles are generally reports of a specific piece of original research and are quite restricted in length. At the other extreme, the economic model of books generally requires that they be at least 150 pages long with a broad enough audience to sell sufficient copies to make them economically viable and with content that is stable enough that they don’t require revision in less than 3 years.

But what about the need for information between these two extremes? What many engineers and scientists most want is a tutorial overview of a broad spectrum of work in areas that are more focused and volatile than is appropriate for books. We think that the solution to this is to create a document that is shorter, with a narrower scope that can be more current, delivered by a system that is much more efficient than print.

ATG: Who is the audience and how are they getting their information now?

MM: There are three basic audiences for Synthesis:

1) Researchers working in multi-disciplinary research. I think it’s generally recognized that many of the most important engineering and computational efforts over the next 10 years will cross traditional discipline boundaries. From work in bioengineering to nanotechnology, researchers are going to have a great need to understand how other fields intersect theirs but the specific nature of the journal literature makes it very difficult to read journals outside your own area. We believe that Synthesis lectures are going to be a very useful vehicle for cross disciplinary work.

2) Graduate students: There is a strong existing and continuing need to bring graduate students up to speed quickly in emerging areas. A Synthesis lecture will act as a guide to the literature and take them to the point where they can read and interpret it directly.

3) Developers in industry: Developers have an ongoing need to track research in university, government and corporate labs that may apply to product development. The problem with the journal literature is that you don’t know what happened downstream with the research described in an article. So if you want to know what’s important in terms of applications, you need an overview. Much of this content is too narrow in scope for a book. Synthesis lectures should help to bridge the gap between research and development.

Currently, in the most active research areas, these audiences rely on personal communication with researchers or tutorials and invited talks at conferences to gain this information. Students get information from researchers at their institutions, assuming of course, that there are available experts.

In some disciplines, although less so in engineering and computer science, there is review tutorial literature delivered to readers in the form of journals or handbooks and edited collections. This is probably the closest traditional content to Synthesis but it is hampered in its usefulness by ties to legacy work flows. Most readers are interested, at any point in time, in very specific information that is up to date as possible. It is therefore a disadvantage to publish content in “batches” such as volumes or issues. It is a further problem if the needed content is only available as part of an aggregation.

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ATG: What appeals to faculty to author a lecture? (Citable unit, their work can be found via Google, Inspec, Marc records)

MM: We have had a great deal of success in attracting many prominent and active researchers to author lectures for Synthesis. One reason is that prominent experts, being closest to these issues of communicating research information, they easily see the needs of the audience for this approach. These are people who are frequently approached by students, colleagues and developers for guidance and advice in their areas.

Often these are people who have considered writing books but who recognize that information is changing too quickly for this to be very satisfying or viable. Also, the opportunity cost for an active researcher to write a book is very high since the time necessary to research the work necessary to broaden a book beyond his own research area can add a year or more to the process. Writing a 75 page overview of one's own area is a much more tractable undertaking.

Another element is that, unlike contributions of chapters to handbooks or edited volumes, Synthesis lectures are stand alone, citable works that can be widely read and referenced in the same to collected volumes, handbooks and encyclopedias are buried.

Finally, I think that people are symbolically attracted to the fact that we share revenues by paying royalties to authors and editors as do book publishers. Although most of our authors won't find the amount of money involved to be hugely significant I think it is a fairness issue, especially in the context of the current debates about the economics of research journal publishing.

ATG: What's it like starting a publishing company? (Lack of legacy systems)

MM: Probably one of the most fun and intense things that I can imagine. This is my second startup and Joel’s first. The most exciting aspect is trying to create a new organization that can partner with its audience to create innovative content that fills an important need for the target community. There are a thousand details and a thousand potential mistakes to make but if you get that part right it will work. A great advantage is not having legacy systems to work around or redesign. It’s also great not to have legacy revenue streams that we need to protect. This gives us much more freedom to design systems and business models that are ideal for a new generation of readers and authors.

ATG: Tell us about your partners. (2 publishers recruit new content, I award winning faculty and author) (also Glyn and [Group])

MM: It’s an amazingly talented and experienced group. Joel Claypool has been an engineering publisher for over 20 years. He developed the CRC engineering handbook series and subsequently, a large number of successful titles at Academic Press. He is the consummate publisher and cares deeply about authors and readers. Joel is our VP and Publisher and is personally responsible for publishing in engineering whereas my publishing focus is in computer science. Our third cofounder is Professor Dick Dorf at the University of California, Davis. Dick is one of the most successful textbook authors in engineering and has been since I represented his controls textbook as an Addison Wesley college sales representative 25 years ago. In addition, he is a prominent entrepreneurship professor and author and served as the mayor of Sonoma, California a few years ago. Glyn Davies recently joined us as VP, Director of Marketing and Sales, coming to us from the same position at Sage Publishers. Glyn and I worked together for several years at Morgan Kaufmann and we share much of the same perspective and values. One of his major contributions is a keen focus on the customer which is important since I spend a good deal of our time with authors and editors. Also, Glyn has spent much of his career in international publishing and this, combined with the fact that he is English, brings a global perspective to our efforts. This is important because technology publishing is rapidly becoming global in both readership and authorship.

ATG: This is a tough economic climate to launch a new business. What do you want to accomplish? (Very broad distribution to researchers, students, engineers and scientists)

MM: This may sound almost unbelievably optimistic but I actually think that this is a great time to start our business. There are two major trends that I see Synthesis being in synch with. The first is the substantial increasing preference on the part of engineers and computer scientists for online sources. The availability of journals and technical reports on the Web has really changed expectations and behavior. In this climate, information in print books is much less accessed and used. We hear that even e-book versions of traditional publications are not seeing substantial usage because of issues of length, static content and usability issues such as restricted printing. In this environment, the Synthesis model may provide the vehicle of choice for book-like content.

The second trend is that budget pressure is requiring librarians to look carefully at issues of cost and value. We believe that our model will be very much more efficient and economical than current monograph and handbook pricing and, at the same time, that our content will be more widely used. In a tough economic environment, we think these advantages will be meaningful.

ATG: Where do you see the company going? (Not bought by Elsevier)

MM: One of the things I’ve learned in my career is that as companies become larger and more diversified, it’s harder to stay close to the customer. Staying close to the needs of the reader and the author is an important value. We have a long term commitment to independent publishing based on a belief that a publishing company is most successful when it is externally focused on the market rather than internally focused on short term corporate goals. Everyone at Morgan & Claypool has been involved with large companies and each of us has chosen to work with a smaller company that can be focused on great publishing. I can also say that all of us have been through acquisitions of publishing companies and that part of our plan is to avoid repeating that experience.

MM: I started in publishing pretty much right out of college as an academic sales rep for Addison Wesley. After a few years I was invited to Boston to edit a list of computer science books, which of course was and is one of Addison Wesley’s strongest publishing areas. In 1984 I was approached by Bill Kaufmann (President of William Kaufmann Inc., former president of Freeman) and Nils Nilsson (Chairman of the Stanford Computer Science Department) to found Morgan Kaufmann Publishers in San Francisco. My co investors and I merged Morgan Kaufmann with Academic Press in 1998 after which I became VP, Director of Book Publishing at Academic Press while continuing as President of Morgan Kaufmann. Reed Elsevier acquired Academic Press and Morgan Kaufmann as a part of its acquisition of Harcourt in late 2001 and I left to take a sabbatical a few months later. Joel and I started M&C about six month after that.

My wife, Debra Hunter, is also a publisher and is President of Jossey-Bass Publishers in San Francisco. We live in Marin County, just north of the Golden Gate Bridge, with our 12 year old son Hunter, our 8 year old daughter Hannah, our Flat Coat Retriever, two cats and a gold fish. I am a volunteer Board Member of Small Press Distribution, a not for profit distributor of books from 500 independent poetry and alternative literature presses. What little time I have for hobbies is devoted primarily to music. I am learning to play the piano and try to stay current with Jazz and some rock.

ATG: Tell us something about your background and personal life.

MM: To comply? And for what reason?

Really, I am conceptually not against these three worthy attempts to openly share software and intellectual content. Yet, I wonder if we aren’t spending too much time selecting music to be played while Rome burns. In any event, I think it is wise to avoid getting on overload with bandwidth. Based upon the following Googleresearch, I am going to focus my energies on open archives:

“open source” 11.8 million hits
“open access” 2.4 million hits
“open archive” 55,100 hits

Endnotes