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Pelikan's Antidisambiguation: "There's an Echo in this room"

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Column Editor: **Michael P. Pelikan** (Penn State) <mpp10@psu.edu>

The weeks leading up to this current writing have been chock-full of encounters with technology and content that are of the sort that, if one stops to consider them, can lead to that delicious sense of strangeness concerning the present moment, that sense that a thing, idea, or time that one has perhaps expected, but perhaps not, has in fact arrived, discernable, emerging in to the present moment.

The opening bookend to this period for me was, perhaps, the welcome experience of attending the film *Interstellar*, a film that left me pleasantly surprised: that here was an example of someone in position to produce such a film really "getting it," in terms of employing solid principles both of science and of science-fiction. There was little in the film that wouldn't occur to anyone who's pondered the Theory of Relativity, it's just that I never expected such a respectful and caring treatment of it to come out of a Hollywood studio.

But why shouldn't we live in a world in which such things can be discussed, enjoyed, mused upon? That there is an audience for such content if shown by the splendid examples that occur in published science fiction, when of the highest caliber. **Clarke**, **Azimov**, **Heinlein**, **Niven**, and **Pournelle**: these are authors who have produced some great literature — literature that happens to take place in a place and time yet-to-be.

Evidence of change in one's attitude can also be a welcome surprise. Readers of this columns over the years (look at all those hands going up! Who knew?) might recall the attitude I expressed in earlier days about the perceived need I felt after a purchase to have something in hand. This was as eBooks were gearing up and we were all struggling to understand what these things were (or if indeed they were things at all). I used to speak for the need to have the eBook in-hand to feel that "it" was "mine." This was, of course, the extension of the idea that one can buy a physical copy of a book, can keep it, can loan it, get it back, give it as a gift, inherit it. The physical artifact was itself an object of delight. I think I wanted this to be extended into the digital realm.

I read fairly selectively, which is to say that, as of now, there are only around 165 eBooks on my eReader. I've migrated, nearly out of necessity and certainly out of convenience, to the Kindle platform, after resisting for a number of years the perceived power and influence that might accrue to a corporation with the success of such a widely adopted platform. I guess they never noticed my high-principled abstention. **Amazon** managed to become the default platform for such content, despite my reluctance to buy in. It seems they were able to wait me out.

Now I think much less of whether I have a "physical manifestation" of a book. Indeed, a look at my Kindle profile would show that between readers, laptops, tablets, and computers, my Kindle use is distributed among six or seven physical devices. And, I can tell you exactly which feature of the Kindle ecosystem proved to be the undoing of my reluctance to join in…

It was "Whispersync" — that ability to pick up my phone, open a book, and be right where I'd left off at home on my "big" reader, then, once home, to pick up again right where I'd left off on my phone. Having experienced it, it wasn't as if I couldn't go back to manual place-keeping, I just didn't want to. And did I worry that "someone" would know what I was reading or where I was in the book? Well, maybe a little, but not enough for me to want to have to keep track of my place. In other words, they got me by being simply useful.
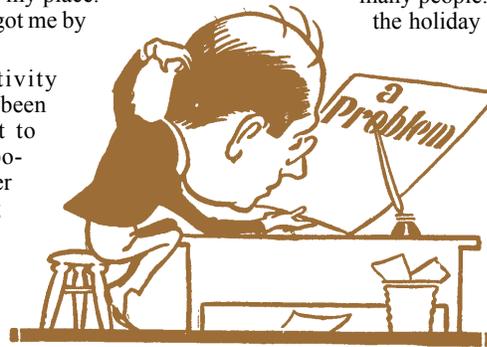
Too, my sensitivity about "tracking" has been worn down to next to nothing by overexposure to tracking's utter ubiquity. Tracking technologies saturate our Web experiences. To borrow an idea from *Interstellar*, the observation that our atmosphere is 80% Nitrogen, and yet we don't even breathe Nitrogen; our Web experience is 80% tracking, and we don't even consume tracking.

So, in this day and age, what is a book? The books I enjoy are individually titled works that each are distributed across multiple presentation devices. Wherever I happen to be, there's my collection, and my place is saved in all those individual books, no matter which device I last used to access them. As I move between devices, replace older devices with new ones, my collection is there. It's the content and the collection that lend familiarity and continuity across all these devices.

And, of course, we're learning to expect the same from our collections of music, of photographs. Access to the utility provided to us by something seems to be sufficient compensation for not having the items themselves. This goes hand in hand with a principle of information retrieval drummed into Information Science students: it's not what you have in hand that matters, it's what you can retrieve. This is the power of the search, a power that, combined with wireless access everywhere, has changed the way we do things. It truly wasn't that long ago this all seemed very much like "Pie in the sky" — a phrase originating, by the way, according to the plausible results of a quick search, in **Joe Hill's** 1911 work, *The Preacher and the Slave*.

The latest New Thing I've encountered that turned out to seem surprisingly familiar in a welcome way, was **Amazon** Echo. Having received an invitation some months ago, responding to it, and then forgetting about it, I was surprised to get an email from **Amazon** letting me know that **Amazon** Echo was ready for my purchase, if still desired. Well, I'd forgotten all about it. But it seemed reasonable, so I replied in the affirmative. Minutes later I got another email letting me know it had shipped, and would arrive the next day.

To try and cut this short, I must say this: **Amazon** Echo has surprised me. It works very much as advertised and, if it continues to improve as promised, may very well surprise many people. It arrived here just as the holiday season was underway, and so was present for several gatherings in our home. I was surprised by the reaction our guests to Echo. No one asked to see an instruction manual, let alone a quick start guide. They simply started talking to it, and were delighted with its responses. I'm hesitant to suggest where this product will lead, although it seems to be a component of the Internet of Things, those things to include digital content we already turn to **Amazon** for, as well as the devices we use to do so. It's certainly no accident that the companion app for Echo runs on your Kindle tablet and on your smartphone. The conjunction of these technological capabilities is potentially very powerful indeed.

What will it mean for my eBook collection? Will I one day be able to ask Alexa to read Moby Dick to me? Will I be able to pause it, then resume in my car? If I "owned" an audiobook, the answer seems fairly clear. As for Text To Speech, well, Alexa is already surprisingly persuasive. Can we leave aside the haunting questions of a few years ago regarding public performance of an eBook? I don't guess so, not forever and always.

It may be, however, that those concerns will be left aside as content licensers discover an upsurge in demand accompanying new modes of access. Why prohibit something that might make a lot of money?

In the meantime, with all the people who've been through our living room trying out Echo in the past couple of weeks, any concerns about tracking I may have held have been blown out of the water. Our guests asked for **Jimi Hendrix**, **Edvard Grieg**,

Decoder Ring — Comic Book Markup Language

Column Editor: **Jerry Spiller** (Art Institute of Charleston) <yeri.spiller@gmail.com>

If you missed the **Charleston Conference** this year, then it stands to reason that you also missed my talk on Comic Book Markup Language (CBML). If you have a collection of comics that you'd like to open up for retrieval and analysis, CBML is a vocabulary for representation of comics documents in XML developed by **John Walsh** at Indiana.[1]

CBML is an extension of Text Encoding Initiative (TEI). As such, it incorporates elements of TEI as well as its own elements focused on comics content and features. Many TEI elements are available to represent common structures in a variety of text documents, for instance chapters, paragraphs, spoken dialogue, or features as particular as epigraphs. The full list of TEI elements is available at *http://www.tei-c.org/release/doc/tei-p5-doc/en/html/REF-ELEMENTS.html.*[2]

Chapters can be represented with the generic <div> that is familiar to Web designers and developers from the HTML version of the same element. Attributes are used within tags to provide more specific information. A type attribute, typically written as @*type* with the @ denoting that it is an attribute, here qualifies that this div represents a chapter:

<div type="chapter">

Our other examples of paragraphs, spoken dialogue, and epigraphs can be represented with <p>, <said>, and <epigraph>. When Sherlock Holmes awakens Dr. Watson in *The Adventure of the Abbey Grange,*[3] we might encode the interaction something like this:

<p><said who="#sherlock-holmes">"Come Watson, come!"</said> he cried. <said who="#sherlock-holmes">"The game is afoot!"</said> </p>

Extending from that TEI base, CBML provides elements for representing features unique to comic books, graphic novels, and related media. The most basic unit of comics is the panel, which can be represented with <cbml:panel>. Similarly, speech and thought balloons can be encoded with <cbml:balloon>.

Now <cbml:panel> is a good start, but clearly not enough by itself to represent everything that's going on. We can choose from a set of useful attributes to note more about a particular panel. Let's take a look at a panel from *Little Nemo in Slumberland* in 1907.

We might want to note that this is the first panel of a page, or whichever panel number a particular panel is within the page. We can provide that information with @*n,* for number:

<cbml:panel n="1">

Further, we might want to know what characters are depicted in the panel. Similar to the way we used @*who* with <said>, we can list characters with @*character,* prefixing each individual character with #:

<cbml:panel n="1" characters="#nemo #little-imp">

A full list of characters appearing in the document would normally appear in the <teiHeader>, as with other TEI documents.

We can keep going with the balloon. Nemo says to the Little Imp, "They are looking for us! We must get down from here!" Using <cbml:balloon> the useful attributes here will be @*type* to denote that this is a speech balloon and @*who,* much as it was used in <said> with the great detective above.

<cbml:balloon type="speech" who="#nemo">They are looking for us!We must get down from here!</cbml:balloon>.

These few elements and attributes barely scratch the surface of what's available. There's also <cbml:caption> for captions from a narrator that are not speech or thought balloons, the <sound> element straight out of TEI for sound effects, and ways of representing features like letters pages or ads for x-ray glasses and ways to bulk up fast and stop that sand-kicking beach bully.

Want to learn more about CBML? Feel free to check out my slides from the **Charleston Conference**, "Metadata for Metahumans" at *http://jerryspiller.net/pres/CBML.*[5] Or for much more in-depth look, go back to the source and check out **John Walsh's** *http://cbml.org*[6] and his excellent *Digital Humanities Quarterly* article, "Comic Book Markup Language: An Introduction and Rationale" at *http://www.digitalhumanities.org/dhq/vol/6/1/000117/000117.html.*[7]

Figure 1: *Little Nemo in Slumberland*, **September 9, 1907.**[4] **Public Domain.**

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Charlie Daniels, **John Phillip Sousa**, **Carlos Santan**a, and Ernie singing Rubber Duckie. They've asked Alexa to read information from Wikipedia articles on Moomintroll, the Beat Generation, and Borscht. The combined, leveraged power of the whole stinking Internet and **Amazon's** Cloud Services, and we asked for Fine Young Cannibals.

My metadata must be pure corned beef hash now.

So I'm looking forward to an endless supply of laughable, hopelessly clueless suggestions based upon my Echo activity. But perhaps more alarmingly, what if the suggestions become better over time? What if the usefulness of what Echo can do for us counterbalances our latent squeamishness over Echo's potential eavesdropping powers? Is it HAL? Is it SkyNet? Or is it C3PO? Or Marvin?

Well, too late to worry about that now…

Endnotes

1. **John Walsh**, "Comic Book Markup Language," accessed Oct 26, 2014, *http://cbml.org.*

2. Text Encoding Initiative, "P5: Guidelines for Electronic Text Encoding and Interchange, Appendix C: Elements", accessed Oct 26, 2014,

http://www.tei-c.org/release/doc/tei-p5-doc/en/html/REF-ELEMENTS.html.

3. **Arthur Conan Doyle**, "The Adventure of the Abbey Grange," in *The Return of Sherlock Holmes* New York: McClure, Philips & Co., 1905.

4. **Winsor McCay**, *Little Nemo in Slumberland*, comic for September 9, 1907, accessed Sept 14, 2014, *https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Little_Nemo#mediaviewer/File:Little_Nemo_1907-09-29.jpg.*

5. **Jerry Spiller**, "Metadata for Metahumans: An Introduction to Comic Book Markup Language," Nov 7, 2014. *http://jerryspiller.net/pres/CBML.*

6. **John Walsh**, "Comic Book Markup Language."

7. John Walsh, "Comic Book Markup Language: An Introduction and Rationale," *Digital Humanities Quarterly* 6, no. 1 (2012), accessed Oct 28, 2014, *http://www.digitalhumanities.org/dhq/vol/6/1/000117/000117.html*