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I Have Seen the Future and It "Doesn't Quite" Work

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I Have Seen the Future and It "Doesn't Quite" Work

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If you love reading, or even merely like it, then you probably do not read eBooks. By reading, we mean a continuous, accumulative, deeply pleasurable and informative process. eBooks do not allow for this. They are painful to look at — not only aesthetically, but literally. Anyone who has spent hours reading digital text knows about the strain on the eyes. eBooks often lack pagination, tables of contents, and indices that make print books easy to navigate (Lynch, 1994).

Not that eBooks are not useful, even wondrous in their way. Digital texts have a flexibility that makes them very useful for research and retrieval purposes (Dillon, 2001). Print books can contain links to other works, i.e. footnotes and bibliographies, but the links in eBooks can take you right to, even into, the other work or works. Any book with an index can be used as a database, but eBooks have the built-in ability to index every word and not only index each word but run that list against other works. This ability to scan and analyze hundreds of texts using sophisticated pattern recognition software has revolutionized Shakespearean studies, for example, and will continue to make this a golden age for textual scholarship. Safari, an eBook vendor that specializes in technology, attributes its success to the fact that users can search thousands of tech books simultaneously and pinpoint the section they need (Miller, 2004). When a book is used as a database, it is not read in the conventional manner. Rather, it is sifted and mined for pertinent information. Librarians and researchers take advantage of this capability, which is why both continue to be interested in eBooks despite their drawbacks.

What if, however, eBooks want not only users, but readers? The rest of this paper addresses the problems raised by this question, including issues of page layout and formatting, highlighting of text, and the lack of standardization in the industry. Through our own heuristic evaluation we will also examine how two Web-based eBook vendors are tackling these issues.

Experts may debate whether an eBook is more like a database than a paper book, but most agree that the transition from paper to an electronic display presents technical problems. Take page layout, for example. Readers of print books generally don’t think about it, which is the point. You are not supposed to notice the layout of a page, because it would probably interfere with your reading. The layout of books is standardized so that readers engage the text with minimum effort. The text in books almost always proceeds left to right in a linear fashion with black type on white paper using one font, etc. Books that do otherwise, like Sven Linquist’s *History of Bombing*, are exceptions to this rule. Unlike readers, publishers of print books do care about page layout because it adds or subtracts to the total page count and ultimate cost of printing the book. This is not the case with electronic books, where length does not add to cost (Gibbons, 2003). On the other hand, page layout is one of the first things readers of eBooks complain about. Let us consider line length. Microsoft found that readers prefer eight to twelve words per line. Long and short lines are disliked. It was also found that eleven point font is significantly faster to read than ten point font, and slightly faster than twelve point (Hill, 1999).

Readers of paper are also accustomed to well-defined features, such as page and character dimensions, a certain space ratio between words, and the color contrast between the characters and the white page (Langdon, 2000). eBooks lack this kind of standardization. As anyone who has worked in a digital environment knows, the font size and kerning that work on paper might not translate well on screen.

The Electronic Book eXchange, formed at the first National Institute of Standards and Technology on eBooks in 1998, came up with the laudable goal of creating an eBook equal in readability to paper books (Coyle, 2001). Microsoft thought readability so important for its own eBook product that it invested in ClearType technology, which triples the resolution of the text on the screen (Wilson, 2002). Adobe, a long time leader in font and publishing technologies, developed CoolType, a font-rendering technology that improves on-screen text resolution on digital liquid crystal display screens such as those used in flat-panel desktop monitors, laptops, and handheld devices (Adobe 2004).

netLibrary and *Books 24X7*, both Web-based eBook services, address some of these issues, both directly and indirectly. netLibrary now allows readers to adjust both font size and the size of the text window to suit their own preferences. The page has a word wrap function so the text automatically adjusts depending on the width of the window. If you prefer large text, but only eight to twelve words per line, you now have that option. netLibrary does not offer this option for books in PDF format. A font sizing option is also available in *Books 24X7*; although tech support says it is more a function of some Web browsers than a conscious decision to support readability (Ouellette, 2004).

Paper, the primary ingredient in printed books, allows for highlighting, scribbling marginalia, and other methods of commentary and location, like the humble, but very useful, bookmark. A recent survey of eBook readers highlighted a number of preferences for eBook features with the most desired feature being the ability to open the eBook to the last page viewed (Henke, 2002). Yet neither *Books 24X7* nor netLibrary directly offer the option to open the eBook to the last page viewed — though a net savvy reader may ac-

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State University examined how patrons preserve digital content. Six participants were asked to find an eBook related to their field of study. They were then asked to save a portion of the book, as if they were doing research for a paper. Of the six participants, three users stated that they would perform a copy/paste as their first option. Two other participants suggested they would try to email the pertinent section— a feature that is not an option in netLibrary. (They came to this decision based upon the use of library databases that do allow users to email content to themselves.) Only two out of the six suggested that they would print the passage, but this was not their preferred choice (Englund, 2001). Nor, apparently, is it netLibrary's. Their current interface offers printing tips, but it is buried in the “reading tips” index, where you may also read a copyright warning about attempting to print the entire eBook.

ALA's eBook Task Force created a long list of functions that are believed to enhance readability and understanding and to make an eBook's content richer than a paper book. These functions include the ability to search both within the current text and other eBook texts; hyperlinks to items in the book, such as a table of contents, as well as related research; sufficient mark up and structure to provide a sense of content involving chapters or sections; and a sense of place that lets the reader know how far along he or she is in the book (Gibbons, 2003).

Both Books 24X7 and netLibrary offer the option of being able to search within the current text or other eBook content. Both vendors offer a way to virtually turn the page with a click of the mouse. However, only Books 24X7 offers a progression bar to give the reader a sense of how far along he or she is in the book. With the ability to create your own folders, bookmarks, notes, even email the current page, Books 24X7 offers the reader more functionality than netLibrary. Books 24X7 calls it a “more user defined experience,” but that experience also has a higher learning curve (Ouellette, 2004).

Technical considerations aside, is there a market for eBooks? If we are to believe the recent sales figures, then eBooks are here to stay. The Open eBook Forum reports that eBook retailers had modest gains in growth during the second quarter of 2004 with a five percent increase in eBook units sold and a 23 percent increase in eBook revenues over the same quarter in 2003 (Bogarty, 2004). The consultancy firm Accenture predicts that eBooks will make up ten percent of all book sales by 2005, totalling 2.3 billion (Dormer, 2003).

So, who's buying, and does saleability equate to readability? Lynch sees anecdotal evidence that younger people, who have grown up with text on display screens from childhood, are more continued on page 59
William Thompson

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EARLY LIFE: Most of my early life was spent learning to walk, talk, and avoid authority figures. This prefigures my later and present life.

FAMILY: I am single and programmed to remain that way.

EDUCATION: BA Fordham University 1979 (Latin and English); Ph.D. University of Southern Mississippi 1995 (English); MLIS Louisiana State University 1997; I am starting an M.S in Instructional Technology.


PROFESSIONAL CAREER AND ACTIVITIES: Reference, Bibliographic Instruction, Collection Development, Programming, Grant Writing, Walking Around Hallucinating New Ideas.

IN MY SPARE TIME I LIKE TO: Read (seriously—I really do like to read); take photographs; count the cats (12) and dogs (4) I share my life with; cruise for cute guys; advise my friends about how to snare cute guys; wonder where things went wrong with the cute guy I was dating—I didn’t want to get married.

FAVORITE BOOKS: Andrew Holleran’s Dancer from the Dance, Adrienne Rich’s poetry, Vanity Fair, all of Evelyn Waugh, Barnaby Rudge by Dickens, Star Money by Kathleen Winsor, Pride and Prejudice, I could go on and on...

PET PEEVES/WHAT MAKES ME MAD: Being late, waiting for other people who are late, the lack of movie theaters in my town, academic pretense and condescension, people who don’t know Latin.


MOST MEANINGFUL CAREER ACHIEVEMENT: Leading the successful effort to get domestic partner benefits on my campus.

GOAL I HOPE TO ACHIEVE FIVE YEARS FROM NOW: Be ungodly rich, find myself in the arms of a very charming man, and continue to amuse myself and others.

HOW/WHERE DO I SEE THE INDUSTRY IN FIVE YEARS: More of the same: More digital content; fewer people in the building; more need to rethink what we do (luckily there are lots of things to do if you know where/how to look); fewer librarians in the building, more librarians or librarian-like people working all over campus to help people connect with the information they need. Archives and Special Collections are going to be huge growth areas (as universities actually own for the most part) the intellectual content contained in them. Anything that can be "reasonably" outsourced will be.

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likely to read from a computer screen and less
insistent about printing. (Lynch, 2001). Eco
claims some hackers, grown up on computers,
have read great literary masterpieces on eBooks
(Eco, 2003). Maybe so, but a casual scroll
through the Amazon top twenty-five eBook
titles reveals a mix primarily of pornography,
business titles, and computing books.

In the classic horror masterpiece, Frankenstein,
the monster is created using electricity but the
beast is not accepted and the town’s people
revolt. If we continue to attempt to electrify the
printed book, will readers revolt, or are they
ready to accept this half-book, half-beast we call
an eBook? 😉

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