

E(merging) Books

By Sam Vaknin

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Economies in Transition <http://samvak.tripod.com/guide.html>

A novel re-definition through experimentation of the classical format of the book is emerging.

Consider BookTailor. It sells its book customization software mainly to travel agents - but it is likely to conquer other niches (such as the legal and medical professions). It allows users to select bits and pieces from a library of e-books, combine them into a totally new tome and print and bind the latter on demand. The client can also choose to buy the end-product as an e-book. Consider what this simple business model does to entrenched and age old notions such as "original" and "copies", copyright, and book identifiers. What is the "original" in this case? Is it the final, user-customized book - or its sources? And if no customized book is identical to any other - what happens to the intuitive notion of "copies"? Should BookTailor-generated books considered to be unique exemplars of one-copy print runs? If so, should each one receive a unique identifier (for instance, a unique ISBN)? Does the user possess any rights in the final product, composed and selected by him? What about the copyrights of the original authors?

Or take BookCrossing.com. On the face of it, it presents no profound challenge to established publishing practices and to the modern concept of intellectual property. Members register their books, obtain a BCID (BookCrossing ID Number) and then give the book to someone, or simply leave it lying around for a total stranger to find. Henceforth, fate determines the chain of events. Eventual successive owners of the volume are supposed to report to BookCrossing (by e-mail) about the book's and their whereabouts, thereby generating moving plots and mapping the territory of literacy and bibliomania. This innocuous model subversively undermines the concept - legal and moral - of ownership. It also expropriates the book from the realm of passive, inert objects and transforms it into a catalyst of human interactions across time and space. In other words, it returns the book to its origins: a time capsule, a time machine and the embodiment of a historical narrative.

E-books, hitherto, have largely been nothing but an ephemeral rendition of their print predecessors. But e-books are another medium altogether. They can and will provide a different reading experience. Consider "hyperlinks within the e-book and without it - to web content, reference works, etc., embedded instant shopping and ordering links, divergent, user-interactive, decision driven plotlines, interaction with other e-books (using Bluetooth or another wireless standard), collaborative authoring, gaming and community activities, automatically or periodically updated content, multimedia capabilities, database, Favourites and History Maintenance (records of reading habits, shopping habits, interaction with other readers, plot related decisions and much more), automatic and embedded audio conversion and translation capabilities, full wireless piconetworking and scatternetworking capabilities and more".

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