TEXT SUPPORT

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Under Review

The History of the Page

Authors: Andrew Taylor and Peter Stoicheff

RATING: ★★★★½

Why is the page of greater interest today with new technologies than it might have been a decade ago?

Two reasons: One is that looking at the computerized page has reminded us that the earlier page is a product of technologies itself — it's not "naturally there," but the result of a combination of materials (parchment, papyrus, clay) and cultures' information needs. The other related reason is that the pre-computer material of the page (recently paper) determined the information it could contain and the organization of that information. The computer opens up vastly different possibilities for information display. Ironically, it hasn't yet exploited those possibilities — the "page" you see when you use a word processing program is almost identical in shape, size and information layout to the paper page that preceded the computer. At the same time, the failure of e-books to really catch on also encourages us to ask what it is about the older form of the page that is so popular.

How is the reading of a technology page a different experience than we have come to know over the past century?

It often isn't different. However, when it is different, one difference is that the computerized page can't be touched. That means that the tactile orientation that we always perform when reading, say, a book, is lost.

Our fingers and hands tell us silently, and continually, approximately where we are in our encounter with a document. Another difference is that the virtual page has only one side — always a "recto" with no "verso." This gives the sensation of a sort of undifferentiated stream of information that endlessly unrolls downward (we "scroll down" the screen as opposed to turning two-sided pages). Thus we tend to experience the computerized page as purely informational, not as an esthetic condition expressing more than pure information.

What characteristics does the hypertext page share with pages from illuminated manuscripts?

The hypertext page is highly visual in its impact and its information, as is the illuminated medieval page. The illuminated page was not only intended to be read for verbal information retrieval — often the most significant information was visually encoded.

When the page was first printed, what was the Church's response and did it change over time?

The Church initially not only accepted the printing press but actively encouraged it because it meant the word of God could be spread more efficiently and in larger numbers to more people at a cheaper cost. However, within about 50 years of the press's invention (in 1451) it became apparent that the press could disseminate information other than the word of God. It could, in fact, spread decidedly heretical arguments, such as those implicitly contained in the works of Copernicus and Galileo. Also, the spread of the book via the press meant that literacy rates rose dramatically. With that came the desire to read the Bible in local languages, not in Latin which was the language of the Church.

What are the sociological implications of pages now being published so easily by so many?

There's a potential breakdown in the relationship between readers and information accuracy. Any info can be "published" on the Web and interpreted by the reader / user to be accurate, even if it is not. That also exists in the traditional publishing system, but not to the same extent.

Why has the study of the page been overlooked for so long?

Because it was so familiar, it was rarely seen and certainly not heard. Now we see it, and hear it, differently at times through all sorts of electronic media.

What can programmers learn from looking at the history of the page?

Two things: The page has evolved through many experiments in information display (from cave paintings to stone tablets to papyrus rolls to paper pages) — it hasn't just arrived on our doorstep intact. The other is that even though it evolved, it has stayed relatively the same since the 13th century — by then it was at its most efficient. If it's going to become even more so it needs to become three-dimensional.

FAST 4

Favourite author
William Faulkner (Taylor)
Raymond Chandler (Stoicheff)

Favourite Web site
www.electronicbookreview.com
viking.som.yale.edu

A good book . . .
. . . repays re-readings.
. . . has conversations, but doesn't need pictures.

Guilty pleasure
Acoustic guitar magazines
Harlequins

INSIDER

William of Redmond gets knighted

EARLIER THIS MONTH, EVERYONE'S FAVOURITE sovereign and cruise ship Queen Elizabeth II bestowed upon everyone's favourite software architect the singular honour of knighthood.

Bill Gates was named a Knight Commander of the Most Excellent (Dude!) Order of the British Empire in a ceremony at Buckingham Palace. QE II gently tapped Gates on the shoulder (while depressing his control and alternate keys) and bade him, "Re-boo- er, arise, o William of Redmond (service pack 2 beta)."

Later, William — who, since he is not a Commonwealth citizen, can't go by the prefix "Sir" — revealed the new Gates coat of arms, also known as the Blue Shield of Death.

Please . . . someone stop me . . .

(Stop it. — Ed.)

A DIZZYING CIRCLE

THIS JUST IN FROM OUR LIFE IMITATING TECHNOLOGY imitating life desk in Puce, Ont., (official village slogan: "We really don't go with anything"): Ecologists at the University of Windsor are using the transmission of computer viruses as a model for the spread of the Russian spiny water flea through Canada's lakes, according to *CNET*.

The Russian spiny water flea is not a flea at all, but a half-inch long crustacean with a barbed tail and a dead-sexy accent. It isn't native to Canadian waters and was likely imported in the ballast water of a St. Lawrence tanker. Ecologists fear it could outcompete native species of small fish for plankton.

According to the Great Lakes information Network, their prolific breeding — females lay as many as 10 eggs every two weeks — wouldn't be much of a problem if anything further up the food chain would eat the damn things, but the eponymous spine makes it difficult.

The flea spreads like . . . well, a computer virus, according to researchers. They believe two characteristics of Internet viruses — that traffic is mostly to uninfected areas, and that the traffic is very high —- can help pinpoint potential points of infection, *CNET* says.

Successful modelling on this basis can likely be applied to predict the spread of other types of infestation. (I know what you're thinking. Stop it. This is a family magazine.)

Does the fact that computer viruses are so named because their spread is modelled on that of biological viruses make this ironic?

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