



Literary Freedom: Project Gutenberg

by [Bryan Stroube](#)

Introduction

Project Gutenberg (PG), started in 1971 by Michael Hart at the University of Illinois, has long been demonstrating its value to the world community. The project is named after Johann Gutenberg, the celebrated father of the movable type printing press [3]. Likewise, Project Gutenberg embodies the revolution of the digital press. The project converts conventional books with expired copyrights into digital format; every book published before 1923 is currently eligible for PG (at least in the US). As of late 2002, the project already offered more than 6,000 full works [4].

Implementation

The concept and implementation of PG is straightforward. Although most of the project's books have been hand-typed by volunteers, a recent joint project called Distributed Proofreaders has streamlined the process by implementing a combination of optical character recognition software and a well-organized task-force of volunteer proofreaders. The result has been a rapid increase in the volume of the PG library [2].

All PG e-books are stored as plain text files. Books can be downloaded as text or as smaller compressed zip files. The files themselves are currently stored on over three-dozen ftp mirrors around the world, increasing accessibility.

Social Considerations

As demands for complex media increase within the Internet, the power of plain text must be emphasized. For instance, PG use is not restricted by hardware, operating system, browser, or e-book reader. Even those who do not have the newest computer technology can access the entire PG library. For all practical purposes, one merely needs access to a working computer.

Proprietary format e-books are a popular alternative distribution method to plain text. Generally encompassing newer titles, these books are sold on-line and require special software to view. An increasing number of popular press authors, such as Stephen King, are choosing this method of distribution [\[1\]](#). While proprietary e-books offer a number of incentives for authors, such as guaranteeing compensation while still allowing direct distribution to readers, they are far from ideal.

The use of proprietary e-books, especially for public domain titles, can potentially make users dependent on e-book software providers. These companies control how and where books can be read; users' abilities to copy, print, loan (even to one's own office computer), or transfer the book to other devices (e.g., a PDA), are all dependent upon the publisher. Suddenly, users lose an incredible amount of control over their possessions. If there is not an appropriate e-book reader for a particular operating system, then users cannot even read what they own. These issues have already begun surfacing [\[1\]](#).

Furthermore, if the makers of the e-book software go out of business, users would forever have to keep their current system configurations to read their books. With new operating systems introduced every few years, the accessibility of e-books can be transient. In the print world, this would be equivalent to the publisher of a classic book going out of business and rendering all copies of its books unreadable! For these reasons, it is difficult to imagine any electronic book outlasting its printed counterpart.

Project Gutenberg suffers from none of these problems. Users can easily transfer books between desktops, laptops, and PDAs without worrying about compatibility issues. Books can be shared with family and friends or downloaded to the latest wave of electronic hardware tablets for reading in the living room. The open format of PG books directly empowers users. At the same time, it does not limit them to the basic features of text files. Other projects, such as the Public Domain Reader [\[5\]](#), dynamically convert

the PG library into more easily readable formats such as Adobe's Portable Document Format or various PDA formats. Consequently, readers have a wide array of choices while simultaneously being guaranteed at least basic access.

Conclusions

Project Gutenberg helps equalize access to intellectual information. PG founder Michael Hart notes that with traditional paper books, "...if you've got a library of 1,000 books, you're pretty cool." Now, anyone can store the entire PG library on a fraction of his or her computer's hard drive. New titles can be acquired in a matter of seconds, and everyone is given equal access to books, regardless of economic status. Hart states that in this new paradigm, "...you actually have to read them to look cool. [6]" The project has already started expanding to public domain musical compositions and hopes to eventually include works of art. It is undertakings like Project Gutenberg that exemplify the true power of the Internet.

References

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- 2 Distributed Proofreaders, <<http://texts01.archive.org/dp/>> (19 March 2003).
- 3 Freeman, Janet Ing, Keep It Secret, Calliope, Feb 2003, Vol. 13 Issue 6, p6, 2p, 1c, 1bw.
- 4 Project Gutenberg, <<http://www.gutenberg.net>> (18 March 2003).
- 5 Public Domain Reader, <<http://pdreader.org>> (17 March 2003).
- 6 Searcher, A Short (Dis)Course on Project Gutenberg with Founder Michael Hart, April 2002, Vol. 10 Issue 4, p35, 2p.

Biography

Bryan Stroube (stroube@acm.org) is currently an undergraduate at Purdue University pursuing degrees in computer engineering and English. His interests include electronic privacy issues, politics, philosophy, and social impacts of technology. In his spare time he participates in the Purdue robotic soccer team and gives campus tours.