Making things happen to the book

A week ago I was at the National Library's Innovative Ideas Forum in Canberra – that's #iif2010. I posted something about Kent Fitch's take on innovation in libraries over on the CAIRSS blog.

One of the other speakers was Mark Pesce, asking What Ever Happened to the Book. This looks at how books are evolving, and how they aren't, as they go electronic. Tom Worthington had a rather harsh summary: Whatever happened to plain English? Well, OK, so it is a bit long winded. I think the main thing it offered was a reminder that we don't yet know what 'the book' will become and whether we will call it 'the book'. That's an important reminder and it was an interesting tour of some of the issues.

One of Mark's gripes was that a lot of electronic publishing is merely "Publishing in light" and publishers are not embracing the possibilities of a new medium; they don't even put links in their material in a lot of cases resisting the "centrifugal force" that pulls readers away. I tweeted:

#iif2010 I think electronic books (portable, cheap) ARE compelling, sure hypertext is nice to

To expand on that – there are substantial benefits to having books published in light; the main one is that, well, they're light. If I can read a book on my Android phone I will, publishing in light makes the book weightless, lit for reading at night and always with me – even without reading glasses, 'cos I can make the words big.

The other point I want to make is about the nature of the links that Mark Pesce puts so much emphasis on. As I said, he talked about a tendency for some commercial publishers to resist linking. Later on he talks about the way links distract and how this means that fewer long texts are being consumed. Coincidentally, the same morning there was a post on the O'Reilly radar blog: Ebook annotations, links and notes: Must-haves or distractions? - O'Reilly Radar (it's short so you can afford to go and read it). This looked at the same issue – the author's conclusion is that our reading tools should allow us to turn links, annotations, footnotes, marginalia etc on and off so we can be distracted, and drift with the links or not as we choose. I agree – sounds like it must become part of our reading experience.

Now, to the main point of this post. The bit about turning on and off links and annotations reminded me of the work we've been doing on our web annotation toolkit at ADFI. And I got to thinking that it would be good to go beyond the author/publisher stuffing a text with links and let third parties to add their own distractions. There are lots of uses cases here; allowing users to make their own notes, in-text discussions, letting a lecturer annotate a text book with notes for their students, a toolbox for the Joycean Scholars to fiddle yet more with Finnegans Wake.

So, as a kind of experiment in Hypertext and in the spirit of WriteToReply.org who do this with all kinds of documents, I have reproduced Mark Persce's script on my Anotar server for you all (and me, and him, too if he wants) to interact with, using the first tentative release of the WordPress version of Anotar.. To comment, hover over a paragraph and click the [Comment] link.

I'm sure there are lots of suggestions you can make about the interface. We have not yet got the ability to highlight terms and add your own links. Other obvious things would be a floating button to show/hide all annotations, and the option to have stuff appear in the margin rather than in-line. It's open source. Send us a patch.

And let me know if there are any bugs via ptsefton, at you know, the URL for google's mail system.

This post was written Microsoft Word (which turns out to be much better than OpenOffice at doing sensible things when you paste HTML into it), using templates and tools provided by the Integrated Content Environment .