The Future of Books (and Authors) in the Digital Age

by Thomas

The release of the [latest version of the Kindle](#) has many waxing poetic on the future of books in the digital age.

While books seem to gather the most interest, perhaps a more important and certainly more sophisticated notion is to examine what it will mean to be called a writer/author in the age of new media.

Current Status

Tim O'Reilly of [RadarOReilly.com](#) describes [the idea](#) of putting a book on an electronic device as analogous to "pointing a camera at a stage play, and calling it a movie."

While that might have been the initial thrust of Hollywood, O'Reilly points out that the "tools of production and consumption actually changed the format of what was produced and consumed. Camera angles, pacing, editing techniques, lighting, location shooting, special effects: all these innovations make the movies (and television) of today very different from the earliest movies."
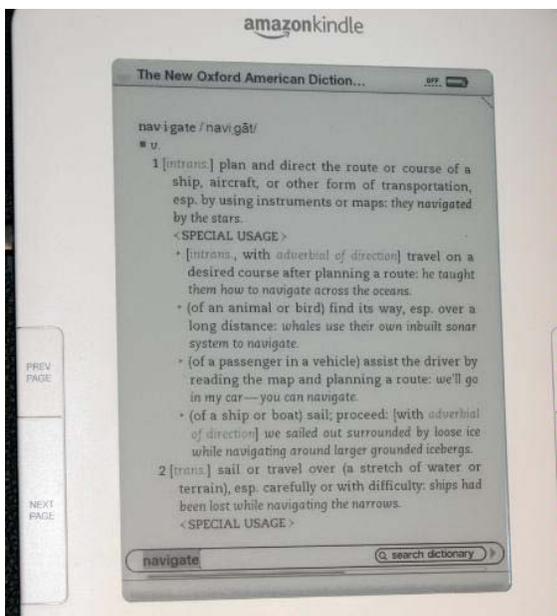
Likewise, we are in the early stages of a new world, one that is shifting to an online medium featuring greater and greater portability. The question thus arises, how will books change in the digital age?

To get a sense of the basics, we turn back to the latest version of the Kindle. The device features the ability to display a wealth of different document styles and formats. As one would expect, the

Kindle 2 provides access to and readily displays books, newspapers, and magazines. However, the latest version also displays a vast array of other document formats: Microsoft Word, PDF, HTML, TXT, JPEG, GIF, PNG, BMP, PRC and MOBI files. Therefore the Kindle now has the potential to be a document repository and full-fledged library.

Perhaps an even more exciting option, albeit still in its infancy as a polished product, is that the Kindle 2 can turn a traditional book into an audiobook. There is still much work to be done before the device can be considered a perfect swap for the audio created by a soothing and polished human voice, but the device offers an amazing step forward in the overall reading process.

As proponents tout, one can use the Kindle as an ebook reader on a train or airplane just as you could pull out a book to read. But then later, the earbuds can be connected and you can continue to read (as in listen to the audio production) as you walk through the station or airport.

 Of course, the new ereader means that no book has to be printed and therefore there is no such thing as a truly finished product. The ereader concept certainly makes nonfiction works more practical as updates can be easily uploaded to ensure that the book available for purchase always represents the latest edition.

Mixing Platforms

Of course, one of the beauties of the internet and thus the Kindle is the ability to provide documents that then hyperlink immediately to provide a relevant citation or reference. Perhaps even more importantly, nonfiction works can consist of fewer collected chapters as some of the text that would normally be incorporated to build upon or explain certain concepts can instead be simply linked to.

Readers without expertise can peruse the linked material at their leisure while those who have a grasp may forgo those links and delve directly into the new material.

According to O'Reilly, such a concept likely means we will need to develop useful modular formats. In such cases, many books could become more of a collection of loosely-related pages allowing for greater depth and breadth of issue exploration.

Therein comes the real challenge: how does one actually write material for the potential to cross platforms? How can the author ensure her book translates well to an ereader or iPhone application?

As but one example, what happens if a writer uses hyperlinks instead of footnotes but the reader doesn't have internet access? And even when the reader does have such access, how can writers ensure such cross-referencing links are still active and reliable at the the time the reader examines the link?
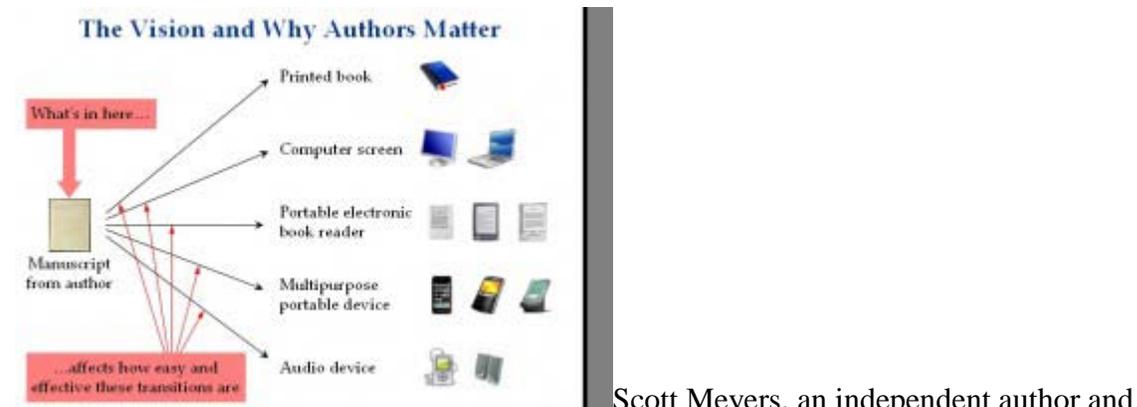
Scott Meyers, an independent author and consultant, examines the notion of cross-platforming in "Authoring Challenges in a Multiplatform World." To the right we present a visual of one of his slides that depicts some of the existing challenges (click to enlarge).

Currently, the conventional manuscript from an author is often designed for the traditional book format. Later, that document is translated where it is viewed on a computer or laptop, an ereader, or PDA or listened to on one of those same devices.

While most everything that works in printed form will work on these devices, simply translating existing documents fails to take advantage of the new technology available. As Meyer notes, text, diagrams, tables, photographs, etc. all work with new media, they just might not work as well.

At the same time, new media offers so much more: color, video/animations and audio are what make the newer platforms so enticing. It is truly as O'Reilly notes, the stage when movies were simply still films of stage plays.

Author Issues

Meyer notes that effective multi-platform publication will require greater author cooperation. It will also mean that writers may well need to develop additional skills if they are to ensure the portability of their work to different platforms.

As it is currently constructed, the idea of designing and writing for traditional print formats then attempting to translate or port that work to other new media platforms makes little sense. Instead,

according to Meyer, we will soon see the adoption of new expository and software tools that allow for the construction of documents that are easily ported among devices.

It will also demand new writing skills and that authors understand two relatively new concepts: how to properly express capability-dependent content (eg., displaying a table on devices that have limited viewing screen sizes) and how to apply capability-dependent formatting (eg. including colors when such an option is available, falling back to black and white when color is not present). And as we noted, there will need to be careful consideration for how cross-references and links are utilized, especially given that documents and web sites will not remain static over time.

Teachers are fond of saying that we are educating students for jobs that do not even exist today. Thanks to ereaders and other portable electronic devices, one of the world's greatest inventions, the book, is undergoing a major review.

At the same time, the notion of what it means to be a writer or author is also undergoing a thorough look. Perhaps it will give rise to a new descriptor or title.

And to a wealth of new career options, much as we saw with the development of the movie industry.