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>>> The next generation of books will be electronic

By Christopher Hennessy

A revolution in reading and publishing may be just around the corner – a fundamental shift that will change reading and publishing forever. It’s called the eBook, or electronic book.

Readers of everything from fiction to self-help to the Bible are already able to download eBooks instantaneously, often at low prices and sometimes for free. eBooks are digital versions of books that can be read a.) on a computer screen b.) on new handheld, lightweight devices called readers, c.) or saved as a document and printed out.

Six years ago, analysts predicted a billion-dollar market for eBooks, but it failed to materialize. Now, however, experts believe that a profitable (albeit not multi-billion-dollar) and user-friendly eBook industry is on the horizon. *BusinessWeek* proclaimed earlier this year, “Many experts are convinced that digital books, after plenty of false starts, are finally ready for takeoff.”

Take, for example, the surprising results of last summer’s online World eBook Fair. During the fair, in which people downloaded free digital books, more than 1.5 million books were downloaded in less than one week. Then, Google announced that it would commit to digitizing 20 million public domain titles, including thousands of classic books, from the collections of major libraries. “Our goal is to create a comprehensive, full-text index of all the world’s books,” said Google Book Search group business product manager Adam Smith.

Several Emerson-affiliated writers already have books available in eBook format. Writer-in-Residence Maria Flook’s best-selling book *Invisible Eden* is available as an eBook, and novels from faculty members Brian Malloy (*The Year of Ice*), Mako Yoshikawa (*Once Removed*) and alum Gary Grossman ’70 (*Executive Actions*) are as well. Associate Professor and prolific poet Bill Knott has declared on his blog that he is publishing on the web every poem he has ever written.

What do writers and publishers think about the possibilities – and potential problems – of eBooks? Emerson faculty as well as alumni working at major publishing houses or consulting for major ePublishing companies weigh in.

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The fall and rise of the eBook

In 2000, something remarkable happened that had the publishing world abuzz. Horror master Stephen King published a 60-page story called “Riding the Bullet” exclusively as an eBook on the web. What may have seemed like an experiment in publishing quickly proved otherwise. King’s story sold nearly half a million copies in 48 hours, shocking industry analysts who long thought readers would stick with paper books.

That same year, recalls ePublishing consultant and author Bill Trippe, MA ’86, New York City was the site of two conferences on the eBook and Oprah listed the Rocket eBook (a device that stores and displays eBooks) on her famous “O List,” a move that can mean a product will disappear from the shelves. The eBook was hot.

But then...the bubble deflated. Says Emerson instructor and ePublishing consultant Doug Bolin, “The technology wasn’t there to support the eBooks, nor was the desire or the demand in the general marketplace.” Bolin, an adjunct professor who has taught Emerson’s ePublishing course for about five years, has worked with digital content for about 30 years. Fast forward to today.

According to the International Digital Publishing Forum (IDPF), eBook publishers reported a 23% increase in eBook revenues over 2004. The numbers of eBook titles published increased 20% over 2004. While revenues are far from the wild predictions of 2000, the group reports that in 2005 eBooks brought in well over \$11 million in the revenue. A total of 18 publishers contributed to the four IDPF quarterly 2005 reports, including traditional publishers such as

Houghton Mifflin, Random House, Simon & Schuster and Time Warner Book Group.

The IDPF even produces a bestsellers list. For 2005, top eBooks included *Star Wars: Revenge of the Sith*, several of Dan Brown’s books, including *The Da Vinci Code*, popular nonfiction titles like Bill Bryson’s *A Short History of Nearly Everything*, as well as the Bible and Webster’s Dictionary.

Trippe, who is president of Boston’s New Millennium Publishing, an author on digital rights management and a regular contributor to the magazine *Econtent*, is cautious about the future but upbeat about the current climate. “Publishers have found that there really is some business there. No one’s retiring [from the profits], but it’s nothing to sneeze at.”

Jennifer Cande Pieroni ’01, who edits the print literary journal *Quick Fiction*, conducted a reader survey for the journal this summer. Of those readers who were interested in purchasing back issues, 27% indicated they would buy a digital download of the magazine for a discounted price; however, 73% said that they would prefer to purchase the print issue at full price. “As a publisher, this tells me that there is certainly money to be made in digital downloads but that the majority of readers still prefer a good, old-fashioned book,” she said.

ePossibilites

Claire Israel ’90, director of digital content and business development for Simon & Schuster Digital, believes reading on a screen “will be second nature for the next generation.” Trippe agrees. “[In a few years], I think

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Courtship

By Olen Steinhauer, MFA ’99

This story was originally offered online by Amazon.com, which published it as part of its innovative Shorts program in which never-before-seen short-form literature from top authors is available exclusively on Amazon.com for just 49 cents. Stories can be downloaded instantaneously. (“Courtship” is re-printed here with the author’s permission.)

Steinhauer’s first novel, *The Bridge of Sighs*, has been nominated for five awards.

Most evenings, after taking the subway back from the magazine offices and climbing the stairs to the city’s surface, Dennis imagined being struck by a car:

He steps into the street, and from the left feels the fender press against the side of his knee. The noise of the engine is like an endlessly clearing throat. The pressure builds, pushing, until something in his knee snaps and burns. Gasoline saturates the atmosphere; a horn blows. Then he falls toward the car. An outstretched hand impacts the hot hood and the rest of his body follows, collapsing.

Sometimes the dream varied, tossing him loosely beneath a high truck that was still low enough to burn his shoulder or the side of his head as it passed. Sometimes even a limb became caught in the machine’s burning intestines, and he was dragged along some distance. Yet for all this, Dennis never died in his visions. He was dragged and mangled and broken, but never fully snuffed. He would often wonder about these visions, but he knew why he had them: Dennis wanted his life to change, and he didn’t care how.

So that evening when he and his wife were walking home from the grocery store and he fainted, Dennis experienced that instant of anticipation, as if the moment of change had arrived. Red points of light crowded his vision, darkening the street, and his scalp tingled. As the plastic bags, heavy with vegetables, slipped from his slackened fists and he followed them to the sidewalk, he was sure that the moment had finally come. When he woke again a few seconds later, the back of his skull throbbed and he stared into the washed-out night sky. Then the sky was obscured by Teresa’s confused face. He interpreted her confusion as compassion, and smiled when she helped him up.

They drove to an all-night clinic, and the doctor shone a small flashlight into Dennis’s eyes. He performed a battery of minor tests, but when nothing appeared irregular he suggested that Dennis was under stress, and Dennis nodded sullenly. The doctor advised a week of bed rest. After Teresa left the examining room to drive their car around front, he helped Dennis with his coat and asked if there was anything other than his job that could have caused the stress. Dennis gave a sharp, tight smile. “My wife is leaving me, and there’s nothing I can do about it,” he said, shrugging. “I can’t even sleep.”

The doctor wrote out a prescription for sleeping pills and walked him to the door, where Teresa pulled up in their car, and idled.

Dennis estimated that his wife had been leaving him for the last two years, slowly withdrawing into the silence he had drawn her out of during their courtship. He could even spot the moment where her withdrawal began: that day when, after five years of marriage, he raised seriously the question of children. It was something he’d been wanting, he explained, and it couldn’t be avoided forever. Her answer had been to stare at her intertwined hands and go mute.

She started taking painkillers on a regular basis, moving from aspirin to vodka tonics to Valium. That was how her leaving began. And



Dennis never died in his visions. He was dragged and mangled and broken, but never fully snuffed.

although he couldn’t have known it at the time, he could now see that his question had staked a point-of-no-return for her – a point, after which, she had to either throw herself completely into their marriage, or begin her escape.

The day after the fainting, while she was at work, Dennis lay in bed with the television remote. On the bedside table was a book he was expected to review, but he opted instead for ten-minute bursts of afternoon soap operas. He didn’t even try to hold onto their names; he only peered into the world of these beautiful people who spent their days slapping and kissing one another, holding desperately onto secrets until precisely the right moment. He noticed that children rarely made an appearance on these shows, and when they did they were silently shuffled on and off camera, or lingered only so they might smile sweetly and be adored; but whenever he saw one of their rather stupid smiles, Dennis felt that parental longing swell inside himself again.

He knew that the feeling was deepened by having fainted the night before, because when he had sunk to the pavement and blinked at the rising street lights, behind the thrill of possible



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a lot of college curriculum will be increasingly electronic," he says.

In fact, says Bolin, one example of the promise ePublishing holds can be seen in the Massachusetts Institute of Technology's OpenCourseWare project, which aims to make the course materials used in the teaching of virtually all of M.I.T.'s courses available on the Web, free of charge to anyone around the world. "You could never conceive of doing that in a text/print world," he says.

Medical and law professionals are using eBooks and digital downloads more than any other group, say experts. "Medical journal articles are absolutely white hot," says Trippe. "It's an

enormous market." Those who need to access a great deal of specific information quickly and in a portable format will be interested in digitized documents, Trippe and others believe.

Is digital better?

The big question for publishers and authors alike is whether general audience readers will take to reading on a screen. Israel understands her competition: "You're up against the fact that the paper book is pretty much perfect technology, unless you drop it in the bathtub. It works perfectly." Israel is also on the board of directors for the IDPF and was director of business development for the Rocket eBook in 1998.

The eBook does have its advantages. On alum Trippe's blog, he writes, "There's the lower publication costs point.... There's the faster time to market due to virtual distribution across the Web..." He goes on to note that digital books have "usability improvements such as the ability to cut and paste, annotate, and customize dynamic documents" that print books do not. He notes that updating, integrating, navigating, and disseminating information "are all part of the 'digital is better' formation."

Dan Brown, author of *The Da Vinci Code*, believes the rise of eBooks will get more people to read. "It is not about replacing books," he told the *Guardian* earlier this year. "eBooks offer features that traditional books cannot....If I want a new book, I can download it instantly online, even if it is two in the morning."

Emerson Associate Professor of Writing, Literature and Publishing Douglas Whyntott has been listening to what his students have to say about eBooks. "Though I think we'll always be printing paper books, the oncoming generations, judging by what I'm hearing, are going to read [eBooks] and use them, especially as the technology improves."

Some writers with eBooks, like Emerson's Flook (*Invisible Eden*), confess they prefer the traditional book. "What about the tactile pleasure of holding a book, the grain of its pages, wrestling with its moody desire to slap shut?" asks Flook. "It's a relationship thing," she explains. Flook does admit that her son's generation (he's 20) has a similar relationship to the screen.

ePublishing consultant Doug Bolin points out that eBooks and projects like Google's digital library "have serious copyright, creative control and intellectual property implications" that must be worked out before the industry can be secure.

It's the technology, stupid!

Bolin sees the eBook as just now "starting to make a comeback. And I think one of the things that's going to make them more prevalent is the emergence of new technology," he says.

One such advancement is called E Ink. eBook readers that use E Ink will offer a more paper-like, 'high contrast' reading experience but use 'ultra-low' power consumption and enable readers to come in even less bulky forms, according to the company's website. "E Ink is going to change the world," enthuses Israel. She notes that prolonged battery life, clearer screens, and more comfortable interfaces will also contribute to more readers picking up eBooks.

Sony has announced an exclusive deal with Borders Books in which 300 stories will carry the new Sony Reader, which uses E ink. The Reader is about the size of a slim paperback, is reportedly lightweight, easy to read from, can store hundreds of titles simultaneously as well as being able to download new titles from the Internet. The *Guardian* notes that some wonder if the Sony device will do what the iPod did for music. The paper notes this "will mark the first time that an eBook reader will have the backing of such a big book retailer." Simon & Schuster's Israel finds this an encouraging sign that the eBook market is "way back on the upswing." In fact, Sony has worked out agreements with many of the world's leading publishers to sell book downloads online at the Sony Connect store (akin to the iTunes music store).

Israel already owns her own Sony Reader. "The first book I bought was by my old writing teacher at Emerson, Jack Gantos," she says. "Talk about full circle!" Israel sees a future with eBooks as "inevitable." Of course, only time will tell and, like a good book's surprise ending, many will be guessing how the tale of the eBook turns out. ■

Here are some important names and numbers behind the world's swelling electronic library:

- Project Gutenberg, the first and largest single collection of free eBooks, in September had at least 19,000 books on its site. Readers download 2 million eBooks every month from the site.
- Google will digitally scan the books of five major research libraries: Stanford, Harvard, Oxford, the University of Michigan, and the New York Public Library.
- Companies NetLibrary and ebrary now offer thousands of eBooks and innovative resources to libraries, publishers, and corporations.
- Conceived in 2005 by Yahoo! and The Internet Archive, Open Content Alliance will digitize collections from: European Archive, Internet Archive, National Archives (UK), O'Reilly Media, Prelinger Archives, University of California, and University of Toronto.
- Sony's eBookstore launched with over 10,000 titles available from publishers Random House, Penguin, and Harper Collins, among others. Sony is discounting the books by 20 percent of the eBook list price initially.
- Random House is digitizing 25,000 of its titles; HarperCollins announced it will digitize all holdings.
- Springer Science+Business Media, the world's largest science, technology and medical book publisher, announced the launch of a new initiative that will allow students and researchers electronic access to more than 10,000 books.
- The popular site Mobipocket.com offers free eBooks and sells others; top downloaded books include *The Art of War* by Sun Tzu, Homer's *The Odyssey*, and *The Last of the Mohicans* by James Fenimore Cooper.
- Amazon.com has a huge library of short fiction (see alumnus Olen Steinhauer's short story on page 7) readers can download, part of their "aggressive" move into selling digital versions of many of their titles.

-C.H.

Peter Jay Shippy '84
Poems from *Alphaville*

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Alphaville, an abecedarian suite written by Peter Jay Shippy '84, an Emerson adjunct professor in writing, literature and publishing, was published by BlazeVOX Books as an eBook in 2006. (These poems are republished here with the author's permission.)

Alphaville won the Gertrude Stein Award for Innovative Poetry. Shippy's first book, *Thieves' Latin* (University of Iowa Press), won the 2002 Iowa Poetry Prize. His work has been published in numerous journals, and he has been awarded writing fellowships from the Massachusetts Cultural Council and the National Endowment for the Arts.

Veins ululate.
The ship rides

qualmless.
plaintless. One

night, magpies
lilting

Kansascity jazz
in high-hat

Glaswegian
fada emporiums

drank
Chenin Blanc

and a beatific cord
dead ends.

Passages
of new moonlight

lick kudzu jiggers.
I hear glass

fish, erasing
downriver, coal

black, aswarm.
A blackbird calls

duskward, etching
frangible glitches.

Hanging in jackets,
kestrels lynch

mice, noosing
on parabolas.

A beach—
Caribou Dunes—

each face
generates

hindsight. I just
keep

longing.
Muskies

nuzzle off
platform

quays.
Rib-caged sterns

turn
unaccountably violet.