

The Social Life of Books in the Humane Library

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ABSTRACT

The development of public libraries may have inadvertently brought the age of marginalia to a close but now that digital copies no longer require us to refrain from writing in a shared text, it is possible to create sociable books, texts that sustain communities of readers. How might people respond to opportunities to share their readings through marginalia and how might the process of reading for pleasure be altered by situating it in a more social space? The current study examining sociable reading among a small group of middle-school girls demonstrates the potential of reading sociably and affirms the value of developing digital library books to support social exchanges among readers.

Categories and Subject Descriptors

H.3.7 [Information Storage and Retrieval]: Digital Libraries – *User issues*; H.5.2 [Information Interfaces and Presentation]: User interfaces – *User centered design*; H.5.3 [Information Interfaces and Presentation]: Group and Organization Interfaces – Asynchronous interaction

General Terms

Design, Human Factors, Performance

Keywords

Electronic annotations, active reading, sociable literacy, digital books, children, markings, annotations

1. INTRODUCTION

The development of networked digital technologies has formed a web of new opportunities for the developers and consumers of media. In the sphere of the book the infinite space of the virtual copy and the unbounded connectivity of the internet open the door to the formation of new arenas for social exchange and cultural formation.

Over the past four years we have explored the impact and potential of these technological developments on the practice of reading through the development of *Alph* a digital book interface through which young readers can interact with the text and each other by leaving annotations in the form of text-laden emoticons anywhere on the surface of the page.

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Alph builds upon a rich and varied history of research into digital annotations in the fields of hypertext and computer supported cooperative work. However, in these studies reading is understood as a task, a component of a bigger activity and not an activity in its own right. The participants in these studies do not engage in reading for its own sake but in order to achieve a specific goal such as writing a legal brief or conducting research.

Our work focuses on the casual reader who is not concerned with a given goal but rather with the flow [2] of the reading activity. Our aim is to provide additional levels of engagement. Thus the annotations created bear more relationship to geoNotes [5] than to the anchored conversations [1].

2. THE CORVALLIS STUDY

In a previous study [4], we explored *Alph* with our young design partners, their families and a few of their friends. That first field study revealed several emerging patterns of social interaction among the participants.

Since the participants in our previous study knew one another and had also participated in the design and development of *Alph*, our current study engages youngsters who had no prior connection to the project and who did not know each other before the study began and who did not meet during the course of the study. Participants were recruited through the Corvallis-Benton County Public Library, which meets the needs of 78,000 inhabitants in Oregon, USA, as part of a general recruitment for library activities. Five participants, all girls between the ages of 10 and 12, signed up for the study which lasted from November 7 to December 5, 2005. Participants accessed the application from computers at their homes or schools.

The study sets out to answer the following research questions:

1. Given an opportunity to freely annotate a book without the incentive of a shared goal or preexisting social ties will young readers do so?
2. Collectively what do the notes tell us about readers' responses to the story and to each other?
3. What patterns of placement, or "codexography," can be detected? Freed from the restriction of annotating in the margins would readers use spatial relations as a means of expression or would they stick to the conventions of the physical domain?

3. RESULTS

Alph collects data passively by recording and time-stamping all user events, including logging on and logging out, turning pages by any of the navigational means, mousing over and clicking on annotations, and creating new annotations. It keeps track of the

page number and x,y coordinates of all annotations, both private and shared, as well as the text of all annotations. It is thus possible to form a detailed picture of each reader's activities during each reading episode as well as to aggregate data about the activities of the group.

An examination of the system logs reveals that during the study 272 annotations were created by child participants. The vast majority of annotations—81.6% of the total or 96.5% of non-deleted annotations—were shared annotations, confirming our observation in a previous study [4] that in a casual setting the tendency to share is greater than in a goal-oriented collaborative environment where the rate of private annotations is normally higher.

The comments left by the readers were wide and varied but were all related to the contents of the book or to other annotations which themselves dealt with the subject matter of the book. Readers reacted to events in the book with statements such as “Hurray sara is well” and “What!!!!!!” on reading about Sara’s impending nuptials. They tried to map the space of the book to their own frame of reference with comments like “Asgard? Man! Lots of these names do not ring a bell!”, “simka” Gosh where are they???” and “Wow! Eight children! What a tight fit! Well, if they had a huge house, then it wouldn't be a tight fit.” They also projected elements of the story into personal experiences as in the number of brothers that can be tolerated by one girl.

The pattern of placement or “codexography” of the annotations was also quite revealing. Some comments remained isolated islands while others blossomed into archipelagos of casual discourse. Forty clusters of notes emerged during the study. The formation of archipelagos or clusters seems to be entirely driven by the contents of the book and the interests of the readers as there is no apparent pattern to their distribution among the pages of the book.

On the other hand the patterns of space use were influenced by social niceties and evidence of prior activity. Readers used spatial proximity extensively to associate and differentiate their notes with the text and other comments as evidenced in figure 1.

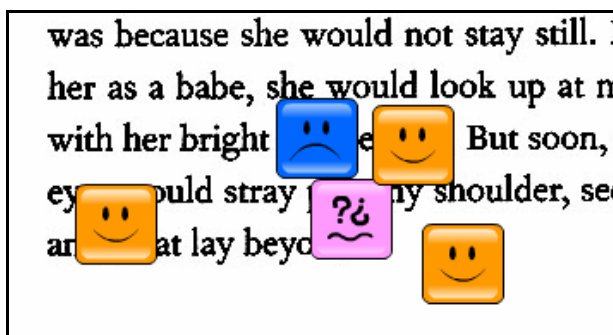


Figure 1. Space Used to Group and Differentiate

However they tended to stick to the margins or other white spaces unless there was prior evidence of others obscuring the text. It seems, then, that readers adapt their use of page space to social norms or social perceptions, echoing a pattern observed in urban uses of space by young adults in studies by Whyte [6].

5. CONCLUSIONS AND FUTURE WORK

Despite its short duration, the limited number of participants, and lack of preexisting social ties, the Corvallis study reveals readers engaged both with the story related by the author and the story woven by the readers as they traverse the narrative. In follow up interviews with participants in this and other studies, young readers indicate that the social activity inherent in reading through *Alph* acts as a major incentive to read the book.

Given opportunities to interact with other readers in a casual setting, children in this age group are clearly inclined to do so. Their notes reveal an attachment to the process of reading the novel but an equal interest in sharing their reactions and responses with other readers. It remains to take *Alph* into a broader study so that we can better understand how sociable reading might affect children’s level of engagement with books and with each other.

The noted urbanologist William Whyte commented after decades of studying urban environments that “[w]hat attracts people most, it would seem, is other people” [6] and the prospects of social interaction they bring with them. If libraries wish to continue and succeed in their mission of engaging the public with literary works, they will be well served by turning their collections of books into the social arenas the young patrons of today and the population of tomorrow would surely expect.

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