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An Investigation into Free eBooks

Investigating Free E-Books

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An Investigation into Free eBooks

Project

- Survey of what free e-books are available, where, and in what formats
- Survey of 'IT champions' in Post-16 education
- Focus group discussions with interested parties from HE

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What is an e-book?

See the EBONI discussion at:
http://ebooks.strath.ac.uk/eboni/documents/definition.html

- Electronic text, for reading
- Formats: proprietary, HTML, XML, ASCII and PDF
- Platforms: desktop, portable, PDA, phone
- Text types: various

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A Working Definition

"An e-book comprises a text in electronic form, coupled with software and hardware in order to read it. Prototypically e-books are electronic editions of material published in print, and which attempt to emulate 'book-like' characteristics."

By a FREE e-book we mean one that does not involve direct costs to acquire, access, read, copy, or use.

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Resource discovery

- Internet Search engines
  - www.google.com
- E-book portals and hubs
  - Voice of the Shuttle

  http://vos.ucsb.edu/

- E-book Enthusiasts
  - http://www.e-book.com.au/freebooks.htm
- Specialised e-book finders
  - http://www.ebooklocator.com/

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- Academic focus
- Collector not creator
- Circa 2,500 titles
- Multilingual
- Emphasis on metadata (TEI)
- Digital resources rather than just ‘texts’?

http://ota.ahds.ac.uk

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Electronic Text Center, UVa

- Academic focus
- Creator and collector
- SGML/XML formats
- 70,000 texts, 350,000 related images
- Multilingual
- MS Reader and Palm formats

http://etext.lib.virginia.edu/

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Project Gutenberg

- Global, distributed effort
- General audience
- Creator of plain ascii texts
- Multilingual
- Circa 8000 e-books (280 per month)
- Source for other projects (www.blackmask.com)

http://www.promo.net/pg/

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Specialised efforts

- Single author or monograph
- Run by enthusiasts or academics
- Multiple editions and formats of single work
- Additional secondary material and links to external resources
- Maintenance & preservation issues

http://www.austen.com

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Miscellany

- Dictionaries, thesauri, reference works
- Bibles, religious works
- Audio e-books
- New technologies

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Characteristics of free e-books

- Out of copyright, IPR issues
- Lack of quality control, assurance
- Lack of bibliographic information
- Created by enthusiasts not publishers
- Multiple file formats & encoding standards
- Largely ignored by academic libraries
- Redefining the notion of the ‘book’?

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Survey results – Post-16

- Current levels of usage of free e-books is low.
- Reading text on screen - very mixed views.
- Useful functions: Search, bookmarking, highlighting, annotation, printing parts, copy and paste (very useful).
- Very few interested in handhelds, readers, phones.
- Availability of free e-books can make the difference between access and no access to the text.
- Many students won't use print library, so there is potential for e-books to be very useful.

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Survey results – Higher Education

"I think it would be useful but we need to have assurances of quality and the fact that they would be there. If we are going to put a lot of resources into cataloguing they have got to be there in 10 years."

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Survey results – Higher Education

"I think the real thing is the persistence of it - if its going to be there one year, are you going to be able to rely on it being there six to ten years on? These people that put things on are enthusiasts; what happens if they..."

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Survey results – Higher Education

"Quality is a big issue for we are very wary in the library of putting resources on our web pages for students to use, for students assume there is a quality endorsement there. We haven't got time to look at all of those E-books have we - its difficult?"

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Survey results – Higher Education

"If on top of that you have in addition to get clearance from different publishers, different rules, you can see it is a bit complicated, and as a lecturer I wouldn't go into that myself I would need an institution to do that for me and for someone to help on the design and so on."

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Survey results – Higher Education

"I think also think different subject areas have different problems with this. For my particular area its great for old out of print texts but I couldn't use it as a primary reader because its not up to date enough for it. You give a student a text book and it has to be the latest in that particular subject."

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Survey results – Higher Education

"I use E-books sometimes and it tends to be text books that are nearly 150 years old I am involved with people who teach very oddball subjects, like Sanskrit, which no text book has been written for in 20 years … so in the terms of distribution no print publisher is going to touch this kind of thing, but … electronic ones seem to be available."

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Survey results – Higher Education

"there have been lots of cases where the sensible thing to do is to pay 50p or even a couple of pounds to get a commercial product, but I think there has to be a major role for free academic sites. If only for the reasons you mentioned because if we could accept a guarantee that it will be around. You can own it outright, whereas commercial function may take it away from you in a year's time."

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Survey results – Higher Education

"In humanities you would expect a publication to have a more or less indefinite lifespan, if you were in medicine or engineering then there is less of a difference because the content is likely to have obsolescence within a reasonably short space of time and so the difference between a subscription model to a purchase model is much less different than in humanities as is in social sciences you have got a major contrast."

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Survey results – Higher Education

"If you look at texts of Shakespeare on the internet the quality is appallingly low. It's lower than that of any printed text of Shakespeare since probably be 1670. Humans have spent centuries building up ways of ensuring textural transmission as reliable, that problem texts are documented and ways of ensuring that the words are text or not, and a lot of that has gone by the board with E-text."

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Survey results – Higher Education

"Even academics are creating E-text and they suddenly throw away all their training and stick them up there with no indication of what edition they are following what editorial principals they are using or backwards. Not all of them but some."

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Survey results – Higher Education

"It seems to me that there isn't much uptake on free e-books. VLEs may be the way of getting electronic resources to the students."

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Survey results – Higher Education

"Students' expectations are rising all the time. They are going to be using things like Blackboard…WebCT or whatever and they are going to be used to things that are more attractive, hopefully."

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Barriers to uptake

- Restricted range of titles
- Quality assurance of texts
- Persistence of resources
- Hidden costs (computing, archiving)
- Poor design and ergonomics of reading technology

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Opportunities

- ‘Freeness’ is vital to FE
- Exploit existing resources and expertise
- Potential for repurposing of free e-books
- Particularly useful for humanities disciplines

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Recommendations

There is a need to offer:

- Wider range of titles
- Quality assurance (of text integrity and metadata)
- Professional cataloguing
- Permanence of collections
- Support for users
- Help with integration into VLEs

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