Sophie: a solution without a problem

After more than twenty years of eBook distribution, certain facts about the eBook market are becoming clear. We may not be too sure of what eBook customers want, but we know what they *don't* want. They don't want proprietary formats, and they don't want Digital Rights Management (DRM) which prevents them from copying and printing the books that they have paid for. The customer response to text enhancements in the form of hyperlinks, annotations, sound, graphics and video has been muted, to say the least: these are seen as all very well in their place, but their place is on the Web, not in a book which is meant to provide an immersive experience in its own right. Publishers also tend to cling obsessively to a 'page-turning' metaphor, while ordinary people are getting more and more comfortable with the idea of scrolling down through a continuous document.

Why, then, do well-meaning software designers repeatedly produce eBook software which embraces all the features that consumers have rejected: potential DRM, proprietary formats, page-turning and multimedia? Because a large – though steadily shrinking – proportion of our reading material remains under copyright and thus largely in the hands of publishers. And publishers are still scrabbling for ways in which they can try and sell their products in the face of increasing competition from free reading material and other forms of entertainment. By locking material up with DRM they can try and prevent it from being redistributed; and by 'adding value' in the form of multimedia they can try to charge for material that is available elsewhere far more cheaply. (And the obsession with page-turning? Simple nostalgia, perhaps.) Hence the long series of publisher-supported eBook products with these features which are touted as 'solutions for readers', though the readers are not the ones with the problem.

The Sophie project (www.sophieproject.org) is the latest example of these. Supported by grants from the Mellon and Macarthur foundations and the University of Southern California, Sophie is a free open-source eBook authoring and reading package. It consists of two downloads: an authoring package for those who wish to produce Sophie-format eBooks, and a reading package for those who just want to read them. Each downloads weighs in at over 27 Mb, which means a long wait just to trial the program. There are also three Sophie books available from the site in zipped format: one is over 50Mb and another is 27Mb! I tried two of the downloads but was unable to open the resulting books. (Confusingly, 'Sophie' is also the name of an apparently unrelated eBook reader program from Rivertext.com, which is still available for download, although its development appears to have halted in 2001.)

[Image: Sophie Authoring package showing highlighted text and 'sticky note']

Like many modern programs, Sophie hooks in to the Internet and provides for collaborative work in the form of annotations. Again, this has its place on the Web – see for instance my article in OC, V22, October 2007 on centralised computing – but it's hard to imagine why a user should want to share their notes on a particular book with a random group of other people.

I downloaded the Windows versions of the Sophie authoring and reading packages, and fired up the authoring package in order to try and produce a new book. The first impression I got – on a new and fairly powerful laptop – was of extreme slowness. I don't know the programming language that was used, but I suspect something like Java is at work here; at any rate, the startup procedure is slow, loading documents is slow, and – worst of all – editing loaded documents is slow, to the point where the user, having typed several words on the keyboard, has to sit back and wait for the characters to appear. An editing package Sophie is not: and this alone is really enough to sink the program.

Also on the negative side: the use of non-standard dialog boxes (the close button is at the top left, for instance, not the top right, raising the potential for endless confusion) and irritating error messages when the program crashes, which is fairly often. I was told twice that 'a primitive has failed' and once that the program 'could not coerce arguments': neither of these messages was of interest or value to me. The 'File' menu needs rewriting: the current entries – 'New Book, Open Book, Open Recent Books, Close Book, Hide Book, Save Book…' make it sound like a demented chicken. And some of the menu items – like 'Open Recent Books' – don't appear to function at all.

On the positive side, the program is simple to use, well-laid out and clearly documented – though significantly, the user manual is in standard PDF rather than Sophie format. It has a neat system of local menus and symbols (called 'halos') which bring up relevant settings for particular text boxes or images. It uses a page metaphor, so a large document has to be laid out on many connected page frames. This was done automatically and smoothly when I pasted in relatively small chunks of text, but attempting to paste more than a hundred pages' worth resulted in the program hanging, with no visual indication of what was going on. The book is saved as a named folder containing the book file along with other resources, and the actual book file is always called 'sophiebook.spb' – a recipe for absolute disaster when cleaning up duplicate files, for instance.

Sophie eBooks can be annotated with 'sticky notes' or coloured highlights. Hyperlinks in the book can take users to other pages, open a new book or jump to a website. Pages, images and hyperlinks can all be connected to a 'timeline' allowing material to be played back in a specified sequence.

I brought the contents of a 1928 novel into Sophie and attempted to add a photo; but when the photo came in there seemed to be no way to shrink it to fit in the space provided. Saving the book as text alone resulted in a total file size of 1.02 Mb, as opposed to 421Kb for the original text file. Saving a book containing just a 41Kb image resulted in a total file size of 159Kb.

Once complete, my 321-page book opened in the Sophie Reader package without problems and I was able to step from page to page within a second or two. I could make annotations and zoom from 25% to 400%, but not re-wrap the text to fill the new page size. Nor could I search the whole document for a word or phrase, and even searching on a single page only found the first occurrence of the text. Annotations appear at the left of the screen in a clickable panel, so they can be used as makeshift bookmarks.

The development of Sophie has been going on since at least 2005, and will no doubt continue until the grants expire, but there is little reason to believe that it will ever make a hit with either book authors or the reading public. As an authoring package it

is too slow, and as a reading package it is too limited. Designers with collaboration in mind would do better to embrace the web-based tools available from Google or Zoho, and eBook publishers and authors should either direct their attention to standard commercial packages like InDesign, Word, PowerPoint or Acrobat, or bow to the inevitable and embrace totally open systems like HTML. Until that happens, and the grants run out, the people behind packages like Sophie will simply go on re-inventing the wheel – and making it square.