

James G. Robinson
Thesis Ideas
January 26, 2005

Text Liberation
A Brief Manifesto In Favor of Serendipitous Publishing
Or, “Why Libraries”?

There is a Hasidic philosophy that insists that everything in the world contains hidden joys that we must continually discover and unlock. Why, then, are the joys and wonders of the written word still hidden in libraries? I ask not to bury libraries, nor to praise them: rather, to ask how we can start to bring the ideas and words they contain into our everyday lives.

As dissimilar as they may be, digital archives still echo the particular limitations that print libraries place on their users. They still require a certain level of intellectual expertise; they still must be “visited”; and perhaps most jarringly, the screens and computers we must use to visit them necessarily remove us from the “real world”. We have been so focused on the sheer aggregation of information that the possibilities for dissemination have been neglected. We now have an unprecedented ability to parse and edit text at the level of chapters, paragraphs, and even sentences – still, we have no satisfactory mechanism by which to “set them free”.

What do I mean by the liberation of text? Simply put, I would like to find some way for digitized words to live as a tangible part of our shared environment. The vast majority of words we encounter in public spaces serve very limited purposes: telling us what (not) to do; telling us what something is; or trying to sell us something. Surrounded on all sides by these phrases we tend to devalue the value of the written word. We do not even consider the possibility that given the opportunity to populate public spaces the words now trapped in libraries might bring great ideas to the real world or improve our everyday discourse.

When one witnesses the inscriptions on the Brooklyn Public Library, for instance, it is easy to see how public words, once liberated, can rise above their assigned status of indentured servitude to a certain exceptional majesty. Still, as some may argue in the case of graffiti, they can be a nuisance or, perhaps, a call to arms. Or, like the Biblical inscriptions served with food at the In-And-Out Burger or Alaska Airlines, they can hint at a more devious religious agenda. It's clear from the latter examples that the main challenge would be the question of what sort of editorial mind (or group) might arrange and oversee this emancipation.

Imagine, then, that you might be able to read a short story set in a certain area while actually walking the streets of that particular locale. I did this once, reading Isaac Bashevis Singer's *Family Moskat* while traveling through Warsaw, and it made the both experience that much more vivid. Or, perhaps, that you suddenly come across an intersection with a stanza of a specific, location-based poem inscribed on each of its four lamp-posts. Most of the interfaces to digital archives have made their first priority in making their search functions as precise as possible. I have no qualms about exactness, but I also believe strongly in the value of serendipity.

One might argue that we already have the technology to free these words from their magnetically sealed bonds: the printer. True, but it is an unwieldy tool – especially when it unimaginatively mirrors the layout, display and content of the screen when presenting its information. It only prints (for the most part) in one size. And the items, once printed, must live awkwardly in piles or binders or the like. In that sense, from the words perspective, it is nothing more than a heavy-handed Underground Railroad traversing one foreign realm to another. Words, once liberated in this way, lie scattered out of context, gasping for breath. I would much rather find a way for them to live dynamically, contextually, in the real world.