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Untitled Peer Response to "ThoughtMesh" by Jon Ippolito and Craig Dietrich

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Peer Response

Experiments in the transformation of scholarly publishing into an all-electronic process abound, but too few such projects have focused primarily on the need to situate scholarly writing not simply online but *within the network*, in multi-layered interconnection with other writing in the field. Such a relocation of publishing within a networked environment promises a transformation of both writing and reading practices, as authors and researchers make material the links that have always implicitly existed across texts.

This is the approach taken by ThoughtMesh, a dynamic and compelling mode of structuring and interlinking scholarly texts via shared tags. The combination of a simple user interface with a system of both automatically and manually generated tags that serve as links across all of the texts in the "mesh" results here in a compelling means of reorganizing scholarly publishing as a community-based, rather than individual, activity, one that recognizes the foundations of such publishing in open, mobile discourse.

Texts that are published through ThoughtMesh can be hosted either in the centralized repository or in the author's own web space, without affecting the mesh's ability to link amongst them. The cut-and-paste interface and automatic HTML generation allows for very speedy publication, and the system's automated tagging allows authors to focus on refining a text's links rather than creating them from scratch. The breaking of texts in ThoughtMesh into author-defined hierarchical lexia (generally comprising sections and sub-sections of the text) produces a nice standard menu-driven internal navigation system, in addition to tag-based navigation, which allows a reader to browse either an individual text or the wider mesh via the concepts and categories either automatically generated by the system or manually produced by the author.

The publishing engine gives the author a number of standardized stylesheets from which to choose, and it also allows for limited uses of HTML within the texts, to support links to web resources, special text formatting such as italics, and the like. The developers have indicated several paths for future development, including the production of a dynamic map of the mesh as a whole, allowing authors and readers to get a sense of the place of any given article within it. Other functions will allow for the creation of author groups and submeshes, enabling the production of ongoing electronic "journals" and other such multi-author publications.

ThoughtMesh is a potentially powerful system through which scholars, students, and other researchers will be able to discover texts related to their interests, and which will allow authors to read and write in collaboration with one another, allowing their texts to develop communally, creating a dense and rich network of discourse. The resulting mesh fruitfully highlights the often under-addressed social nature of reading and writing, as writers react and respond to one another through their texts. However, in ThoughtMesh, the texts themselves remain closed systems, allowing their *authors* to interact, but restricting others to read-only access. For a fully social publishing network to emerge, it would be useful for future development of ThoughtMesh to include possibilities for reader response or interaction beyond simply clicking and reading. What if readers could add tags that enable their own uses and interpretations of these texts? What if texts were open to commenting and discussion, allowing authors to receive feedback from a broader readership?

A few other small nitpicks arise -- ThoughtMesh does not currently support illustrations, and thus the work published through it must be entirely text-oriented; those texts must be primarily linear, in order to take advantage of the heading/sub-heading mode of navigating an article's lexia -- but on the whole, this project represents a significant development in the translation of publishing to network settings.

- Kathleen Fitzpatrick, Pomona College, 09.24.2007