THE LAST WORD

THE DEMISE OF BORDERS GROUP AND THE CHALLENGE OF BROWSING

By Charles Day

Borders Group, whose large, café-equipped bookstores have become places to spend a few agreeable hours in the presence, if not the company, of fellow book lovers, filed for Chapter 11 bankruptcy on 16 February.

Over dinner that evening, my wife and I lamented Borders’ fate, but we struggled at first to identify what exactly we’d miss about the stores. Not the coffee—the espresso served in the chain’s cafés was thin and sour. Not the music—the selection was modest and uncompetitively priced. And not the books. For despite yards and yards of shelving, I’d often fail to find a book I was looking for.

What we’d miss, we realized, was the browsing—the wandering amid the store’s shelves, surveying their contents, pausing to pick up and examine an intriguing title. We also realized that whereas browsing for books in a bricks-and-mortar store is a satisfying experience, its online equivalent is slow and tedious.

Human anatomy accounts for some of the difference. I’m writing this column on a 13-inch Macbook. The laptop’s screen, which is 13 inches from my face, subtends 0.46 steradians. That’s about a tenth of my field of view. Given that text has to subtend the same minimum angle to be legible, a single gaze will encompass 10 times more book titles in a bricks-and-mortar store than it could in an online store.

Can a cleverly designed GUI offset the advantage of real-world browsing? I haven’t found one, but I have conceived one. Paradoxically perhaps, my online book browser resembles an antique: the rotating bookcase, like the one in Figure 1.

Imagine a virtual rotating bookshelf that you can spin with your computer’s mouse or with your finger on a touchscreen. To browse the vertically stacked shelves, you move the mouse or sweep your finger up and down. Being virtual, the bookcase wouldn’t be limited in physical size. All 37 of Amazon’s main book categories could comfortably fit one on top of the other.

Books in the virtual bookcase would be displayed cover out, not spine up. Left-clicking on a cover would bring up reviews and other information about it, including the option to display a new shelf of additional books by the same author. Right-clicking would bring up the subcategories and keywords with which the title had been tagged. Selecting any of those would also create a new shelf.

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