
Book Review

First European Conference on Hypertext

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Hypertext conferences have become major forums in both Europe and North America for practitioners and students of hypertext and proceedings of the conferences serve as substantial sources of information for those interested in the field.

Twenty-four papers plus the keynote address and summaries of panels make up this volume of proceedings from the First European Conference on Hypertext, held in France in November 1990. The volume forms part of the Cambridge Series on Electronic Publishing.

The mixture of authors' workplace locations indicates the European-oriented but international quality of the conference. Thirteen papers, including the keynote address, were presented by Europeans, seven by North Americans, two by joint North American/European teams, and three from elsewhere. As might be expected at a research-oriented conference, most of the contributors were from academia or research institutes. Five complete papers and one joint paper, however, were prepared by the staffs of commercial organizations. Such commercial participation suggests a spread of interest in hypertext applications into the market.

The keynote address by P. J. Brown of the University of Kent at Canterbury, England, covers the problems of hypertext evaluation. How does an evaluator decide that a hypertext application is 'good'. The author's paper is based on his experience teaching a university-level hypertext authoring course during which he graded hypertext projects submitted by students. Although Brown attempted to evaluate the overall utility and effectiveness of the hypertexts he reviewed, he encountered a special version of the 'lost-in-space' problem. How does the evaluator know that he or she has evaluated the entire product? Is a hypertext document apparently incomplete because information was completely omitted? Because appropriate links or other tools were not provided? Because of poor quality instructions or help? The address and the problems identified help set the tone of much of the volume, which generally takes a practical approach to solving problems identified in actual (if experimental) applications.

After the keynote address, the volume is divided into eight sections of three papers each. The sections are titled: toolkits for hypermedia applications; formal models and query languages; databases, indices and normative knowledge; argumentation, design and knowledge representation; turning text into hypertext; designing and reading hyperdocuments; navigation and browsing; and building hypertext applications. Although the organization leads from low-level technical and conceptual issues (toolkits, formal models, etc.) to actual applications, there is no firm line between the sections. Indeed, the first paper in the last section describing 'MICROCOSM: An Open Model for Hypermedia with Dynamic Linking' would have fitted with the papers in the earlier sections on toolkits or models. Despite the somewhat muddy separation between content, the abundant information makes hopping about very useful. The lack of an index makes hopping about a requirement for comparative analysis or for using the volume as reference. Had it

been produced as hypertext, this reader would have found the volume easier to use.

The volume's subtitle 'Concepts, Systems, and Applications' provides a synopsis of the types of information found inside. Of course, the contents of the individual papers are mixtures of the various themes. Some papers are largely 'How I did it in my shop'. Others attempt more abstract or generic approaches. The papers in the first section provide information about the development of toolkits in specific environments. While learning about the experience of toolkit makers is useful, *knowledge* about the underlying models that the toolkits support or assume is probably of more general use.

The issue of models permeates all sections of the volume, whether the papers are specifically about models or not. Papers about applications reveal a great deal about assumptions that the applications' builders made concerning domain-specific hypertext implementations. Papers about retrieval indicate assumptions about types of browsing, and therefore types of links, that may or should exist in hypertext implementations. The underlying issue of conceptual models for hypertext is well-aired in this volume and provides valuable insights into both conceptual and practical problems.

Despite the value of the contents of the volume, the physical volume itself is a disappointment. The authors apparently supplied camera-ready copy. Although similar typefaces are used, different weights of type, sometimes in the same paper, cause the reader to slow down and think 'Is this change significant?' Furthermore, despite numerous high-quality illustrations, there are several crudely drawn, low-resolution illustrations that also detract from the readability of the volume. A volume in a series on electronic publishing should be a better advertisement for the art.

One interesting effect of having a variety of authors write on a similar topic is the identification of the central papers in a field by repeated references to them. In addition to the expected basic texts (Vannevar Bush, Jeff Conklin, Douglas Englebart, Ted Nelson) several more recent works are repeatedly cited. These cited documents form the genealogy and definition of a developing field. Among the documents frequently cited in this volume are Akscyn's 'KMS: A Distributed Hypermedia System for Managing Knowledge in Organizations', Halasz's 'Reflections on Notecards: Seven Issues for the Next Generation of Hypermedia Systems', Marchionini and Shneiderman's 'Finding Facts vs. Browsing Knowledge in Hypertext Systems', and Zellweger's 'Scripted Documents: A Hypertext Path Mechanism'. The development of a core literature is part of the development of a paradigm for a research field. Hypertext research is clearly maturing as a self-defining field.

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