Book Reviews

EPUB 3: Best Practices, by Matt Garrish and Markus Gylling. Sebastopol, CA: O'Reilly. 2013. 345 pp. ISBN: 978-1-449-32914-3. $29.99.

There is much of value in this book—there aren't really that many books out right now about the electronic book markup framework, EPUB 3—yet I have a hard time recommending it, especially if you're an EPUB novice like me. So much of the book assumes a familiarity with EPUB 2. If you aren't familiar with this version of the specification, then you will be playing a constant game of catch-up. Also, it's clear that the book was written by multiple authors; the chapters are sometimes jarringly disparate with respect to pacing and style. The book as a whole needs a good edit. This is surprising since O'Reilly is almost uniformly excellent in this regard.

The first three chapters form the core of the book. The first chapter, "Package Document and Metadata," illustrates how the top level container of any EPUB 3 book is the "package document." This document contains metadata about the book as well as a manifest (a list of files included in the package as a whole), a spine (a list of the reading order of the files included in the book), and an optional list of bindings (a lookup list similar to the list of helper applications contained in the configurations of most modern Web browsers). The second chapter, "Navigation," addresses and illustrates the creation of a proper Table of Contents, a list of Landmarks (sort of an abbreviated Table of Contents), and a Page List (useful for quickly navigating to a specific print-equivalent page in the book). The third chapter, "Content Documents," is the heart of the core of the book. This chapter addresses markup of actual chapters in a book, pointing out that EPUB 3 markup here is mostly a subset of HTML5, but also pointing out such things as the use of MathML for mathematical markup, SVG (Scalable Vector Graphics), page layout issues, use of CSS, and the use of document headers and footers. After reading these first three chapters, my sense is that one is ready to dive into a markup project, which is exactly what I did with my own project. That said, I think a reread of these core chapters is due, which I intend to do presently.

The rest of the book is devoted to specialty subjects such as how to embed fonts, use of audio and video clips, "media overlays" (EPUB 3 supports a subset of SMIL, the Synchronized Multimedia Integration Language, for creating synchronized text/audio/video presentations), interactivity and scripting (with Javascript), global language support, accessibility issues, provision for automated text-to-speech, and a nice utility chapter on validation of EPUB 3 XML files. Of these, the chapter on global language support I found to be fascinating. For us native English speakers, it's not immediately obvious some of the problems one will inevitably encounter when trying to create an electronic publication that can work in non-Western languages. Just consider languages that read vertically and from right to left, for one!

As an EPUB novice, my greatest desire would be for the book to provide, maybe in an Appendix, a fairly comprehensive example of an EPUB 3 marked-up book. Maybe this is a tall

order? Nevertheless, I would love to see an example of marked up text including bidirectional footnotes, pagination, a table of contents, etc.; simple, foundational things, really. Examples of each of these are included in the book, but not in one place. Having such an example in one place would be something that could be used as a quick-start template for us EPUB beginners. To be fair, code examples of all of this is up on the accompanying Website, and I am using these examples as I learn to code EPUB 3 for my own project. But having a single, relatively comprehensive example as an appendix to the book would be very useful.

As I read this book, something kept bothering me. EPUB2 and EPUB 3 are so very different, with reading systems designed to render EPUB 3 documents being fairly rare at this point. So if different versions of the same spec are so different, with no guarantee that a future reading system will be able to read documents adhering to a previous version, then the prospect of reading EPUB documents into the future is pretty sketchy. Are e-books, then, just convenient and cool mechanisms for currently reading longish narrative prose—convenient and cool, but transitory?

Mark Cyzyk is the Scholarly Communication Architect in The Sheridan Libraries, Johns Hopkins University, Baltimore, Maryland, USA.