Project Gutenberg: Enlightening the World Digitally

Sajid Muhaimin Choudhury

WHEN I was a little boy, I liked classic books. My mother used to buy books of, Children's Fairytales, Edgar Rice Burroughs' 'Tarzan Shamagra'; Arthur Conan Doyle's 'Sherlock Holmes Shamagra' all translated in Bengali. When I grew up, (I am twenty now), I wanted to read the original English versions of those books. But if you want to buy good quality English books, they may cost you as much $20. Moreover, it is not easy to find all old and famous books in a Bangladeshi book-shop. The book-stalls usually keep books that have higher demands in the market. An alternative solution to obtain copyright-expired books legally is also available today. You can try to read a book by downloading it and then reading it from your computer. Such computerized versions of books are known as electronic-book, or e-book.

There are many sites to download free electronic books. Microsoft has developed its own standard for e-books like the MS Reader format. A lot of free e-books can be found from Microsoft's library, University of Virginia's E-taxt library or Google Book Search. But the oldest and perhaps most famous digital library in the internet is still project Gutenberg.

Project Gutenberg: What it is

Project Gutenberg is a collection of different old texts, copyright-expired materials, drama etc. People of Project Gutenberg define it as "a volunteer effort to digitize, archive, and distribute cultural works." It was founded in 1971 by Michael Hart and is the oldest digital library. Most of the items in its collection are the full texts of public domain books. The project aims at keeping the books "as free as possible".

For that reason most of the books are stored in simple text (ASCII) format that can even be opened from a DOS based operating system. Some books are even stored in MP3 Audio format.

Meaning of 'Free' is 'Freedom'

What is 'Free'? Project Gutenberg tells us actually there are two types of 'freeness one is free as 'free of charge' and the other is free as 'freedom'. Free of charge means that you don't have to pay for the book you received. Freedom denotes that you may do as you like with the book you received. As for example you might receive a complementary copy of a book from a writer free of charge, but copying the book, redistributing it, or even lending it to a friend causes an infringement of the Copyright act. On the other hand, free as in 'freedom" means you may just copy, redistribute, or even reprint and sell the book. So free as in freedom beats free of charge. Almost all Porject Gutenberg e-books are both free of charge and free as in freedom.

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The history of Project Gutenberg

The Founder Michael Hart was a student at the University of Illinois in 1971. He got access to a Xerox Sigma V mainframe Computer in the university's Materials Research Lab. Through friendly operators, he received an account with a virtually unlimited amount of computer time. (Computers were expensive those days, unlike today, where all of us have virtually unlimited computer time) Its value at that time has since been variously estimated at $100,000 or $100,000,000. Hart wanted to repay this gift by doing something that could be considered to be of great value.

Incidentally, that particular computer was one of the 15 nodes on the computer network that later became part of the Internet. At that time Hart also believed that computers would one day be accessible to the general public and decided to make works of literature available in electronic form for free. He used a copy of the United States Declaration of Independence in his backpack, and this became the first Project Gutenberg e-text. He named the project after Johannes Gutenberg. Johannes Gutenberg was a German goldsmith and inventor and is usually considered to have invented the European technology of printing with movable type in 1447.

By the mid 90s, Hart was running Project Gutenberg from Illinois benedictine college. More volunteers had joined the effort. Hart later came to an arrangement with Carnegie Mellon University, which agreed to Administer Project Gutenberg's finances. As the volume of e-texts increased, volunteers began to take over the project's day-to-day operations that Hart had run.

In 2000, the Project Guetnberg Literary Archive Foundation, Inc. was chartered as a non-profit corporation, in Mississippi to handle the project's legal needs. Project Gutenberg is now hosted by ibiblio at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. At first most text was entered namually through typing until image scanners and optical character recognition software improved and became more widely available, which made book scanning more feasible.

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