

Editorial

A damsel with a dulcimer
In a vision once I saw
Kubla Khan (Coleridge)

A man who devoted 30 years of his life to promoting the idea of global literature interconnections, who persuaded a successful American company to back a product embodying these ideas, and who invented Hypertext deserves a good hearing. That man is of course Ted Nelson. His vision was not a damsel with a dulcimer, but Xanadu, the palace of Kubla Khan, conqueror of China, after which he named his system. An article about Xanadu appears in this issue.

Vannevar Bush saw the need for “making real use of the record” [1], and that is what Nelson wants to do. Bush continues: “The summation of human experience is being expanded at a prodigious rate, and the means we use for threading through the consequent maze to the momentarily important item is the same as was used in the days of square-rigged ships”. It is nearly 50 years since Bush wrote those words, but they are almost as true today.

Nelson sent me some material which I cobbled together to provide the article published here. I believe it is the first one which includes an explanation of the Xanadu scheme in detail, although Nelson has described the general idea several times [2–4].

He sent me this material following the circumstances discussed in [5]. He has severed his relationship with Autodesk which would have been releasing a Xanadu product about now, but he is likely to continue being backed by Japanese capital. Perhaps Autodesk ran out of faith and cut their capital losses. A quantity of both are needed before Xanadu can become a going concern.

Software and networking problems would not seem to be insurmountable, but the incentive for participants would be connection to a critical mass of material from the outset. As Nelson says “What we need is unbounded online media with compatible connections for scholarship, controversy, anthologising, understanding, the re-working of ideas, and freedom”.

It is the old problem of creating a large database before you can attract users who are needed to create it in the first place. Alternatively you must buy the database material to set up the incentive. Perhaps Nelson will be able to adopt this alternative.

References

- [1] Bush, Vannevar. As we may think. *The Atlantic Monthly*, 101–108, July 1945.
- [2] Nelson, T.H. The tyranny of the file. *Datamation*, 83–86, December 15th 1986.

- [3] Nelson, T.H. The once and future literature. *Journal of Information Science*, 16, 339–343, 1990.
- [4] Nelson, Ted. On the Xanadu project. *Byte*, 15(9), 298–299, September 1990.
- [5] Cawkell, A.E. Xanadu lives. Letter to be published in the *Journal of Librarianship and Information Science*, December 1994.

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