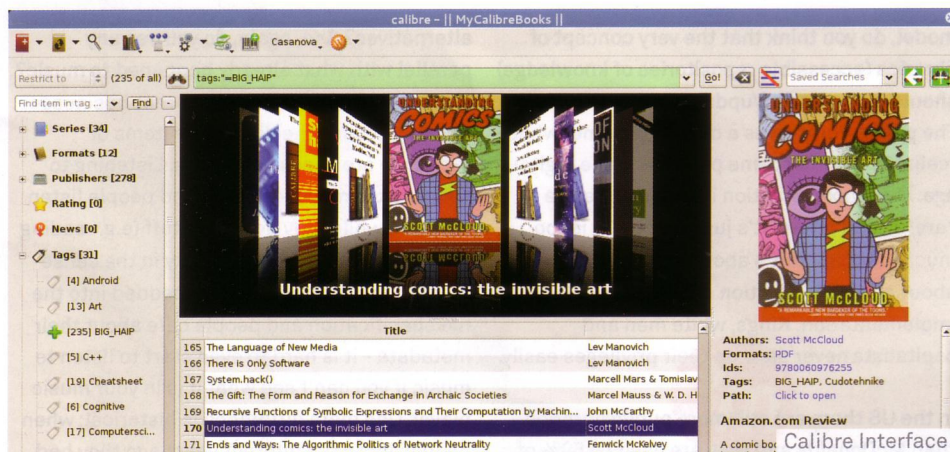


Marcell Mars

> interview



Marcell Mars (photo Tomislav Medak)



*** In your workshops you teach people how to use the free Calibre software in order to share ebook libraries, locally and remotely. Do you think that it has the potential to be as socially powerful as Napster was in the beginning for mp3 music exchange? And what kinds of social dynamics have you seen in Calibre's adopters?**

Calibre (these days) is mostly used as a useful tool to convert and transfer books found/bought on the net to e-readers, smartphones and tablets. It is a very well written (modular) piece of software and it has many different interfaces. One of the interfaces is (view/download-only) web frontend that is (by default) accessible only in local area networks. Being able to access it only in local area networks is the result of consequences we faced after an unfortunate decision in the early 80's about how many bits IP address should have. At that time not having more then 4.294.967.296 devices with unique public IP addresses seemed quite reasonable. A very unfortunate estimate. The consequences are that most *personal* computers are not able to communicate directly with each other. The public IP addresses, just like radio frequency ranges a long time ago, became scarce only because the decisions about how to use, govern and maintain them made them scarce. We sacrificed two-way communication architecture for scarcity. The idea of sharing got us stuck with the idea that only servers could serve (the files) and only clients could

ask for the content. Of course, any computer can serve the files. We just need to enable two computers to talk directly to each other and for that we need to assign them "public" IP addresses (or at least to the "server") or we need to get in control of the middle man: the closest router or some dedicated server with public IP address. When we are in control of the network resources we are able to enable sharing between any connected computers. The problem where we were not able to transparently and directly connect users computers through the internet led to big stories of success: Napster, Kazaa, Skype, BitTorrent, The Pirate Bay, Gigapedia etc. At a certain moment in history these software were able to provide the "bridge" between people. Their success was getting a critical mass of people keen to install extra application/software that made people's computers a good network citizen (able to request but also able to serve any digital content). My attempt with the project "Public Library" is about encouraging people to install extra applications like [let's share books] which provides the temporary network "bridge" between their local Calibre library and potential readers, or to get them to install software like Bryan Newbold's <http://rooter.is> or <http://freedomboxfoundation.org/> on their routers. When that "bridge" is established true sharing can begin :) At the moment, people usually send books found/bought on the net by emailing it to each other. The biggest problem is that, even it is super easy and quite an

automatic process to build your own searchable catalogue of the books people don't do that and are usually stuck with a messy directory full of badly named pdfs. Projects started at HAIP festival are addressing that problem and provide the network infrastructure and easy-to-use tools so that building your own catalogue should be easier than just throwing it into a messy directory.

The process of building a universal library, decentralized, even fragmented into hundreds of thousands of small database "islands" implies a mass digitalization process. In music it has happened spontaneously and also in a nicely chaotic way. Do you think that it will be different for books, possibly following some guidelines, or is random better?

The attempts to do digitization at large are facing either huge legal problems like the Google case or maybe even bigger logistical problems like the Europeana case. When big organizations are slow in doing something that is "ready" they usually face DIY bottom-up competition and that's exactly what's going on these days. Projects like DIY bookscanner gather together hundreds if not thousands of people improving digital book scanners and make them affordable for small organizations and individuals. This amazing DIY development is an important reminder to big organizations that the job can be done without them but this distributed approach is even more important when it comes to small (sub)cultures/ languages or what is also called a "long tail".

Making certain books available (when they are not) proved so many times through history to be a strong political gesture of confrontation (towards the system), inclusion and request for radical change. Today is not different at all.

Google Books' stated goal is to build the "universal library", scanning 130 million books while making partnerships with European national libraries (digitalization is exchanged with rights to use the content). On the other end Archive.org is also scanning a few million books but with a non-commercial (a "common") goal. How do you think those two efforts will evolve in the future?

This whole field is as political as it can get. We have commercial actors, the non-profit partisans who do amazing jobs but who are aware of the (political) limits of their approach, the governmental actors who usually just pretend that they are doing something but just wait for the commercial actors to take over, and the true outlaws who are doing their limited distributed thing but are only able to act tactically. This is political struggle and as with most struggles it is very hard to say what will happen. It is sad that inclusion, this time into the world of knowledge and development, still has to be generated through civil disobedience. Revolution as usual :)

You once said that "books are considered as the symbol of the knowledge society." Did you mean "books" as in the iconic form of knowledge container, or "books" as in media with specific, reliable characteristics (the fixity of content, portability, usability regardless of surroundings and independence from other technologies)?

For the tactical purpose of establishing truly inclusive public libraries the iconic form of knowledge container should be enough. But with every strategic step that maintains the catalogue/reference characteristics of the book, usability, portability and beauty become even more important.

You also said: "When everyone is a librarian, the library is everywhere." Beyond describing a purely digital peer-to-peer (or distributed)

model, do you think that the very concept of libraries (accessible repositories of knowledge) should be expanded/updated?

The public library was a dream (of some) whose realization just became possible in the digital age. The whole situation is very simple: We *are* in the future. It's just that there is too much resistance. It's about political will not about conceptualization or technical implementation. Kings, white men and capitalists never gave up their privileges easily.

In the US there are still more public libraries than McDonalds and they are used by 69% of the population. But there are a lot of libraries all around the world threatened with closure because of public funding cuts. What kind of evolution and/or destiny do you see for traditional libraries?

Without political struggle for universal access to knowledge, libraries are doomed.

There are (and have been in the past) different attempts to build large online libraries ignoring copyright restrictions, and more often than not they are focused on certain topics, like textz.com, aaaaargh.org, monoskop/log, the "paper" section of UbuWeb and a few others.

Some of them accumulate texts (in various forms, ascii, searchable pdf, ePub), but UbuWeb adopted a specific policy: sharing only expensive and rare stuff, not things that can be bought for cheap. Do you think that the quality of a file should somehow change policy decisions?

It is very hard for businesses to deal with symbolic capital when its exchange value grows without significant investment in "real" infrastructure. In a network context it's either processing power or traffic costs that, at the moment of success, asks for the investment. Then one can start business and become the (legal) target of other businesses, or you can try to improve distributing the costs through distributing the infrastructure. The latter is harder but much more fun.

Economically wise, how can a system based on purely free distribution sustain authors and publishers? Do you think that crowd-funding would be the most viable model or are there

alternatives? And, again, do you see any parallel with what already happened to music?

Music and books are very different businesses, mainly because the distinctive items of exchange are songs and books. Listening to songs takes much less time and people listen to music while they do other stuff (e.g. reading the book). Music was also lucky in the sense that mp3s have metadata embedded into the file specification and people care about their metadata - it is hard to even start to listen to music if you can't see what it is in your music player. One more difference is historical: when people got to the internet years ago they had quite a lot to read and very few web sites to listen to. That made them quite enthusiastic about downloading and sharing music and that's why we have sharing infrastructure developed and maintained. What is similar is that now both music and books are digital and available on the network. And on the networks there is a tricky threshold where you need to give something in order to pass it. And when you pass that tricky threshold people start to give you something back. You can't enforce people to do that. That's the trick of internet business.

Do you consider the act of sharing a book as a digital file a more radical form of "lending" as applied by libraries (a way of sharing without owning the object)?

We need metaphors when we don't understand stuff or when we need to introduce something new to each other. In 2012 we understand digital networks enough to know that we don't own the files that are transferred through the networks. We just have exact copy of the transferred file. On both ends. It is simple. But as we know from the past: kings, white men and capitalists never gave up on their privileges easily.

Nenad Romic (aka Marcell Mars) is one of the founders of Multimedia Institute - mi2 and net.culture club mama in Zagreb. He initiated GNU GPL publishing label EGOBOO.bits.
