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Pioneering DRM Innovation In The EBook Business

Digital Rights Management (DRM) is one area of publishing and the eBook business that should be of particular interest to any author who wishes to protect their written work when using digital formats.

DRM relates to protecting creative output in digital media formats (CDs, DVDs, eBooks, etc.). DRM technology attempts to stop your written eBook being resold or duplicated without your permission. The music industry was slow to react in protecting their music in digital formats, meaning tunes were widely available on the net without the music publishers profiting.

In the case of the eBook business, rights management was built in from the early days of computer engineering as eBooks are a product of the computing industry, rather than having started out of the regular hard-copy book publishing industry. This key differentiator means eBooks have used technological innovation from an early stage to protect the text and content of eBooks.

Historically, it has been software producers such as Adobe who pioneered the PDF file format for writing eBooks. Their software can be configured to constrain/restrict certain functionality of PDF readers. You may have seen this before where you receive a PDF book but are perhaps unable to copy/paste any of the text. It is possible to even restrict the user from printing out hard-copies of the document. This is DRM in action.

Most PDF file creation software now has this functionality (e.g. Adobe Reader and Microsoft Reader). Microsoft went a little further by stamping PDF files with the purchaser's information in order to facilitate tracking down file sharers.

What does the future hold for DRM? Perhaps the future is already here! Devices such as the Kindle Reader can communicate back to servers if eBooks are being illegally shared. It is then up to the publishers/vendors (e.g. Amazon) to decide what to do. Could they remove the PDF? Yes, apparently, as detailed in one recent case (2009), Amazon remotely removed PDFs from customers' Kindle Readers (<http://mashable.com/2009/07/17/amazon-kindle-1984/>).

And it now seems that even software houses are putting similar functionality into their PDF creation/publishing applications including password protection on PDF files combined with the ability to disable the eBook from a remote computer in the event that a customer has provided a false credit-card or is seeking a refund. For a lot of authors writing eBooks, protecting their PDFs through a simple configuration of their publishing software is an optimum solution.

These developments in the eBook business may be too late arriving for the millions of written eBooks that are already available online (these still have copyright protection on their intellectual content; Just no technological means to protect them). Future developments in PDF copy protection should make it even more practical for authors to start writing eBooks and begin profiting from selling eBooks online.

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