

***² = Asterisk to the Power of Two – A Digital Upgrade**

This idea tries to fix a dilemma of written language. When writing something down, our language guides us through a well-structured path. If we don't want to lose the direction we are heading for, this path is pretty narrow and there is not much room for explanations. But there is a difference between our train of thoughts and our written language. Our thoughts are not so straight. We have reasons for the steps we take. Using a metaphor again, our thoughts are like side roads of a highway. If we integrated them all into our highway, the highway would be much longer and it would take much more time to reach our destination. This problem was identified in the analogue world before and they partly tried to fix it with the *-sign. Today we are living more and more in a digital world, so there is no need to retain restrictions from the analogue world. Annotations no longer have to be written at the end of a text and there is not one damn good reason why they should be that short.

My suggestion:

We need a new letter-symbol, an interactive one (in this blog post I will use *² for it). When reading an ePaper, I may wish to see annotations. I then click on the symbol and a text box opens up, overlapping most of the current page. The size and look of the box, the text symbol, the operation, the control functions, all this would have to be further discussed. Most of all, an international standard (W3C) would be very good to prevent compatibility problems between different platforms and devices. It would also make sense to be able to integrate other media (audio, picture, video).

I would describe the difference between such an annotation and a link as follows:

“Asterix to the power of two” is for “longer” explanations that are not worth putting on an extra sub-site. *² also has differing contents from a link— a link brings you mostly to external contents, whereas *² would mostly link to its own contents, providing a seamless integration into the main page (if supported by the author). This would make it possible to write short texts offering a lot of further information, which you could call up according to your interests and reading habits.

1st possible application:

While writing this down, I came up with the idea of creating a new letter symbol. The end of the preview sentence would be a good place to demonstrate my annotation idea. Imagine there would be a “*²” letter and when clicking on it, we would get the text: “The new symbol should have a high recognition value... should integrate harmoniously into the typeface.... should be accentuated by color, related to a link, but with an other color than a typical link, etc.” All information given in this annotation would be only for interested people. People who just fly over the text wouldn't be disturbed by too many details. *² is in a certain way a stylistic device that can heighten the worth of a text when rightly used.

2nd possible application:

Another very good example is eBooks. Who is telling us how books have to look like? Wouldn't it be nice to have a book showing us what we wanna see? Yes, I think it would! A text box with a tag adding function would be the answer. Before beginning to read, I would select/de-select different tags in the index. This would integrate some passages and remove others. My parents, for example, really like information about environment and culture (as many others do), but I'm not that interested in it, so I would choose not to read that kind of

environmental information. *2 could bring customization to eBooks and allow it to be closer to different human tastes. Like all techniques, *2 will have limits, but they will be further removed, compared to analogue books. Imagine a book where you can decide how much extra information you get and how detailed this information is, when learning something new.

3rd possible application:

Online newspapers could use *2 to shorten their messages and at the same time present in-depth information. Conclusions could be “out-sourced” so that the well-informed reader can skip them. Here too, the author needs a sense of proportion (out-sourcing too much information is as bad as including it all). Or when they write about an opinion poll, they could give further details like, what type of people were interviewed, who was the sponsor, what the questions were, etc. In a rudimentary way, info boxes serve the same purpose as *2, but *2 would be better in a lot of cases, because it wouldn't force the writer to limit their contributions that much.

Ideas for navigation and design:

I prefer a simple user interface where I have as much freedom as possible. It should be possible to choose different layouts and to design new ones. I'm dreaming of a text box design without buttons and continuous border crossover. The size should be proportional to the text size shown (20% shorter horizontally – 40% vertically). If the box is not big enough for the contents, I suggest adding a dragging function to move the text up and down (as on certain cellphones – otherwise: mouse wheel/arrow keys). Depending on how fast you move the text, you would get more or less far into it. A double click anywhere in the box should close it, except on a link (this would guarantee easy use for PC & smartphone user). I prefer an aesthetical design – not like Windows 95 – that enables me to add different buttons and scrollbars, if I wish to.

Conclusion:

The examples above show the many possibilities of *2 and how it could better structure digital papers. The whole range of this idea is not visible at once (because of our “old thinking habits”) – but you should get it with some imagination. Other, further going ideas and uses should develop over time. *2 has the potential of strongly affecting future digital writing styles. Unlike a common annotation, *2 provides not only an addition, it can provide further extensions within a well-adapted frame. Digital technology is pretty young, we haven't yet completely realized its potentials, nor what limitations have become obsolete.



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