Tech fair shows 11th century books, 21st century technology

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Banners sporting the CeBIT computer fair logo flutter in the wind March 13, 2007 at the fair grounds in Hanover, central Germany. Precious mediaeval books, usually displayed in glass cases and touchable only with gloves, can now be read in glorious 3D, thanks to a system unveiled Tuesday at the world's top tech fair.

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With the 3D interactive book explorer, developed by Germany's Fraunhofer Institute, users browse through the sinewy Latin text and colourful illustrations penned centuries ago but in a distinctly up-to-date manner.

The text is scanned in and displayed on a flat-screen display and readers, standing a couple of metres (feet) back from the screen, scroll through the pages just by waving their hands in the air to operate motion sensor cameras.

The Fraunhofer Institute is working with the Bavarian State Library in the southern city of Munich to make some of their ancient collections available to a wider audience, explained project leader Paul Chojecki.

"I think the oldest book digitalised so far is at least 1,000 years old," he said.

Using just the motions of hands through the air, the reader can flip the book through 360 degrees and in 3D, revealing the jewel-encrusted covers of the priceless tomes.

"The next step would be to enhance the digital content," said Chojecki. "You could imagine a search function or a simultaneous translation if for example, you didn't speak Latin."

The technology is not limited to ancient volumes, however. Bookstores could offer customers a sneak preview of forthcoming offers or show them works that are currently out of stock, explained Chojecki.

The CeBIT, the world's biggest high-tech fair in the northern city of Hanover, runs until March 9.

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