The Interactive Picturebook: Mapping ‘literacy’ on a narrative/technology continuum

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Abstract

In The Dynamics of Picturebook Communication (2000), Nikolajeva and Scott outline a continuum approach to the determination of the interaction between image and text in picture books, from symmetrical through to contradictory (2000:225-6). In Reading Other People’s Minds Through Word and Image (2012), Nikolajeva suggests that “multimedial narratives frequently make use of ambiguity created in the interaction between media” (2012: 275). Hoggart suggested that “…changes in English society over the last fifty years have greatly increased the opportunities for further education available to the few people who will seek it” and concluded that this has “little direct compensatory bearing on the fact that concurrent changes are bringing about an increased trivialization in productions for the majority” (1957: 262). Using Hoggart (1957) as a contextual frame, this paper will consider shifts in the emerging field of interactive picture books for children. It will adapt and apply Nikolajeva and Scott’s (2002) continuum notion to map the progression with technology of interactive children’s books from closely aligned with their codex source material to contradictory (or, at the very least, asymmetrical). It will also consider the question of whether the interactive aspects of these digital narratives function as Nikolajeveva suggests (in relation to ‘traditional’ books) – as a means of creating imaginative ambiguities in the text – or whether they, in fact, might to some extent undermine the effectiveness of the ‘interaction between medias’ that makes picture books effective.

These ideas will be discussed with reference to digital interactive books by Bonyton (But Not the Hippopotamus (2010), Moo Media, and Blue Hat, Green Hat, (2011), Loud Crow Interactive) Potter (The Tale of Peter Rabbit, (2011), Loud Crow Interactive) and Joyce (The Fantastic Flying Books of Mr Morris Lessmore, (2010), Moonbot Books).

Introduction

In his conclusion to The Uses of Literacy, (1957) Hoggart observes the impact of the nexus between technological change, and the construction of ‘literacy’.

The fact that illiteracy as it is normally measured has been largely removed only points towards the next and probably more difficult problem. A new word is needed to describe the nature of the response invited by the popular material I have discussed, a word indicating a social change which takes advantage of and thrives on basic literacy. All this needs to be considered with special urgency today because it is in continuous and increasingly rapid development… (1957:264)

As a narrative medium with far-reaching but as yet unquantifiable implications for the landscape of literacy, the arrival and rapid development of television was predicted by Hoggart as just the beginning of an inevitable movement into shifting literacy norms. This prediction proved prescient in succeeding decades. Hateley, in her chapter Reading: From Turning the Page to Touching the Screen (2013), concludes her comparative examination of the treatment and function of reading as an act of agency in both digital and codex picture books with the observation that
Both these notions might be regarded, to a certain extent, as bookends for the central thesis of this paper – that the ideas identified by Hoggart might be usefully applied to our evolving understanding of the function and value of ‘literacy’ in a cultural context and that, partly because of ongoing technological shifts in narrative forms, the increasing availability of texts continues to outstrip their value in literacy terms. Hateley’s suggestion mirrors this, albeit in a slightly different context. Taking as a case in point the rapid expansion and ongoing development of the digital children’s picture book, this paper will examine the current disconnect between form and function, particularly when compared to the notions of narrative literacy currently available to child and adolescent ‘readers’ in other contemporary digital narrative vehicles, such as through gaming.

Hoggart framed his conclusion with the suggestion that the emergence of mass ‘popular’ literacy was not necessary adding cultural value or being reflected in literacy outcomes.

The fact that changes in English society over the last fifty years have greatly increased the opportunities for further education available to the few people who will seek it has, therefore, little direct compensatory bearing on the fact that concurrent changes are bringing about an increased trivialization in productions for the majority (1957:262).

Hateley, however, takes a less pessimistic view. Her argument captures the degree to which digital picture books are in their infancy with her suggestion, posited earlier in the chapter, that these books, in both their codex and app forms, “speak to changing times for reading by their emphasis on the value of books and reading as technologies of literature and of the self” (2013:1). This argues that, from a cultural literacy standpoint, there would be value in the development of a model of narrative function against which the rapidly growing field of digital picture books – both new works and adaptations of existing material – could be considered.

As a starting point, then, this paper considers the central notion in Nikolajeva and Scott (2000)'s proposed model of thinking about the interaction between words and images in codex picture books. This model permits both acknowledgement of the often highly complex semiotic relationships at play in the creation of meaning within these texts, while also allowing for a broader framework within which the wider scope and diversity of picture book communication might be examined. Theirs is a continuum model for the analysis of picture book texts, whereby the relationship between the words and images, and the degree of alignment between the two, might be used as a means of examining the methods by which individual works create meaning.

...for example, in symmetrical interaction, words and pictures tell the same story, essentially repeating information in different forms of communication. In enhancing interaction, pictures amplify more fully the meaning of the words, or the words expand the picture so that different information in the two modes of communication produces a more complex dynamic. When enhancing interaction becomes very significant, the dynamic becomes truly complimentary. Dependent on the degree of different information presented, a counterpointing dynamic may develop where words and images collaborate to communicate meanings beyond the scope of either one alone. An extreme form of counterpointing is contradictory interaction, where words and pictures seem to be in opposition to one another (2000: 226).

In looking at some of the developments in the field of children’s literature since 2000, aspects of this idea can be usefully applied to the digital picture book in its various forms. In examining the ways that new technologies and platforms are being applied to the creation and marketing of children’s literature, there is evidence of not identical,
but similar, concepts to Nikolajeva and Scott’s continuum notion taking place. At one end are texts so closely ‘aligned’ to their codex source material that they are, in effect, simple, wholesale translations of that text into another reading medium – the equivalent, if you like, of taking a hardback and converting it to a board book – while at the other end is the increasing development of digital texts which actively and consciously use intertextuality, hypertextuality and metanarrative to create meaning simultaneously in multiple narrative modes.

Increasingly, electronic narratives created specifically for children are evolving in such a way as to use the capacities offered by new media platforms such as tablet computers and E-readers to not simply translate texts from one medium into another, but to create texts which, ostensibly at least, rely upon a degree of both interactivity and reader agency in order to demonstrate and create narratives. These narratives, in a similar manner to the complimentary, counterpointing and contradictory narrative models identified by Nikolajeva and Scott (2000), rely on different levels of literacy on the part of the reader, require various degrees of intuition and critical thinking to access meaning, and draw upon the capacity of the platform itself to ‘add value’ to a narrative beyond that evident in only the written text or static illustration.

**Technology and Reading**

While a comprehensive account of the development of picture books for digital platforms is outside the scope of this paper, it is worth briefly considering, perhaps, the rapid development of this field of practice starting with the release of the first generation iPad, by Apple in 2010. At the launch keynote on January 7, Steve Jobs introduced Apple’s brand new iBooks application and bookstore by addressing the capacity of the iPad in relation to the Amazon Kindle e-reader – at that point the dominant digital reading device on the market; “Now, Amazon’s done a great job of pioneering this functionality with their Kindle. And we’re going to stand on their shoulders, and go a bit further” (2010: Online). His choice of language – particularly his reference to the idea of ‘functionality’ as a defining feature of a successful e-reader, and of the first generation iBook app and store as ‘pioneering’ – suggests that from the outset the designers of the iPad were not just aware of the potential of the iPad to contribute to a dramatic realignment in both reading behavior and texts, but that in their view such a realignment was intrinsic to the success of the new platform.

One possible indicator of the impact that the iPad had on digital reading culture for children can be seen in the speed with which Amazon.com – which up until that point had been more or less unrivalled in digital publishing – adapted to the changed reading landscape. A search by publication date of ‘Kindle picture books’ in the children’s books category on the Amazon store on July 10, 2013 yielded a total of 8287 results, 1903 of which had been published prior to December 31, 2011. The same search, conducted a little over 12 months later, on July 29, 2014, yielded 11656 results. The results of these searches, while significantly impacted upon by the limitations of the Amazon search engine, are nevertheless broadly indicative of a startling increase in the availability of e-picturebooks, beginning at around the same time as the launch of the iPad1.

In *The Uses of Literacy*, Hoggart (1957) addresses the rapid expansion of various forms of popular publishing in the mid 20th century. He is cautious as to the value of this expansion, suspicious of the motives of those creating and providing literature for ‘entertainment’, and careful not to equate increased availability with increased cultural ‘value’.

> There has been, particularly during the last few decades, a great increase in the consumption of many kinds of material designed to entertain; there has been an absolute increase, not simply one proportionate to the increase in population. Something of this was inevitable, as the technical capacity to provide entertainment on a large scale and as the money available to the majority of people for its purchase both increased. An increase is not to be deplored… But to some extent the size of the increase appears to have been decided not so much by the need to satisfy previously unsatisfied appetites, as by the stronger persuasions of those who provide the entertainment (1957: 256).

The application of this observation to the rapid expansion of the digital picture book, roughly 50 years on, throws
up some interesting ideas for comparison. Certainly his identification of the expansion of technology and of economic factors as significant drivers in the development of the industry would seem to apply neatly in the more contemporary example. On initial consideration, though, Hoggart’s implied binary between notions of ‘worthwhile’ literature and that designed primarily for ‘entertainment’ seems, perhaps, archaic.

When considered in terms of the continuum notion outlined above, however, many, if not all, of the digital picture books currently published through both Amazon and iBooks would be described as being closely aligned with their source material; the e-book functions more or less as a ‘scan’ of the codex book. There is minimal ‘value added’ in terms of the ways in which these texts create narrative meaning, and the readers are not required to go beyond simply the image on the screen. In literacy terms, in these there is no effective requirement for either readers or creators of these texts to go beyond the established literacies required for accessing and engaging with that narrative in any other form and, in many of them, an argument can be made that their publication has been driven as much by the commercial imperative to reach a global entertainment market as it has by any desire to contribute to the development of increased digital and critical literacy. This is problematic, not least because of the fact that the ‘readers’ of these texts have become accustomed to digesting digital narrative in far more interactive forms than many digital picturebooks are currently providing, and thus the reading expectations that consumers of these texts bring to the narrative often fail to be met.

**Games and Narrative**

To illustrate this notion of these texts not meeting the expectations of consumers who are more used to interactive narrative forms, this paper looks briefly at the field of computer game design, and the extraordinary development and shifts in the role of narrative in game design in the last 15 years. There’s a strong argument to be made that the application of narrative devices to game design has had an extraordinary impact upon the way in which digital texts, and especially visually-driven ones such as e-picture books, are approached by their readers.

When studies of the role of narrative in computer games were in their relative infancy, Jenkins (2004) identified a schism between game developers whose primary concern with the burgeoning development of interactivity in gaming was with that of game mechanics – those he termed *ludologists* – and *narratologists*, who supported a move towards the consideration of game design and study as an aspect of storytelling, and advocated the application of more ‘traditional’ narrative values and devices to this field.

He highlighted what he believed to be the central point of conflict between these two viewpoints by arguing that, while attempting to map ‘traditional’ modes of narrative onto games could potentially lead to the neglect of their specificity as an emerging form of entertainment in their own right, the role of narrative was nevertheless essential in the development of games that would engage their players effectively:

> You say ‘narrative’ to the average gamer and what they are apt to imagine is something on the order of a choose-your-own-adventure book, a form noted for its lifelessness and mechanical exposition, rather than enthralling entertainment, thematic sophistication or character complexity… yet, at the same time, there is a tremendous amount that game designers and critics could learn through making meaningful comparisons with other storytelling media. One gets rid of narrative as a framework for thinking about games only at one’s own risk (2004: 118 – 119).

In the decade since, significant leaps in the development of gaming technologies have enabled the role of narrative in game design to become not just significant, but – as Jenkins suggested back in 2004 – fundamental to the success of a game. Consider, as a case in point, the trailer for Grand Theft Auto 5, (online) which draws heavily on cinematic and televisual conventions in order to frame up the central narrative thread, which in turn forms the foundation around which the gameplay itself is built.

The same might be argued in relation to games for younger players. As an example, look at the opening scenes of ‘Machinarium’ – a 2009 PC game, adapted for iPad in 2011. The hand-drawn aesthetic of the game itself is comparable with many of the influential illustrative techniques of children’s book creators such as Shaun Tan and...
Jon Scieszka, and the importance of narrative as a device to not simply ‘hang’ gameplay on, but as a central
driving motivator to encourage players to ‘read’ the game as much as they play it, is evident right from the opening
scenes, where a small robot is removed from a futuristic city and dumped on a rubbish tip. This scenario
immediately sets up a classic quest narrative, which is then filled in through animated backstory dotted throughout
the scenes.

This paper suggests that when considering the broader notion of visual storytelling on digital platforms, narratives
like those evident in GTA5 and Machinarium are having, and will continue to have, enormous impacts upon reader
expectations when approaching any form of digital narrative, and should thus be considered alongside digital
picture-books in discussions and analysis of the effectiveness or otherwise of such narratives, and in discussions
about digital narrative literacy. In terms of the notion of a continuum from close alignment with codex form to zero
alignment, these game narratives – which function by literally placing their readers into the story and capitalizing
upon the value of the gaps and silences needed to fill in the plot – are at the far end of the continuum, allowing
them to maximize the reader’s engagement with the reading experience. In doing so, they also effectively collapse
Hoggart’s (1957) binary between the literacy value of ‘worthwhile’ versus ‘entertaining’ texts. The same cannot be
said of many of the texts currently available as digital picturebooks, which by failing to fully utilize the technological
 Capacities of their platforms, are in turn remaining very much at the ‘close alignment’ end of the continuum and do
not meet their reader’s expectations of interactivity. In turn, they are effectively contributing to maintaining this fifty-
year-old binary.

But Not the Hippopotamus

Consider, as an example, American children’s writer and illustrator Sandra Boynton’s iBook version of her 1982
children’s picture book But Not The Hippopotamus. Like much of Boynton’s catalogue, the appeal of this book in
its codex form lies in the simplicity of the rhyme, the universality of the message, and the gentle humour, all of
which translates into the iBook version. There is, it can be argued, little difference between reading the book as an
iBook or in codex form. The physical act of reading this e-book is similar to the act of reading the physical artifact;
pages are turned manually, eyes scan left to right across the page, and the time between turning pages is spent
relatively passively. Cadences in the reading and page-turning action therefore remain identical between forms.
The only significant difference between the codex and iBook editions is that the iPad platform includes the addition
of the soundtrack – in this case Boynton herself narrating the story. This addition, arguably, renders the reading
experience of the digital version as being a more passive, less interactive experience to that of the codex form;
with the soundtrack turned on the only required literacy is that of consumption of the text, not interpretation of it. As
Hateley (2013) suggests, and as this example illustrates, in failing to effectively re-imagine and re-present
the physical act of reading, many digital picturebooks are effectively undermining (or at least, failing to capitalize upon;
their own effectiveness as multimedial texts.

In Reading Other People’s Minds through Word and Image (2012), Nikolajeva identifies the multimedial nature of
codex picturebooks as a central contributing factor to their ability to convey and transfer emotional intelligence to
readers at different levels of cognitive development;

> I am looking in particular at how understanding of other people in the actual world is enhanced by
multimedial texts, where verbal and visual components can support or contradict each other…
> multimedial narratives frequently make use of ambiguity created in the interaction between media
(2012: 275).

If the same idea is used as a foundation for examining the communicative effectiveness of multimedia texts such
as ‘But Not the Hippopotamus’, many of the digital picturebook texts currently available fall short. In adopting
wholesale both the physical form and unadorned content of a codex book for presentation to a reader on a
platform such as a tablet – which brings with it a high expectation of interactivity on the part of the reader whose
previous ‘reading’ experience with that device has likely been shaped by texts such as increasingly narrative-
driven games – these e-books offer a ‘flat’ reading experience in that they fail to create or play upon the
‘interactive ambiguity’ idea posited by Nikolajeva. Hateley makes the point that
...it is important to consider the ways in which reading is represented in other forms, in order to begin to disentangle (as far as is possible or desirable) form from content in the shaping of reading as a meaningful experience (2013: 6).

Using ‘But not the Hippopotamus’ as an example, it's possible to argue that the tendency of the iBook (and, to a slightly less literal extent, the Amazon e-book) to represent reading as an act which remains closely aligned to the physical properties of the codex book serves to undermine the ability of the text to shape itself as a meaningful reading experience in that medium. Put another way, despite the fact that the original book is presented faithfully – including presentation of all the gaps and silences between written and illustrative texts – the high degree of alignment in the reading experience means that the book fails to generate the sort of interactive ambiguity readers have come to expect of a text on a digital platform. In doing so, its ability to convey emotional and cognitive impact is – at best – exactly the same as that of the codex version, and arguably less effective.

**Picturebooks as Apps**

This paper now considers two examples of what might be described as the next stage in the development of the digital picture book – the presentation of books not through a secondary-platform retailer such as Amazon or iBooks, but as stand-alone applications. These ‘app-books’ take into account the increased capacity of a digital platform to ‘add value’ to a text, and offer their readers a more interactive reading experience. Nevertheless, to develop Hateley’s notion that the representation of the act of reading is important as a means of discerning form from content, there’s a strong argument to be made that many of these app books are underwhelming in terms of the degree to which they re-code and re-develop the act of reading narrative. Put in terms of the continuum notion, it could be argued that while these app books are clearly a move along the continuum, the fact that many of them remain closely aligned with the codex experience of reading puts them squarely at the less interactive end of the spectrum.

One of the early examples of the app-book was Loud Crow Interactive’s adaptation for the iPad of Beatrix Potter’s *The Tale of Peter Rabbit*. *PopOut! The Tale of Peter Rabbit* was released through the app store on October 20, 2010 – six months after the launch of the first generation iPad. Immediately apparent is a higher degree of interactivity which has been introduced into the reading process; individual illustrative elements can be manipulated, sound effects have been introduced beyond a simple narration (though that is still present), and the application makes far more active use of the device’s inbuilt capabilities – the accelerometer, for example, can be used to ‘tip’ pictures from one page to the next. Nevertheless, it’s important to note that the model of reading presented in the app is still closely aligned with the codex conception of the picturebook – in this case the ‘traditional’ pop-up book, right down to the presence of physical tabs, wheels, and cuts in the pages to manipulate characters. Even the stitching of the book’s ‘binding’ is evident in the gutter. While the producers of the Peter Rabbit application have increased the degree of interactivity between reader and text, in terms of adding value to the narrative – of requiring the reader to step beyond the meanings implicit in both the written and visual narratives, and in the gaps between them – they have still chosen to remain closely within the spectrum of ‘traditional’ picture book functionality.

From this point, though, it’s possible to make the argument that both writers and developers have become increasingly aware of the capacity of the digital picturebook not simply to re-present a given text, but to also add value to the narrative itself. To illustrate this, the paper looks briefly at another Loud Crow Interactive book – the app-book version of Sandra Boynton’s *Blue Hat, Green Hat* released on 22 June, 2011, nine months after the release of *PopUp! The Tale of Peter Rabbit*. While the app still presents close alignment to the physical act of reading – pages must be turned, reading cadences remain unchanged – in this version there is a significant shift in the way that the digital book communicates its central narrative idea. Unlike *But Not the Hippopotamus*, this book has been not simply translated as a scan with a soundtrack, but has been actively adapted to allow and encourage a far higher degree of interaction on the part of the reader. In comparison with the codex edition, it becomes evident that the central humorous thread of the narrative – that the turkey character seems utterly incapable of dressing itself properly – is given a great deal of added emphasis and possibly rendered even more effective in this translation to digital form. The animated underwear humour, the soundtrack, and the requirement for the reader to actively touch and engage in the transformation of the characters allows the narrative a far higher
degree of engagement.

In the digital version of *Blue Hat Green Hat* we can also see the addition of a number of smaller ‘sub narratives’, which draw upon elements of game play and game narrative in order to ‘add value’ to the overall reading experience. This is significant, if for no other reason than it marks a shift in the way that creators – in this case Sandra Boynton and her production company – have shifted their thinking about not just the presentation of narrative in digital children’s literature, but also the role and function of it.

Where someone who already owns a hard copy of *But Not The Hippopotamus* would be reticent or unlikely to purchase the available, closely-aligned digital versions of the book, this would not necessarily be the case with *Blue Hat, Green Hat*. The additional hidden elements of the narrative (which might be likened, perhaps, to the idea of ‘Easter eggs’ hidden within game narratives) not only adds interest and engagement for child readers new to the work, but also adds appeal and a sense of value to its existing readers. It could be suggested that what Boynton has done with this adaptation is not so much translate an existing text to a new medium, as use that medium as a springboard to create a new layer of narrative on top of an existing story. In terms of the spectrum from alignment to contradiction, this is where the first really significant departure from the notion of digital books for children as simply another delivery platform, and movement into a newer critical model, might emerge.

**The Digital Picture book as source material: Morris Lessmore**

The final text considered in this paper might in some ways be seen as an inversion of the previous examples in that the ‘source material’ for the Codex version of this narrative appears on first glance to have been drawn directly from firstly a short film, which was then developed into an iPad app, and finally published in codex picture book form. *The Fantastic Flying Books of Mr Morris Lessmore* was first released to the public as an animated short film, directed by William Joyce and Branden Oldenberg in January 2011. Six months later an interactive version of the story was released as a stand-alone digital picture book for the iPad and was soon after featured on Apple’s App Store as an ‘App of the Week’. This, along with the short film winning the 2011 Academy Award for best short film, bought with it massive exposure and, in 2012, the narrative was published in codex form under the sole authorship of William Joyce as a ‘traditional’ children’s picture book.

This work is significant for a number of reasons, not least because one of the central thematic motifs running through it is an overt preoccupation with the notion of reading codex books for entertainment as being an intrinsically valuable skill and pastime. The plot begins with the protagonist, the eponymous Morrison Lessmore, writing in his journal, before being swept up in a hurricane and transported to a mystical library where he lives out his life among animated books, all of which demonstrate their own anthropomorphised charms. At the end of the story he has aged, but his aging is reversed when he either dies, or is flown back to his own reality, depending upon your interpretation of the text. At the same time his own book and likeness are immortalised in the library as the next custodian – a young girl, replete with many of the classic markers of childhood innocence and with more than a passing resemblance to Dorothy in the Wizard of Oz – takes his place in the library and begins to form her own special relationship with the books.

There are numerous aspects of this particular group of narrative works worthy of consideration, including the degree to which the central narrative, which presents an unproblematised representation of the value of reading, actually manages to achieve this end. This is a central notion explored by Hateley (2013) who concludes that

> ...as impressive an aesthetic and technical feat as the Morris Lessmore texts are, they demonstrate the fallacy of equating interactivity with agency. They show that texts can be about books without also being about reading (2013: 11).

Indeed, the actual reading experience presented by the codex version of *The Fantastic Flying Books of Mr Morris Lessmore* might be likened to the experience of reading early ‘scanned’ e-picturebooks such as *But Not The Hippopotamus*. The stripping away of the interactive elements of the app leaves behind an underwhelming narrative, and one that arguably works against the central thematic idea of the text.
The written text in the codex version has been flattened with the addition of redundant words and descriptors throughout (for example, the adding in of the unnecessary word 'for' after 'hoped' on pages 1, 27 and 40). There are also several points where the written text has been used in a heavy-handed manner to over-emphasise the central theme of valuing books and reading – on page 19, for example, in which Morris Lessmore takes on the task of repairing damaged books. The app version presents the text as “Morris cared for the books”, whereas the codex form takes a more didactic approach, and places specific emphasis upon the importance of this act in terms of Morris’s identity formation; “Morris found great satisfaction in caring for the books…” (2012:19).

Similarly, on page 25, the text shifts from ‘and Morris would always share the books with others…’ in the app edition, to a version in which the act of sharing literature is shifted from being a part of his library ‘duties’ and into an active pleasure as ‘Morris liked to share the books with others…’ (2012:25 – my italics). These small but semantically significant shifts in the written text have a number of effects upon the reading experience. In ascribing to the protagonist the more thematically supportive positions above, the text strips away a degree of ambiguity and agency from both the character and the reader. In the codex picture book we are left in no doubt that books are at the core of Morris Lessmore’s identity, and further, that this can only be a good thing. Unlike the app version of the story, the codex form shifts clearly towards the close alignment end of Nikolajeva and Scott’s (2000) picture book continuum, with little semantic distance between the illustrated and written texts. Within the context of the story, this has the effect of making the protagonist more obviously a vehicle for the author’s own desire that his thematic message be conveyed to the reader, and less effective as a character governed by the needs of the story.

The result is that the more overt statements of the book’s central theme in the hard copy version strip out much of the subtlety that underpinned the two preceeding source texts – the silent film and digital picturebook app – and as a result the codex picturebook is by far the least demanding of the three versions in terms of the literacies that it asks of its readers.

Alignment and Contradiction

Interestingly, while the comparative release and publication dates of the short film, the app-book and the codex picture book would seem to suggest that The Fantastic Flying Books of Mr Morris Lessmore started its life as a silent film before evolving into the iPad app and then finally the codex picture book, the liner notes for the codex version indicate otherwise –

William Joyce has been working on The Fantastic Flying Books of Mr Morris Lessmore since 1999… finishing the book took many paths – an Academy Award-winning animated short film, a groundbreaking story app, and now, at last, the book (2012: inside back cover).

In terms of this paper’s central thesis about the effectiveness of reading digital picturebooks along a continuum of alignment with their source material, this is important to note. This indication that the codex version of the story printed in 2012 is in fact a significant part of the source material suggests that, perhaps, much of the success of this work as a piece of digital literature is due to the fact that the writer, working with the designers of the film and app, allowed the narrative to move away from overt and slavish devotion to the source material as a reading experience, and instead allowed the platform, as much as the narrative, to tell the story. This shift along the continuum from a closely-aligned form of the narrative (the codex version) to a more contradictory and interactive form (the short film and iPad app), can be seen as a broader indication of the ways in which digital literacies might be applied to existing texts, to great effect.

Conclusion

Al-Yaqout (2011), writing about the early impact of the iPad as a pedagogical tool for picture book studies, observed that
Certainly it is not proposed that this paper answers many, if any, of the questions that Al-Yaqout implies, but it is argued that the digital picturebooks currently under development are beginning to demonstrate something of the evolution that she hints at here. One of the underlying ideas in her paper is the notion that part of the reason for the immediate popularity and increasing success of digital picturebooks on the iPad was its alignment with, and ability to reflect the physical representation of reading codex books. While this is doubtless true, and clearly evidenced by the high degree of reference to conventional reading in app-books to this day, the success of works like *The Fantastic Flying Books of Mr Morris Lessmore* as digital narratives in their own right, suggests also that the convergence of approaches to narrative in other digital mediums is just beginning to move the digital picturebook along the continuum towards complimentary and, perhaps, even contradictory text, rejecting notions of overt alignment with source material, to the overall benefit of the medium as a whole. While Hoggart’s (1957) concern – that the sudden profusion of available popular texts should not be equated with the ‘value’ of them in literacy terms – might appear to hold some relevance to this emerging digital reading landscape, it is credible to suggest that the binary of entertaining / valuable literacy is increasingly being challenged.

References


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Dr Anthony Eaton has been writing professionally for children, young adults, and adults since the late 1990s, to date he has published eleven novels. Anthony is currently researching the shifting conceptions of ‘young adult’ fiction, examining tensions between writers, publishers and consumers, with particular reference to notions of liminality as they present themselves in the field. With Assistant Professor Scott Brooks, he is also conducting research into the development of young and emergent writers as a significant area of cultural capital in contemporary Australia.