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THE MEDIUM BY VIRGINIA HEFFERNAN

Click and Jane

What are kids learning to read when they learn to read online?



"Did you like this book?" asks the computer. It's a customer-satisfaction question, but it seems more profound than that.

We hesitate. Ben, my 3-year-old son, shoots me a puzzled look. The answer should be yes. Ben enjoys what's on the screen right now: Starfall, an online medley of free learn-to-read activities. But he doesn't like the question.

"It's not a *book*," he explains, emphatically, to the laptop. "It's more like a *movie* or a *video*."

Oh, God. I knew it.

In a hundred ways, we pretend that screen experiences are books — PowerBooks, notebooks, e-books — but even a child knows the difference. Reading books is an operation with paper. Playing games on the Web is something else entirely. I need to admit this to myself, too. I try to believe that reading online is reading-plus, with the text searchable, hyperlinked and accompanied by video, audio, photography and graphics. But maybe it's just not reading at all. Just as screens aren't books.

I kind of like that Ben is not remotely fooled by Starfall's booklike graphics. The site is loaded with all kinds of biblio-iconography: title pages, tables of contents, frontispieces, page numbers and covers. But, to him, nothing that plays on a screen is a book. And though 20th-century critics like Roland Barthes encouraged readers to see textual experience as play, it's quite possible that nothing that *plays* is a book.

In their book "Freakonomics," Stephen J. Dubner and Steven D. Levitt write that kids who grow up in houses packed with books fare

better on school tests than those who grow up with fewer books. But they also contend that reading aloud to children and limiting their TV time has *no* correlation with success on tests. If both of these observations hold, it's worth determining what books really are, the better to decisively decorate with them. The widespread digitization of text has complicated the matter. Will Ben benefit if I load my Kindle with hundreds of books that he can't see? Or does he need the spectacle of hard- and softcover dust magnets eliminating floor space in our small apartment to get the full "Freakonomics" effect? I sadly suspect he needs the shelves and dust.

Anyway, Ben doesn't distinguish between my Kindle and a BlackBerry. My immersion in the Kindle is not (to him) an example of impressive role-model literacy. It's Mom e-mailing, or texting, or for all he knows playing video games. In fact, the only time he describes what he and I do together as "reading" is when we're sitting with a clutch of pages bound between covers, open in front of us like a hymnal.

Starfall, a lovably cluttered site, includes games (match "d" with a picture of a drum) with its offerings, and perhaps the proximity of these games to the site's "books" (artless plot summaries called "The Wooden Horse" or "The Little Red Hen") is what leads to a category error. But there's also the pesky fact that the pictures in Starfall's would-be picture books tend to fidget. They're animated. Something about an audience of kids apparently makes it hard for authors to refrain from animating: if an image for children can be made to dance around, it usually does.

One More Story, a subscription-only online children's library that first appeared in 2005, takes exception to this treatment of images. The site, which maintains a sublicensing arrangement with 13 publishers, offers only picture books that have already been published. It does not use cartoons of any kind. You can find "The Snowy Day" on One More Story, as well as "The Poky Little Puppy" and "Stellaluna." "The books are never animated," Carl Teitelbaum, a onetime "Sesame Street" contributor who created the site, explained to me by e-mail message. "We do not alter the text or the illustrations at all."

But One More Story also demonstrates that — as Barthes and his fellow critics might have put it — every translation entails a reworking. It's impossible to render books as pixels without making changes. "We do take the text out of the page and place it in a text box in a size type that children can easily follow," Teitelbaum conceded. Moreover, voice-over is added, so a child can have a book read to him.

One More Story does not use facsimiles of the lettering in a book, even if a book is hand-lettered or idiosyncratically lettered. Nonetheless, Teitelbaum explained: "We try to match the typeface with the typeface in the book so going to the actual books will be a smooth transition. We

Photograph by Kevin Van Aelst

sometimes go in for close-ups, the way your eye might, when the text refers to a portion of the illustration.” Hmm. All this reconceptualization, and scoring and even sound effects: sounds like filmmaking to me.

And yet. While some movie devices show up on One More Story, great pains are taken to preserve — even enhance — the booklike feel of the works in the online library. The gutter of the book is shown, the pages are slightly curved and shadows are used to create an impression of depth. It’s kind of funny to go to the trouble to radically reconceive a book for new distribution and display, only to have to add back some of its humblest physical qualities. “This realistic portrayal is very intentional,” Teitelbaum explained. “When a child has a positive experience, we want that child to know that they have just read a book, not seen a cartoon or video game.”

I’d like that, too. I’d like for Ben to sit with One More Story and come away with the impression that he’d been read beautiful books all afternoon. But Ben tends to ask for One More Story when he wants privacy, the same state of mind in which he likes videos. Books, by contrast, are for when he feels snugly.

Which brings up something significant about books for a 3-year-old: whatever else preschool reading is, it’s intimate. Before you can read, you get to see books mostly when you’re cuddled up with an adult or jostling with other kids in a circle. In one significant sense, then, One More Story may be closer to true reading than even the ink-on-paper books (with real gutters!) that I read aloud: Ben can do it himself. As he maneuvers the computer trackpad and he shoos me away so he can study (for the 10th time) “Sidney Won’t Swim” on One More Story, I’m not sure he’s developing an appreciation for books. But he is learning how to enrich his solitude, and that is one of the most intensely pleasurable aspects of literacy. ■



Points of Entry

THIS WEEK'S RECOMMENDATIONS

FREE-FOR-ALL: In early-childhood education, nothing is underthought. Except, refreshingly, **Starfall**. The eccentric, cheerful learn-to-read site is loaded with scattershot activities. Some of them are great — the “D” sequence in the opening alphabet is curiously effective — while some miss the mark. (The Groundhog Day game is plain weird.) All told, though, the site is fun, free and — see for yourself — effective.

UPSCALE: For a more elegant, more serious and more expensive early-reading experience, try **One More Story**, the subscription-only online library. For \$44 a year, you get a sparkling-clean interface, acclaimed tried-and-true picture books, lovely narration and a glitch-free player.

JOUISSANCE: Nothing like teaching someone to read to make you wonder what reading really is. Turn your adult phonics skills onto the great 1973 breakthrough “**The Pleasure of the Text**,” by Roland Barthes, and revisit the argument that rapture lies in making meaning of written language. Find a battered grad-school copy chock-full with marginalia on AbeBooks.com for about \$10, including shipping.



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