

Chapter 70

New and Strange Sorts of Texts: The Shaping and Reshaping of Digital and Multimodal Books and Young Adult Novels

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ABSTRACT

Dennis Baron (1999) writes about the impact of digital technology on literacy practices and thus is a good exemplar for considering how communication technologies are changing the ways in which stories are told. In this chapter, we argue that young adult literature authors and readers are currently in what Baron terms an inventive stage as they devise new ways of producing storied texts. Young adult authors, aware of their readers as avid, exploring, and savvy tech users, experiment with text formats to appeal to readers growing up in a digital “participatory culture” (Jenkins, Purushotma, Weigel, Clinton & Robins, 2009). In a cultural climate where the very notion of what constitutes a book is changing, our chapter responds to Baron’s (2009) claim that readers and writers are in the process of “[learning] to trust a new technology and the new and strange sorts of texts that it produces” (p. x).

For many of us, the computer revolution came long ago, and it has left its mark on the way we do things with words. (Baron, 2009, p. 15)

Books as cultural tools are part of the shaping and reshaping of cultures and the stories those cultures tell. Recent changes in communication technologies have raised the alarm that *the book* as a format is in danger. Readers accustomed to the terse prose of Tweets and the speedy delivery of ebooks to their tablets, the worry goes, may lose interest in the long form of literary prose. However, the book per se is not as fragile and unchangeable as many fear; books have already proven that they can both cause and survive cultural shifts. In observing the power and resilience of the book, Richard Nash (2014) pointed out

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Books withstood the disruption of new modes of storytelling—the cinema, the TV set. And books have been the disruptor themselves many times, disrupting the Roman Church and upending the French aristocracy, the medieval medical establishment, then the nineteenth-century medical establishment. (para. 35)

Thus, as Nash asserted, the tensions surrounding contemporary developing communication technologies and their ongoing influence on the shape and form of the book echo the tensions expressed in previous moments of cultural change.

Two videos, both available on YouTube at the time of this chapter's writing, demonstrate this current moment of cultural tension surrounding the book. The first video, a piece of Norwegian sketch comedy originally broadcast in 2001 called "The Medieval Helpdesk" (NRK, 2007), shows a befuddled monk seeking expert advice on how to use the new technology of the codex. He expresses delight and frustration as he labors to understand the page-turning functions of the unfamiliar format. The second video, a more recent ad by Ikea (Ikea Singapore, 2014), features a serene speaker explaining the ease of use of the company's paper-and-ink catalog, referred to as not an iBook or an ebook but as a "bookbook."

The popularity of both videos (YouTube views combined are in excess of 20 million) points to the contested present in which practitioners of the book form--both readers and makers--find themselves. The videos' humor hinges on the ongoing anxious relationship between the book community and the technolog(ies) at its creative disposal. In the 2001 "Medieval Helpdesk" video, social satirists reflected the helplessness readers felt towards perplexing new digital formats and related practices (D'Arcens, 2014); in the 2014 Ikea work, marketers tapped into a perceived consumer nostalgia for the out-of-fashion process of turning a page. In less than 15 years, readers went from bewildered babes in the woods to wistful old hands.

But while readers and writers today are increasingly turning to portable technology for the consumption and distribution of texts, discussions within book communities over the nature and role of the book in the digital era are by no means settled. Instead, they continue to intensify. At the heart of the discussion is the very structure of texts and modes of content in the digital age and, as a result, the qualities and types of experiences available to readers and writers. Print-based books, by the nature of their physical make-up, are predominantly linear, ordered, and bounded while digital and electronic texts--which feature multimodal communication and linking capabilities--can be multi-sensory, changeable, impermanent, flexible, and unbounded. Creators, academics, publishers, and users wrestle with this overarching problem: Given that the book form is a technology that directs extensive aspects of human experience, what are the effects when that technology is radically altered, when the components of "bookness" are profoundly disrupted? Said differently, what happens when the structure of the book, which Marshall McLuhan (1960) argued was responsible for human constructs ranging from the assembly line to romantic love, is displaced by newer technologies of knowledge? Underlying these concerns is an even more daunting inquiry: If, since its inception, the technology of the book has guided how humans make knowledge, then how can the features of digital communication technology support humans "to begin to think differently" (McLuhan, 1960) and what repercussions might that thinking differently bring?

The scope of these questions is vast, which perhaps adds to the current jitteriness of the discussion. Dennis Baron (2009) comfortingly reminds us that we are in the process of learning to "trust" these emerging communication technologies and the "new and strange sorts of texts" (p. x) made possible by them. In this chapter, we start by looking at some of the tensions surrounding the impact of digital technologies on the book format and how those tensions might be framed within stages of technological development. We give an overview of early electronic literature as a response on the part of authors

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