



Storytime on a screen

Children's e-books rise in popularity,
but are they good for young readers?

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In 2005, pop culture contrarian Steven Johnson asked readers of his book “Everything Bad Is Good for You: How Today’s Popular Culture Is Actually Making Us Smarter” to imagine a topsy-turvy world in which video games were invented before books. ■ “Kids have been playing games for centuries — and then these page-bound texts come along and suddenly they’re all the rage,” he writes. “What would the teachers and the parents and the cultural authorities have to say about this frenzy of reading? I suspect it would sound something like this: “Reading books chronically understimulates the senses. Unlike the longstanding tradition of gameplaying — which engages the child in a vivid, three-dimensional world filled with moving images and musical soundscapes — books are simply a barren string of words on the page.”

Reading, they might fret, is socially isolating and dangerous in its passivity. “Reading is not an active, participatory process; it’s a submissive one. The book readers of the younger generation are learning to ‘follow the plot’ instead of learning to lead.”

It’s an interesting fantasy to revisit as children’s e-books start to catch up with their adult predecessors in popularity. Sales of e-books for children increased 475 percent from January 2011 to January 2012, according to Digital Book World, an educational and networking resource for commercial publishers, making them an impressive \$22.6 million-a-month business.

Particularly when aimed at early readers, e-books resemble video games more than traditional page-bound children’s stories. They engage multiple senses, allow for interactivity and transform books from a static medium into colorful, active, talking *experiences*.

But is that a good thing?

Johnson was making a point about our reflexive habit of maligning new trends, but literacy and early childhood experts have begun to turn serious attention to how young minds are affected when technology marries literature.

“We’re sensing something really important starting to happen,” says Chip Donohue, director of the Technology in Early Childhood Center at the Chicago-based Erikson Institute. “What we’re seeing so far is the success of an e-book is quite similar to the success of a traditional children’s book: It’s about relationships.”

Specifically, the relationship between the child and the person reading with him or her.

“If parents assume that an e-book is something you just give a kid and sit them on the couch and you don’t need to interact, they’re really missing a key piece of why books are so important for young children,” says Lisa Guernsey, author of newly released “Screen Time: How Electronic Media — From Baby Videos to Educational Software — Affects Your Young Child.”

“The way parents talk to a child while they’re reading together has as much impact as the text on the page — questioning children as they’re looking at the book, taking moments to ask if they understand what’s happening so far, asking what they think will happen next,” says Guernsey. “Those moments of interaction, which are called ‘dialogic reading,’ are associated with stronger reading skills when children get to be true, independent readers.

Michael Robb, the director of education and research at the Fred Rogers Center for Early Learning and Children’s Media, wrote his doctoral dissertation on e-books. He says parents and teachers and caretakers are the scaffolding upon which literacy skills are built.

“What we found is the interactive features available to children in e-books are unrelated to children’s ability to understand a story or freely recall what happened in a story,” Robb says, citing his research comparing children who read e-books to children who read traditional books. “But having a parent there — in both reading an e-book and a print book — was significantly related to the ability to understand a story.

“Parental involvement is the most important element,” Robb says. “Particularly if they’re engaged in labeling what’s on the screen or on the page and asking related questions.”

An exception arises, however, if the parents focus their attention and comments on the device itself, a phenomenon Guernsey addressed in a recent article for Time Magazine, “Why e-reading with your kid can impede learning,”

Separating e-book wheat from chaff

All e-books are not created equal.

“Just as saying all TV is bad or good would be ridiculous because of the number of different things on TV and the different ways people watch,” says Lisa Guernsey, author of “Screen Time.” “The same applies to e-books. We need to start with what we know about regular books and how the brain puts together all the ingredients needed to read.”

We checked in with Jeremy Brueck, director of the Center for Literacy at The University of Akron, who’s developing a quality rating tool for e-books, for his favorite features.

→ **Ease of use:** “Does the e-book have things that make it easy and intuitive to navigate? Forward and back buttons, a home button to return to the beginning of the story or the cover of story, a swipe feature that simulates page-turning.”

→ **Traditional book features:** “Ideally it corresponds with what we call book-handling skills,” Brueck says. “The ability to turn pages. Maybe a table of contents. A cover or a title page that has the illustrator and the author clearly stated. When you’re teaching kids to read you want them to understand who the author and illustrator are and what part they play in the process.”

→ **Clarity:** “What types of fonts and letters and styles does it use? For an early reader, you don’t want a fancy, gothic font that presents the letters in a way that children aren’t used to.”

→ **Narration:** “One really nice feature of e-books is the narrated mode so the child can actually have the story read to them,” Brueck says. “Learning to associate the letters and words offers extra support to teachers and parents if the child is reading the book, say, in the back of a car or on a train or bus.”

→ **Audio components:** “Some e-books allow you to tap the word and the word is sounded out. That kind of a phonetic awareness can really be a learning aid. Some will ... tell you the definition, which is a nice vocabulary-enhancing tool.” The book should, at its heart, tell a decent story. “Kids connect to a narrative,” says Chip Donohue of the Erikson Institute. “And because I’m so committed to joint engagement and pulling mom and child or dad and child together, there’s got to be something there that engages the adult as well. I always go back to the Disney movies that are designed to entertain kids, but also give the adult who paid for the ticket something to enjoy, the same way Sesame Street is always cracking jokes that are very much meant for the parents who are sitting and watching with their children.”

— H.S.

citing research out of Temple University. Temple researchers reported that in a study involving 33 children and their parents, parents who read children traditional books made more comments related to the story than those parents who used e-books.

“Instead of talking with their children about the content of the books, parents ended up spouting ‘do this, don’t do that’ directives about how to use the devices,” Guernsey wrote. “All this chatter may interfere with comprehension.”

Some e-books are little more than an audio version of the print book, with a narrator reading the story aloud as your child clicks an arrow to turn each page. Others allow the reader to click on certain words to see their definitions, tap characters to bring them to virtual life and even control the outcome of the story.

“They are a wonderful opportunity to add some liveliness to the text and get kids to laugh and play with books in a way that is new and exciting,” says Guernsey. “But I think we are seeing parents who are, in some ways, still trying to get used to the technology and wonder if their children are using it right and others who are so excited by the technology themselves that they forget they still have a big role to play.”

A frequent concern among parents, Guernsey says, is whether kids raised on e-books will find traditional texts too dull to bother with. “Especially the struggling reader,” she says. “Will these books become a crutch for kids who just prefer to have the book read to them?”

It’s too early to know conclusively, she says, whether a generation of kids will shun paper texts. The technology simply hasn’t been around long enough for research to draw long-term conclusions. But anecdotally, she thinks print is safe.

“I have two kids who very much enjoy reading print books,” she says. “This generation isn’t so enamored of technology that they’re willing to completely forgo print. They’re still interested in turning page after page without any animation or words jumping off the page at them.”

Ideally, Robb says, parents and children will embrace both mediums.

“Media and technology are such a dominant part of the world we live in,” Robb says. “It would be a mistake to try to shut e-books out entirely. The best strategy is to teach technology etiquette and to balance technology with all the other things we know are good for children — outdoor play, interacting with friends and other children, reading books.”

And though it’s impossible — and ill-advised — to remove the debate over appropriate amounts of screen time from the equation, it’s important not to let it dominate the discussion.

“Yes, we should be very mindful of screen time,” Donohue says. “But I wouldn’t want to see parents fearing this technology. You still have to decode letters and sounds and make meaning of words and move through the story. This is another chance to make reading really fun for a child.

“I have a job as a parent to fill my child’s world with language and questions and add perspective in ways that will really resonate,” he continues. “It’s what happens after you close the book or turn off the iPad — ‘Let’s talk about the story. Let’s act it out.’ That’s when the learning happens.”

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