

# Reading and “Gamification”

## Joining Guilds, Earning Badges, and Leveling Up

MARIANNE MARTENS

Starting with examples of early gamified transmedia books such as Patrick Carman’s *Skeleton Creek* series (launched in 2009) and Scholastic’s *The 39 Clues* series (first published in 2011) and continuing with a look at several book apps and recent books for tweens, this paper explores how “gamification” has entered the realm of books and reading for young people.

This convergence of reading and game playing enabled by new digital formats raises concerns and misperceptions among adults. In a recent series of interviews in a library in Southern California, several parents expressed surprise that apps found on the iPad could be anything *but* games.<sup>1</sup> For these parents, print books provide an educational experience, while iPads and similar devices are viewed as being strictly for entertainment. While children might be more eager than their parents to gravitate toward digital devices, as Sonia Livingstone and Kirsten Drotner write, “Children’s agency in relation to media is not always publicly welcomed. On the contrary, often this is precisely what gives rise to adult concerns. Examples include contemporary conflicts with teachers and other adults of authority over time spent texting or gaming.”<sup>2</sup>

In general, compared to gaming, which resides in the realm of entertainment, print books for young people are a form of entertainment deeply entrenched in values associated with reading and learning, and are therefore considered as having significantly more of what French philosopher Pierre Bourdieu calls “cultural capital.”<sup>3</sup>

Since the mass introduction of television in the 1950s, continuing through the age of the personal computer, and then since April 3, 2010, when the first iPad was released, “screen time” has been something parents and caregivers have been warned against.

Screen time has been blamed for violent behavior, Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD), and now, studies in both scholarly and mass media sources, from the American Academy of Pediatrics to the *Chicago Tribune*,<sup>4</sup> have found evidence that too much screen time contributes to childhood obesity. However, despite the risks, multiple research shows that children’s interaction with enhanced digital books (including book apps and enhanced e-books) supports early literacy development and diverse learning styles.<sup>5</sup>



**Marianne Martens** is assistant professor at Kent State University’s School of Library and Information Science. She has a background in children’s publishing, is a member of ALSC’s Children and Technology Committee, and serves on the Littleelit Advisory Board. You can read more about her work at [mariannemartens.org](http://mariannemartens.org) and she can be reached at [mmarten3@kent.edu](mailto:mmarten3@kent.edu).

The multimodality of these formats incorporate text, visual elements, sound, and interaction, which together support what Cahill and McGill-Franzen describe as “transliteracy development”—the ability to read, write, and interact across multiple media platforms. Yet others, such as Meyers, Zaminpaima, and Frederico have found that the absence of longitudinal studies on such learning means that the actual impact of reading on these devices remains largely unknown.

Meanwhile, these new formats are on the rise. According to a 2012 report by Shuler, Levine, and Ree,<sup>6</sup> apps for young people in the iTunes store went from zero available in June 2008 to nearly 700,000 in 2012. Of those apps, more than 80 percent in the “education” category target children, and 72 percent of those target preschoolers.

In December 2013, *Forbes* magazine reported that the number of apps in the iTunes Store had reached 1,000,000, with an average of 25,000 to 30,000 added monthly.<sup>7</sup>

Some are helping navigate the digital terrain. Lisa Guernsey’s 2012 book *Screen Time: How Electronic Media—From Baby Videos to Educational Software—Affects Your Young Child* speaks calmly and rationally about this phenomenon that (understandably) instills panic in parents, educators, and caregivers of young children.<sup>8</sup>

Others, such as blogger Carisa Kluver, founder of *The Digital Media Diet* (<http://digitalmediadiet.com>) and *Digital Storytime* (<http://digital-storytime.com>) and Cen Campbell, founder of *Little eLit* (<http://littleelit.com>), highlight some of the benefits of quality digital media for young people, and provide resources on how to select and use them.

In the case of books for young people, technology blurs the line between “books” and “games,” as demonstrated in the books and apps explored in this paper. In recent years, the publishing industry has struggled—first with closing independent bookstores and now with declining superstores, starting with the demise of Borders in 2011.

Digital formats are seen as new profit centers. New ideologies on digital reading, encouraged by publishers and authors, argue that the best way to motivate readers—especially reluctant readers—is to blur lines between books and games. The largest transnational publishers, who can afford to produce innovative formats, are lauding electronic formats and interactive books as ways to create readers out of children raised on gaming, who might prefer technology to printed books.

Carman, author of several multiplatform books including the Skeleton Creek series and the Dark Eden app, argues, “Mixing media is a way to bring kids back to books,” and describes his hybrid creation as a form of “book evangelism”<sup>9</sup> that attracts children to reading. Rick Richter, former president of Simon & Schuster and current digital media consultant, described a key advantage with digital formats as appealing “to non-bookworms, such as computer and gaming geeks.”<sup>10</sup>

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According to a marketing director interviewed in 2011, a key goal in creating multiplatform books, which are books that must be read across multiple media platforms, was to attract those children who were more interested in gaming than in reading.<sup>11</sup>

This marketer imagined children’s reading as taking part in a digital media landscape strewn with computers, tablets, cell phones, television, and even print. Publishers have made significant financial investments in digital formats, and there is an assumption on the part of the publishers that young people enjoy—and even expect—these multiplatform/transmedia formats, especially as e-book use is on the rise.

According to the Pew Internet and the American Life Project, in January 2014, three in ten Americans read an e-book in the preceding year and half owned an e-reading device.<sup>12</sup> This is a significant increase from the last report of May 2011, in which 12 percent of adults [over 18] in the United States owned an e-book reader.<sup>13</sup>

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## Gamification Explained

Game researchers Sebastian Deterding, Dan Dixon, Rilla Khaled, and Lennart Nacke describe “gamification” as the “idea of using game design elements in non-game contexts to motivate and increase user activity and retention.”<sup>14</sup> Writing about interaction design and digital marketing, they describe how “vendors now offer ‘gamification’ as a software service layer of reward and reputation systems with points, badges, levels and leader boards.”<sup>15</sup>

Technology enables the use of gamification to motivate people in different spheres: from business, to fitness, to charity, to education, and now also to reading. For example, “Recyclebank” ([www.recyclebank.com](http://www.recyclebank.com)) uses gamification to get people to recycle, and the Fitocracy app ([www.fitocracy.com](http://www.fitocracy.com)) motivates



Figure 1. Clicking on the profile of CobraDark48<sup>20</sup> leads to his or her shield, badges, and medals.

users to go to the gym by having them earn points and beat quests. In education, the type of “digital game-based learning,” identified by Marc Prensky in 2001,<sup>16</sup> has been experimented with and adopted by many in the K–12 curriculum.

## Gamified Books

Arguably, connecting children’s reading experience to play is not a new concept, and there are many examples of game elements in print books, such as in Edward Packard’s Choose Your Own Adventure series published in the 1980s and 1990s. Movable books, including pop-ups, are hybrid formats that elegantly fuse educational elements with play.

In 1989, Carolyn S. Brodie and Jim Thomas described print movable books as coming in “a variety of formats. . . . Many librarians, educators, and authors have extolled their unique features as well as their educational and entertainment values.”<sup>17</sup> Arguably the authors could have been writing about book apps. Indeed, you could think of printed pop-up books as an early version of the book app, combining educational elements in a very entertaining package.

Now technology allows book producers to borrow elements from video game design, and create literary products that approximate games. Two such pioneering series for tweens, both published by Scholastic, include Patrick Carman’s *Skeleton*

*Creek* series and *The 39 Clues* series (by assorted authors), influenced other books, series, and book apps that followed. *Skeleton Creek* (grades 6 and up) uses a dual-narration framework in which one author, Ryan, narrates via a print journal (i.e., the books), and the other, Sarah, uses “vlogs” (video blogs) to communicate her portion of the story.

Carman has a background in advertising, technology, and game design. In *Skeleton Creek*, gamification refers to the game-like design of the series, the interplay of the text and the videos, and the opportunities for readers to extend the story online on the “character’s” social media pages (created by the author). Beyond the *Skeleton Creek* franchise, readers participate by making their own YouTube parody videos, such as *Skeleton Creek: The Ending Pt.1*, which mimics the hand-held camera-feel of Sarah’s vlogs.<sup>18</sup>

Scholastic’s *The 39 Clues* (grades 4 to 7), first published in 2008, is a multiplatform book series consisting of eleven books in the first series, an integrated website, collector cards, and now also a book app. By blending the books, the integrated website, and collector cards with gaming elements such as badges and competitions (including cash prizes), this series employs more sophisticated gamification than *Skeleton Creek*.

The website implores readers to: “JOIN NOW to start your hunt for the 39 Clues. Create an account, discover which branch of the Cahill family YOU belong to, play missions, and explore the

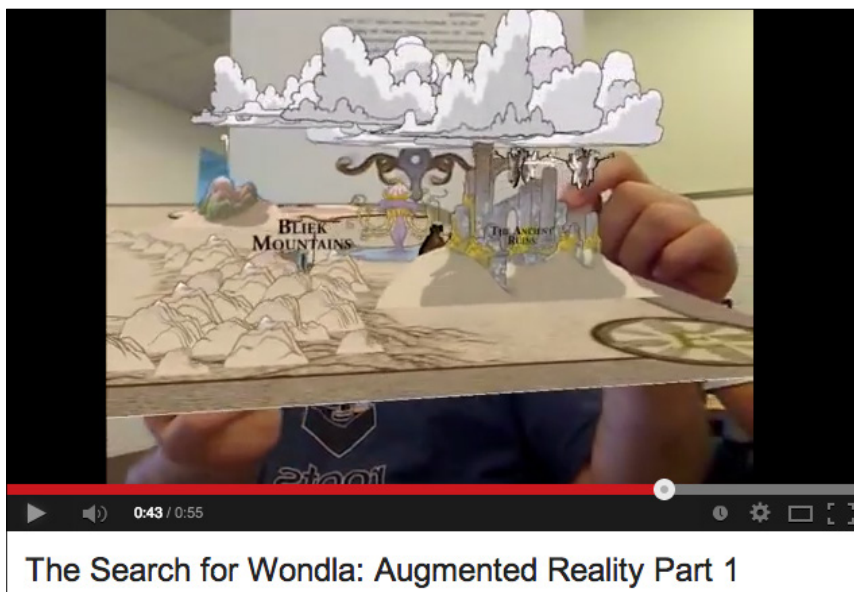


Figure 2. World building with Wondla's Augmented Reality

website to see if you can be the first to find the Clues.”<sup>19</sup> There is an additional interactive component on which readers can post to each other and share “secret” information. In addition to sharing information about *The 39 Clues*, members also post user-generated role-playing games; belong to “branches” (much like the “guilds” of online games); and display crests, badges, and medals as earned for their participation, as in the example in figure 1.

On publication of the first book in the series, Scholastic even offered more than \$100,000 in prizes. To win the prize money, readers had to invest in cards to get clues. Buying more cards resulted in getting more clues, which in turn increased participants' odds of winning.

Augmented reality is a game-like device used since 2013 by Guinness in its popular reference books. By downloading an app and scanning QR codes, readers get a 3-D visual experience. To see a demonstration of *Guinness Book of World Records'* augmented reality, see the book trailer here: [www.youtube.com/watch?v=eYE9W3qSIRo](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eYE9W3qSIRo).

Augmented reality has also been used in fiction, as in Tony DiTerlizzi's *Wondla* series for children (grades 5 to 8), published by Simon & Schuster. Using a webcam, readers can hold the print book up to the camera to reveal 3-D maps of the world created in the series. The website for the book also has links to a game available for purchase, and free online activities. Figure 2 shows a screenshot of what augmented reality looks like in this book.

## Marketing Playfully

In these new book formats, gamification extends from book-based content, across integrated websites and apps, into related products such as collector cards. The structures supporting

these products are gamified as well, as marketing plans become part of the story line, connect to the series' world building, and use digital media to play with readers. In the past, publishers directed marketing efforts, and authors promoted their books via tours and school visits.

However, with technological innovations in social media, marketing becomes a collaborative, community effort between marketers, authors, and readers. Authors such as Carman embody multiple roles multitasking as author, producer, and marketer of their work.

Marketing efforts around *The 39 Clues* focused on play as well. The publisher's staff had the idea of extending the story by creating an ancillary mystery character. A man in a trench coat started appearing in the background in videos and then suddenly showed up in person on Peter Lerangis's tour stops.

In creating such interactive character extensions, the publisher playfully blended fiction with reality as people became book characters, and book characters came to life. The collaborative community marketing effort, involving publishers' marketing staff, authors, and the participating young readers, explicates the new configuration of the field, in which game-like elements play a major role.

## New Means of Production

Digital reading moves book production into new dimensions rooted in the gaming industry, and requiring game developers, or, in the case of *Skeleton Creek*, a casting agent to help find an actor to embody the online character of Sarah. Book apps borrow even more from the world of gaming. Mary Kay Carson's *Bats! Furry Fliers of the Night* (2012) was built with 3-D software, generally used for game design, by Unity.<sup>21</sup> In addition, apps require a production team that includes artists and writers, but also software developers, game developers, and coders, which leads to apps' close connection to the world of games.

## Challenges Faced by Book Apps

The eventual success or demise of book apps depends on several factors. While there are many high quality apps for young people, finding them in venues like the App Store can be overwhelming. Unlike reviewing a physical picture book prior to purchase, where the content is obvious, relying on short previews in the App Store can mislead, providing only minimal details about the products. Information about in-app purchases or in-product advertising (which can be expected to appear in free apps, but also sometimes in apps sold) is obscured.

While users can and should critically read reviews and award sites for more information, it is also important to note that even

well-reviewed award winners might contain in-app purchase requirements or advertising that allow users only to read or play up to a certain point without additional fees.

One parent, Allison Pomenta, described “a famous piano-playing app that makes my child [either pay or] watch video ads in order to earn coins that will allow him to download new songs to play.”<sup>22</sup>

One reason for gamified in-app purchases and in-app advertising, is that app developers have not yet figured out how to monetize apps. As Beth Bacon writes, app pricing sometimes begins at “free” or low-cost. To get all features in a free or “light” version requires additional payment, “but the price is often low, because customers expect that cost to be pretty close to free.”<sup>23</sup>

Game elements within apps that are successful are those that enhance—not distract—from the story. The highly acclaimed app PopOut! The Tale of Peter Rabbit, developed by Loud Crow Interactive, was named a Kirkus Top Book App of 2010; it features Beatrix Potter’s original illustrations, is easy to navigate, and includes digital features that closely approximate a physical pop-up book.<sup>24</sup>

But as Junko Yokota has pointed out, the app includes a distracting interactive feature in which children are supposed to drag leaves and squash blackberries as the story is read. The squashing activity does not enhance the story, but rather becomes a distraction.<sup>25</sup>

A similar feature exists in another award-winning app, Dragon Brush by Small Planet Digital.<sup>26</sup> This story, that includes in-app art activity, has a distracting effect that readers can make Bing-Wen, the main character, jump up and down across a spread as the story is read.

Yet what is considered distracting for one audience is perfect for another. Jennifer Hopwood, a librarian and mother of a reluctant reader (and former member of the ALSC Children and Technology Committee), describes the success she had motivating her son to read with transmedia stories, as they provided extension stories of his favorite video game, TV, or movie characters.<sup>27</sup> Barbara Klipper has written about how iPads and apps can be successful with children with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) and other disabilities.<sup>28</sup>

There is much confusion among parents and caregivers about what apps are; many associate print books with education and apps with gaming, and this confusion is heightened among lower-income families. In a 2013 report, Common Sense Media identified a new form of digital divide, which they call an “app gap.” They found that “even among families who do own a mobile device, lower-income parents are less likely than higher-income ones to have downloaded educational apps for their children.”<sup>29</sup> In part, this is because of lower levels of device ownership, but it is also because lower-income parents are less likely to be familiar with apps.

## Gamified Readers

Ian Bogost, a game designer and professor of interactive computing at Georgia Institute of Technology, describes “compulsion” as a key element of gamification, requiring the player (or reader in this case) to keep coming back—to the book, to the videos, or to the website, which transforms the reader into a commodity resource for the publisher, and creates a direct link to consumption and commodification of readers and the reading experience. Bogost dismisses gamification, arguing that it is little more than a fad promoted by marketers. Instead, he suggests “the term ‘exploitationware’ as a more accurate name for gamification’s true purpose.”<sup>30</sup> As publishers incorporate gamification, one potential risk is that imagination becomes secondary to commerce as readers compulsively return to books, to videos, to websites.

Because of assumptions about books being embedded with educational elements, reading belongs to what Bourdieu calls an inalienable cultural field, and books are considered as belonging to a higher form of engagement than other forms of media for young people, such as games or television. Yet digital technologies enable a blurring of forms.

While publishers might be seduced by the idea that gamification of children’s literature motivates children to read (and subsequently motivates someone to buy them books), gaming fails with young readers when they become “winners” or “losers.”<sup>31</sup> “Losing” at reading becomes demotivating to poor readers, and even “winning” is problematic for proficient readers as reading stops when the awards and points stop.

Game researcher Scott Nicholson argues the key is for readers to establish an internal motivation to do an activity (in this case, reading), because otherwise there is no way out of the rewards cycle. In order to stress the positive and motivational aspects that gaming can provide in arenas like reading and education, Nicholson describes the need for *meaningful* games: “the integration of *user-centered* game design elements into non-game contexts.”<sup>32</sup>

According to Nicholson, it is important to emphasize play and minimize points, as points or badges eventually demotivate players. Instead of tallying up points on a leaderboard, creating a system of reader winners and losers, the “user-centered designer must ask: How does this benefit the user?”<sup>33</sup> In order to motivate readers, gamification must be meaningful to the user, and to do so, Nicholson emphasizes a need for “playification” rather than “gamification.”

Technology extends these game-like elements into stories. As consumers of digital content, or as selectors of such for young people, it is important to be aware of content versus marketing. The case of *The 39 Clues* represents an example of how young readers can potentially be commoditized via gamification. The series has been successful, in part because it features strong titles written by the best-selling authors, such as Rick Riordan, author of other series books for children, including the Percy Jackson series.

While The 39 Clues series presents effective use of gamification by entertaining readers with engaging stories by top-notch authors, a fun website, and collector cards, in the case of gamified books for young people, there is a delicate balance between imagination and commerce. If such products lean too far toward commerce, readers are commoditized, as the books become more about consuming points, badges, or collector cards than about reading. This, in turn, divides those who are able to participate in the series (i.e., those with access to books, a computer, Internet, and collector cards), from those who are not.

Arguably, while readers of The Skeleton Creek series must also have Internet access to “read” the books, more room is left for the imagination, as evidenced by Carman’s participatory Facebook pages, on which readers share their own speculations about solving the creepy mystery of the dredge and by creating their own parody videos of the series.

Within the corporate structures of multiplatform books such as Skeleton Creek and The 39 Clues, imaginative elements are provided for the readers on multiple media platforms. However, young readers still find creative ways to repurpose content, by writing fan fiction, by posting Skeleton Creek parody videos on YouTube, and by using social media to extend the story experience in a collaborative community of fans. As such, when technology intersects with books and the imagination, the true imaginative process occurs outside of the corporate realm.

At this point, as more books in digital formats emerge each year, publishers are in a uniquely challenging position. Kate Wilson, managing director of Nosy Crow in the United Kingdom, points out that books are “directly competing with media and other games. We do not want reading to be the most boring thing a child can do on a phone or a tablet,”<sup>34</sup> which essentially means that to have successful products, publishers are increasingly expected to incorporate gaming elements into books for digital platforms.

Increasingly, publishers are committing to enhanced formats, but young readers are not necessarily adopting them at the levels that publishers might like yet. Perhaps the first generation of young people raised on multiplatform books, transmedia products, and book apps will feel differently about the convergence of books and technology. In some cases, the content is very similar as books go from print to digital formats, but new digital containers and multimodal platforms lead to a different reading experience.

Instead of comparing digital formats to print, perhaps these new electronic formats should be considered separate entities, leaving room for print to coexist. For now, one negative aspect of gamified reading is that it can easily lead to commodification of readers and the reading experience, turning an experience otherwise loaded with imaginative possibilities into an endless quest for rewards.

But a positive aspect of meaningful gamification is that the best interactive, multimodal reading experiences merge reading

with play, which in turn can motivate readers, including reluctant readers or readers with different abilities. &

For more information, read the *New York Times* article “All the World’s a Game, and Business Is a Player.” Gamification is embedded into the article: <http://bit.ly/CAL-NYTimes>.

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