

Read Beyond the Lines: Transmedia has changed the very notion of books and reading

November 4, 2011

by Patrick Carman

Whenever I speak to a group of middle school students, I run the same simple test. I ask the audience to think about the day before I arrived. Only that one day. Then I have them count on their fingers each of the following things they did the day before I got there:

- Used a cell phone
- Used a personal device to listen to music (iPod Touch, smartphone, tablet, etc.)
- Watched TV
- Played a video game
- Went online

Then I ask if anyone in the audience can give me a high five.

What's astonishing to me is the regularity with which I find at least 70 percent of the audience laughing and waving back at me, all five fingers splayed out so they're sure I'll notice (Who says girls don't play video games? Farmville and other social games like it have made sure they do). When I ask for a high four, I'm getting better than 80 percent participation. Three fingers gets me to 99 percent.

I keep asking myself a question in these situations (I hope the librarians and teachers in the room are asking it, too): when these kids leave school, are they also reading every day? And if they are, how big would the reading slice of pie be compared to, say, posting on Facebook, listening to music, and texting their friends? I'm increasingly convinced that I'm staring at a pie where 90 percent of the slices are cut up into non-reading forms of entertainment and social media.

When I started touring in early 2003, the only people at middle schools who had cell phones were the adults. I had the advantage of being on the ground at hundreds of schools, day in and day out, at the beginning of a sea change: I could see the wave building and feel the power of what was about to crash onto school campuses. Today the vast majority of middle school students carry mobile devices, and not just phones; iPod Touches and laptops have also become commonplace among tweens and teens.

At some point—I think around 2007—I found myself standing in too many gymnasiums talking to kids who were spending far more time consuming entertainment through technology than they were reading. And the really big wave hadn't even hit yet.

After years of serious contemplation on the road (and an entire set of Michelins for my Camry), an answer—at least my answer—began to form: stop trying so hard to stand out. It was a scary conclusion, one that would require a completely new way of thinking about what a book could be. What many ultra-wired kids needed was a pathway back to books. They needed someone to take two steps toward them before they could take one step in the direction of reading.



Illustration by Leslie Cober-Gentry

My “blending in” experiment began with [Skeleton Creek](#), a project that started simply enough: I would make a book and a movie at the same time. I’d ask tweens and teens to read 20 pages, then I’d send them online to unlock a video that would deliver part of the story. Back and forth we’d go, nine times in total, and at the end they’d have read 200 pages.

“I’ve heard the same statement in one form or another from hundreds of different teachers and librarians when they talk about the emergence of multimedia books: kids who weren’t reading are reading again. They’re coming back.”

I soon discovered that innovation is a messy business filled with long stretches of doubt, countless false starts, and a constant black cloud of indecision. There was no road map to follow, no guarantee that a story told this way would result in anything more than a pile of broken parts. All I could do was hold onto the same question at the start of every day and hope it would guide me to the right decisions:

What will make distracted kids turn more pages?

Well, I think I may have gotten a little bit lucky. I still believe the entire story could have gone off the rails at any moment (it sure felt that way right up to the end). But 10 million videos watched by over a million different kids has me convinced that we can win back lost readers if we make the critical decision to meet them halfway.

I’ve heard the same statement in one form or another from hundreds of different teachers and librarians when they talk about the emergence of multimedia books: kids who weren’t reading are reading again. They’re coming back.

But what are they coming back to? Is it reading or something else? To answer that question we need a definition for transmedia, a buzzword catching on across all entertainment media.

Transmedia, as I define it for the work I do in publishing, is a project that uses multiple platforms to create one seamless story through: the written word, video, audio diaries, illustrations, websites, apps, and social media. But transmedia is an evolving concept. It can just as easily describe a book series that’s been made into a movie or a TV show. Or maybe the series simply has a really cool website.

In case those of us in publishing are interested in how Hollywood defines it, I asked Nick Harris, co-head of media rights at ICM, the big talent agency. “Transmedia,” he responded, “must utilize different media to create a single universe in which multiple storylines and characters can exist and evolve for an interactive audience experience.”

While it may be a difficult thing to pin down, one thing’s for sure: transmedia by any reasonable definition will play a critical role in the future of books.

As a storyteller, I’m enjoying the move to less traditional methods of finding readers, in part because—I’ll be honest—it’s kind of fun doing creative stuff with other people. Writing words is a magical, solitary pursuit, but there’s a lot to be said for building a story in tandem with a director, actors, programmers, game designers, and artists.

So where does the path go from here? I’m happy to say it leads in many directions. More and more writers are starting to experiment with different ways of reaching into a wired world and reconnecting kids to books. The 39 Clues blends adventure, trading cards, and online games into a jet-fueled reading experience kids are embracing. That series alone has brought nine bestselling writers under the multimedia tent, including Rick Riordan. And notable authors like [Jon Scieszka](#) and [Michael Grant](#) have also created multimedia reading experiences that are picking up steam.

As for me, I’m actively forging ahead into more uncharted territory. With www.315stories.com I’m attempting to re-invent the short story for distracted readers. I’m asking young readers to listen, read, and watch in 15 minutes or less. Are they going to listen to a one-minute audio introduction? I

think they will. Are they going to watch a spooky two-minute video at the end? Totally. But the story won't make any sense if they don't do the important part in the middle, which will involve reading for 10 to 12 minutes.

I've also just released [Dark Eden](#), a traditional YA novel for teens who love a big, dark, paranormal world. But if they'd rather experience the same story in the form of a multimedia app, they have that option, too. The app version of [Dark Eden](#) tells the same story through words, maps, audio diaries, videos, and slide decks. Crazy? Probably. But I'm convinced we should be creating books for every kind of reader—traditional, ultra-wired, and everything in between.

I spend about half my time writing conventional novels, the other half exploring new ways to engage a different kind of reader. So I guess, in a sense, I've answered my own question.

Can reading make the top five every day for every kid?

It can if we spend a little less time trying to stand out and a little more blending in.

Author Information

Patrick Carman is the author of many acclaimed bestselling series for children and young adults, including [Skeleton Creek](#), [Trackers](#), [Thirteen Days to Midnight](#), and [Dark Eden](#).

<http://www.thedigitalshift.com/2011/11/transliteracy/transmedia-and-its-multiplatform-brethren-has-changed-the-very-notion-of-books-and-reading/>

from *The Digital Shift, On Libraries and New Media*. Nov. 10, 2011