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WORK IN PROGRESS
BOOKS: THE NEXT CHAPTER
A JWT TRENDLETTER JANUARY 2009

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Books have remained largely unchanged for 500 years. But today the Internet is changing the way we think, the way we process information, even the way we read. It's also changing how we access books—eventually all information will be digital. Slowly, publishers, authors and booksellers are adapting to this new reality. The savviest among them—those who realize they're in the story business, not the paper and glue business—are engaging the digital generation through everything from social networking to mobile phone novels to multimedia add-ons to electronic readers.

Key Questions

- How is the digital age changing reading habits?
- How are authors and publishers experimenting with different forms of media? How are they digitizing to better engage readers?
- How will books change format to fit the habits of generations of readers accustomed to on-demand access to information?
- How are authors and publishers changing their marketing strategies and tactics in response to these developments?
- Can the digital revolution actually help save the book industry?

Key Findings

Digital media is changing the way we process information. Rather than reading in a quiet corner, we're plopped in front of our laptops with the music blaring, toggling between inputs and windows dozens of times in the span of an hour. We "power-browse" because our minds have become reluctant to stop in one place for too long—the digital age has created a hunger for diversion that one academic calls "acquired attention deficit disorder."

Pessimists believe this spells the death of reading—but consider that literacy has always leapt forward when more information is made available to more people. And ultimately it's not the *thing* book lovers are taken with, it's what's inside the thing—the ideas, characters, possibilities. Expanding a good story into the digital realm opens numerous opportunities to attract consumers.

Savvy authors and publishers are finding ways to engage the digital generation, whether via a book-themed dating site or online serials or multimedia add-ons that complement the text (playlists, online games, etc.). And e-readers like the Kindle speak to consumers who increasingly expect information on demand, on the go and online.

Books will have to evolve even further, and even faster, if they are to survive. For example, Millennials will demand content be made available digitally, along with the tools they need to rewrite, mash up or reinvent the story. Purists might shudder, but ultimately an evolution of the book will only widen the circle, engaging more people in the written word.

There is no quieter space than between the covers of a book. A book isn't a magnet for the world's signals. It doesn't beep, buzz or vibrate. And in the 21st century, that may be its greatest disadvantage. Because while books have provided human beings with a singular escape for thousands of years, it seems the printed word is no longer diversion enough.

We are a digital generation. Scroll left, scroll right and find the data that defines us—phone numbers, e-mails, song lists and bookmarked links. And our minds struggle to consume it all, skipping from medium to medium, alighting nowhere. Call me Ishmael? Not when I have three seasons of *The Office*, a new Decemberists album and the June issue of *The Atlantic* on call in my chest pocket.

Deriding Amazon's electronic reader, the Kindle, Apple's Steve Jobs noted: "The fact is that people don't read anymore. Forty percent of people in the U.S. read one book or less last year. The whole conception is flawed at the top because people don't read anymore."

Of course, people *are* reading. They're just reading differently. Digital media is changing the way we process information. Rather than sitting in a quiet corner with a book or magazine, we are now plopped in front of our laptops with the music blaring and several windows of information open at once. In the span of an hour, the user may toggle between inputs dozens of times. Devoting that same hour to one author, be it Albert Camus or Stephen King, may seem tedious by comparison.

Still, pronouncing the death of the book is a bit premature. Books, largely unchanged since the Gutenberg Press, are making their run at the digital divide. Publishers finally seem to be embracing the Web's promotional power in earnest, while enterprising authors are publishing their works online. Electronic readers are finally getting prime time exposure thanks to Amazon's Kindle and its competitor, the Sony Reader.

The book isn't dying—it's evolving. In this *Work in Progress*, we take a look at how the quietest space is expanding beyond a book's traditional covers.

**THE
EVOLUTION
WILL BE
DIGITIZED**

“Dave, stop. Stop, will you? Stop, Dave. Will you stop, Dave?” So the supercomputer HAL pleads with Dave Bowman as the astronaut coldly disconnects the circuits that power its artificial brain in Stanley Kubrick’s *2001: A Space Odyssey*. “Dave, my mind is going. I can feel it. I can feel it.”

If we’re being honest, we can feel it too. The Internet is changing the way we think, the way we process information and even the way we read. All this after just about a decade of searching and surfing, uploading, downloading, e-mailing, watching, listening and shopping. Strange, considering that up through the late 20th century, our interaction with the written word had scarcely changed in 500 years.

The modern book was born in the 1450s, thanks to the innovations of Johann Gutenberg, the inventor of the movable metal-type printing press. His printed Bible, with an estimated first run of 160 to 180 copies, was the world’s first mass-produced book (the Bible is still the most widely distributed book—despite rumors that it’s now the IKEA catalogue).

The printing press didn’t just usher in the book as we now know it—several hundred printed pages bound by two covers—it put books in the hands of the common man. Sure, a first-run Gutenberg bible cost 30 florins, a clerk’s wages for about three years. But until then, books had been the dominion of scribes, clergy and nobility. The printed page democratized information, helping to end the Dark Ages and usher in the Enlightenment—the Western world’s first information age.

Literacy has always leapt forward when more information is made available to more people. The ancient Egyptians could not have hoped to build their empire on the backs of the old oral historians. But using the hieroglyphs developed around 3100 B.C., a class of scribes recorded the civilization’s complex law codes, commerce records, royal histories and religious doctrines. Likewise, the Roman alphabet paved the way for a broader literate class that built a republic across myriad cultures and languages. (It was the Romans who abandoned the scroll for the codex, the page-turner we use today.) Conversely, a short supply of books during the Dark Ages allowed the powerful to manipulate the hoi polloi. Enter Gutenberg, whose invention put books in circulation.

Could it be that books are so perfect a medium—portable, easy to read—that they have needed little improvement over the centuries? “Printed books provide pleasures no device created by an electrical engineer can match,” writes Randall Stross in *The New York Times*. “The sweet smell of a brand-new book. The tactile pleasures of turning a page. The reassuring sight on one’s bookshelves of personal journeys.”

Indeed, books have maintained their almost magical hold on the imagination and intellect. They are not just a pastime, they are sirens, lush and seductive, promising a wealth of experience.

Now we have a new siren. The Internet might be described as Gutenberg on steroids. Aptly named the World Wide Web, it put information not just in the hands of the common man, but at the fingertips of every man at any time. It has redefined our world, our expectations and, yes, our minds.

“Over the past few years I’ve had an uncomfortable sense that someone, or something, has been tinkering with my brain,” writes Nicholas Carr in his *Atlantic* article “Is Google Making Us Stupid?” He continues:

I can feel it most strongly when I’m reading. Immersing myself in a book or a lengthy article used to be easy. My mind would get caught up in the narrative or the turns of the argument, and I’d spend hours strolling through long stretches of prose. ... Now my concentration often starts to drift after two or three pages. I get fidgety, lose the thread, begin looking for something else to do. I feel as if I’m always dragging my wayward brain back to the text.

Books have survived periodicals, picture shows, television and video games, despite schoolteachers’ complaints of shorter attention spans. But they are demanding. They require a quiet space or, at minimum, a quiet mind. They demand from the reader whole blocks of uninterrupted time, sometimes 20 minutes stolen on a commuter rail, sometimes several fervent hours late at night.

But our minds no longer work that way. As Marshall McLuhan famously theorized, “The medium is the message.” In other words, media doesn’t just supply the stuff of thought, it shapes the process of thought.

That’s bad news for books, because the processes of the digital age are diametrically opposed to the quiet, absorptive relationship between book and reader. The digital age has created an insatiable hunger for diversion that prevents our minds from stopping in one place for too long. Harvard neuropsychiatrist Dr. John Ratey calls this “acquired attention deficit disorder”: accustomed to a constant stream of digital stimulation, people now feel bored in its absence.

This experience is partly described by Carr in his article:

What the Net seems to be doing is chipping away my capacity for concentration and contemplation. My mind now expects to take in information the way the Net distributes it: In a swiftly moving stream of particles. Once I was a scuba diver in the sea of words. Now I zip along the surface like a guy on a Jet Ski.

According to researchers at the University College London, there is some hard evidence that the Internet is changing the way we read and think. As part of a five-year research program, they coined the phrase “power browsing” to describe the way online readers skim through “titles, contents pages and abstracts going for quick wins.” The researchers note that, “It almost seems that they go online to avoid reading in the traditional sense.”

Jeff Gomez, author of *Print Is Dead: Books in our Digital Age*, agrees. According to Gomez’s book, young people are reading text messages, e-mails, blogs and short online news reports, but they’re not engaging with long-form material the way their parents did. Which means book publishers, dependent on a graying stable of avid readers, will have to elbow their way onto the digital generation’s entertainment playlist: on-demand movies and TV, online attractions like YouTube and MySpace, online role-playing games and the ubiquitous iPod.

The book, it seems, is becoming a very hard sell.

**FRENEMIES:
PUBLISHING
MEETS THE NET**

At the 2008 Frankfurt Book Fair, author Paulo Coelho looked into an audience of publishers and told them they were as bad as copyist monks—back in the 16th century, the monks greeted printed books as inferior imposters of illuminated manuscripts. Not much has changed, Coelho said, according to a report in *The Guardian*:

Instead of seeing in this new media an opportunity to invent new ways of promotion, publishers concentrated on creating microsites, which are totally outdated, and a few of them complained about the “misfortunes” of the other cultural industries, perceiving the Web as the “enemy.”

Compared with the tepid experimentation that most publishers have engaged in, Coelho has taken a good deal of risk, giving his work away for free via his Web site, The Pirate Coelho. Like a new band that uses free MP3s to build its fan base, Coelho has managed to increase his sales by way of these freebies. Science fiction/fantasy author Neil Gaiman has done the same; for a while, readers could download an audio file of Gaiman reading his latest title, *The Graveyard*, for free online.

For the most part, publishers have done little more than post low-cost online book videos. Since 2006, Random House, Scholastic and others have been posting the literary equivalent of movie trailers on sites including YouTube and MySpace. A video might feature a well-known author speaking about a new title, or it may be fast-paced and visual, like a music video. One, for Workman Publishing's *Generation T: 108 Ways to Fashion a T-Shirt*, could have worked as an infomercial, according to a *New York Times* report.

Such efforts are flawed because they approach marketing from the question of how, rather than why. The videos have a fairly limited, niche appeal—to avid readers, who are likely to forward them onto other avid readers—and haven't led to much. “I would love to see an example of one video that really did generate a lot of sales,” Bloomsbury's Peter Miller said in a *New York* magazine article titled “The End.” Publishers have to step up their game online, the article contends, but no one has quite figured out how. “There's a sense of desperation,” Miller said.

Efforts that leverage the social networking mind-set may have greater success. Part of the appeal of social networking is the ability to craft one's image and then broadcast it to friends, friends of friends and beyond. Sites like HarperCollins' Book Army (set to launch later this year) and Amazon's Shelfari allow readers to do that in spades.

Functionally, both are book recommendation sites that suggest titles based on what users read and what their friends like. But the sites add an element of showmanship, allowing users to choose which books go on their shelves and which are kept in the shadows. (Does everyone really need to know that you read *The Beverly Hills Diet* when *Slaughterhouse-Five* looks so much cooler?) Moreover, they allow users to write reviews, giving a generation of uploaders the chance to weigh in and participate in the literary sphere.

**EXTENDING
THE
EXPERIENCE**

Penguin Books' co-venture with dating site Match.com does the same, but more explicitly. Penguin.match.com, which is operating in the U.K., aims to pair up people based on their reading preferences; more important, singles can brand themselves based on the books they read and on the kind of reader they want to meet. (Looking for a classic romantic? Try posting *Wuthering Heights*. Want more of a brooder? How about *The Catcher in the Rye*?)

"At Penguin we believe that the books we cherish ... say something defining about us and the type of people we are," states a Penguin press release.

Much as music lovers do with their playlists, these sites (along with virtual-bookshelf apps on Facebook) allow readers to define themselves via their consumption habits: They might be news hounds, romantics, dieters, spiritual seekers, scholars. And for a generation of uploaders accustomed to baring it all online, it might even be more satisfying to add to a virtual bookshelf than a physical one.

Throw in the appeal of online ratings and reviews, and publishers might just have a shot at cracking the Millennial set. Convince young readers that a robust virtual bookshelf can make them a more fashionable, more intriguing online friend and books could again become real cultural currency.

"To expect future generations to be satisfied with printed books is like expecting BlackBerry users of today to start communicating by writing letters, stuffing envelopes and licking stamps," says *Print Is Dead* author Gomez. After more than a decade of connectivity, we can't help craving more—more input, more inventory and even more physical interaction with our media.

Savvy authors and publishers are finding ways to engage the digital generation, even if the old guard doesn't approve. In Japan, for example, older generations are cocking their heads in confusion over the recent tide of mobile phone novels. Young, primarily female writers tap out these stories on their mobile phones and ping them to Web sites for fans awaiting the next installment. The near-daily distribution provides readers with regular doses of entertainment.

The staccato style of text messaging, already incorporated into these readers' everyday lives, could be a selling point for a generation with acquired attention deficit disorder—all the better for consumption while manipulating a playlist or checking the weather.

The method and style is a far cry from that of J.K. Rowling, who wrote her seven *Harry Potter* novels in longhand and has prohibited her works from being digitally distributed. But while *Harry Potter* has been lauded for introducing a generation to reading, mobile phone novels have their own allure. Young readers have propelled the print versions of these novels to best-seller status—of 2007's 10 top-selling novels in Japan, five were initially distributed via phone.

The idea of short serialized installments—which hearkens back to the time of Charles Dickens, one of the first proponents of copyrights for authors—may be well-suited for the digital age. In 2008, British writer Alexander McCall Smith,

author of the *No. 1 Ladies' Detective Agency* series, began penning a "daily novel" for the *Telegraph* online. Titled "Corduroy Mansions," the novel allows the digital crowd to enjoy a long-form work in short bursts, and for those who preferred not to read at all, a Podcast was available simultaneously on iTunes.

Increasingly, for a generation of readers accustomed to consuming a variety of media at once, the printed book is just one element of a broader experience. *Twilight* author Stephenie Meyer, for example, satisfies her young-adult readers' need for more input by creating music playlists intended to complement specific chapters of her vampire romance novels.

Some publishers are creating "alternate-reality games" to accompany books: Random House's lead-up to the young-adult title *Brisingsr*, part of Christopher Paolini's Inheritance Cycle, included the immersive online game Vroengard Academy. Readers were required to solve riddles, share information and accomplish real-world tasks in order to progress in the game and to be entered in a weekly sweepstakes. It launched June 2 and by August, 41,000 users had logged in, with a return rate of 45 percent.

Perhaps the most ambitious effort to date is Scholastic's *The 39 Clues*, a project that recognizes not only young consumers' heightened expectations and high tolerance for digital input but also their desire to be part of the story. The multimedia series, which debuted in September, will have multiple authors writing a total of 10 books about a powerful, mysterious family in upstate New York. Online games, collectible cards and maybe even a Steven Spielberg movie will round out the experience.

"*The 39 Clues* takes creative leaps to expand the story experience from the pages of the books to multiple stages of discovery and imagination," Spielberg said in a press release. The project, which will pursue the Harry Potter market, provides "the opportunity to develop this property that says 'film,' 'family,' 'fun' and 'franchise.'"

Even the youngest readers are being targeted by eager publishers. Scholastic's BookFlix pairs fictional-story videos with nonfiction eBooks in a bid to get computer-savvy kinder reading. Likewise, TumbleBooks puts printed books online with an audio accompaniment and scrolling illustrations. For the next generation of readers, video and text may not be separate propositions.

A CLOSER LOOK PRINT ON DEMAND

Technology is redefining the publisher-author dynamic: Where once self-publishing was a serious undertaking that required a significant financial investment, today it's an easy and affordable option for anyone with authorial ambitions.

Web sites offering print on demand (POD) publishing services like Lulu, iUniverse, BookSurge and Xlibris allow would-be publishers to upload text, design a cover and format their work, producing a professional-looking book. Copies are

printed only when ordered, bypassing the need for warehouse space and helping to keep costs low. Depending on the POD service and the distribution package the author selects, fees range from a few hundred dollars to a few thousand.

A CLOSER LOOK PRINT ON DEMAND *(continued)*

POD services have seen a surge in the number of titles published: Bowker, a bibliographic management company, reported a five-fold increase in POD books from the previous year to 134,773 in 2007. At the same time, by comparison, the number of books published traditionally remained relatively flat in the same period (growing from 274,416 in 2006 to 276,649 in 2007).

The rise of self-publishing goes hand in hand with the growth of user-created content online, the flourishing of digital creativity and the popularity of DIY projects. Some people publish books for family and friends: a photo collection, a genealogical history or a memoir. Others are writing for a small, specific audience that may not exceed a few hundred people. POD services usually publish fewer than 200 copies per title.

Most POD customers are not expecting their book to receive widespread distribution or garner profits, and they're not interested in pursuing traditional distribution through a publishing house. But some writers who have pursued traditional publishers without success are hoping a self-published book will find a wide audience and open doors in the book industry. And unlike traditional publishing,

POD allows authors full control over every aspect of the final product, from the editing to the color of the binding.

Writer Jeremy Robinson used Lulu to publish his Christian thriller *The Didymus Contingency*, which eventually made it onto the Barnes&Noble.com best-seller list and got the attention of a literary agent. But such self-publishing success requires significant marketing savvy. Self-published authors have a hard time getting their books into stores and taken seriously by reviewers. As one Lulu author says, "There's definitely a stigma about self-publishing because the common thought is 'Well, my book isn't good enough for a real publisher, so I'll just do it myself.'"

POD alliances with bookstores and social networks may help lower some of these barriers. iUniverse, for instance, has partnered with Barnes&Noble.com; on its Special Collections page, the site now features self-published books that have earned iUniverse's "Rising Star" designation. Borders has launched a program with Lulu called Borders Personal Publishing, which gives self-published authors access to formatting, printing, an ISBN code and even editing services. And Amazon.com owns

BookSurge, which allows self-publishers to sell through Amazon, among other retail and wholesale distribution channels.

Social networking may also help the POD movement. Lulu has paired with weRead, a social networking application that allows readers to recommend, rate and share books with their friends. WeRead founder Krishna Motukuri has described this partnership as no less than "the first step toward the democratization of the book."

Watch for POD to become increasingly popular as an outlet for self-expression. Creative writing programs at universities are flourishing, and the National Endowment for the Arts reported in 2008 that 7 percent of adults engage in creative writing, according to *The New York Times*. The aging Boomer population—with more free time and discretionary income on their hands—may also drive POD growth. And consider how many people are already self-publishing online: According to blog-tracking site Technorati, 175,000 new blogs are added to the blogosphere every day. It's only a matter of time before many of these bloggers will want to see their thoughts in print.

THE ELECTRONIC BOOK

The only proposition that will matter is "Can I get what I want, and can I get it now?" Surely, upcoming generations of readers—accustomed to on-demand TV and movies, downloadable music and instant access to information—are not likely to page through *The New York Times* Book Review, then hunt down their chosen title bricks-and-mortar-style.

Remember waiting six to eight weeks for a mail order? Digital consumers now balk at waiting six to eight minutes for a large file to download. They want instant consumption, and they want lots of it. Just as they build music collections with a flick of the thumb, they may soon find themselves building personal libraries in the same way.

The electronic book, which has spent more than a decade on the back burner, is enjoying a second act. Back in the 1990s, Silicon Valley startups developed the RocketBook and SoftBook Reader, two bulky, battery-challenged devices that offered a limited selection of material. They also required a hard-line connection, which at the time were very slow. Very, very slow.

Today's e-readers are sending a titter through the book industry. The Amazon Kindle arrived in 2007 to mixed reviews but quickly sold out. In 2008, none other than publishing's patron saint, Oprah Winfrey, championed it as her "favorite new gadget." As a result, it sold out long before Thanksgiving weekend—the biggest shopping period of the year in the U.S.—and eager consumers had to wait 11 to 13 weeks for a Kindle, making it a no-go for Christmas gifters.

There's also the Sony Reader, which has garnered less press but uses a similar design. Both readers are about the size of a trade paperback, with large, "paper-like" screens. And both are pricey: The Sony Reader is tagged at \$300 and up, while the Kindle is priced at \$359.

There are cheaper electronic options, though, such as the popular Stanza e-reader, a free desktop, iPhone and iPod Touch application. Its maker, Lexcycle, reports that more than 500,000 users have downloaded Stanza, which gives them access to more than 100,000 titles.

If e-books succeed, it will be due not to Oprah's endorsement or Amazon founder Jeff Bezos' book-market heft but to the fact that they've arrived at a time when people expect to have more at their fingertips. Kindle readers, for example, are able to carry 200 titles, according to Amazon.com. Sony Readers, depending on the model, can hold 160 to 350 titles.

"Digital readers are not a replacement for a print book; they are a replacement for a stack of print books," says Ron Hawkins, vice president for portable reader systems at Sony, in *The New York Times*. "That is where we see people, on the go, in the subway and in airports, with our device."

Book lovers might argue that books are already portable. But 80 books? Or 200? No such luck. Oprah Winfrey, a self-described "professional reader," told her audience she was reluctant to try the new gadget at first. But the Kindle soon won her over. "Before I had this, I had 17 books on vacation this summer," she said. "You don't have to do that anymore!"

And if the Kindle 1.0 is "a complete bust" among naysayers—including countless tech critics—the combination of instant-access technology and Amazon's offering suggests the electronic book is poised for a renaissance. The company has made available more than 200,000 titles, ensuring that users have enough fodder to sustain their interest in the gadget. And at about \$10 a download for best sellers and new releases, it is cheaper than what can be found in traditional booksellers.

That number looks puny, however, when you consider how many books are actually out there. While Project Gutenberg and iBiblio have provided on-demand electronic text for some time, Google's new online book database (now in a beta test phase) allows buyers to choose from millions of titles, many of

them out of print, or read them on a page-by-page basis. The launch follows two years of tense negotiations between Google and the U.S. book industry, with the final agreement stating that Google will take a 37 percent cut before passing on payments to authors via the new Book Rights Registry.

Could electronic technologies save reading as we once knew it? In describing her experience with the Kindle, Virginia Heffernan observed that e-reading is still, basically, reading:

It doesn't turn literacy into a sensory flood. To read on a Kindle, you still have to go, mentally, more than halfway to the experience. You have to commit to concentrating, integrating new material, persevering when you might be stopped by thorny words or elusive concepts. The Kindle shows you the words on the pages, but the words don't light up or move or turn into cartoons, and you—and you alone—make meaning of them.

The experience sounds familiar because it's how people used to read when they read books, not bits. Admittedly, e-readers may currently be used mostly by the kind of avid readers who are likely to be in the midst of two or three books at once. And it may only be a matter of time before e-readers are just as wired as smartphones and laptops, enabling users to indulge their acquired attention deficit disorders. But for now, it may be the best way to get young, early adopters back to reading books as they were originally intended to be read—quietly, thoughtfully—even if it is against a backlit screen.

THE DIGITAL FRONTIER

When publishers and other book lovers begin waxing romantic on the book's appeal, they should remember the fate of the vinyl album. When CDs began to wipe out vinyl in the 1980s, old-school music lovers mourned the snap and crackle of the needle slipping into the groove, as if changing the music's format would rob it of its soul. Today, CDs are sold five for a dollar at garage sales, while vinyl records are acquired by fetishistic collectors (and are still manufactured for this niche). Digital music files, bought and sold online, have replaced jewel cases and dust jackets.

The logical evolution of the book follows suit. Eventually, all information will be digital. The proposition is enough to scare the book industry's tweedy pants right off. These are, as laid out by the *New York* magazine article entitled "The End," dark days for the publishing industry. The recession has only made matters worse. Publishing houses have already laid off employees and frozen salaries, pensions and new acquisitions. Bookstore chains reported third quarter sales drops that could mar their entire year. But necessity is the mother of invention, and if the industry plays its cards right, the digital revolution may well be its savior.

Some publishers, like the devisors of *The 39 Steps*, have already realized they are in the story business, not the paper and glue business. The way to save the industry, to save literacy, is not to circle the wagons in defense of the printed page, but to move the plot forward no matter the device. For now, those

devices seem to be e-readers and print on demand. But books will have to evolve even further, and even faster, if they are to survive.

For a generation of downloaders, cheap e-books will lead to the discovery of more titles and more authors. But these users will also be looking to mimic their behavior with music downloading: to acquire portions of books—a single chapter of a tour guide, a recipe or two from a cookbook. Sticky copyright and pricing questions surrounding the digital unbundling of books will have to be answered quickly in order to keep up with consumer expectations.

Satisfying a generation of uploaders will be more complicated. Millennials, who think of themselves as having an audience, will want to interact with books beyond touching their e-reader screen. They will demand content be made available digitally, along with the tools they need to rewrite, mash up or reinvent the story. Already many young readers are creating stories involving characters from their favorite novels and posting them on fan fiction sites.

Meanwhile, hyperlinked text could allow readers to jump around a book just as they jump around the Net, gleaning the information they need or choosing just how a story progresses, like a souped-up *Choose Your Own Adventure* book. In fact, some readers may ignore the gatekeepers altogether, collectively writing their own works.

If all this sounds a bit too much like handing high culture to the unwashed masses, well then, maybe you are as bad as a copyist monk. Because what the monks didn't see was that widening the circle enriches it. Whether that widening takes place online or off, the end game will be more people engaged in the written word, be it fiction, nonfiction or, maybe, fan fiction.

Making books more malleable engages readers who might otherwise perceive them as stubborn and static. Purists might shudder at the thought of seeing their favorite work mashed up with punk rock lyrics, but that would mean some youngster has read their favorite work. Pleasing the new crowd may mean that publishers will have to give up some of their status as cultural arbiters, trade in their corduroy patches for today's sleek plasticity, but it may be the only way to sustain mass interest in literature.

WHAT IT MEANS

When William Faulkner finished *The Sound and the Fury* in 1929, he said he wanted each character to be represented by a different ink color. His publisher balked, saying this would be too expensive. Today, Faulkner could easily have had his wish, thanks to digital media. Faulkner clearly believed the different colors would have enhanced the work rather than distracted readers—is it too much, then, to think he also would have welcomed the possibilities offered by digital media?

Traditional books are havens, escapes, old friends and familiar journeys. It's easy to wax poetic about their heft, their smell, their romance. But ultimately it's not the *thing* people are in love with, it's what's inside the *thing*—the ideas, the characters, the possibilities. And if there's one thing digital media offers, it's possibility. As it stands, reading is on the decline, and as reading declines, so do the power of informed democracies and an independent mind.

Modern life is evolving, and so is the book. Book lovers may never give up their precious enclave, nor should they. But to engage future generations, we all may have to move beyond it.



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