

Young Adult Literature Goes Digital:

Will Teen Reading Ever Be the Same?

We probably should have seen it coming, the young adult digi-novel, or “vook” (video-book). After all, we’ve witnessed the effects of new Internet technologies on young adult literature before. Emails abound in Schindler’s (2004) *An Order of Amelie*, Hold the Fries, Hrdlitschka’s (2005) *Sun Signs*, and Wittlinger’s (2005) *Heart on My Sleeve*. IM (Instant Messaging) or chat room language serves as a medium for adolescents’ stories in Draper’s (2001) *Romiette & Julio*, Myracle’s (2005) *TTYL*, and Lyga’s (2007) *The Astonishing Adventures of Fan Boy and Goth Girl*. Norris (2008) takes us into the blog world with *Something to Blog About*, and Mancusi (2008) propels YA readers into the online gaming world in *Gamer Girl*.

But until now, technological innovation in young adult literature has remained predominantly print-bound. In *TTYL*, *Something to Blog About*, or *Gamer Girl*, for instance, readers don’t actually go online to read or interact. Readers don’t enter chat rooms or send emails, visit (or create) character blogs or online gaming worlds. In fact, readers don’t ever have to leave the pages of the book to engage with the stories. Thus, outside of resembling or mimicking the *look* of the techno-textual worlds adolescents currently frequent (94% of teens are online, according to a recent Pew Internet report [Lenhart, Purcell, Smith, & Zickuhr, 2010]), young adult novels haven’t really been doing anything new in that they haven’t required new ways of reading or interacting (although some could argue the novels do require readers be familiar with online genres).

Not so anymore. A new trend in young adult

literature—the digi-novel or video/book hybrid—now combines traditional print-bound text with true, interactive online components. Carman’s *Skeleton Creek* series (2009a and 2009b) and Lennon and Kantor’s *The Amanda Project* (2009) are two such examples. In this article, we provide brief summaries of the works and then describe their technological innovation using Jenkins’s ideas about “convergence culture” as a theoretical frame. We then describe what literacy and reading researchers have to say about such texts and the reading processes they entail. We end with critical questions raised as a result of the production of digi-novels.

Meet Two Digi-Novel Series

Skeleton Creek Series

Skeleton Creek and *Ghost in the Machine* (author Patrick Carman and director Jeffery Townsend)

This two-volume series centers on the efforts of 15-year-old Ryan and his best friend, Sarah, to solve a mystery surrounding the abandoned gold dredge that gives their hometown of Skeleton Creek its name. An old miner named Joe Bush was killed in the dredge, and now Ryan and Sarah think his ghost might be haunting it. Their videotaped escapades to the dredge almost get Ryan killed. He is just home from a two-week stay in the hospital when the first book in the series opens. Ryan is a writer, and in his journal, he tells readers about himself and what led to his hospitalization. It is here where Ryan also reveals that he fears for his life; he worries his Dad, other townspeople, and a secret society might somehow be involved

in the mystery, and his journal is to serve as a record of events in case something happens to him.

Because Ryan's parents believe Sarah is the reason Ryan was hurt, they have forbidden Ryan and Sarah to see each other. In the age of the Internet, however, Ryan and Sarah can stay connected via the computer. Sarah is the film geek (described by Carman as "Nancy Drew with a camera" [Jasics, 2010]). She continues to look for clues and sends secret Web videos to Ryan when she discovers new information or makes connections. Readers access Sarah's videos intermittently throughout the novel by going to the website (www.sarahfincher.com) and using the passwords provided by Ryan in his journal. Once Ryan has watched the videos, he reflects on them in his journal and makes connections between what Sarah finds and his own fragmented memories and dreams.

In our humble opinion, *Skeleton Creek* isn't great, sophisticated young adult literature in the vein of such Edgar® Award-winning young adult mystery writers as Sonia Levitin, John Green, or Nancy Werlin, but boy, is it fun to read. The story is well-paced, and readers will get hooked by Ryan's foreboding tone and paranoia. Sarah's videos are truly scary, but not in a gory, violent way—more like a you-know-there's-something-behind-the-corner-waiting-to-jump-out-and-scare-you-but-you-walk-to-the-corner-anyway kind of way. It's good, clean fun—emphasis on "fun" here—that readers of all ages (but especially middle schoolers and reluctant readers) can enjoy.

The Amanda Project

invisible i (Book One) (author Stella Lennon [pseudonym] and Melissa Kantor)

This eight-volume mystery series (only the first book is currently in print) centers on three high school students (Callie, Hal, and Nia) who are looking for their missing friend, Amanda Valentino. Before Amanda mysteriously disappeared, she vandalized the vice-principal's car, made Callie, Hal, and Nia—all social introverts—believe she was their best friend, and planted strange and confusing clues all over town. As the search for Amanda begins, the unlikely trio uncovers more questions than answers: Who is Amanda, truly? Where is she, and why did she tell Callie, Hal, and Nia different stories about her background? What is the meaning of the clues she left behind? By the end of the book, Callie, Hal, and Nia are still searching.

They launch an interactive website (www.theamandaproject.com) and ask readers to help them find Amanda.

Readers will become quickly engaged with the ambiguity and mystery presented in *The Amanda Project*, wondering, as the main characters do, who and where is Amanda? The plot is filled with near misses as the characters (along with the readers) try to piece together information based on clues Amanda leaves behind. We do think this series is a more complex read than the *Skeleton Creek* series, well suited for sophisticated readers in middle and high school.

Convergence Culture and the Young Adult Digi-Novel

Jenkins, a leading cultural theorist (and admitted pop culture fan), describes media "convergence culture" as a phenomenon of the 21st century, in which "content flows across multiple media platforms, multiple media industries (e.g., music, film) cooperate with each other, and media consumers will go almost anywhere in search of the kinds of entertainment experiences they want" (2006a, p. 2). Some adolescent literacy researchers use Jenkins's ideas about media convergence culture to help make sense of what draws adolescents online. Jenkins explains one of the draws is the highly active—not passive—participation media that convergence culture requires.

We see *Skeleton Creek* and *The Amanda Project* as examples of this participant-heavy media convergence, albeit in different ways. To read the *Skeleton Creek* series, readers must go back and forth between the book and the www.sarahfincher.com website. Carman has said in interviews that the idea behind the structure of the book/media hybrid was to create a "reading-plus experience" that would actually compel readers (especially resistant, adolescent male readers) to read:

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[Skeleton Creek] is probably the best attempt I can think of to give a young person a reason to want to read. They only have to read 20 or 30 pages and then they get to watch part of the story—and so that’s the idea, they go back and forth, and that’s why I structured it this way, because I want, particularly that age group—5th, 6th, 7th, 8th, 9th graders—to just be compelled to have to keep going. If you read the first 30 pages and watch the first video, it’s almost impossible not to keep going. You understand the structure, you’re right into the story, something scary is happening. (Jasics, 2010)

Carman has expressed that he sees kids drifting toward technology and away from books (Jasics, 2010), but explains that Skeleton Creek “is not an

attempt to bridge the gap between the technological world that kids live in and books,” but an attempt to “erase [the gap] altogether” (Jasics, 2010). Thus, in Skeleton Creek, Sarah’s videos and the print-based text (Ryan’s journal) work hand-in-hand, complementing each other: the book doesn’t work without the videos, and vice versa.

Jenkins explains that when multiple media platforms converge, the varying platforms provide opportunities to tell different parts of a story in

different ways. Media creators often must consider what different media platforms afford and use them smartly. Otherwise, the convergence can feel like a “gimmick” (Jasics, 2010). Sarah’s videos provide the atmosphere and mood (think *Blair Witch Project*) that give cause to Ryan’s foreboding tone in his journals, and they provide important clues that help to propel the mystery forward. Jenkins explains that media convergence requires active participation by media users, as they must “make connections among dispersed media content” (2006a, p. 3). Indeed, just as Sarah and Ryan follow clues and make sophisticated connections across multiple media, so must readers.

In contrast, the media convergence experienced in The Amanda Project doesn’t happen until the print-based reading experience is over. Readers don’t have

to go online while reading to understand the story (at least not in the first book, the only one published thus far). At the end of the novel, readers are encouraged to visit the website, where they can interact with the story, its plot, characters, and other readers in various ways.

For example, some areas on the website include “Our Stories,” “Clues,” “Zine,” “The Debate Club,” and “Gallery.” “Our Stories” is an interactive section where Callie, Hal, and Nia post news about the continuing search for Amanda every Friday at 3:30 p.m. After each post, readers respond to questions posed by Callie, Hal, or Nia. Readers help to figure out clues and offer advice on what the characters should do next. The Amanda Project authors have told readers and fans that the information gathered from the “Our Stories” section can influence the future books, as the writers consider what readers suggest for future story lines.

The “Clues” section portrays text messages, handwritten notes, artwork, and tangible objects that fans can use to solve the mystery of the disappearing Amanda. Readers are encouraged to send additional clues to the website administrators that might help others investigate Amanda’s disappearance.

Members can also go into the “Zine” section and post drawings, editorials, stream of consciousness, poetry, song lyrics, rants, advice, and other forms of self-expression. The “Zine,” much like the online fictional Harry Potter newspaper *The Daily Prophet* (www.dprophet.com), is an online publication edited by a “student” from Amanda’s school, Endeavor High School. Each online issue has a suggested theme for readers to address in their postings. This section connects back to the text in which Amanda advocated for self-expression when she encouraged Hal to submit his artwork to a contest. Furthermore, Amanda had written editorials for the school newspaper that sparked controversy with other characters in the story.

The “Debate Club” is a place for readers to mingle and build a community with one another, posting comments and talking about the clues and the storyline. The “Debate Club” includes an orientation to the website and a miscellaneous section where members can discuss anything not related to the book. Readers can initiate new topics and create discussion threads, allowing onlookers to speak up (respond) or just read.

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In the “Gallery,” readers can post sketches (much like Hal, who kept his own sketchbook in the story) or other graphic images through a variety of media (artwork, pencil sketches, photos, collages, etc.). Members can create the outfits that they think certain characters might wear or depict how they think Amanda might look. After the images are posted, members have the option to make comments about them.

All of these forums help to describe the participatory nature Jenkins says marks convergence culture. In a convergent media culture, the computer becomes a way of “linking media users’ own fixations to a broader social community that shares similar frustrations, fascinations, and fixations” about a TV show, book, etc. (2006b, p. 132). Jenkins explains, “Participating in the virtual community becomes a way of increasing the intensity and density of the media users’ predictions and speculations,” as users often use online fan spaces to discuss storylines, collect information, and help others answer questions (2006b, p. 132).

The virtual communities established around The Amanda Project become sites for collaboration, negotiation, and self-expression, as fans describe themselves and share their talents, pull together clues, and vet their speculations concerning central narrative questions. Jenkins describes the “collective intelligence” that emerges as fans work together in these virtual communities (2006a, p. 27). Just as neither Ryan nor Sarah have all the clues in *Skeleton Creek* and thus must rely on each other to solve the mystery, so, too, must Callie, Hal, and Nia pool their knowledge and expertise to begin to solve the mystery of the disappearing Amanda. Fans mimic this pooling of collective knowledge in the virtual communities they create as they also collaborate, and thus participate, in solving the mystery. Too, online readers become collaborative authors, taking part in constructing the character of Amanda as much as any “real” author does.

Thus, while technology does not supplement the storyline in *The Amanda Project*, it becomes an integral part of the reader’s extended experience of the text. Participating in the virtual community becomes a way of broadening and deepening the reading experience beyond the confines of the print-bound text. Jenkins suggests the exploration of fictional realms that occurs in such online communities can lead to richer understandings of both text and self (2006b, p. 132).

So What Do Young Adult Digi-Novels Mean for Teen Reading?

It’s easy to see why series like *Skeleton Creek* and *The Amanda Project* are popular with adolescent readers (at last count, there were over 4,000 registered fans at *The Amanda Project* website, and over 3,500 fans at the “*Skeleton Creek Investigations*” Facebook site). The books combine mystery and adventure—preferred genres of teens (Clark & Rumbold, 2006). They’re series books, which some reading researchers say appeal to teens because of the “comfort of the familiar” and readers’ desires to “be a part of a community of readers who share delight in particular stories, characters, or language” (McGill-Franzen, 2009, p. 57). Ross (1995) explains reading is more often than not a “social activity,” and “series books have the cachet of something precious, to be collected, hoarded, and discussed” (p. 226).

The “social activity” of digital young adult series novels carries over into cyberspace, and literacy researchers have long said this activity is marked by sophisticated literacy engagement, rather than something that might displace traditional reading and writing skills. Black and Steinkuehler (2009) describe adolescents’ literacy engagement in digital worlds as a “constellation of literacy activities” that includes advancing, resisting, and negotiating a medium’s linguistic norms; writing and “performing” original stories and coauthoring collaborative stories; reading and navigating multiple textual genres; discovering and following inter- and extra-textual connections across multiple textual genres; and serving as “beta-readers” or peer-reviewers for writers and new virtual community members (p. 277).

Jenkins explains that to participate successfully in virtual fan communities such as those surrounding *Skeleton Creek* and *The Amanda Project*, media users must do multiple re-readings of texts and engage in dialogue with other group members as they flesh out speculations and predictions (2006b). Jenkins explains part of the appeal of such online fan communities is

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the pleasure that comes in exchanging knowledge (what he calls “epistemophilia” [2006a, p. 139]) and the intellectual demand placed upon members, since they must tolerate ambiguity, defer narrative resolutions, and consider the multiple meanings that arise from group discussion and negotiation. Jenkins explains that in fans’ virtual communities, “meaning is a constantly renewable resource and its circulation can create and revitalize social ties” (2006b, p. 145).

James Gee (2004) might call these informal learning cultures “affinity spaces”—spaces that cohere around a common affinity for a certain topic, passion, or endeavor where participants learn more, participate more actively, and engage more deeply than they do in school or with traditional texts (2006a, p. 186).

The New (Old) Reading Wars?

The 2004 National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) report entitled *Reading at Risk: A Survey of Literary Reading in America* (Bradshaw & Nichols, 2004)

warned of a marked decline in the American public’s engagement with literary texts and claimed that the young adult population showed the steepest decline for reading in recent years. The report contrasts books with “electronic media” such as the Internet, claiming that such media “often require no more than passive participation” and “foster shorter attention spans and accelerated gratification” (vii).

Leading neuroscientists have also jumped into the fray. Wolf, author of *Proust and the Squid: The Story and Science of the Reading Brain* (2007) worries about the evolution of the reading brain in today’s fast-paced technology-driven society. She says, “In music, in poetry, and in life, the rest, the pause, the slow movements are essential to comprehending the whole” (p. 214). She suggests that rapid technological changes affecting how and what we read will negatively impact our attention spans and the “range of inferential and reflective capacities in the present reading brain,” as

well as “our capacity to find insights, pleasure, pain, and wisdom in oral and written language” (p. 214). Ultimately, Wolf worries that technology will change our relationship(s) with language.

Still other reading researchers worry about the loss of the “transportive appeal” of traditional texts; since images of characters are immediately available to readers (Peters, 2009), they don’t have to rely so much on their own imaginations and visualizing processes while reading digital texts. Carman claims that Skeleton Creek “plays along with the way the [multitasking] young mind operates” (Jasics, 2010), but some neuroscientists suggest multitasking while reading (e.g., moving from print to computer screen) slows the brain down and increases the room for errors in comprehension (Hesse, 2010). Adult and young adult author Walter Mosley might agree: “Our cognitive abilities actually go backwards when we’re watching television or doing stuff on computers” (qtd. in Rich, 2009).

Black and Steinkuehler (2009) explain that much of the criticism of adolescents’ preferences for anything digital comes from long-standing fears and misunderstandings of technology and youth culture, as well as “a fear of *what* kids are reading and writing, not *whether* they are engaged in such practices per se” (p. 283). Research by Applebee (1989) over 20 years ago, and Stallworth, Gibbons, and Fauber (2006) more recently, shows that the most commonly taught texts in high school English classes continue to be canonical works like *To Kill a Mockingbird*, *Romeo and Juliet*, and *Of Mice and Men*. When asked, English teachers explain that they teach such works because they feel responsible for preparing students for college and/or cultural literacy (Stallworth, Gibbons, & Fauber, 2006). Teachers might also associate adolescents’ online activities with entertainment and “fluff,” and view technology as something adolescents should “do” outside of school.

We worry about this growing divide between adolescents’ out-of-school and in-school literacies (as well as the divide between tech-savvy adolescents and their teachers). We think teachers might be well-served to consider bringing series like Skeleton Creek and The Amanda Project into the classroom. Indeed, we know that the novel itself (only 300 years old) has never been stable, and reading processes are always in flux (Hesse, 2010). We also know that adolescent

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readers are inventive, and that teachers must be flexible—willing to use new kinds of texts in preparing adolescents to be strategic readers of diverse texts delivered in multiple and varied mediums. We imagine this is the English teacher’s responsibility because young adult digi-novels may provide opportunities for teachers to transform the use of literature in English classrooms in such a way that adolescents will see relevance between the classroom, the technological worlds they inhabit, and their literacy futures (whether they go to college or not).

With that said, however, we offer some questions for reflection that we think the production of young adult digi-novels raises. First, we wonder about the readers ignored by digi-novels and “vooks”—the differently-abled, poor, English Language Learners (ELLs), and African American teens who Internet researchers say lag behind their White peers in computer Internet use (Lenhart et al., 2010). Do digi-novels and vooks widen the “digital divide” between rich and poor adolescents? Adolescents of color and their White peers? Historically, “digital divide” researchers have considered digital equity only in terms of physical access to computers, but Gorski (2009) explains the digital divide must also be considered in terms of the “opportunity to use technologies in ways that empower people to participate in society” (p. 352). Framed in this way, different questions about digi-novels become important: Who has the easiest, most consistent access to the technological resources digi-novels and vooks require for participation? Who are these books produced for? Who is the “implied reader”? With what student populations can we assume such books would be used? (Gorski (2009) would say White and affluent populations, as computers in schools serving high-minority/high-poverty students are often used for remediation, i.e., “digital flashcards” [p. 356]).

We also worry about the rampant consumerism digi-novels encourage. At The Amanda Project website, there is a “Shop” section where readers can purchase official Amanda gear (e.g., t-shirts, buttons). The website also links to Modcloth (www.modcloth.com), an interactive site that allows members to design clothes. Readers can create Amanda’s “perfect outfit” through the Modcloth website, and then designs are actually created and available for purchase at the site.

The “Shop” section also connects readers to iTunes (www.itunes.com) where one can download Callie’s, Hal’s, or Nia’s playlists, as well as playlists by the authors of the upcoming books in the series. There is also an “Oracle” iPhone “app” available for purchase that gives fans either a tarot card or a reading by Amanda (in the book, Amanda uses Oracle cards to tell her friends about their personalities or paths in life). This section also offers posters related to the books and information about monthly contests that have cash prizes.

We worry that with convergence culture comes an under-criticized commodity culture, where marketers promote a sense of fan affiliation with fictional worlds and then exploit this affiliation through the marketing of consumable goods (Jenkins, 2006a). As Jenkins suggests, these goods offer the empty promise of deeper levels of involvement with the story’s content and other media users. At a time of worldwide economic insecurity, we wonder if young people should be getting different, more responsible messages about spending and consumption. As *English Journal* editor Kenneth Lindblom (2010) encourages, it’s time to critically challenge the 1980s mantra, “Whoever dies with the most toys wins” (p. 11).

Maybe digi-novels offer a way into conversations with adolescents about these kinds of questions in high school English classrooms. We know it can be risky to co-opt adolescents’ out-of-school literacy activities for classroom use, and we also know there’s a fine line teachers must walk as they critique (and encourage adolescents to critique) what adolescents find pleasurable. But it seems to us that, once again, adolescent literature—even (especially?) in digital forms—is doing what adolescent literature does best: offering English teachers opportunities to show adolescents that their out-of-school lives and interests matter in the classroom.

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