

To Read with Your Fingers: E-Lit for the iPad

My television set is covered by smudgy one year-old fingerprints. I often notice my youngest growling in frustration, index finger on the screen, confused by the fact that the television refuses to respond to his touch. It occurs to me that we now have the first generation of media consumers who expect a screen not to be something that you only watch, but manipulate directly, with the touch of your finger.

In recent years, smartphones and tablet devices have become commonplace and changed the way that people conceive of the function of their phones and the other devices woven into the fabric of everyday life. A smart phone is a toolkit of apps for almost every conceivable purpose: a jukebox, a collection of video games, a currency converter, a flight tracker, a writing machine, a voice recorder, a web browser, a library, an atlas, or a television. It is potentially just about any machine or software function you could conceive of emulating, a touch or swipe away. More recently, tablet computers have brought the same approach and functionalities to a larger touchscreen space, offering a light, portable device with a tactile interface, about the size of a book. Among other things, the iPad, like the Kindle and other e-book devices, is a reading environment. The difference is that the iPad is more an app-space than a book emulator. Sure you can read a book on it, but you expect the silicon behind that high-resolution touchscreen to offer you other capabilities as well.

From the perspective of the relatively obscure field of electronic literature, this may well be a transitional moment. The interactive book, the literary artifact that is also a computational artifact, is no longer a concept completely divergent from the path of mainstream publishing. E-Books are a fast-growing sector of the publishing market. And from the launch the iPad, a number of writers, artists, publishers, and media makers have conceived of the tablet computer as an opportunity for reading experiences that don't simply mimic the operation of the print book.

Not surprisingly, titles made for children have lead this trend. Children's books have long been the most playful sector of print publishing,

involving lush illustration, making innovative use of tactile materials, pop-ups, die-cuts, integrated audio, and sophisticated visual design.

Interactive children's books are often the first apps that iPad will eagerly show to people who ask them why they would want to own one of these devices. *Alice for the iPad*, developed by Atomic Antelope, demonstrates some of the capabilities of the device. Including the full text of Lewis Carroll's classic, the illustrations in the iPad edition are made for reader interaction. Objects on the screen can be moved about with a finger or by tilting the iPad. There are a number of clever gravity effects, from pocket-watches swinging on chains, to candy falling across the page, to a lizard popping from a chimney like a jack in the box. Tiny fingers can launch cupcakes across the screen or balance toadstools on a hookah-smoking caterpillar's head. The Chesire cat materializes and vanishes from the page, leaving only his smile. *Alice* and other titles like it are 21st Century versions of classic pop-up books operating not in a three-dimensional space, but a two-dimensional screen enhanced with touch and Newtonian physics.

While all the twirling about of objects and other interactive play in the *Alice* app and others like it offer some amusement, its main attraction is the ability to touch and manipulate objects. *The Pedlar Lady of Gushing Cross*, written by Jacqueline O'Rogers and developed by Moving Tales, is an animated book that elegantly plays to the multimedia strengths of the device. While the reader can't move objects about as in the *Alice* apps, the line-drawn animations in this work are cinema quality. Each page of the this story, about an old pedlar living on a dry patch of land who one day follows a dream to the city, is itself an exquisitely animated episode of the narrative. The words fall into place alongside the animation, as it is narrated in a light Irish brogue (or optionally, in Spanish or French). This simple cross of techniques of animation, audio book, and traditional folk tale provides an enriched narrative experience.

Meanwhile, some independent e-lit artists and writers are also developing for the iOS. Jörg Piringer, who has for years been making unique Letterist-style software for interaction and performance, has developed iPad apps including *gravity clock*, *gravity tweets*, and *abdefg*. The two gravity apps bring physics to time keeping and twitter browsing: the hours and minutes or the fleeting tweets materialize, fall, and vanish

as you read them. *abcdefg* is an animated sound poetry gizmo for the iPhone. The user is offered the alphabet as a palette. The letters can be dragged onto the center of the screen, where they begin making syllabic noises and moving in space. At the top of the screen, one can select algorithmic behaviors, including “gravity”, “crickets”, “vehicles”, and “birds”: each has a different effect on the way that the individual letters move on the screen and the sounds they make. When letters collide, they change course. There are also playful game-like elements: the user can select an arrow, to shoot individual letters off the screen, or a bomb, to clear a space. Overall, the app makes for an absurd but engaging experience: not quite reading, not quite playing, but interacting with an artwork that is also a language toy.

Jason Lewis and Bruno Nadeau of OBX Labs offer us *Speak v2*, a “P.o.E.M.M platform.” The idea here is to explore the touchscreen interface as a way for the reader to explore and interact with a poem. The app ships with two different poems, and more are in the works. The reader is presented with clouds of letters. By touching the screen and “pulling” letters out of the clouds, the reader accesses individual lines of the poem and is able to drag them around the screen. OBX promises four more apps, each addressing a different potentiality of the platform for poetry interfaces.

Eric Loyer’s *Strange Rain* offers a beautiful and unique touchscreen environment for storytelling. The developer, Opertoone, promises “stories you can play.” *Strange Rain* is an interesting textual instrument, a cross between an interactive music box, a kinetic poem, and a story driven by your interaction with it. The app opens on a rainy sky that we view from below. There are three modes of play: wordless, whispers, and story. In each mode, as the screen is tapped, drops of rain splatter on the screen and musical notes sound against background noise of rain. The faster we tap, the stranger the sky grows. If we tap in a certain rhythm, the notes shape into a waltz. In the whisper mode, in addition to these effects, ambient words such as “nourish . . . wash . . . liberate . . . absolve” also appear as we touch. Finally, in “story mode”, lines from an individual story, “Convertible”, also appear on screen. The story is about a man standing outside of a hospital in the rain, attempting to gather his thoughts as he deals with a family tragedy. His sister has been hurt in a car accident, and he is struggling to deal with the consequences for

himself and his family. We begin to understand his situation, one thought at a time. The speed and tempo with which the user taps the screen has consequences for the outcome of the story. If the screen is tapped at a particularly frenetic pace, the protagonist is forced to make a decision about whether to go back to the hospital and engage with the mess of his family crisis, or remain outside in the rain in his meditative escape from reality. If the story of “Convertible” itself seems fairly one-dimensional in the context of its stunning interface, it is a great example of how artists are beginning to engage multiple sensory registers in delivering narratives that are made for the eyes, ears, and fingers, as well as the mind.