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As books go beyond printed page to multisensory experience, what about reading?

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By Monica Hesse
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The mysterious man looks completely wrong to me.

In the text of conspiracy thriller "Embassy," an online novel by Richard Doetsch, the character is described as "a starkly thin fellow with a protruding Adam's apple." My brain goes: *Alan Rickman!*

But when I click on the chapter's accompanying video, the man is younger, tanner, scruffier. He's dressed like he should be bumming clove cigarettes at a concert, not spying on the Greek Embassy.

What I'm reading is a Vook -- a video/book hybrid produced in part by Simon & Schuster's Atria Books. Interspersed throughout the text are videos and links that supplement the narrative. In one chapter, the Greek ambassador receives a mysterious DVD, and readers must click on an embedded video to learn what's on it. In another, kidnapper Jack ominously tells his hostage that he's going to prove that he means business.

"How are you going to do that?" Kate asks.

"Are you squeamish?" Jack replies.

Below that dialogue, a little box encourages readers to "SEE WHAT HAPPENED NEXT" by clicking the play button.

(What happened next, in a comically foreboding scene: Jack grabbed Kate's hand and threatened to chop off her fingers with a kitchen knife.)

It's a dizzying experience, reading Vooks. But they represent just a few examples of a new genre that has been alternatively dubbed v-books, digi-books, multimedia books and Cydecks, all with essentially the same concept: It's a book . . . but wait, there's more!

There will certainly be more *of* them. The first six books of text/Web hybrid "The 39 Clues" have nearly 5 million copies in print, and nearly 700,000 registered users for the site. A seventh book will be released in February. "The Amanda Project," released this fall, is set to be an eight-book series. Brad Inman, founder of [Vook](#), said that his company will release as many as 200 titles next year -- a goal made more feasible by the relative cheapness of producing his online-only books. "It's very inexpensive in scale. We're talking thousands of dollars, not even tens of thousands of dollars" for each project.

Is a hybrid book our future? Maybe. "As discourse moves from printed pages to network screens, the dominant mode will be things that are multi-modal and multilayered," says Bob Stein, founder

of the Institute for the Future of the Book. "The age of pure linear content is going to pass with the rise of digital network content."

Predicting the eventual death of the traditional novel sounds practically heretical. But keep in mind that the genre has actually existed in English for only about 300 years, and that experimentation and evolution have always been a part of the way we tell stories.

Perhaps the folly isn't in speculating that the book might change, but in assuming that it won't.

Choose your adventure

The bells and whistles in hybrid books are endless. In "The Sherlock Holmes Experience" -- one of six books, including "Embassy," published by Vook since the company launched in October -- two classic Arthur Conan Doyle stories are annotated with video clips of historians sharing Holmesian trivia. Hyperlinks pepper the text, sending readers to Wikipedia pages explaining old-fashioned terms.

In "The Amanda Project," a young-adult series launched earlier this fall, three teens investigate the disappearance of a mutual friend, primarily in a book but also on a companion Web site, where readers are encouraged to upload their own "clues" to Amanda's presence. Some contributions will be incorporated into the second book, due out in February.

In "Skeleton Creek," another work for tweens, the narrative alternates between the written diary of Ryan, a housebound teen trying to investigate strange occurrences in his home town, and the video missives of his best friend, Sarah. Ryan -- and the reader -- access Sarah's transmissions by logging onto a Web site with various passwords, provided at the end of each chapter.

[Myebook](#), which helps users self-publish books online, is flexible with the definition of "book," allowing text to be mashed up with video and applications.

These hybrid books "truly [are] groundbreaking, and I don't use that word lightly," says David Levithan, a Scholastic editor who worked on "Skeleton Creek" as well as "The 39 Clues," a series involving an elaborate online game. "It's expanding the notion of what storytelling can be."

If readers visit every hyperlink, watch every video and play every game, it is possible for the experience of consuming a single book to become limitless -- a literal neverending story. It's also possible for the user to never read more than a few chapters in sequence, before excitedly scampering over to the next activity.

Hybrid books might be the perfect accessory for modern life. They allow immediate shortcuts to information. They feel like instant gratification and guided, packaged experiences. What they don't feel like, at least in certain examples, is reading.

Envision, for a moment, what it feels like to delve into your favorite book. Picture losing yourself in the fictional world for hours on end -- the way the characters sound in your mind, the way unfamiliar references give you pause. *What is a nose-gay, anyway?*

If you could see the authoritative version of a character right away, without waiting for the movie version, would you?

If a floral dictionary were just a click away, would you interrupt your reading to visit it?

Would these abilities represent a breakthrough, the sort of enhanced involvement that book lovers

have always dreamed of? Or would they tamper with our imaginations, completely changing the experience of reading?

Can you imagine?

It's not coincidence that many current hybrid books are aimed at kids -- the first generation of "digital natives" who, we're repeatedly told, feel stark naked without a cellphone, iPhone and a couple of laptops strapped to their persons.

"What they really love is staying in that world," says Lisa Holton of Fourth Story Media, which packaged "The Amanda Project." The non-text components "give them a way to dive even further. When you hang out with kids and you watch what they're doing, we as adults can't even begin to understand their relationships with technology." Holton left a job in traditional publishing to found Fourth Story and explore new forms of storytelling.

But what happens to the traditional reading experience, the one involving a fat novel, a fireplace and a cup of tea?

"It's very common for [a 15-year-old] to read, but have her phone there and her computer there," says Patrick Carman, who wrote "Skeleton Creek" and one volume of "The 39 Clues." "For her, having this multimedia experience is like sitting down with a cup of tea."

He directs me to his niece, an exceedingly generationally aware 14-year-old named Madison Wilcox. "The books with the videos, I think they keep our interest better," Madison says. "The generation we're in is always using technology. [Books like 'Skeleton Creek'] are easy to blend in with our lifestyles."

Inman of Vook says it would be a mistake to compare products like his with traditional texts, the two genres being independent entities.

"We don't pretend that it's a book because it's not." With the Vook, "there's an expectation that you're not gulping the text," as you would in a traditional novel. Instead, Inman says, "you're tasting the text," dipping in and out of it at will.

One wonders how this tasting affects the way we read -- that shortening of attention span we've read so much about.

"When you go from one task to another, your brain does slow down," says Earl Miller, a professor of neuroscience at MIT. "Your brain has to reconfigure its cognitive network. For the first few seconds [of the new activity] there's an increase in errors," in how well we comprehend what we're reading or viewing.

"The way the brain handles language is very different than the way it handles pictures," says Clifford Nass, a Stanford professor who studies multitasking. "One of the ways is pacing. You read a book and you stop whenever you'd like. When you watch a video, you can't do that. It goes on." It's active entertainment vs. passive.

Retention and comprehension are moot points when the narrative in question is, for example, "Embassy." Missing a paragraph or two won't affect a reader's understanding of the plot; missing a plot point or two isn't a life-or-death scenario.

In reading "Embassy," what concerned me wasn't that my brain was getting overworked but that my imagination wasn't.

The pleasure of reading has always been its uniquely transporting experience: the way a literary world might look completely different to two readers. One might picture the fictional heroine as a Natalie Portman type; the other might see her as [Freida Pinto](#).

But when the "true" representation -- like clove cigarette guy -- is immediately provided to the reader, imaginary worlds could be squelched before they have a chance to be born. Reading Vooks made me feel a little like a creative slacker. Maybe there was no point in imagining what someone or something looked like, if I was going to be helped along anyway.

David Sousa is a consultant in educational neuroscience and author of "How the Brain Learns to Read." In his classroom research, he says, "we find that kids are not able to do imagining and imaging as exercises" as well as they once did, "because video's doing the work for them. . . . They still have the mental apparatus for that, the problem is they're not getting the exercise."

Reading has traditionally been one of imagination's personal trainers, and while skipping from medium to medium might provide other benefits (catering to a variety of learning styles rather than just the visual reader's), it might adversely affect the way we create our own worlds.

Of course, some hybrid books' companion activities seem designed to exercise creativity. Readers of "The Amanda Project," for example, are encouraged to contribute to the site's catalogue of reader-submitted stories in a sort of organized fan fiction compendium. Madison, the 14-year-old, says that though she's never been what you would call a bookworm, the multimedia aspects of her uncle's books have made her more willing to read other things.

And Stein of the Institute for the Future of the Book says that whatever assumptions we might make now about hybrid books, there's a good chance they won't hold true when the medium grows up. "Things like the Vook are trivial. We're going to see an explosion of experimentation before we see a dominant new format. We're at the very beginning stages" of figuring out what narrative might look like in the future. "The very, very beginning."

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