# When Technology and Books Collide

Attracting Struggling Readers with Multiplatform Books

Books with accompanying videos, online games, and chat forums can motivate readers and offer interactive activities for the classroom. **By Rebecca A. Hill**

Nowadays, young readers are tech savvy. They communicate via social networking sites, simultaneously talk on their cell phones and listen to their iPods, or are on the computer while doing their homework. This generation of readers has more distractions than any previous group, thus creating a tectonic shift in how educators must assess and then motivate struggling readers. This is where technology and books collide.

In the last several years, a variety of digital reading options, including interactive CD-ROMs, electronic storybooks, downloadable e-books, and online reading libraries, have become available, with the most recent addition being the "multiplatform" book, which couples traditional books and computer applications, such as videos, online games, chat forums, or other online activities.

J. Greg McVerry at the New Literacies Research Lab at the University of Connecticut believes that multiplatform books can motivate the reluctant reader. "They have the characteristics necessary to draw in readers, such as plot line developed through dialogue and action and not through descriptive texts, and a hook
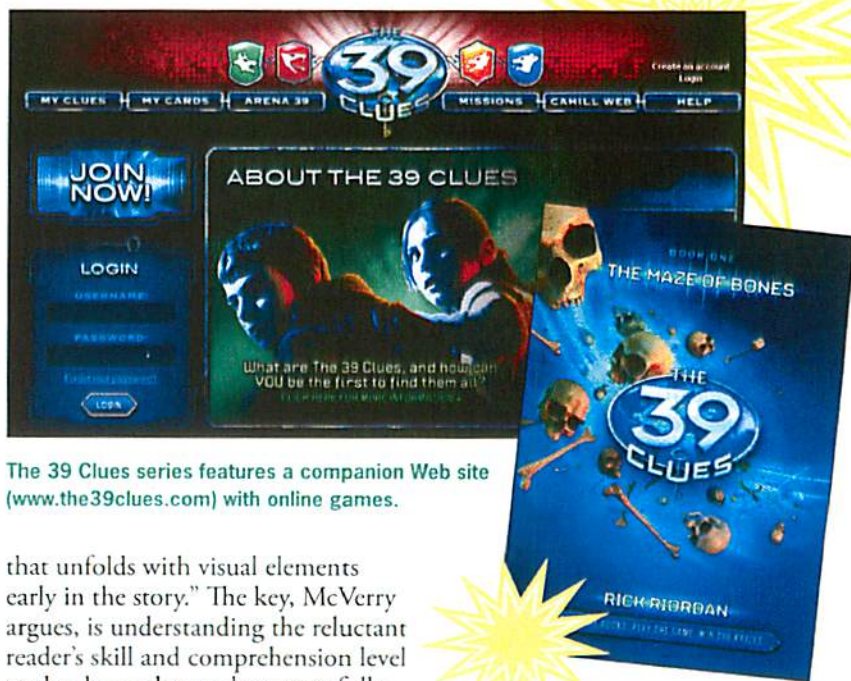
The 39 Clues series features a companion Web site (www.the39clues.com) with online games.

that unfolds with visual elements early in the story." The key, McVerry argues, is understanding the reluctant reader's skill and comprehension level so that he or she can be successfully paired with a suitable text.

As teachers and librarians, broadening our perspective when it comes to reading doesn't mean that our jobs are made obsolete by technology. In fact, this reader's advisory role is even more important. The crucial task lies in identifying what type of medium and material best fits reluctant readers' abilities. As one teacher put it,

"Children today need to be entertained. They have so much visual/auditory input that the traditional ways of teaching are 'boring' to them. Anything that keeps their interest and motivation is a great tool, so I use technology as an additional tool for students who struggle."

Though technology such as multi-platform books can be a powerful resource, without sufficient instruction it alone will not encourage the struggling reader to keep reading. McVerry strongly believes that technology is no substitute for adequate instruction. "Technology will never replace teaching, but it can with a talented teacher transform teaching in powerful ways. You have to look at electronic reading programs as material, not as a curriculum."

Employing a variety of strategies, such as a multiplatform tool like Fanfiction, where readers get involved as a reviewer or author, is important. This variety, McVerry suggests, is "the real power in the multiplatform link for reading comprehension. Not only can students develop a sense of story elements online but they can develop comprehension by reading like a writer and writing like a reader."

Multiplatform books like Sean Stewart and Jordan Weisman's Cathy series use various types of these tools. Readers can submit original artwork to an online art gallery or meet in chat forums to discuss their thoughts and feelings about the books. The Amanda Project series draws on blogging and social networking tools to connect readers. The Mackenzie Blue series includes "Money Tips" and "Green Tips" features, which could be used as a jumping-off point for mini-lessons on economics or ecology.

Taking note of recent studies showing that students today write more and more via social networking and blogging tools, a teacher I interviewed suggested utilizing these books in independent literacy work stations, where students practice reading and writing activities. By applying map reading, geography, and social studies skills, the 39 Clues series offers an interactive opportunity to follow the journeys of Amy and Dan Cahill. Similar to CD-ROMs, Jon Scieszka's Trucktown series' Web site is a unique opportunity for

younger struggling readers to read along with the books and then play games with the books' characters. All of these supplemental tools, McVerry says, offer students the chance "to join a community of readers."

As educators, we must remember to look beyond the norm and try the unconventional if, in fact, that approach is necessitated by our students. Some students may be motivated by a good story alone, while others need more bells and whistles to be caught up in a book. Below is a list of recent multiplatform series, with the online features of each noted.

Bibliography

The 39 Clues: The Maze of Bones. By Rick Riordan. 2008. 224p. Scholastic, $12.99 (9780545060394). Also available in an audio edition. Gr. 4–7.

In the first of a 10-title series written by different authors (the last book will be published in August 2010), Amy and Dan Cahill embark on a worldwide quest in search of the answers to 39 clues. Using history and geography throughout the series, the books include gaming cards that readers can use in their virtual travels, as well as online games on the Web site, www.the39clues.com.

The Amanda Project: Invisible I. By Stella Lennon and Melissa Kantor. 2009. 352p. illus. HarperTeen, $16.99 (9780061742125). Also available in audio and e-book editions. Gr. 7–10.

In the start to a proposed eight-book series, enigmatic teen Amanda plays a prank that brings together three high-school students and gets them in trouble before she disappears, leaving only a few clues and lots of questions. Who exactly is Amanda and what does she want? The Web site, www.amandaproject .com, provides a zine for readers to upload their own art and writing projects, clues to the mystery, a

chat forum titled The Debate Club, and Amanda-inspired clothing. The second title, *Signal from Afar*, will be published in July 2010.

Cat the Cat, Who Is That? By Mo Willems. Illus. by the author. 2010. 32p. HarperCollins/Balzer and Bray, $10.99 (9780061728402). PreS–K.

Beginning readers will hail the arrival of the first title in a new early reader series from the creator of multiple Geisel Award–winning and Caldecott Honor Book titles. Willems' signature thick outlines, pleasing colors, and offbear humor are at play in Cat the Cat and her friends' adventures. A companion Web site, www.gomo.net, features games, videos, a coloring page, and a gallery where fans can upload their drawings for display on the site.

Cathy's Book: If Found Please Call 650-266-8233. By Sean Stewart and Jordan Weisman. Illus. by Cathy Brigg. 2006. 144p. Running Press, paper, $9.95 (9780762433469). Also available in an audio edition. Gr. 8–11.

In this first title in the Cathy Vickers trilogy, teenage Cathy is being pursued by members of a mythical Chinese group called the Eight Ancestors. She leaves behind her journal for her best friend, and it provides clues to her whereabouts and the dilemmas she encounters. Other titles in the trilogy are *Cathy's Key: If Found Please Call 650-266-8202* (2008) and *Cathy's Ring* (2009). The Web site correlations include chat forums, an art forum, and a downloadable app.

Fairy Godmother Academy: Birdie's Book. By Jan Bozarth. Illus. by Andrea Burden. 2009. 224p. Random, paper, $7.99 (9780375851810); lib. ed., $12.99 (9780375951817). Also available in audio and e-book editions. Gr. 3–6.

In the first of an eight-book series, Birdie discovers that her grandmother

is a fairy godmother, an ancient protector who was trained by fairies in the magical world of Aventurine. When her family's talisman, the singing stone, breaks, Birdie must travel to Aventurine to fix it. The Web site, www.fairygodmotheracademy.com, offers online and offline activities including a blog, music, a Build Your Own Adventure wardrobe, and puzzles and games. Upcoming titles include *Fairy Godmother Academy: Kerka's Book* (April 2010) and *Fairy Godmother Academy: Zally's Book* (August 2010).

The Looking Glass Wars. By Frank Beddor. 2006. 384p. Dial, $17.99 (9780803731530); paper, $8.99 (9780142409411). Also available in an e-book edition. Gr. 6–9.

In this intriguing take on *Alice in Wonderland*, Alyss Heart, heir to the Wonderland throne, is forced to flee when her vicious aunt Redd murders her parents, the King and Queen of Hearts. She escapes through the Pool of Tears to Victorian London and tells her stories about Wonderland to Charles Dodgson. The other titles in the trilogy are *Seeing Redd* (2007) and *ArchEnemy* (2009). The companion Web site, www.lookingglasswars.com, offers interactive games, videos, and an "aural novel," a soundtrack the author created for the book.

Mackenzie Blue. By Tina Wells. 2009. 224p. HarperCollins, $10.99 (9780061583087). Also available in an e-book edition. Gr. 4–7.

Mackenzie Blue is not a typical seventh-grader. Starting at Brookdale Academy, Mackenzie, or Zee as her friends call her, is looking forward to a national music contest that offers its winner a recording contract. But then calamity strikes—someone steals Zee's diary, and her best friend moves away. Subsequent titles include *Mackenzie Blue: The Secret Crush* (2009) and the upcoming *Mackenzie Blue: Friends Forever* (June 2010). The Web site, www.mackenzieblue.com, offers
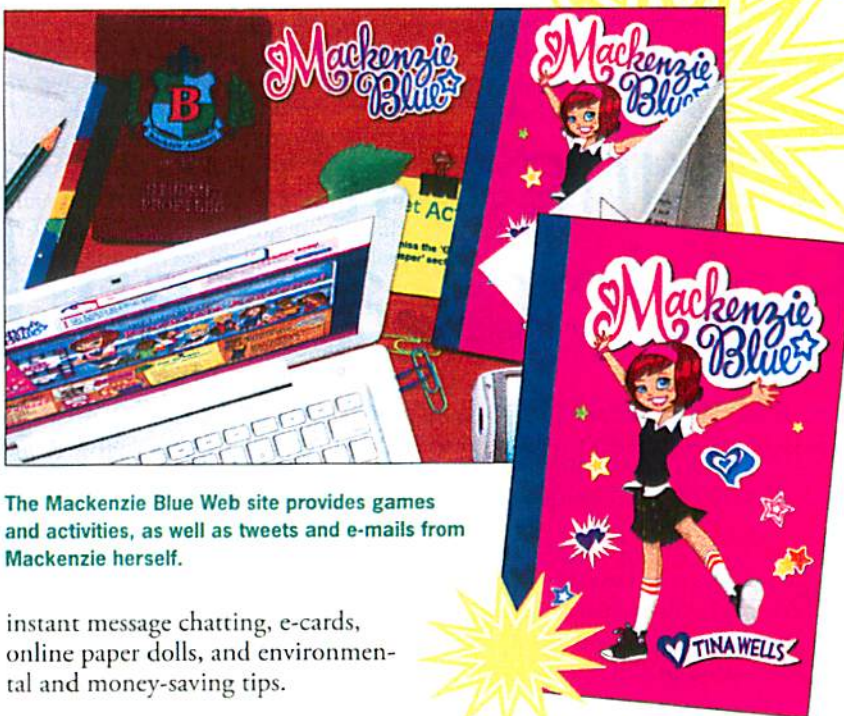
The Mackenzie Blue Web site provides games and activities, as well as tweets and e-mails from Mackenzie herself.

instant message chatting, e-cards, online paper dolls, and environmental and money-saving tips.

Nanovor: Hacked. By Jordan Weisman and others. 2010. 128p. Running Press, paper, $7.95 (9780762437566). Gr. 3–6.

Lucas' fortune-teller project is a success in the science fair, but when the "Lab Rats" discover that someone has been hacking into the data stream, they must enter the nanosphere to stop the hacker. On the Web site, www.nanovor.com, readers can play games with a handheld gaming device. Weekly animated webisodes and strategy guides, as well as the *Welcome to the Nanosphere Field Guide* (2010), are also available. A companion title is *Nanovor: Prank Week* (2010).

Skeleton Creek. By Patrick Carman. 2009. 192p. Scholastic, $14.99 (9780545075664). Gr. 5–8.

Set in a small town with a mysterious dredge, this ghost story features a multimedia component, with online videos telling part of the story about the eerie encounter Ryan and his best friend, Sarah, have at the dredge. There's a tantalizing cliffhanger, and links and passwords are included at the conclusion of each chapter of Ryan's journal. The Web site, www.scholastic.com/skeletoncreek/, offers videos with access passwords that are given in the book. Also see the sequel, *Ghost in the Machine* (2009). For more on this author's work, see "Talking with Patrick Carman" on p.12.

Smash! Crash! By Jon Scieszka. Illus. by David Shannon, Loren Long, and David Gordon. 2008. 42p. Simon & Schuster, $16.99 (9781416941330). PreS–Gr. 1.

The first in the Trucktown series introduces Jack Truck, Dump Truck Dan, Izzy Ice Cream Truck, Grader Kat, Wrecker Rosie, and other characters that rambunctiously smash and crash their way through Trucktown. The Web site, www.trucktown.com, offers games, coloring pages, story creations, video, and an online version of *Smash! Crash!*

Rebecca A. Hill is a librarian and freelance writer in Zionsville, Indiana.