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Reading as Synthesis of Immersion and Interactivity: Multimodal Metaphors in *The Fantastic Flying Books of Mr. Morris Lessmore* Combo

Abstract: In addition to being praised for promoting the healing power and the pedagogical potential of literature, William Joyce and Moonbot Studios' *The Fantastic Flying Books of Mr. Morris Lessmore*, a cross-media narrative, which consists of four thematically related but discrete versions of one story (a film, an e-book app, a picturebook and an IMAG-N-O-TRON app), has been criticized for two main reasons. First, it has been revealed that the book emphasizes the significance of books at large at the expense of foregrounding the benefits and mechanics of the act of reading. Second, one of its components, the e-book app, has been regarded as ineffective in enhancing the reading experience due to its limited interactive options. Whereas we partially agree with the latter argument, we nevertheless argue that, if seen as a whole, the Lessmore combo employs a catalogue of metaphors, such as READING IS SHARING or READING IS REMAINING YOUNG, with a view to deepening and refreshing the reader/viewer/user's appreciation of reading as an activity that fosters one's affective and cognitive development. Significantly, depending on the narrative platform, these metaphors can be cued textually, visually, musically or/and kinesthetically. Focusing specifically on the metaphor READING IS ENGAGING WITH FICTIVE MINDS, this article explores how the Lessmore film and its remediations recycle that metaphor along with encouraging the experience of immersion or/and interactivity.

Keywords: Lessmore, remediation, multimodal metaphor, immersion, interactivity, reading

On April 3, 2010, Apple launched the iPad, a touchscreen-based computer with the iOS 8,¹ used also in the iPhone Touch. A phenomenal commercial success, the iPad has become a sophisticated transmedia storytelling platform that enables writing,

¹ The iOS stands for Operating System, which functions as the base software powering other apps so that they can be run on Apple's mobile devices. As advertised on the Apple official website (2014), the iOS 8, "with its easy-to-use interface, amazing features, and security at its core," is designed both "to look beautiful and work beautifully, so even the simplest tasks are more engaging" and "to take full advantage of the advanced technologies built into Apple hardware."

shooting, and animating interactive stories. *The Fantastic Flying Books of Mr. Morris Lessmore*, created by William Joyce and Moonbot Studios, is a spectacular example of such a transmedia narrative: it makes use of different modalities and is available across multiple platforms and formats.² This “textual grouping,” as Erica Hateley (2013: 9) dubs it, consists of four thematically related but discrete versions of one story: the Oscar-winning short animated film (2011), an e-book app (2011), a paper picturebook (2012) and an IMAG-N-O-TRON app (2012), “a companion” to the picturebook, which “uses augmented reality technology to bring the printed page to life” (Moonbot website 2013) by animating the scanned pages on the screen and by adding details absent from the book or film.

The narrative shared by all these platforms focuses on Morris Lessmore, a book lover who finds a refuge from a hurricane-devastated and bleached world in a library inhabited by living books. As Morris becomes a librarian looking after the books and giving them away to those who visit the library, he restores colors to the world and begins to understand his own longings and desires. Summarizing the message behind the story, Erica Hateley points out that the Lessmore cross-media narrative focuses on “a spectacle about books,” which is “not the same as an invitation to consider the meaning and significance of reading” (11). Ture Schwebs (2014), on his part, views the combo as a harbinger of “a new marketing strategy”:

If the aim is to advocate for an unknown device like an app, it is a good idea to base the promotion upon something familiar, in this case the book “platform” and particularly children’s literature genre. Perhaps the unconditional homage to the old media is a way of justifying a new one.

We partially agree with Hateley’s and Schwebs’s critical commentaries in that the Lessmore combo’s affordances are geared towards promoting consumerist attitudes among children and adults rather than towards a genuine love of literature. In this light, the combo emerges as a commodified narrative whose both form and contents are objects of consumption.³ Nevertheless, we argue that, if discussed as one entity, *The Fantastic Flying Books of Mr. Morris Lessmore* abounds with multimodal conceptual metaphors⁴ (Forceville and Urios-Aparisi 2009) of reading, such as READING IS DISCOVERING, READING IS A KINESTHETIC ACTIVITY, READING

² Henry Jenkins (2007) stresses that intertextuality and multimodality, and not the very presence of various platforms, are crucial characteristics of transmedia storytelling. Intertextualities in *The Fantastic Flying Books of Mr. Morris Lessmore* have been discussed, among others, by Erica Hateley and Ture Schwebs, albeit not as a constitutive feature of transmedia. We refer to these two authors later in the article.

³ We would like to thank one of the anonymous reviewers for indicating this aspect of *The Fantastic Flying Books of Mr. Morris Lessmore* phenomenon to us, but we also think that in the consumer culture of today this could be said of any book.

⁴ They can be classified, in Charles Forceville’s (2009: 398) words, as phenomena of thought whose “target and source domains are predominantly or entirely presented in different modes,” as opposed to monomodal metaphors typically found in fiction. Conceptual metaphors are conventionally indicated by means of small capitals.

IS SHARING, READING IS AN ADDICTION or READING IS ENGAGING WITH FICTIVE MINDS, that are employed to present the viewer/user/reader with a more meaningful and enriching experience than the sheer technical enhancement of the storyline. Depending on the narrative platform, these metaphors can be cued textually, visually, musically or/and kinesthetically and can thus be seen as multimodal. We also contend that the very activity of comprehending the distinguished metaphors proceeds along the interplay of immersion and interactivity, with the reading experience being understood as an intricate and challenging multi-sensory cognitive process.

Focusing specifically on the long-established micro-metaphor READING IS ENGAGING WITH FICTIVE MINDS, we intend to explore how the Lessmore film and its “remediations”⁵ (Bolter and Grusin 2000) creatively re-use that metaphor along with encouraging the experience of immersion and interactivity, two distinctive modes of engagement with a narrative that Uri Margolin (2002: 708) defines as, respectively, a feeling of being a member of “the displayed or signified domain” and “self-aware or un-self-aware ... manipulation of the signifiers that gives rise to the corresponding fictional domain.”⁶ While we realize that these two processes constitute the nature of numerous human activities, including the reception of stories regardless of ways in which they are presented, we are especially interested in how they are enabled by a transmedia story experience.

In our analysis of Lessmore’s storyspace, we have decided to concentrate on those elements that constitute “additive comprehension” (Jenkins 2007). This characteristic quality of transmedia storytelling distinguishes it from processes of adaptation and can be explained as “the degree that each new text adds to our understanding of the story as a whole” (Jenkins 2007). Hence, contrary to what could be expected, we do not attempt to discuss the same elements in each of the platforms but rather try to determine how specific “extensions” (Jenkins 2007) enhance possible interpretations of *The Fantastic Flying Books of Mr. Morris Lessmore*. Finally, while at first sight our analysis may appear to be a sheer description of possible interpretative processes, this is precisely the nature of examining the cognitive activity of meaning construction.

⁵ Being a distinctive feature of the new digital media, *remediation* is concisely described as “the representation of one medium in another,” or, more specifically, “the formal logic by which new media refashion prior media forms” (Bolter and Grusin, 45, 273). Although the concept assumes the primacy of new literacies, with “older electronic and print media ... seeking to reaffirm their status within our culture” (Bolter and Grusin, 5) by means of new media, in this article we have decided to expand and modify its meaning in order to consider the reverse scenario, in which, like in the Lessmore combo, a digital medium (e.g., an e-book app) is refashioned in a more traditional medium (e.g. a picturebook).

⁶ In her seminal book *Narrative as Virtual Reality*, Marie-Laure Ryan (2001: 229) clearly favors the experience of immersion over the experience of interactivity, arguing that while the former is synonymous with deep reading, the latter causes an effect similar to that evoked by hypertexts, of “an amnesic mind that desperately tries to grasp some chains of association but cannot hold on to them long enough to recapture a coherent picture of the past.”

1. The film

Employing simple yet compelling narrative devices to draw clear-cut boundaries between a wordless wasteland space and a colorful literary utopia, Joyce and Moonbot's film constitutes a paradoxical example of a story about literacy that is communicated almost exclusively by means of non-linguistic multimodal metaphors. Contrary to its later remediations, it provides no textual aid (except for the title itself and quick glances at Lessmore's diary) that could help viewers make sense of the story's principal meaning. As Schwebs (2014) puts it, "[i]t is a silent movie, but not in the sense of no sound since there is some diegetic sound (sounds made by objects in the story), like the noise of wind and storm." Still, even without any verbal cues, viewers would have no difficulty identifying one of the multimodal metaphors underlying the narrative — READING IS ENGAGING WITH FICTIVE MINDS, which is constructed through the choices of semiotic resources in the visual and musical modes. Throughout the film, such an analogy — of understanding the act of reading in terms of identification with fictive minds — is clearly evoked at least three times: (1) in the film's opening, when implied readers of a book turn into viewers as they are, through a deictic "spatial projection" (Stockwell 2002: 96), dragged into Lessmore's world; (2) when Lessmore becomes lost in a French book; and (3) when the anthropomorphized Humpty Dumpty book entertains Lessmore with a re-enactment of the balcony scene from *Romeo and Juliet*.

Whereas the first invoked visual expression of the metaphor could be seen as an encouragement to explore Lessmore's mindscape, to keep track of his changing mental states and thus to engage in what Nikolajeva (2014: 129) calls "empathic and immersive identification,"⁷ the other two are examples of metarepresentation of the experience of immersion. As the shrunken Lessmore runs over the lines in a text, as he flies inside a whirlwind of words and, already outside of the book, as he reacts emotionally to what he reads, all this to the accompaniment of accordion music reminiscent of romantic French café classics, viewers get a clear grasp of what it means to feel absorbed in literary fiction. Observing the protagonist's changing facial expressions⁸ (e.g., sorrow, rage, terror), they gain easy access to

⁷ In her most recent study, which applies cognitive tools to the analysis of children's literature, Maria Nikolajeva (85) opposes immersive identification to empathic engagement, and ascribes the former to naïve, less-trained readers, who are uncritically "absorbed in fiction" and thus "unable to liberate themselves from the subject position imposed by the text." Empathic identification, or empathy, is a social skill that is attributed to expert readers: it assumes the ability to position oneself outside the character, that is, "to understand other people's minds without sharing their opinions or, more importantly, their emotional experiences" (Nikolajeva, 86).

⁸ According to Theory of Mind, readers, equipped with emotional scripts and the ability of mindreading, establish rapport with literary characters by attributing to them mental states based on information supplied by the text, be it the use of words like intend, think, suppose, believe or descriptions of characters' body language, facial expression and vocal tone. In other words, in prose

Lessmore's mind and are thus likely to interpret the analyzed scene as the fullest exemplification of the identification metaphor. The other metanarrative illustration of immersion seems more subtle and vague by contrast. With a slow-paced tune played in the background by a flute/piano duo, Lessmore attentively watches Humpty Dumpty's rendition of *Romeo and Juliet*, but his face reveals no recognizable expression. However, it may be assumed that Shakespeare's drama, the prototypical love story, is referred to for a reason. Specifically, the play might strike a chord with Lessmore, reflecting his unfulfilled desires and triggering his memories. As suggested, reading is a way of dealing with one's emotions in an offline, safe environment. Additionally, in the absence of the textual modality, music appears to play a significant role in the process of meaning construction. The film shapes and bolsters viewers' understanding of READING AS ENGAGING WITH FICTIVE MINDS through the foregrounding of two different "cognitive models" (Zbikowski 1997) cued musically, that of CHEERFULNESS and MELANCHOLY, which are employed to show how varied the experience of immersion might be.

2. The app

The app introduces the user to Morris and his world by combining textual, audio, visual and tactile cues. As users go through the sequence of 27 tableaux, they are invited to touch the screen in various places, which enables them either to animate certain elements of a given image or to open a new tableau containing interactive components. For Schwebs (2014), "the interactive ingredients in *The Fantastic Flying Books of Mr. Morris Lessmore* app generate a noteworthy literary hybrid. They include components that establish linear, dynamic processes, like a film, but also non-processual or static spaces, like an amusement park." Hence, following the development of the app narrative involves movement and pauses, which in turn correspond to intervals of immersion or interactivity. In consequence, as Schwebs (2014) notices, "the spatio-temporal division of narration" is repeatedly suspended.

It could nonetheless be argued that the app offers yet another kind of experience. As is the case in the film, the user is encouraged to enter the fictional world by following a transition from a diary page with a sketch of Lessmore reading on the terrace to the same scene in an animated form. The effect of empathic and immersive identification reappears, but is accompanied by another form of engagement: the user may reshape the fictional world, including Morris's life, by animating selected elements of the screen. In this case, it is creating/activating the wind blowing away some of the books piled up on the terrace and moving

fiction, as Nikolajeva (2013: 98) points out, "we must rely on language to provide explicit or implicit descriptions of emotional states; these descriptions are referred to as emotion discourse."

Lessmore's chair, which in turn causes his astonishment. Fleeting and limited as it is, this opportunity to control the protagonist and his environment is likely to prompt users both to alternately identify with Lessmore and immerse themselves in his world and to detach themselves cognitively from him as they are interacting with the screen.

One of the most vivid examples of how the app affordances affect the visual, oral and kinesthetic realization of the *READING IS ENGAGING WITH FICTIVE MINDS* metaphor is the tableau where Morris shares books with visitors. Those who have seen the film or read the book may notice the transition from generic books to specific titles — *A Christmas Carol*, *Treasure Island*, *Frankenstein* and *Alice in Wonderland* — all of which are certainly not “lonely little volume[s]” (e-book 2011) but British children's classics or cross-over fiction enjoyed regardless of age. The volumes hover in the air over the patrons' heads, attracting the user's attention and urging him or her to touch them. As a particular title is dragged onto one of the grey patrons, each of them becomes momentarily transformed into a fictional character from the story and even utters short lines from it, which can be seen as a “conceptual blending” (Fauconnier and Turner 2006) of a given patron's self and his or her mental image of a particular fictional character. The screen offers 12 possibilities of such transformations, whose overall purpose is, as Hateley (10) puts it, to emphasize the meaning of reading as “the identification with a narrative that changes the reader's sense of self, if only for a short time.” As in some cases other sounds rather than the character's voices can be heard (e.g., waves, seagulls, ominous music), it could be postulated that the fictional worlds in the novels become briefly accessible also to Lessmore and, ultimately, to users themselves. The very fact that each of the patrons can interact with each of the books may also give the user a sense of the universal nature and appeal of stories. Noteworthy, the patrons do not necessarily identify with likeable or major characters, but sometimes choose those who are overtly negative or marginal. This is especially the case with the lady, who apparently enjoys a variety of impersonations. Evidently, this “identification game” serves as an encouragement both to wonder about one's own literary preferences and to appreciate the sheer variety of readerly interactions with literature with emphasis on sustained engaged reading stimulated by novels. Simultaneously, users are invited to speculate how reading the books from the library, or any other books, for that matter, will affect the lives of the patrons and Lessmore himself. They are also asked to share the stories they know and their reading experiences with others. In that sense, users are not just consumers of the digital narrative but also interpreters, for themselves and others, of the meaning and purpose of reading. This cognitive process is activated not just kinesthetically but also visually — by Morris's comment in the text that ““Everyone's story matters”” (e-book 2011) — and orally, by the voiceover reading the same phrase.

3. The picturebook

Unlike the earlier renditions of the narrative, the picturebook makes no explicit reference to the metaphor *READING IS ENGAGING WITH FICTIVE MINDS*. Rather, by juxtaposing the domains of *BOOKS* and *EMOTIONS* through verbal-visual arrangements, it utilizes a related conceptual metaphor that equates the act of reading with the development of a deep relationship with books. As readers of the story gain fleeting glimpses into Lessmore's mind and witness his growing attachment to the anthropomorphized Humpty Dumpty, "an amiable fellow" who "would flow up to Morris and land on his arm" (Joyce 2012), they are prompted to view imaginatively that peculiar relationship as dependent on mutuality. On the one hand, Lessmore, who "loved stories" and "would become lost in a book and scarcely emerge for days" (Joyce 2012) feels responsible for the books' well-being, fulfilling their principal need of being read and expressing his affection towards them through direct verbal statements like "I'll carry you all in [my heart]" (Joyce 2012). On the other hand, the flying books, endowed with distinctively human attributes, bring inspiration and comfort to the ageing Lessmore, which is intended both to point to the healing power of literature and to bind conceptually the act of reading with the act of writing. Such metaphorically represented reciprocity, which manifests itself in "a joint action"⁹ (Croft 2009) performed by Lessmore and the flying books, can be seen as an intradiegetic exemplification of the conflation of immersion and interactivity in the reading experience. In a similar vein, the image of two metonymic hands resting on the sides of a double-page spread, preceded by the line "it began ... with the opening of a book" (Joyce 2012), may be interpreted as a symbolic transition to the extradiegetic space with a view to inviting target readers to follow in Lessmore's footsteps and reflect on the particulars of their own reading experience.

It is hard to determine whether all readers might be willing to take that heed. Arguably, the picturebook is likely to appeal to more expert readers as it relies on an asymmetrical interaction of word-image combinations, with the visual component being mostly reduced to illustrations of one of many situations or mental states described in corresponding text passages. Furthermore, as Schwebs (2014) has it, "the absence of the interactive animations that are included in the app implies a dominance of cardinal narrative functions. The book form allows for a more condensed story than the film" or the app. Readers learn more about the protagonist's empathic attitude from one passage detailing Lessmore's caregiving activities than from the accompanying image, where he is portrayed as a surgeon performing an operation on an unread book. Moreover, while the textual dimension, abundant in more or less explicit indications of the characters' mental states, offers substantial

⁹ Performing a joint action in real life and fiction is seen by William Croft (2009: 399) as a sum of individuals' "beliefs, intentions and actions ... that can be described as cooperative."

interpretive guidance, the visual dimension, with Lessmore's modest emotional repertoire, ranging from slight amazement to a subtle smile, seems surprisingly expressionless and redundant by contrast. Such asymmetries might affect readers' mind-reading and their comprehension of the multimodal metaphors of reading, whose conceptual material is mostly recruited from the textual modality.

4. The IMAG-N-O-TRON

IMAG-N-O-TRON offers yet another possibility of experiencing the narrative by conjoining the use of the mobile device with the print medium, which results in a 3D experience of the fictional reality, often referred to as augmented reality (AR), or "a live view of a physical, real-world environment through a digital device" (Schwebs 2014). Ronald T. Azuma (1997: 356–357), for example, defines AR as:

a variation of virtual environments (VE), or virtual reality as it is more commonly called. VE technologies completely immerse a user inside a synthetic environment. While immersed, the user cannot see the real world around him. In contrast, AR allows the user to see the real world, with virtual objects superimposed upon or composited with the real world. ... Ideally, it would appear to the user that the virtual and real objects coexisted in the same space.

To activate IMAG-N-O-TRON, the user has to focus the iPad's camera on a book page and wait until the image is recognized. Once it happens, the page on the screen seems to become alive. The iPad can be directed at the user's surroundings, which results in the impression that the storyspace merges with our reality. The whole procedure is relatively uncomplicated if a bit awkward as much depends on the proper amount of light falling on a given page.

As in the book, Lessmore remains expressionless, while the text and the voiceover are always available to provide the basic context. Alternatively to the other renderings of the story, the application repeatedly presents the books in motion, thereby generating another version of *READING IS ENGAGING WITH FICTIVE MINDS*. This time it is the metaphor *READING IS ENGAGING WITH A DYNAMIC WORLD OF BOOKS* that underscores the conception of literature as an ever-evolving system of interconnected texts. Lessmore's participation in this system is visualized in the tableau depicting his first moments in the library, whose infinitely soaring shelves are filled with numberless volumes. As the user adjusts the screen to the page and follows the instruction to "look up," or, practically, to raise the screen so that the figure of Lessmore disappears, the walls of the library leave the printed page and seem to be replacing the real walls, which may come as especially surprising once one starts to turn around. It is also at this point that the books' voices can be heard. This effect is another example of the conflation between immersion and interactivity: users both share Lessmore's perspective and become visitors to the library even if they are still holding their iPads or iPhones. In both cases, it is the sheer abundance and diversity of the volumes that seems to be the focus of the tableau.

A similarly powerful effect challenging the division between fiction and reality appears in the tableau presenting Lessmore's departure from the library. As the user listens to the voiceover, the colorful volumes keep flying around the center of the screen with a varying speed and rustling regardless of how it is positioned. Even if the device is directed at the real surroundings, the books continue to fly and encircle the user. The subtle rustle of the pages enhances the sense of the books' activity. Again, the merging of immersion and interactivity occurs, inviting users to reflect not so much on their experience of reading as such but rather on their own perception of and on their relationship with literature. They are also encouraged to ponder the very physicality of books and the place they occupy in the user's surroundings.

5. Concluding remarks

With the aid of several semiotic channels, the Lessmore combo has the capacity to represent the how and why of reading in more nuanced ways than just claiming that it colors people's lives. Above all, through the use of different modalities — text, music, sound, image, movement, touch — and sophisticated transmedia storytelling platforms, it rejuvenates some easily recognizable, well-established metaphors of reading (such as *READING IS ENGAGING WITH FICTIVE MINDS*) and presents them in the new guise of intermediality both to make them appealing to savvy Net Generation readers and to promote new cultural competencies. Indeed, as apparent in the Lessmore set, the ability to distinguish and take advantage of the affordances offered by various media is a vital element of new literacies, which are being developed both by young and adult readers. The multi-sensuous nature of *The Fantastic Flying Books of Mr. Morris Lessmore* combo makes a powerful example of how the complexities of this new metaphor-awareness result in redefinitions of the role of the reader (a shift from the reader to the user/interactor) and of the reading experience (juggling between immersion and interactivity) as such.

Although neither the Lessmore film nor its remediations seem to fit into or come close to Ryan's "ideal mode of art experiencing" (Margolin, 708), whereby maximum interaction coincides with maximum immersion in a work of art,¹⁰ they together give a detailed account of the particulars of cognitive and affective engagement with story. On the one hand, the film and picturebook offer a glimpse into an intradiegetic representation of the conflation between immersion and interaction. On the other hand, the app and the *IMAGNO-T-R-ON*, both of which make use of intricate digital designs, focus on enhancing interactivity at the cost of deep reading, which, ultimately, gives the effect of a superficial and short-lasting enjoyment with little room for deepened reflection. In light of these complexities, we see it fit to conclude that the above analysis of the range of potential reading

¹⁰ Or, as implied in the title of this article, where reading becomes the synthesis of immersion and interactivity.

experiences offered by the combo remains purely theoretical and would have to be corroborated by empirical research into cognitive and emotional responses of actual readers, viewers and users, which would certainly offer insight into differences in narrative engagement as enabled by various media.¹¹

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¹¹ For example, see A.K. Tveit, and A. Mangen. 2014. “A Joker in the class: Teenage readers’ attitudes and preferences to reading on different devices.” *Library & Information Science Research*. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.lisr.2014.08.001>.