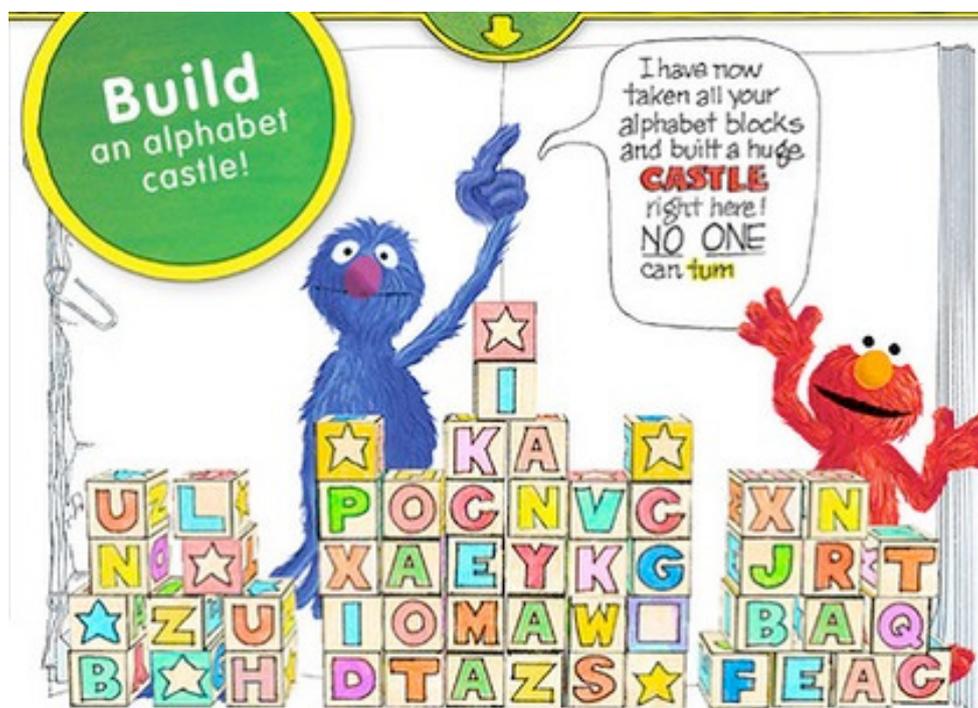


# Monsters in the children's app store

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by Farhad Manjoo

A technophile confesses that - despite their magic - children's books made for the iPad miss the point completely.



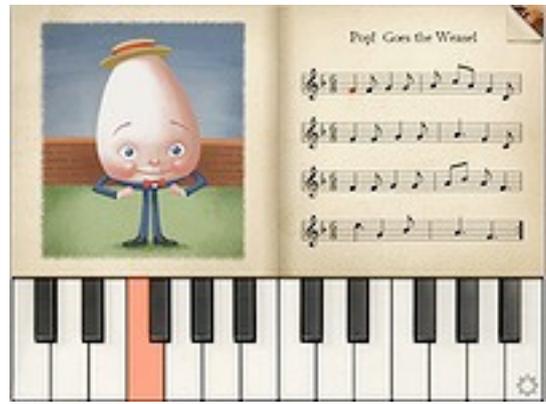
Borges for the under-5 set ... a screenshot from Another Monster at the End of This Book.

When is a book no longer a book? I wasn't expecting to have my mind blown by the iPad app of the children's story *Another Monster at the End of This Book*. The tale, of course, is about itself: Grover, fresh from the nightmare of *There's a Monster at the End of This Book*, cooks up a half-dozen schemes to prevent the reader from turning pages to get to the promised fright at the end. (Spoiler alert: In a Shyamalanian twist, the monster is, once again, Grover himself.) In the sequel, Grover is joined by Elmo — a casting move nakedly designed to appeal to a younger demo — who, eager to meet the monster, encourages us to subvert all of Grover's defences.

The iPad version is animated and interactive. Grover keeps begging us not to turn the page in his real whiny-gravelly voice. To help Elmo get to the end, you've got to swipe away the paper clips, glue, and alphabet blocks that Grover puts up to block each page. At first, this is delightful; when I offered the app to my 19-month-old son Khalil, he was instantly smitten. But as I watched him play with *Another Monster*, I began to wonder what was really going on.

When a young reader engages with the *Another Monster* app, what is he doing? Is he reading a book? Playing a video game? Watching TV? It's hard to say. Grover and Elmo are animated television characters appearing on an iPad screen, thanks to an app that works like a game but calls itself a book. Indeed, the entire narrative is about the physicality of books; *Another Monster* only makes sense if young readers imagine that they're looking at a static, print-bound item that's somehow embedded within a digital experience. That's what I mean about mind-bending. With its various forms of nested media, *Another Monster* is like Borges for the under-5 set.

The Another Monster app is an extreme example of what I've found to be a common problem with children's books made for the iPad. They offer too many different kinds of experiences, becoming muddled in the process - and, more importantly, missing the point of children's books, which is to get kids excited about reading.



Wrong note ... a screenshot from "The Fantastic Flying Books of Mr. Morris Lessmore".

I didn't expect to feel this way. In raising Khalil, my wife and I have been liberal about technology. Last year I argued that doctors' absolute prohibition against television for toddlers is too rigid. The iPad, meanwhile, has become one of Khalil's favourite toys. He also loves phones, remotes, computers and TVs, but the iPad is the one grown-up gadget I feel comfortable letting him play with for an extended period of time. It can't break as easily as a phone, he can't make stray calls, and the large screen is easy on his fingers and his eyes. Plus, there are lots of educational games available for the device, and it's a good way for him to watch Sesame Street in bed.

But Khalil also loves books. My wife has plied him with board books since he was born, and now he'll bring us his favourite titles — Go, Dog, Go!, But Not the Hippopotamus, Cars and Trucks and Things That Go — several times a day, demanding that we read to him with his universal call to action, "More!" Recently we went on a vacation to South Africa, a trip that involved a total of about 48 hours in a plane. We brought along a handful of Khalil's favourite books, but given how much we already had to pack, the trip seemed like an opportunity to test out books created for the iPad.

Along with Another Monster, I bought an app that collects five Dr. Seuss titles; a celebrated and well-designed book called The Fantastic Flying Books of Mr. Morris Lessmore; a Kindle book about birds; and PlayTales, an iPad bookstore that sells hundreds of touch-based kid titles. I expected these iPad books to become the star of the trip. But as soon as Khalil began using them, it was obvious they couldn't match their paper-based cousins.



Touch and go ... a screenshot from PlayTales, an iPad bookstore that sells hundreds of interactive children's titles.

One problem is that iPad books had a hard time holding Khalil's attention. When kids look at a screen, they seem to expect to see movement. These iPad books offer some animation - in the more sophisticated titles the characters move around the screen, while others show Ken Burns-style pan-and-zooms over static images — but they're not nearly as dynamic as cartoons. The stop-start motion seemed to confuse Khalil; whenever the action paused, he thought the video was over, and he'd press the iPad's Home button to get to something else. Even when we guided him through a book — for instance, helping him swipe his finger to wipe away the glue Grover splashes to get us not to turn the page — Khalil was rarely content to stick with the book. The Home button, the doorway to the iPad's many splendours, was always more interesting. (The other major hassle to some of these books: They're not coded to be interrupted, so when you click away to the Home screen and then go back to the app, the book starts all over again.)

Now, physical books don't always hold a toddler's few-minute-long attention span either. Khalil will often hand me a book, then walk away to get another one just as I'm getting into the meat of the story. Other times he'll protest my linearity — he likes the part of *Bear Snores On* where the bear wakes up with a thunderous sneeze, so if I start at the beginning, he'll usually pull the book away and correct me. Yet even when he loses interest in the content of a book, Khalil is still fascinated by the book as an object. Give him any book and he'll be captivated by the way the pages feel and how they turn to reveal new stuff.

I suspect that this is an important advantage books have over booklike apps. To a kid, a physical book is much more versatile, and ironically more interactive, than a tablet — you can open it to any page, you can drop it or bang on it or step on it, you can draw on it, you can rip out a page and tear it and crumple it up. In this way, a shelf of books can be endlessly fun — by which I mean at least many minutes of fun. On an iPad, meanwhile, a shelf of books represent just a few apps out of thousands, none of them as compelling as warping your own face in Photo Booth.

Perhaps that explains why designers tart up these apps with so many multimedia baubles — the talking characters, the interactive puzzles, the animation. But I'm deeply suspicious of this flashy approach. The point of getting young children interested in books - of reading to and along with them — is to encourage them to think of books, and by extension reading, as a source of wonder. To the extent that these apps achieve that, it's only through trickery — the trick of taking a video game or a cartoon and pretending it's a book just because it's surrounded by "pages". Yet those insistent design elements (like page-turning animations) meant to mimic physical books all serve to remind me how unbooklike the app really is.

They are also deceptive to children, and they don't advance the goal of reading. I have nothing against video games or TV, but I do want Khalil to be able to distinguish those visually dynamic media as being distinct from text. It's possible such divisions won't be necessary in the future — maybe when Khalil is my age all books will be a combination of text and puzzles and animation, god help us all. For the foreseeable future, though, books and video games are different, and they're supposed to be different. I don't see any reason to conflate the two in Khalil's mind, especially when he's so perfectly happy reading good old static books.

Now, you might argue that if Khalil is using his print books as hats or projectiles or cudgels with which to beat his stuffed animals, he's not getting much out of them, either. But I'm more optimistic. If "reading" for Khalil involves three minutes of pushing through the narrative reading punctuated by two minutes of using the book for peekaboo, I'm willing to accept that. It's better than a book that functions as a hybrid between a video game and a TV show, and which forgets about imagination and the virtues of textual narrative in the process. Plus, even though I always end up sounding like Linda Blair in *The Exorcist*, Khalil prefers my Grover voice to the real thing.

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