

App resurrects 'Frankenstein' for the digital age

Mary Shelley's gothic tale of Frankenstein and his monster has been rewritten as an interactive app for iPads. Is this the triumph of human ingenuity, or a hideous mockery of a great book?



ENGLISH & MEDIA
 DESIGN & TECHNOLOGY

Terrified spectators cower in a corner while lightning rages about a hatch in the roof. A scientist hits a button and a metal table descends. It is covered by canvas, but a hand protrudes, unnaturally large and disfigured. Suddenly, the hand twitches. The scientist is gripped by frenzy. 'It's alive!' he rants. 'Now I know what it feels like to be God!'

The scene is the birth of Frankenstein's monster, as imagined in the classic 1931 film. But the monster's first twitchings, in Mary Shelley's 1818 novel, were quite different. The scientist is a troubled intellectual, no evil lunatic; his fateful creation begins its life in an atmosphere not of manic triumph, but secrecy and shame.

The story of Frankenstein has been subject to countless adaptations. Like the monster, the tale has been twisted and reassembled in new forms, some barely recognisable. Now it is at the forefront of a whole new genre, which some predict could change literature forever: the inter-



The new 'Frankenstein' app, beautifully illustrated with old anatomical drawings.

active e-book.

No trees will be harmed in this version: it is only available as an app. That is not new – digitally enhanced books have been around for years, animated with videos or soundtracked by effects and mood music. *Sherlock Holmes* and Bram Stoker's *Dracula*, for instance, have both been given electronic makeovers.

This time, though, the novel is not simply enhanced – it is rewritten. Dave Morris, previously a writer for video games and comics, has adapted the original text into a format in which the reader interacts with the story's main characters. The basic plot remains the same. The monster will always be rejected from human society; tragedy will ensue. But the tone and detail mutates depending on the avenues you choose.

Such a radical rewriting of a classic might be expected to cause outrage. But the e-book is more faithful than any film has been, and experts have largely

reacted with excitement. It is, says one professor 'a thoroughly literary experience... done with enormous sensitivity.'

A NOVEL APPROACH

Is this a new stage in the evolution of the novel? Plots you can navigate and explore; videos and music worked into the text; interaction with other readers, and even the authors themselves! These, say fans, are only a few possibilities in this brave new literary world. We are experiencing of the birth of a whole new art form.

Stop, the purists beg. You have created a monster! Part of what makes novels wonderful is that they force us to use our imagination. We should not need earphones, they say, to hear the fire crackle; nor do we need to digitally 'interact' with characters in order to care about their fate. Far from enriching books, these developments only make them more superficial.

Q & A

Q When will these interactive books be available?

A Right now! Although few are available for those without an iPhone or iPad. That includes *Frankenstein*. Some are newly-written novels, but so far most are children's books and textbooks. However, all that is likely to change soon.

Q Aren't these e-books basically just computer games?

A The publishers emphatically deny this, and there *are* important differences. There are no challenges or puzzles to overcome; just different routes you can take through the story. For some, though, the similarities are still a little too pronounced.

Q If it's not a game then what are the interactive bits supposed to add?

A The idea is that they help the reader respond to the book and engage with the characters. Does it work? Depends who you ask...

SOME PEOPLE SAY...

'Adaptations of great books and films are never as good as the original.'

WHAT DO YOU THINK?

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WORD WATCH

Frankenstein's monster – It's a common misconception that Frankenstein *is* the monster. In fact, the novel is named after the scientist – his creation has no name. Interestingly, though, some critics interpret Frankenstein's monster as a symbol of the dark parts of his own subconscious. In a way, then, the misconception might not be so far off after all!

Mary Shelley – Mary Shelley was the daughter of Mary Wollstonecraft, a famous writer on the rights of women who some claim was the first feminist. She began writing *Frankenstein* when she was just 19, and was probably assisted by her husband, the poet Percy Bysshe Shelley, and their illustrious friend Lord Byron.

Dracula – It is often said that modern vampires and Franken-

stein were created on the same holiday in Geneva. The Shelleys, Lord Byron and a friend called John Polidori entertained one another by telling ghost stories late into the night. Mary invented her tortured monster, Polidori created a bloodsucking aristocrat. This new idea of the 'vampire' (previously little more than a wild animal) did not become famous until *Dracula* was published 70 years later.

YOU DECIDE

1. Is it wrong for authors to rewrite classic novels?
2. Is modern technology damaging our ability to imagine and think about things for ourselves?

ACTIVITIES

1. Design an interactive rewrite of one chapter from your favourite novel – be as inventive and as usual as you can!
2. Research another important technological development in the arts – such as the printing press or talking movies – and write a paragraph about its effects.

 **BECOME AN EXPERT** Check our website for a selection of useful links to videos and further reading.

 **NOTES**

