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Bells and Whistles for a Few E-Books

by JULIE BOSMAN • AUG. 23, 2011

In the film versions of “Pride and Prejudice” the music jumps and swells at all the right moments, heightening the tension and romance of that classic Jane Austen novel.

Will it do the same in the e-book edition?

Booktrack, a start-up in New York, is planning to release e-books with soundtracks that play throughout the books, an experimental technology that its founders hope will change the way many novels are read.

Its first book featuring a soundtrack is “The Power of Six,” a young-adult novel published by HarperCollins, soon to be followed by “The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn,” “Jane Eyre,” “Romeo and Juliet” and “The Three Musketeers.”

In September and October, Booktrack will release editions of the short stories “In the South,” by Salman Rushdie, and “Solace,” by Jay McInerney.

“It makes a new and engaging way to read and really enhances the experience and enhances your imagination and keeps you in the story longer,” Paul Cameron, Booktrack’s 35-year-old co-founder and chief executive, said in an interview. “And it makes it fun to read again. If you’re not reading all the time, it might help you rediscover reading.”

As e-book sales have skyrocketed in the past several years, publishers have searched for ways to improve on the digital editions of their books. In 2010 enhanced e-books with video and audio were all the rage — Simon & Schuster, for instance, found some success with an edition of its best seller “Nixonland,” with 27 videos scattered throughout the text — but sales for many enhanced e-books were dismal, and the books were often expensive to produce.

Tara Weikum, an editorial director for HarperCollins Children’s Books, said she believed “The Power of Six” could work with a soundtrack because the book is “cinematic in scope.”

“We’re learning that everything is up for grabs in terms of what people are going to respond to or be interested in, and the digital space is ever changing,” she said. “If a reader falls in love with the book, they want more of it. And if we can give it to them in something like an e-book or the Booktrack edition, then it’s pre-emptively anticipating what readers might be looking for.”

The idea of pairing a book with music is not new. In the past some authors have suggested full playlists to

listen to while reading their books, and the best-selling thriller writer James Patterson has even given away CDs to accompany his novels.

But Booktrack's founders say that their product is an improvement on the old book soundtracks, partly because it plays at the pace of the individual reader and can be paused or adjusted with a touch of the screen.

Reading the Booktrack edition of "The Power of Six" on an iPad is much like reading the standard e-book edition, with the addition of a small indicator scrolling down the page, line by line. (The user sets the reading speed.)

Much of the music — about nine hours' worth for the typical novel — is instrumental or ambient noise. But during livelier passages, a reader may hear the patter of footsteps, a booming gong, a crackling fire or the tick of a grandfather clock.

The retail availability of Booktrack editions is limited, at least for now. They can be purchased through Apple's App Store — to be read on an iPad or iPhone — but Mr. Cameron said he expected the editions would be made compatible with Android devices in the next several months.

The books are expected to be priced slightly above a simple black-and-white e-book. The standard e-book edition of "The Power of Six" sells for \$9.99; the Booktrack version will be \$12.99. Revenues are to be shared among the publisher, Booktrack and the retailer.

Mark Cameron, Paul Cameron's brother, came up with the idea when he was traveling in Hong Kong and tried to read a book and listen to music on his iPod at the same time. He wondered if there could be a way to combine the experiences.

The Cameron brothers eventually enlisted Brooke Geahan, founder of the Accompanied Literary Society, as the vice president for publishing. Booktrack's financial backers include Peter Thiel, a PayPal founder.

Ms. Geahan tapped her wide circle of friends in the literary world, including the authors Candace Bushnell and Bret Easton Ellis.

"One of the challenges was educating the authors about the very fast-moving digital publishing world," Ms. Geahan said. "A lot of them were not very informed about what's been happening. So a lot of my first introductions to Booktrack were just conversations about where e-books were going, and then introducing them to the technology."

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