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ENG1450: Reading and Writing in the Digital Age

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Skeuomorphs and the Stagnation of Digital Innovation

Opening up the Kindle or the iBooks app, you'll see a display of book covers, which look exactly as they do in real life. Click on a book and a black and white screen gets pulled up, resembling a real book. Turn the page and you see a virtual page flip accompanied with the sound of a paper turning. So many factors on e-readers resemble a real book and few have put in the effort to mix it up, make it more interesting, or integrate new technology. Their use of a skeuomorph, -- basing the design of some technology off of a similar physical object in order to aid understanding -- is inhibiting the evolution of technology and slowing innovations in the world of digital reading. Digital reading has become stagnant as we keep reading off of a black and white screen without expecting anything new or exciting.

Michael Kozlowski comments on the stagnation of e-readers today. Amazon's Kindle is currently the most used and well-known e-reader to date. A monopoly like this can be great for the company but isn't great for improving the product. The Kindle has had few innovations lately since they have little to compete with. They seem to believe their product is "good enough" and so they haven't focused on using technology to make the reader's experience better (Kozlowski). Their model of e-reading is focused on some skeuomorphs. Their words are placed on a their screen to look like a page and they have page numbers like you would find in a book. The format of each page looks like the page in the real book. Yes, there are certain things you can alter to

your liking, like font size and brightness but there are still so many places they can expand to. Technology has endless possibilities and there are many places the Kindle can go to continue to innovate. Instead, they are sticking with a product that resembles a real book very closely. Why not take advantage of what you can do with technology and continue to invest time into innovations? If more companies were to enter this market with a product that included interesting factors instead of keeping online reading the same, Amazon would have someone to compete with and the evolution of digital reading could pick up.

An amazing example of someone who has tried to use technology in order to enhance his writing is Jon Bois in his piece *17776*. Here, he uses a variety of technology such as videos, different colours, and pictures to create a more interactive story. It's true that this type of media writing can be confusing. Personally, it took me a while to figure out what was happening when I opened up his article. But this sense of confusion and finding out that something exciting was going on made my experience of reading much more interesting. Instead of opening another boring article, I was looking at something completely new. His use of this technology draws the reader into the story and interests them on a whole new level. Instead of just relying on words to portray a point or feeling, use of media helps add even more to the experience. When reading it, you get to deeply experience the world and the characters personalities through his use of conversation and pictures. His new take on writing in this new age we live in intrigued many and caused people to follow the story and read each chapter right as it came out. Other writers chose to abandon the boring words on a screen technique and turned towards new ways of using technology to enhance their writing.

At first, the use of skeuomorphs made sense. Computers were such a new thing to everyone and it was hard to get used to this advanced technology. Some skeuomorphs helped people learn to use the Internet. Online books that looked similar to real books helped people understand how to use them. If someone had pulled up a story like Bois immediately after learning to use technology, they probably would have been deeply confused. This is the argument that many fans of skeuomorphs are still using: it helps introduce people to new technology. But, people have been using technology daily for years now and we still use many of these useless skeuomorphs. As Ferris Jabr argues, "*These* design features … no longer help novices make a transition. You don't need unsightly paper remnants to understand you are using a calendar" (Jabr). He explains how we have grown used to using technology and now that we understand it, these features serve no purpose other than for design purposes.

The Interaction Design Foundation also explains how there is "a whole generation out there now that has never known a world without computing" so there is no point in having these design concepts that hold us back (Interaction Design Foundation). They bring into light a new design concept referred to as "flat design" (Interaction Design Foundation). This design takes away all the unneccessary concepts such as gradient and all the things that clutter your screen. Instead, simple boxes and bright colours are used. Windows was the first to use this concept as they included brightly coloured boxes scrolling across the screen as the first thing you see when you turn on your computer, instead of a desktop. While some argue that this flat design is ugly or it makes it look like "'Windows 10 years ago'" as a Chilean designer claimed, it was a step in a different direction (Brown). This design concept was controversial and definitely not perfect at first but soon after, companies such as Apple caught on. Instead of focusing on minute

skeuomorphic details that seem useless in the end, flat design can focus on what's important: working efficiently and coming up with new ideas. Transferring these ideas into digital reading could help enhance the experience. Designers could clear up clutter on the screen by taking away things like the page flip simulation and sound.

The younger generations have grown up using technology. I have used the Notes app on an iPhone more times that I have used a physical notepad. Making the app look like a real notepad doesn't serve any purpose other than as an outdated design. Straying from this design could lead to many new ideas and help our technology move forward at a faster pace. Catalin Zorzini explains how these uses of skeuomorphism "have very real limitations" because they are less precise. An example he uses is music-making applications where "Skeuomorphic design mimics the appearance of the application's real-world equivalent, with dials, knobs and slider bars" (Zorzini). These strategies cause the application to work less precisely than if they had something like "data input boxes" (Zorzini). The dials and knobs cause frustration as you try to move them to the exact spot you want, whereas a data input box would be a quick and easy way to reach the level you want.

A designer, Sacha Greif, elaborates on the limitations skeuomorphs bring: "when borrowing elements from a design's previous reincarnation, you often also bring its limitations along for the ride." To elaborate, she used the example of a calculator. When Apple created their calculator app, they made it look similar to a real calculator with aspects such as a "single-line screen" which ended up being a limitation (Greif). But, when people abandon the idea of skeuomorphism, they can create something with many more possibilities, such as calculator apps like Calcbot (Greif).

People who follow this design option build many limitations into their applications. If authors embraced different forms of media instead of just transferring their typed words onto a screen, they could enhance their writing by making it easier to understand and making it more interesting. Plain old written stories include drawbacks that take away from reading experiences. Sometimes the words aren't clear to everyone. The story can get boring. "He said" or "she said" has to be included every time someone talks. Innovative uses of technology could take all these away. It could help get people who normally dislike reading to read more.

Reading online has been the same for far too long. We have created an interface that is capable of doing so many things, some of which we haven't even discovered yet. There are still countless ways a more efficient use of technology could make our lives easier but there has been a lag in design. Designers are still stuck in a place where they base many applications on real world things, even if everyone is comfortable using technology. In order for digital reading to progress, people need to take advantage of the things technology can provide, similar to the way Jon Bois improved his article with the use of interactive media.

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