

Press Outlet Reviews

Anthony Zuiker's 'Level 26' marks origin of the 'digi-novel'

By Bob Minzesheimer, USA TODAY

http://www.usatoday.com/life/books/news/2009-05-11-digi-novel_N.htm?loc=interstitialskip

Anthony Zuiker, creator of the hit TV series CSI and its two spinoffs, says his new multimedia "digi-novel" will launch a "revolution in publishing for the YouTube generation."

Level 26: Dark Origins, to be published by Dutton Sept. 8, is the first in a series in which each book will be supplemented with 20 videos, or "cyber-bridges," featuring actors playing characters from the novel.

The series, written with Duane Swierczynski, features a rogue investigator who hunts serial killers.

The title refers to 25 levels used by law enforcement to classify serial killers. Zuiker vows to introduce readers — and viewers — to level 26.

After every 20 pages or so, readers will be able to go online to watch a three-minute video. The videos are designed, Zuiker says, "to embellish the novel and drive readers to the next book."

Dutton's Brian Tart, who signed Zuiker to a seven-figure, three-book deal, calls the idea "unprecedented mainly because of the quality" of the videos Zuiker is directing, which star Daniel Buran (CSI) and Bill Duke (Cold Case).

Two of the videos, recently previewed for the media, were as slickly produced as any network TV episode.

Publishers are using websites and low-budget videos, but mostly to promote books, not as part of the book itself.

Zuiker coined the term "digi-novel" (for digital) but isn't the first to combine text and video.

Scholastic, the children's publisher, uses a website to add to clues in its best-selling series The 39 Clues and has a multimedia ghost-story series.

Patrick Carman's Skeleton Creek, released in February, is split into two parts told by two characters: one through the text and the other via videos on a website.

Zuiker, 40, brings TV experience to what he calls "a triple platform": books, videos and an interactive fan website, designed by the creators of lonelygirl15, the popular teenage blogger who turned out to be fiction.

He says that he lacks patience to read a 400-page book, but that his 384-page debut, "in the style of James Patterson," will be more than "just a book on the shelf. You can watch the story on film and log in to unlock deeper levels of the experience."

Tart says Zuiker's novels "have to stand on their own as books, and they do. But publishers need to experiment with new ways of engaging readers. Books were a primary form of entertainment when there were only a couple of TV channels and no Internet."

The New Storytelling: Multimedia Children's Publishing

by Rachel Deahl -- Publishers Weekly, 03/30/2009

Back in early December, when we meet with Lisa Holton about her new book packaging company, Fourth Story Media, it seems like an oddly exhilarating moment to be discussing a start-up, much less a book publishing start-up. Back then, word had just leaked that Houghton Mifflin wasn't acquiring new books. Anxiety about the state of publishing, and the deteriorating state of the economy, was mounting. Everyone, it seemed, was nervous. That's why Holton's cheery attitude seemed decidedly out of place... and decidedly refreshing.

Perched in a cozy top floor of a classic dot-com-like space—Fourth Story is in a former sail-making factory on a short cobblestoned street at New York City's South Street Seaport—Holton exuded excitement. Having recently left corporate America—she stepped down as president of Scholastic Trade in 2007—she's now focused on her

current job, a deep multimedia YA series called The Amanda Project that HarperCollins is launching this fall. After last year's launch of The 39 Clues, Scholastic's elaborate book-series-wrapped-in-a-contest-connected-to-a-Web-site-with-play-along-trading-cards, the Amanda Project is primed to be one of the most ambitious multimedia children's series to date.

And, whether the Amanda Project fails or succeeds, its existence speaks to the fast-changing face of children's publishing. Kids, more so than adults, are ready for books delivered on a multitude of platforms, willing to follow stories that begin in print and wend their way onto computer screens and various handheld devices. This makes for both an exciting and anxious moment in children's publishing, as longtime progenitors of print and ink tales are trying to figure out how to present content, and a reading experience, in a wholly different way.

While other publishers have done books with digital, off-the-page content—Running Press's 2006 YA mystery, *Cathy's Book*, sent readers to phone recordings and URLs, and Dutton recently acquired an adult series from CSI creator Anthony Zuiker that will pair a print mystery with a collection of grisly film clips—39 Clues set a new standard for this emerging genre. More elaborate and more expensive than previous efforts, 39 Clues is a planned 10-book series that attaches an ongoing mystery plot to playing cards, an online contest and a deep Web site featuring games, videos, elaborate backstories and more. (The sales pitch on the back of the books announced—“Read the Books. Collect the Cards. Play the Game. Win the Prizes.”)

Susan Katz, president and publisher of HarperCollins Children's Books, called 39 Clues the “first very formal large stake in the ground” in this arena. She also believes these kinds of projects are steering a bold new direction for children's publishing. “The 39 Clues and the Amanda Project are today, they are 2009, and this is us figuring out the way to the future.”

The 39 Clues, which embedded a boy-friendly gaming element into a story about two kids who go on a global treasure hunt, has become more of a ready-made brand than a mere print book series. (This is likely one of the reasons Steven Spielberg bought the film rights last summer.) The series also presented Scholastic with an immediate opportunity to make money on more than just books—to date, according to a Scholastic representative, there are 500,000 Card Pack #1 sets in print, along with 2.5 million copies of the first three books in the series. (Currently there's no advertising on the39clues.com, but this might change.)

And, although the series was an involved endeavor—David Levithan, executive editorial director at Scholastic, said the project incubated for roughly three years—it offers something print publishers are chasing: nontraditional ways to make money on their intellectual property.

Holton doesn't warm to the description of the Amanda Project as a 39 Clues for girls, but there are elements that make the comparison apropos. The series, which she calls a “Rashomon-style” tale, follows a high schooler named Amanda who, after showing up as the new girl in town, disappears. Each book, penned by a different author (à la 39 Clues), is written from the point-of-view of a different student—all part of an enclave searching for Amanda. The online component—built heavily around girls' interest in social networking and creating their own content—is the fascinating part. Readers can go to an ancillary Web site to discuss (and create) potential fates for Amanda, and HarperCollins plans to publish storylines contributed by readers.

The Amanda Web site, which will launch with the first book in September, is currently being beta-tested by 200 teenage girls. For non beta-testers, all that www.amandaproject.com currently features is a short YouTube clip offering a window into the series. As one female voiceover in the clip explains, “The book can be in our real lives and in our online lives.”

The meticulously designed look of the site along with the depth of its functionality—it will allow users to create online alter egos, to blog and to create and share artwork, among other things—is the product of many hands, including Web developer Happy Cog, and various designers, coders and architects.

While both HarperCollins and Holton were mum on the specifics of how Amanda might generate money off-the-page, Katz confirmed that the project is “intended to bring in revenue in a variety of ways.” Certainly Holton is hoping Amanda shows the capability of what Fourth Story Media can create.

Before launching Fourth Story, Holton became obsessed with all things digital—she says she spent the last year

“living at game conferences.” She sees her company as a conduit for publishers that want multimedia properties but don't know how to bring them in-house or build complex digital add-ons. Along with her three other fulltime staffers—editorial director Jill Ellyn Riley, creative development and marketing manager Ariel Aberg-Riger and director of new business development David Stack—Holton is looking to help publishers develop “the ability to bring together talent and technology.”

Whether all houses are as open to packaging multimedia properties remains to be seen. There are lingering questions about who will own what—a potentially thornier issue when revenue is coming from a variety of streams.

Some children's publishers seem eager to see whether new authors, with technology backgrounds and expertise, can provide the answer, acting as the single creative source for a complex project.

When Running Press, for example, signed Cathy's Book, the proposal included the non-print elements because the authors also happened to be game developers. Scholastic's Skeleton Creek, which went on sale (and live) in early February, follows this model. The book features a dual narrative about spooky goings-on in a small town—one side of the story unravels in print and the other in a series of video clips posted online. Skeleton Creek author/creator Patrick Carman, according to Scholastic's Levithan, “created his own movie studio.” (Dutton, when it announced the Zuiker deal, said he will similarly handle casting and other particulars.) Levithan noted that Scholastic structured the deal with Cormon to account for his added cost in doing the film/Web production.

Kate Klimo, v-p and publisher of Random House/Golden Books for Young Readers, is embracing a Skeleton Creek-like model for what she dubbed one of Random's “transmedia” projects. The Fairy Godmother Academy—the first book in the series bows in August—is the brainchild of Jan Bozarth, an author Klimo said has “a background in music and online gaming.” (Bozarth, who has worked on games around Barbie and other children's brands, pitched the manuscript along with the Web site.) Bozarth's storyline—girls from around the globe are called upon to join a mythical order of fairy godmothers who act as stewards in an alternate fantasy world—skews to younger readers than Amanda and rolls into a Web site built around social networking. Klimo, who couldn't reveal too many details of the series, said the site is “good deeds-based.” Bozarth, like Carman, is creating the Web site, bringing on outside help as she sees fit.

Story Comes First

While Klimo didn't say flat-out that she wouldn't work with a packager on a “transmedia” project, she's acutely attuned to the notion that everything begins with story. “We've seen a lot of projects, but all felt as if they were born in a lab. We're wary of them because we've always felt, and still feel, that if you don't have a good book, you ain't got jack.”

A similar mantra about the primacy of story came from executives at the Perseus Book Group, where two new ambitious YA multi-platform projects, both to be published by Running Press and created by Cathy's Book author Jordan Weisman, recently found a home. The two series—Nanovor and Lost Souls—will feature elaborate add-ons; in the case of Nanovor, a handheld gaming device will launch with the first book in winter 2009, created by Weisman's gaming company, Smith & Tinker. (Nanovor follows a group of high schoolers who discover a prehistoric life form in mite size computer bytes, and Lost Souls is a trilogy about a 13-year-old trying to save the world.)

Rick Joyce, chief marketing officer at Perseus, said neither of these projects dazzled simply because of their non-book bells and whistles but, rather, because of their storylines. “As publishers we still have to go back to that essential question: ‘Do I want to spend time with these characters?’” How publishers erect the games, Web sites and contests wrapped around these stories is something, in Joyce's view, that will continue to happen in a variety of ways. The key, he warns, is to have a single driving force at the center of it all, making sure characters and storylines aren't diluted or misrepresented in the creation of off-the-page content. “That center can be the publisher, the creator or the packager, but [projects like these] definitely need that. As hard as that can be for a trade book, it's exponentially harder [with multimedia projects].”

Jon Anderson, the newly minted head of Simon & Schuster Children's Publishing (who also just happened to bring Cathy's Book into Running Press), admitted that the biggest challenge to high-end, multiplatform projects is, not surprisingly, the cost. “The trick is either to find inexpensive ways to do things with lower-level projects, or

to devote the expenses to projects that justify those costs." Anderson said S&S is "creating departments" that will have the digital expertise to create complex Web sites, such as the company's in-house multimedia studio, which currently creates various digital promotional material for the house.

S&S Children's current big project on this front is Jon Scieszka's forthcoming chapter book series, Spaceheadz. Slated for March 2010, the series, about three aliens who come to Earth to convince humans that ETs are good (while an adversary is running amok trying to convince Earthlings of the opposite), will, according to Anderson, feature several interactive Web sites.

In late January Lev Grossman, writing about the future of the book in Time, said the novel is on the verge of evolving "into something cheaper, wilder, trashier, more democratic and more deliriously fertile than ever." Although Grossman wasn't speaking to what is happening in children's publishing per se, there seems to be something in his description that taps into this brave new world.

It's clear that children's publishing is embracing the spirit of the book while finding more and more ways to tell a story outside the book. The challenge, as almost all who commented for this story said, will be figuring out how to create these non-book books cheaper, faster and better. As Katz put it, "This isn't landing in the new world, this is on the road to the new world."

Patrick Carman's print-video hybrid targets readers for a digital age Seattle PI

By CECELIA GOODNOW
P-I REPORTER

The video didn't load?

Oops.

Author Patrick Carman, in Seattle to visit schools and bookstores, threw a sweat shirt over his 6-foot-4-inch frame and ducked outside to call his tech elves back in Walla Walla.

They solved the problem posthaste -- and a good thing, because video is integral to Carman's new multimedia book, a children's ghost mystery called "Skeleton Creek."

At 43, with two adolescent daughters of his own, the charismatic author is targeting a generation of digital natives known more for spending time with "hand on mouse" than "nose in book."

He's luring them with a new kind of storytelling that's a bit like the Old Spice centaur -- two things in one. "Skeleton Creek" is a book, but it's also an online movie. And, like the centaur, it needs both halves to function, which sets it apart from the usual online book spinoffs.

With a "Skeleton Creek" sequel due out in September and another multiplatform series in the works, Carman and publishing giant Scholastic Inc. say they're promoting reading by pushing the boundaries of how we define a book.

"Mixing media is a way to bring kids back to books," said Carman, who describes his hybrid creation as a form of "book evangelism."

Author of the best-selling "Land of Elyon" fantasy series, the boyish writer is a former advertising entrepreneur whose knack for storytelling and promotion helped pluck him from the obscurity of self-publishing.

In the past five years he has visited 622 schools -- and he says it was those visits that alerted him to the rapid inroads interactive media have made into preteen life.

At first he never saw young kids with cell phones. Suddenly they were everywhere, and kids -- his daughters included -- were texting and trailing earbuds and doing homework, all at the same time. Interactive media had become the white noise of their generation, and Carman wanted in.

"Whether adults like it or not -- or are comfortable with it -- that's the world we live in," he said.

Authors Sean Stewart and Jordan Weisman flirted with interactivity in 2006 with "Cathy's Book: If Found, Call (650) 266-8233," a teen novel that included phone numbers and Web sites readers could access.

Scholastic heightened the multiplatform concept last fall with "The 39 Clues," a 10-part, multi-author series (Carman is writing book five) that uses clue cards, an online game and contests to extend the text.

"Skeleton Creek" ups the ante by treating interactive elements not as an add-on, but an integral part of the story. The tale revolves around two teens, Sarah and Ryan, who have encountered ghostly doings during their nighttime exploration of an abandoned dredge -- an earth-chewing machine once used for extracting gold.

As we learn from Ryan's journal -- the "book" portion of "Skeleton Creek" -- Ryan was injured in a mysterious fall at the dredge and his parents have barred him from further contact with Sarah. (As if.)

While Ryan uses his journal to speculate about the mystery, Sarah resumes her exploration, camcorder in hand. Through furtive e-mails, she shares her findings with Ryan and directs him to video links on her Web page. Ryan records the passwords in his journal, allowing readers to go online and see what Sarah has found.

Some of the nine clips show Sarah musing into the camera from the safety of her bedroom. But her illicit, nighttime footage of the dredge has a heightened tension that recalls "The Blair Witch Project" as the camera captures abandoned woods, a ghostly face and mysterious taps and groans. The footage ends with a heart-stopping cliffhanger.

The video was directed by Carman's friend, Jeffrey Townsend, a Walla Walla filmmaker who spent 20 years in feature films -- mostly as a production designer or second unit director on films like "Sleepless in Seattle" and "Maid to Order."

Townsend, 54, said he jumped at Carman's invitation because his mission as a filmmaker is to bring "feature-level quality" to smaller-scale projects.

"My initial panic," Townsend said, "was that he just wanted my advice and not my involvement."

Carman, who fronted production costs from his six-figure advance, said, "We actually went down to Los Angeles and screen-tested about 100 girls. The casting agent was the same casting agent as for 'Pulp Fiction.' "

In the end, they cast a hometown girl, Amber Larsen, to play Sarah and used a part-time, relatively inexperienced cast and crew.

Book two was a relative breeze to film -- and, according to Townsend, resulted in "a deeper and richer experience" for the viewer -- because he and Carman faced a steep learning curve with book one. At times, they weren't sure they could pull it off.

In particular, Townsend said, "I was nervous I would not gauge how scary it should be for this age group."

He shot the spookiest scenes first so Scholastic could vet them. Booksellers who've seen the film say age 11 or 12 is a good threshold.

"Ten may be too young for the scary parts," said Rene Kirkpatrick, buyer at Third Place Books. Still, she said, the scary element is exactly what will grab reluctant readers, especially boys.

Terry Foster of Barnes & Noble, a former teacher who has worked with interactive learning, said she thinks the hybrid format transcends gimmickry and will make young readers feel they're participating in the story.

"I think they've been longing for something like this," Foster said.

The inspiration for "Skeleton Creek" was a landmark dredge Carman encountered several years ago on a family vacation in tiny Sumpter, Ore. Now part of the Oregon State Heritage Area, the dredge -- the last of three built on

the Powder River -- operated from 1935 to 1954. Carman's story plays off a legend that the dredge is haunted by a worker named Joe Bush, who perished when his pants leg was caught in the gears.

Scholastic's executive editorial director, David Levithan, foresees "a huge future" for multiplatform books like "Skeleton Creek."

"I don't think it's going to replace print," he said, "but I think print will broaden to include it."

Within a few years, he said, readers will be able to toggle easily between print and video links directly from electronic readers like Amazon's Kindle device. The result, he maintains, will be a richer experience that expands kids' learning.

"I really think," he said, "it will make us rethink our definition of what literacy is."
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http://seattlepi.nwsourc.com/books/401596_skeleton27.html

Publishers Weekly

Scholastic Rolls Out Carman's Multimedia Venture
By Sally Lodge -- Publishers Weekly, 1/15/2009

"Read it. Watch it. Live it." Scholastic's promotional blurb for Skeleton Creek, a multiplatform project due next month, lets kids know what they're in for. Conceived, written and produced by Patrick Carman, author of the Land of Elyon, Atherton and Elliot's Park series, Skeleton Creek is a ghost mystery that plays out on the page and in online video footage. Here's how it works—and how it all came together.

Slipped into a plastic sleeve suggestive of videocassette packaging, the paper-over-board book is the journal of Ryan, a teen who had a serious accident after a brush with the sinister force shrouding the town of Skeleton Creek. Now confined to his home, Ryan writes of his research into the mystery and his frightening experiences, while his best friend Sarah uses her video camera to track the ominous presence, filming documentary-type footage. Readers use passwords in the journal to access the videos, posted on a dedicated Web site. The site goes live February 10, the laydown date of the book, which has a 100,000-copy first printing.

The project grew out of Carman's interest in finding a new way to combine literature and the Internet, now so integral to kids' lives. "In the past, when technology has been included in one of my book projects, I've never felt like it was deeply connected to the story," says the author. "A web-based add-on that has no meaningful connection to a book often feels hollow for readers, as if it's been bolted on as a bonus rather than essential to the experience." Carman says this left him frustrated, knowing that technology means something different to his children, ages 11 and 13, than it does to him. "Technology holds more weight as a narrative expression in their world."

On one of his frequent school visits, Carman was thinking about how he could bring the printed word and online video together, when he sketched a picture in his journal. "It was a page from a book that twisted in the middle. When it came out the other side, it was a piece of film stock. The image completely ignited my imagination."

Patrick Carman.
Photo: Matt McKern.

This then sparked two key questions for him: "Was there a story that could be told in which the printed word and online videos could contribute equally? And better still, could they be made inseparable?"

He decided they could. Carman's journal doodle became the logo for PC Studio, the production house he founded to create Skeleton Creek's video elements. After writing the script—his first ever—the author shared it with David Levithan, Scholastic's executive editorial director, who, Carman says, "offered a lot of great suggestions to tighten things up."

Carman then collaborated with Jeffrey Townsend, a scriptwriter, production designer and director who worked in Hollywood for 20 years. "Jeffrey took my working script and turned it into something that could actually be used

to direct actors and scenes,” Carman says. “There were months of back-and-forth meetings, and I was present at all the shoots, where we made a lot of changes on the fly. It was demanding, exciting and amazingly fun.”

Levithan calls *Skeleton Creek* a “massive undertaking on Pat’s part, as it is essentially making a movie and a book at the same time.” Since the editor has worked with Carman on *The Land of Elyon* books, he notes, “I was confident that Pat could pull this off. He’d send us casting videos and show us stills of the locations, and we basically acted as editorial consultants. I guess it was my one chance to be a movie executive.” Though the *Skeleton Creek* story arc now spans two journal and video installments—the second is due in fall 2009—Levithan says that additional books and films may follow. And Scholastic has signed Carman for another multimedia project based on this model, likely launching in 2010.

When Patrick Carman was deliberating about how he could incorporate technology into a book series, he made a sketch that inspired him to add the video component to *Skeleton Creek*. That sketch morphed into the logo for the production company he founded to do the videos.

Levithan emphasizes Scholastic’s commitment to finding new ways of using technology and literature together, citing the success of *The 39 Clues*, a multiplatform series launched last fall whose two debut books have 1.5 million copies in print. (Carman will pen the fifth installment, due in August.) “This is absolutely the wave of the future, and something we jumped on early because of our resources,” he says. “As we did with *The 39 Clues*, we are launching *Skeleton Creek* across all of our publishing channels in an ambitious way. We want to have the best possible projects along these lines.”

Musing on his future projects, Carman says, “There will always be endless space in bookstores and libraries for traditional books, and I hope to write many more of them. But as an author who stands in about 100 different school gymnasiums every year, I think we need to start thinking outside the box more often.”

Such thinking on the part of authors and publishers, Carman adds, can lead to innovative projects that enhance the appeal of the printed word to today’s young readers. “Books are by far the most difficult entertainment sale for our kids,” he observes. “No sounds, no lights, no gaming strategy, no beat to dance to, no person on the other line to talk with. And yet all the studies show the same thing: reading is king when it comes to educating kids. It’s not about bridging the gap between technology and books—it’s about erasing it.”

***Skeleton Creek* by Patrick Carman. Scholastic, \$14.99 ISBN 978-0-545-07566-4**

<http://www.publishersweekly.com/article/CA6629554.html?nid=2788>