

## Immersed in Stories:

A New Journey into Reading

**W**hen I wrote *The Survivors* in 2009, the world hadn't yet seen an iPad. We hadn't been introduced to new forms of storytelling, hadn't consumed stories in transmedia and app-based experiences. Not really. And in my graduate school education classes in Peabody College at Vanderbilt, our discussions about technology in the classroom revolved around smart boards and how to teach students the full uses of technology, even as we dissected which forms of technological know-how were important for which ages. These discussions were current then, sure, but now seem antiquated in only three years' time. The reason is simple: in that time, everything has changed.

I have a particular vantage point in this evolution. I feel the effects these changes have made on all our lives—and will continue to make with increasing speed—with a weight I'm not sure most people could. I am, after all, an author, a transmedia storyteller, an educator, and now an app developer.

When I envisioned *The Sur-*

*ivors*, the first in a young adult paranormal fantasy series with historical and mythological ties that somehow coexist nicely with its pop-culture setting, I envisioned an app. I didn't know the word for it then, and I certainly couldn't tell anyone how to make what I saw in my head. Once there was a 100,000-word narrative in place, I spouted to anyone who would listen—friends, family, cohorts, other writers, and literary agents—about a vision I saw for the future of books. “Imagine one day you could touch the screen of a Kindle,” I would say, “and where there was historical research, you could see documents or books, sources that the author or, better yet, the character read to make the conclusions presented in the story!” To blank stares, I'd say, “Imagine if you could hear music playing at the right time in the right moment, like a soundtrack in a movie. Or if you could follow a character's travels on Google Earth. See the real places they visit. See clothes they're wearing—and buy them yourself. What if you could *talk* to them? On Twit-

ter? Or inside the book? Wouldn't that be amazing?”

And it was amazing, but at the time it was far from feasible, far from a reality. It quickly became apparent that I would have to make it happen before anyone would understand what I proposed. What I saw was a future for the way you could read a book, a way to further immerse a reader in story worlds—dive further, if you like to dive, or skim the water and just read the text, if that were more your style. I saw a curated reading experience that could get you as close to what I thought of as the most immersive, most engaging, and most perfect form of story consumption: experiencing what I saw in my head when I, the author, wrote it.

I have always experienced stories—my own and others'—in particularly intense ways. For me, there is a soundtrack, a camera pan (for a camera that doesn't exist), a perfectly coiffed sentence to illuminate and illustrate, a gentle rhythmic lull to the character's voice that says so much about him. I think and imagine in giant, grand-scheme

pictures and in minutiae so small, people can't be bothered by it. And because of that, transmedia stories, interactive book apps, and new story experiences of any kind are the perfect medium for my art. In a new, interactive form of a story, I can share with you the song that plays and the detailed observation you may not have made on your own. I can write original music that conveys tone in an emotional way that my words might not. I can give you the aesthetic details of a character you might miss or not form as fully as you could. I can inform all that you imagine, and take it to greater heights. When I write a story, I live it, breathe it, (don't) sleep it, eat it, and drink it in.

With a transmedia story, one you can explore and fall in love with the way I do, *you* can do all those things, too. You can find yourself immersed, consumed by the story, and caught up in the chaos of the story world itself. Print books can do this to an extent, but there are limits. Though the greatest imaginations may take more from my words than I put into them, other minds might not open themselves to the possibilities of just how big and real and sensory the story could be. These new kinds of stories I once dreamt of offer you all of this: the words, sounds, sights. These stories and their cross-platform, transmedia content are jumping-off points for each reader. You don't all have identical experiences with a print book, and so you wouldn't in a new story form, either. But whatever way you would have read the book, these new kinds of stories can offer you *more*.

## Going Places When You Read

In my undergraduate studies in early childhood education and child development, I acquired a mental list of take-aways from massive processes, concepts, or experiences we want children to have. This is of particular importance to me. I work this way: I get to know the inner workings of everything I touch, and then I find one recurring mantra to repeat to myself that symbolizes all of that. When studying the art of teaching a child to read—thinking of *how* I wanted children to be able to read and what they could get from it—a single phrase rang on repeat inside my head: people need to *go places* when they read.

It's simple, right? Maybe that's a goal you set for students, or maybe you've never thought of it quite like that, but that's the gist, isn't it? You don't learn to love literature, stories, or books if all you do is decode words on a page. You do not engage in other worlds if you don't care about them. You cannot put yourself there if you don't wonder, ask questions, or let yourself depart the text. So when I formed this asinine idea of an interactive book, of an immersive story, I knew my head was in the right place because it gave books an even better chance of taking you somewhere. If you were already a reader accustomed to mental travel while reading, then I could simply fuel your fire. But if you were not this reader, if you were one of the many children, teens, or even adults who never really connect to stories, this new interactive book could make reading so much more.

By the time these unconnected readers are offered young adult lit, many people have already given up on them; they may tell you that if these readers haven't already made it there, they may never make it, so what's the point? (For the record, I'm not one of those people. I don't think it's ever too late, for anyone. For anything.)

But there is a point.

## The Immersedition™

Fast-forward to 2011. I've signed with a small start-up publisher, Chafie Press, to publish the five books in *The Survivors* series. I partnered with Chafie because of their desire to breach the world of the interactive book, faster and with more passion than any of the bigger, more traditional publishers could offer me. Soon after *The Survivors*' release in the spring, parent-company Chafie Creative and I were neck-deep in the development of what we now call an Immersedition™. The Immersedition interactive book app is a model of an interactive book. It is not a one-size-fits-all platform. It is not for every story. It is not a stagnant platform, but is instead a concept that will evolve with each iteration of the technology and with each step the world takes toward becoming more accustomed to consuming stories in new and varied ways. And so it is a way to accomplish everything I set out to do. It is a way to bring mine and many other authors' stories, current and classic, to life in a new way.

In what was originally a 283-page hardback book, *The Survivors Immersedition* has over 300 touch-points that elicit over 500 frames

of additional information without ever visually leaving the pages of a book. You are guided through the book by watermark icons that tell you where a point of interaction is and what kind of interaction it will be. In the prologue, which takes place in Salem in 1692, there are character profiles of the Reverend Samuel Parris and Governor William Phips, side by side with brief histories of the infamous witch trials and historical documents from the era, all of which fill out your understanding of the story and of the history behind it. But if you read only the book, with none of these extras, the story is complete enough to stand on its own. This is the key. In an Immersedition, the additional content takes the story to new heights, but the story can stand on its own merits. The book can exist as just a book, but it can exist as so much more, too.

In other places, there is a soundtrack—some original and some licensed from the likes of Coldplay, Mumford & Sons, or Old Crow Medicine Show—that plays a certain song at just the right moment, just like I foretold. And the rest I imagined is there, too: interactive satellite maps, character profiles that evolve as the story evolves for spoiler-free reading, character clothes and style, the cars they drive, the places they visit, books they read, mythological backgrounds and information, handwritten author anecdotes, and so much more. And, yes, you can even talk to the characters from inside the book. They have Twitter accounts that they've had for years that you can access from inside the app; ask them a question, get an answer. The content is high qual-

ity and carefully selected, and it is always relevant. We may have put a *ton* into it, but each choice was a deliberate one. The Immersedition is about offering you a choice to engage as you like. Content is never forced upon you. Nothing just appears in your line of vision, detracting or distracting from your reading experience. But if you would like to dig, then it's as easy as touching a watermark.

### The Future of Books

I think that this is where stories are headed. It could be because I watched a generation read *Twilight* and then think an actor was the embodiment of a character enough to fall for him. It could be because I see an ever-growing need for *more* from my and others' reading. In any case, I know that we are in the right time and place to blur the lines between fantasy and reality, to offer more to consume and to create more that is consumable. There are entities out there creating story apps that are much more intricate and game-like, stories that abandon the idea of a central narrative and offer you a chance to explore a story world on your own like never before. I am excited to see where these transmedia ventures head and what will come out of them. As a storyteller myself, I'm excited to embrace them.

But that's not what we—what *I*—set out to do. I wanted to make an evolutionary step in *books*. I wanted to show you what we were capable of doing with the written word. Some will tell you I have not taken enough steps toward the future, not fully embracing a world beyond books. Others will tell you

that I've gone too far, that I'm building things that will threaten the greatest asset in our society.

But I hope you can see what I see: that this is the crucial step. Books will always matter. Should I say that again? Books will *always* matter. It doesn't mean they're going to look the same as they do now. It doesn't mean—actually, I implore you *not* to let it mean—that loving books-as-we-know-them will keep you from embracing the newest forms of storytelling. I see a world where stories and literature-based experiences exist in myriad ways. And perhaps foolishly, I believe that this will offer the next generation *more* opportunities to engage in the narratives of past, present, and future, not fewer. I don't think offering book apps and interactive stories means that I'm jumping ship on hopes of raising readers. Instead, I think it means that I am one of the few who are patching the holes to keep our ship from sinking.

Not that I'm biased, of course.

We're raising and educating a generation of thinkers whose brains either consume information in more rapid and varied ways—because avenues by which to consume information are more rapid and varied than they have been before—or whose brains don't ask questions because they don't have to. Is that too bold a statement? Probably, but it's what I see. What Chafie and I have created offers a solution for both sides of that spectrum. For those who ask questions of themselves while reading, I have presented an answer. For those who never ask the questions in the first place, I offer a friendly prompt that a question could have

been asked there—and then answer it. I want to offer you, the reader, a way to engage in stories like never before. I want you to read books in a new, more immersive way. It's that simple.

### YA as the First Step

And why young adult, you might ask? The answer to that is even simpler—because they get it. When we were beta-testing the pilot *Immersedition*, a version that existed without the intro page and demo video it now does, we tested it on 8th–12th graders, college students, and adults. The adults opened the app and refused to move forward until someone presented them with instructions. (They wanted to be *told* to turn pages like an eBook, or to touch buttons where virtual buttons appeared.) College students asked, “When does it do something?” as they rapidly flipped pages and waited for something to jump out at them, waited for something to *happen* (which, of course, everyone would hate if it actually did). But the 8th–12th graders took the iPads out of our hands, flipped pages, touched watermarks, enlarged them, closed them, made music play. They never asked a question. They got it instantly, and they were hooked. (Ultimately, it's the adults' fault that there are instructions in the app at all.)

Clearly, I knew before that moment that I wanted to start in young adult literature for my adventures into interactive books—I did, of course, write *Survivors* long before there was an *Immersedition* to speak of—but this testing just validated it. I can't tell you how many teenagers—even teenage boys who usually wouldn't be

caught dead reading “something like that”—walk up to me and say, “If books were always like this, I'd read all the time.” Or, “Are there more of these? Where can I get more books like this?” That, too, is much-needed validation, and I take it warmly. I understand. They want more books that take them places when they read. I want more books like that, too.

### Changing the Way We Teach Stories

What started as a vision for how to tell my story quickly evolved into a new way to tell anyone's story. And what I quickly accepted as a new way to tell stories, I saw even more clearly as a new way to *teach* stories. *The Survivors Immersedition* was the pilot app for Chafie Creative and me. The second is a *Romeo & Juliet Immersedition* that takes a whole new step toward making it obvious that book apps can offer us something we've needed for a while. Whether used in a classroom as the curricular text of choice, used only by a teacher as a guide in creating his or her discussions and plans, or used by the struggling eighth grader who, without an *Immersedition*, might ditch the book and read Sparknotes instead, the *Romeo & Juliet Immersedition* is a new way to think about a teachable text.

In the educational *Immersedition*, we use similar watermarks and the engage-as-you-like model. There are no textbook-style features, like quizzes at the end of an act, but there is access to thought-provoking discussions that arise at the appropriate line. We address ways to work out puns, identify themes, read stage directions,

discuss characters, and decode allusions often missed. We offer simple video interpretations for particularly difficult scenes. Additionally, we created a reader mode that offers a chance to read only the text with the watermarks, and a workshop mode that offers footnotes, puns, themes, and foreshadowing already marked up. And there's more. This app is a chance to capitalize on every teachable moment, a way to guarantee high-quality, thought-provoking information and discussion to anyone who reads the book. It is a chance to take literature-based learning experiences to an entirely new level, a way to individualize instruction with a single tool.

### Embracing the New Models

I challenge you to see the potential that I see in the *Immersedition* model. Open your mind to what literature and story experiences you could have or could offer the students and readers you connect with. I challenge you to wonder where we're headed and to start consuming new stories as they're offered to you. They might not always come from the most-established entities. (*Wired* magazine once said about the *Immersedition* that we were only able to accomplish what we did because we were small and unattached to a more established group, a business steeped in its own dated traditions). They might not always feel familiar. But what if they're worth it? What if they offer you something new that will become as magical to you as books are?

I love books. I'm one of their biggest fans. I write, read, and

teach them. I tear them apart and think about them. I let them infiltrate my mind, take over my soul. I am not the enemy. Not yours. Not books'. Instead, I am an inventor. I see what a story, what a *book* could be, and I take steps to make it that. The Chafie team and I are ready to take other books—so many other books!—to this level. In *Survivors*, I got my chance to truly blur the lines between fantasy and reality. And in *Romeo & Juliet*, I'm thrilled to see a high-quality, literature-based interactive educational text land on the table. To me, this could change so much for so many.

Yes, I think that this is where stories are headed. I think they will

exist in apps and on the Internet, across platforms, and in an increasingly slim space that holds the line between fiction and reality. I think we will find ways to teach stories to those who need it most, offer more ways for stories to take us places than they already do. We will find ways to reinvent storytelling for those who already love books and those who haven't yet had the good fortune of falling in love with them. I think if we open our minds, we can take a step together toward embracing a future of books, securing what we love about them, exploring what they could become.

Actually? I don't think. I know.

### Editors' Note

Throughout the online version of this issue, you will find active links to additional related content.

*Amanda Havard is the author of the supernatural young adult series The Survivors, a transmedia franchise with an online following of over 3 million readers. For her first series, Havard teamed up with transmedia content studio Chafie Creative to create Immersedition™ book apps, a patent-pending app that is a curated, interactive reading experience for full-length novels. The Survivors was the debut Immersedition™. She recently headed up the first Chafie educational project, a Romeo & Juliet Immersedition. It is currently being adopted in schools across the country.*