The Potential for Aesthetic Experience in a Literary App

An analysis of The Fantastic Flying Books of Mr. Morris Lessmore

Anette Hagen

PhD student, Faculty of Humanities, Sports and Educational Science, University of South-Eastern Norway.

Her PhD project is about aesthetics and multimodality in literary apps.

anette.hagen@usn.no

Abstract

This analysis of the literary app *The Fantastic Flying Books of Mr. Morris Lessmore* is theoretically grounded in Wolfgang Iser's theories of aesthetic response and multimodal social semiotics. The first part of the analysis shows how aesthetic meaning comes to the fore in different modes and in the interplay between them. The second part deals with the interactivity of the app and shows how the reader's interaction with the tablet may influence the wandering viewpoint (Iser, 1984) and let it take different paths, transforming the reader into a real-time participant in the story. The article argues that touch interaction may enrich aesthetic experiences by evoking feelings in the reader, and that interactive tasks can prolong aesthetic experiences. In addition, the performing of interactive tasks may underline certain aspects of the story.

Keywords
aesthetics; Iser; multimodality; interactivity; literary apps; picture book apps; digital literature; touch interaction

The story of Morris Lessmore begins as Morris sits on his balcony and writes his memoirs. Unexpectedly, a hurricane descends and destroys everything. A woman, referred to as the «lovely lady», appears with a book, which leads Morris to a magical library where he lives among the book shelves until he completes his memoirs and leaves. A young girl then enters, seemingly to be the library's new resident. *The Fantastic Flying Books of Mr. Morris Lessmore*, hereafter referred to as *Morris Lessmore*, was published in 2011 as an animated short film (Joyce & Oldenburg, 2011). The app was released later the same year. The following year, an augmented reality (AR) app (Moonbot Studios, 2012) was released along with a picture book (Joyce, 2012). The iPad app, the AR app and the picture book serve as remediations of the film.

In this article, I investigate the *Morris Lessmore* app (Joyce, 2011), using a combination of multimodal social semiotics and Iser's theory of aesthetic response. My aim, through close reading, is to explore how literary apps can be perceived as aesthetic works. I ask two main questions: Which aesthetic potential may arise from the story as a multimodal expression, and which aesthetic potential may arise from the media-specific features of the app?

Morris Lessmore has been the subject of several analyses (Aguilera, Kachorsky, Gee, & Serafini, 2016; Carlin, 2016; Engberg, 2014; Linkis, 2017; Mygind, 2016; Schwebs, 2014). My attempt is to contribute with the comprised perspective of multimodal social semiotics and Iser's theory of aesthetic response, thus considering literary *form* to a larger extent.

The two abovementioned theories complement each other. Social semiotics is a way of understanding meaning making in social and cultural contexts (Halliday, 1978). Multimodal social semiotics is based on the different semiotic resources that are available for interpreting the world and creating meaning (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006; van Leeuwen, 2005). Iser's focus on aesthetics is combined with the analytical tools for multimodal text presented by multimodal social semiotics. Iser's theory of aesthetic response was directed at printed fiction, and using it on a multimodal text may be taking it too far from its origin. However, Iser was open to the extension of his perspective, for example to young readers and different types of texts (Maagerø & Tønnessen, 2001). Iser's theories are suited to the mapping out of aesthetic potentials, which has not previously been done in the same way in the research on *Morris Lessmore.*

I refer to *Morris Lessmore* as a literary app (aligned with Frederico (2017) and Henkel (2018)). I identify «literary apps» as apps that possess literary qualities in the sense that they are narrative, fictional, and present aesthetic expressions through different modes and the interplay between them. A mode is «a socially shaped and culturally given resource for making meaning» (Kress 2011, p. 54). When investigating different modes, I use analytical tools especially developed by Kress and van Leeuwen (2006) and van Leeuwen (2005). In addition, I study multimodal cohesion (van Leeuwen, 2005), drawing on the complex system of interrelation of modes that Painter, Martin, and Unsworth (2013) have mapped out based on picture

books. To understand the potential for meaning making in touch, I draw on Jewitt (2018, p. 87), who points out that touch actually can be considered a mode, as it realises meanings in the three metafunctions (Halliday, 1978). The ideational metafunction is concerned with how language is used to represent content, the interpersonal metafunction involves how language is used in interrelation between humans, and the textual metafunction refers to the inner coherence of a text. Both Frederico (2017) and Zhao and Unsworth (2017) have used analytical frameworks from multimodal social semiotics on literary apps, but they employ the framework with other aims. However, Zhao and Unsworth look at interactivity in particular; I will therefore return to their work in my analysis.

In contrast to multimodal social semiotics, Iser's theory of aesthetic response does not provide analytical tools. It rather revolves around the reading process and the meeting between the text and the reader. Iser does not understand meaning in a text as something definable or objective, but rather as a human experience (Iser, 1972). Aesthetics is perception; aesthetic effect a form of realisation through the senses. The fiction reader's understanding occurs through sensory experiences. Gaps in the text occur when text segments are indirectly connected to each other and can also break the expected order in the text (Iser, 1984, p. 302). Indeterminacies require the reader to make individual decisions on textual meanings. In any fictional text, such gaps and indeterminacies are present to a greater or a lesser extent. The reader must construct the connection between the text segments and fill the gap with meaning.

In this article, the concept of gaps is considered from a multimodal perspective. I argue that the complexity of gaps in the text can even occur on several levels, as there are gaps not just between segments of verbal language but also between verbal language and images, images and sounds, and

interactivity and verbal language—between all the modes and, at the same time, within each mode. One might also argue that different modes close potential gaps, for example, when images in a written text leave little to the reader's imagination. In literary apps, however, these indeterminacies and gaps are often used effectively as a device for a potential aesthetic experience.

A text is organised in structures that invite the reader to read in a certain way. These structures constitute the implied reader (Iser, 1974), which calls for a response from the actual reader. In the case of apps, it also suggests a direct physical response through the interactive elements. In addition, I will argue that in the app, interactivity is intertwined with *the wandering viewpoints*, the structures in the text that let the reader take certain viewpoints and stances throughout the reading (Iser, 2006, p. 65). In the case of *Morris Lessmore,* I assert that these viewpoints are strongly and directly influenced by interactivity. Interactivity becomes a guide for the reader because (as I elaborate in the analysis) it hands out viewpoints as the reader becomes a real-time participant in the story.

Characters and modes in Morris Lessmore

The protagonist, Morris Lessmore, is present in all spreads. He is the only human character in the story with a name. The phrase «less is more» connotes minimalism. Morris's life is minimalist; it involves only the books, with no family, romance, or other aspects of a normal life. Morris is dressed in a way that leads the reader to place him in a decade other than the present, perhaps somewhere between the 1920s and 1960s. He has a walking stick and wears a grey suit and a «pork pie» hat. Painter et al. describe such character attributions as complementary ideational meaning systems across images and verbal language (2013, p. 138). In *Morris Lessmore,* colour has a distinct meaning potential and expresses the characters' emotions. It is pri-

marily connected to affect, which is often seen as an aspect of the interpersonal metafunction (e.g., Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006, p. 229). When the hurricane descends, the colours present in the beginning of the story change and turn darker; when the storm is over, and everything is destroyed, the world is in grey. Morris starts to wander through this grey world until he looks up and finds the lovely lady, carried by a group of flying books, who hands him a copy of *Humpty Dumpty*. Suddenly, the world is in colour again – insisting on the importance of books in people's lives. The use of the grey colour after the hurricane is effective because grey has sad and boring connotations, as opposed to colourful and happy. Morris himself acquires colour as he enters his new home, the magical library. The metaphor that connects colour with the importance of books repeats itself when Morris lends out books from his library. The people standing in line are grey, but when they are handed books, they are also given colour. When they get hold of their books, their voices change accordingly, and they speak like one of the book characters. Van Leeuwen (1999, p. 125 ff.) has mapped out the dimensions of voice quality, which have potential for meaning. As one of the library visitors becomes a pirate, his voice is dark and rasping, connoting masculinity and a rough life. It is just as much the vocal quality that brings this meaning forth as the verbal language spoken. In one image, when the woman receives a copy of *Treasure Island*, the sounds of seagulls, the wind and the sea appear, enhancing the message that people gain access to different worlds through literature.

Music works in parallel with the use of colour. When everything is scattered, the music stops. It returns with the lovely lady and the colours, sounding almost sacral. Sound time can be unmeasured or measured, according to van Leeuwen (1999, p. 7). You can typically tap your feet to measured sound time, in contrast to unmeasured, which is «a particularly apt signifier for 'eternity'»

(van Leeuwen, 1999, p. 7). The music in the spread that indicates the coming of the lovely lady is unmeasured, thus expressing the sacral, through a harmony of string instruments. When the lovely lady shows up, they are accompanied by a choir singing harmonies, connoting church music. When the voiceover states that everything that Morris knew was scattered, Morris looks somewhat confused, but it is the pictures in the background and their colours that express the seriousness of the situation. Houses are thrown up in the air, they land upside down. When the hurricane is described, there is a dissonance between the verbal language and the calm voiceover. The lack of drama is conspicuous in both its intonation and the words expressed: «The winds blew and blew». This dissonance marks a gap between the oral verbal language and the visual modes. The dissonance between the voiceover and the images is an example of divergent couplings, couplings defined by Painter et al. as «the repeated co-patterning within a text of realisations from two or more systems» (2013, p. 143). The lack of music and colour expresses Morris's state of mind. He has experienced great loss and sadness, but this is not recognisable in his facial expression. Thus, representation and absence are equally significant devices.

The lovely lady is the second human character presented in the story. She is a classic beauty in a 1950s or 1960s dress. Books literally lift her up. They are tied with ribbons. She holds them in her hand like balloons. The fact that she flies along with the sacral music is reminiscent of an angel or a saviour. She leads Morris towards a new life.

The sentences in the literary app are mostly short and simple, with a few exceptions. At the turning point with the arrival of the lovely lady, the language acquires a musical quality, such as «happy bit of happenstance», «lovely lady», and «festive squadron of flying books.» The alliterations underline the importance of the musicality and add to the connection between music and verbal language. The convergent coupling contributes to the joyful atmosphere in the spread: the bright colours, the sacral music, and the poetic alliteration. The lovely lady scene forms a parallel to the end scene where Morris leaves the magical library in a fashion similar to that of the lovely lady, with balloon-like books lifting him, the same posture as hers, thus leading the reader to believe that she was the previous resident of the magical library.

The life in the library is characterised by books with human features. They are Morris's friends. When he enters the library, they sound like different actors reciting iconic quotes from the English literary canon. These magical books have voices of their own, whereas Morris, the lovely lady, and the little girl have none, which emphasises the importance of books over human characters in this story.

According to Painter et al. (2013, p. 137), exaggerated size can realise the meaning potential of *force*. Some images in *Morris Lessmore* have elements that are larger than normal. When Morris resumes writing his memoirs, he sits on a gigantic open book on a pile of equally enormous copies, accentuating the importance of books and the way that Morris literally lives with them, as if the books have power over him. The most unrealistic image appears when Morris is lost in books—with the background colour in yellow, like the pages of an old book, the letters passing by him, as if to place him in a world of fiction. According to van Leeuwen (2005, p. 61 ff.), colour may express identity. Morris Lessmore's identity is connected to the yellow pages that he flies through. They are not bright, white, new book pages; they are an expression of the nostalgia that surrounds him. This point is underlined through the accordion music, which is quite different from the orchestral music that dominates throughout the app.

This representation of «getting lost in books» refers to a parallel world within the reader. It is the inner, perceptible, and crea-

tive experience of fictional literature that Iser (1974, p. 279) describes. The letters passing by and the yellowed, old-book page colour that Morris flies through support the interpretation that he disappears into the reading experience. In other spreads, the written verbal language is separated from the other visual modes with a line. The framing (van Leeuwen, 2005, p. 9) of the verbal language marks a separation between the modes. However, in this particular part, when Morris gets «lost in books,» the line disappears. The reader's world and the world of books merge.

The music is otherwise characterised by a recurring theme, which constitutes variations of the old children's song «Pop! Goes the Weasel». In the end, when Morris becomes young again and leaves the house, the music changes to *ritardando*, gradually slowing down, as if to express that Morris's life is ending, even though this is not spoken out loud. The arrival of the little girl also underlines this point. She has pigtails, red hair, a red skirt, a blue T-shirt and knee-length stockings, like a 1950s or 1960s schoolgirl. As she enters the magical library, the light shines on the books and presents her like a shadow on the doorway pointing towards the books as a source of enlightenment. The next picture shows the tiny girl outside the gigantic building filled with books. The books again seem to be given more weight than the human characters. At least they last longer, as is certainly visualised when Morris later throws his memoirs back to the building as he flies away from the little girl. The book lives on in the library even though Morris does not. The little girl takes over the library, indicating that Morris's life is over.

The assumption that the lovely lady is the former proprietor and the little girl is Morris's successor as the library caretaker is certainly a gap-filling activity. It is not explicitly explained what the little girl does in the library; in the same way, the reader does not know whether the lovely lady was an earlier inhabitant of the library. Morris has minimal contact with the other characters. Even more striking is that the reader hardly knows anything about the human characters at all. There are almost exclusively gaps and indeterminacies, in Iser's view, surrounding the female characters. They make only fleeting appearances in Morris's life; hardly any communication exists between them. The female characters stay undetermined as aesthetic figures because they contribute to the feeling that Morris is alone in the world, distant from human relations. In this way, they fill certain functions of the narrative and the coherence of the text more than they represent actual characters. They are present to illustrate the cycle of the library, the books, and the stories that are handed down from one generation to the next. What is left unsaid about Morris may also be called a gap. There is very little information about his life, except the facts that he likes to read, lends out books, and writes his memoirs. Years pass in the story, but what transpires during most of those years is a mystery. The books are all-important; other human activities that do not involve books are not really worth mentioning.

The lines between the person of Morris Lessmore and his memoirs are blurry. The only aspect indicating that Morris has a family or a past is his memoirs, of which the reader catches a glimpse at the end of the story. In the memoirs, there is a drawing of a grown woman, probably a mother, pushing a swing. However, a book sits on the swing, metonymically representing Morris himself. In the case of his childhood, the visual modes have a greater semantic load (Painter et al., 2013, p. 141 ff.). The book on the swing calls attention to essential aspects of Morris's life. The app opens and ends with his memoirs. When tapping the red book in the opening picture of the app, it seems to open a book with a drawing of Morris Lessmore; however, it immediately changes into the «real» (animated) Morris, sitting in the exact same position on the exact same balcony. The verbal language states, «His life was a book of his

own writing.» The book that he is writing or reading in this picture might well be the book that the reader «opens» when starting to read the app. In the end, when he leaves the book of his memoirs in the magical library, the resemblance is also striking. The book's red leather cover has a golden «M» on its back, and the front is the stylistic icon of the app. Tapping one of the pictures in the book leads the reader to a picture of Morris writing his memoirs. What do these blurry lines between Morris and his memoirs tell the reader? What gives Morris's life meaning may well *be* books. Interpersonal relationships are absent, close relationships with books are present.

A common aspect of the characters in the book is that they all appear in a nostalgic setting. Their clothes and accessories are *attributions* (Painter et al., 2013, p. 64), with symbolic significance. Morris Lessmore's character attributions express bygone times. In addition, the voiceover sounds like a radio host from the 1940s or 1950s, underlining the ring of nostalgia (Linkis (2017) elaborates on the aspect of nostalgia). The voice quality expresses levels of social distance (van Leeuwen 1999, p. 24). This is a full voice, not too personal, which contributes to the radio host connotation. It is hard to date the story, which illustrates the timelessness of fiction. Judging from the clothes worn by the human characters and the appearance of the books, the story might be set in the 1950s or 1960s. However, several articles draw a line between the hurricane in the app and Hurricane Katrina, which struck the United States in 2005 (Carlin, 2016; Schwebs, 2014).

This section has dealt with the story as a multimodal text, and serves to illustrate how the different modes and the modes in combination bring forth possible aesthetic experiences. By pointing out and interpreting some of the gaps in the story, it shows how aesthetic potential can be realised in a multimodal story. As the analysis is based on the characters, parts of it are relevant for several of the versions of the story, such as the film or the book. The next part, however, concentrates on the media-specific feature of the literary app: the interactive element.

Interactivity

Zhao and Unsworth (2017, p. 94) distinguish between two types of touch design. One type of interactive element is the «hotspot», which signals what to do – for example, opening a menu, changing the language, recording, etc. Such features are called extra-text interactivity. Aligned with Zhao and Unsworth, I am more interested in the intra-text interactivity, which calls for an interpretation within the narrative context. As the app instructs the reader to take specific viewpoints, the reader needs to take a stance. In the following, I elaborate on how the viewpoints are wandering and how this affects the reading experience. The interactive features in some sections let the reader *do the actions* of Morris. The reader can take Morris's perspective as he or she does what he is doing in real time. For instance, as the reader gets to pour cereal and milk into bowls, which is what Morris does in the morning to feed his books, he or she playfully assumes Morris's perspective. As he sits in his study, mending the books, the reader can suddenly do so him- or herself, participating in the activity. In this way, the app creates an empathetic viewpoint towards the books; the reader takes care of them the way Morris does. Jewitt (2018, p. 87) elaborates on how touch can meet the interpersonal metafunction. In this case, the touch of the screen meets this function by evoking empathy.

The reader also enters into Morris's perspective as he or she lends books to the people visiting the library. As the reader participates in the scene, the impression of what happens can appear stronger. The subjective experience of reading books is emphasised as the separate characters react differently to the same books.

Apart from this, the reader sometimes has the opportunity to take the wind's perspective through the wandering viewpoint. For instance, in the beginning of the app, the

reader starts the wind blowing, which leads to the hurricane. The reader also twirls Morris's house, playing the role of the hurricane and thereby taking the position of the initiator of misery. This is a sensory experience that may cause a reaction of empathy or even a little guilt. Through the lens of social semiotics, touch in this case creates meaning through the interpersonal metafunction (Jewitt, 2018, p. 87). However, when the hurricane is over, the reader can try to write in Morris's book. Nonetheless, the words of the book disappear, indicating the emptiness of Morris's inner life after the devastation. The frustration with the disappearing words is experienced on a different level when the words that the reader has written also vanish. Such frustration is quite tangible and is perceived without a verbal description. The realisation is sensed through an aesthetic experience of frustration. The representation is visual and tangible, but none of this would be as effective and experienced as significantly different without the disappearance of what the reader might have created.

A few times, the reader performs the task of underlining some of the gaps in the story. For example, when Morris resumes writing his book, the reader decides whether it is night or day (the transition is gradual) by swiping a finger over the screen, which leads to a change in the surroundings. The reader shifts the time for Morris and, in this way, feels how day and night pass for him when he is caught up in writing. The reader senses that time is passing without knowing the full extent of what is happening. Similarly, as the verbal language states, «The days passed. So did the months. And then years.» The reader's interaction with the medium this way becomes a performance of the verbal language. Morris sits outside under a tree with a book, and the reader can switch the seasons with a finger for as long as he or she wants, from spring to summer to autumn to winter, and so on. Again, the reader has the possibility to stay for longer, and to linger in this aesthetic experience.

As Morris walks around in the colourless world, the reader can touch the sky to make it blue. The colour disappears as the reader moves a finger; it is volatile. Simultaneously, musical sounds are heard. Although, as Schwebs (2014) points out, this breaks with the metaphor of the colourless world, it can also be perceived as an effective foreshadowing of the arrival of the lovely lady. As Morris looks up in the next spread, he sees her. This puts the reader in yet another position and with another viewpoint, almost magical, with God-like omnipotence; he or she unveils something that Morris does not know. Additionally, it underlines the sacral in the lovely lady character. The music and the tilt towards the sky form an angelic image of her.

When Morris arrives in the magical library, the reader can steer the books into the house. As the reader does so, parts of «Pop! Goes the Weasel» are played. This musical theme is part of what makes the app a coherent whole, as it is a recurring motif throughout, though the key changes from major to minor and the tempo shifts. This contributes to different expressions of feeling: sad or happy, for instance, connoted by the keys. Upon Morris's arrival at the library, as well as in a piano-playing scene, the reader can start the music and *participate* in its binding together of the aesthetic work.

At one point, the interactivity encourages the reader to take the book's perspective, learning how to play the piano. It seems to be the book playing for Morris; suddenly, the reader has the opportunity to play the piano him- or herself. Both this exercise and the cereal pouring are quite time consuming, and perhaps they do not even support the narrative, as Sargeant (2015, p. 462) claims. In my opinion, they still have an aesthetic function in affecting the wandering viewpoint; in the case of the piano playing, this also emphasises the musical theme in a profound way. The interactivity in many of the situations (e.g., piano playing, getting lost in books, cereal pouring) introduces a «here and now»

perspective that is not possible in a printed medium; these activities occur in the reader's real time.

The reader initiates the books' talking. When the books are tapped, on several occasions they speak out or perform other human-like activities. In this case, the reader performs the task of initiating what makes the books more human-like. On one level, it makes the life of the books more vigorous for the reader, creating aesthetic meaning. *Initiating* the event *emphasises* it. Thus, the books' human-like features do not become mere ornaments of the story; they become more crucial to the narrative. It also has symbolic, if not realistic, value that the books need the action of a human to come alive. As Iser argues, the literary text does not come alive until it is read (Iser, 1981, p. 103). A reading of the *Morris Lessmore* app entails participating in the story. The interactivity causes the reader to dwell on certain spreads, augmenting the experience, possibly giving the reader the chance to notice further details in the music and the visual modes more carefully than he or she would if they had just turned a page. This strongly applies to the episode where Morris gets lost in books. The effect of «getting lost in books» seems more intense as the reader has to be present in the story and activate the elements on the screen, which in this case, gives the reader the feeling of actually being *in* the situation. When the reader tilts the tablet, Morris leans in different directions. The reader's feeling in doing so constitutes a different way of realising aesthetic meaning than what is possible in, for example, the paper book medium.

Towards the end of the app, as Morris leaves the library, the reader has to tap on him to let him throw his book down to the library. It is as if he hesitates to do so—to leave behind the library and his life. The fact that the reader has to start Morris's movement of throwing the book evokes empathy. A feeling arises through the action, and thus the interactivity is part of the aesthetic experience.

Concluding remarks

This article's aim has been to contribute to a broader understanding of the aesthetic aspects of literary apps, specifically in looking at the media-specific interactive features of the app and the aesthetic potential of the multimodal story. The analysis has thereby shed additional light on the different aspects of *Morris Lessmore* compared to previous research (e.g., Linkis, 2017; Schwebs, 2014).

There will always be differences in how readers come to aesthetic experiences. Interactive tasks invite the readers to participate in certain activities without always forcing the reader to do so. The readers might also do the tasks just to get to the next page, or they might find them so amusing that they, for example, play «Pop! Goes the Weasel» for so long that they forget the narrative context. My aim, however, has been to map out some of the *potentials* for aesthetic experience through a rich multimodal text with interactive features. This does not suggest that every reader experiences the app in the same way. The aesthetic potential will also be diverse in different literary apps, and analyses of other apps will most probably unveil other ways of realising aesthetic potential.

Literary apps are rich multimodal texts that are perceived through several senses. However, the representations through visual modes, touch, music, or other sounds require a redistribution through the work of imagination to create an aesthetic experience within the reader. Through the analysis of how the characters come forward in the multimodal text, I have shown how, for instance, voice quality can influence aesthetic meaning just as much as the written verbal language. I have also shown how, in a rich multimodal text, the interplay between the modes may form the aesthetic experience. The key to the potential for aesthetic experience in a literary app lies in the interplay between the modes more than in one mode after the other, and the combination of modes bring forward a unique potential for interpretation. There are gaps to fill, but they

may differ from the ones we find in a paper book. Traditional literary devices come forward in the app, but through a combination of modes. In *Morris Lessmore*, the app's many different modes offer a unique opportunity to bring out and lend lustre to the traditional book, insisting on its importance. A meta comment on this is made through one of the spreads in the app that presents a piano with book legs. This illustrates how the modes and the media support each other by literally doing so, creating an aesthetic unity that none of the modes can hold up alone. This acknowledgement is key to creating interesting multimodal aesthetic experiences.

The fact that the whole of a multimodal text is different from the parts, however, is well known. The narrative analysis of the characters in *Morris Lessmore* forms the basis for the analysis of the interactivity in the app, which brings new insight by showing how interactivity may influence aesthetic experience. It does so by letting the wandering viewpoint take different paths, letting the reader be a real-time participant in the story. Touch interaction may also enrich aesthetic experiences by evoking feelings, such as empathy or guilt. Interactive tasks can even prolong aesthetic experiences by letting the reader perform different activities for as long as he or she wants. Performing interactive tasks underlines and emphasises certain aspects of the story. Lastly, interactivity may let the reader take part in the cohesion of the app to create an aesthetic whole. The interactive tasks are not mere ornaments or distractions, but influence the aesthetic experiences of reading a literary app.

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