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Mickey Mantle and his associates are bringing Broderbund, a longstanding maker of educational toys for children, back to life. IJ photo/Robert Tong

Broderbund classics are about to be revised

Living Books gets digital makeover by Novato group

By Janis Mara
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A longtime Novato product, Broderbund's Living Books, is coming back to life, sending familiar characters like the tortoise and the hare racing across the screens of tablets, smartphones, PCs and Macs.

Introduced in 1992 by Broderbund Software, Living Books ran off CD-ROMs on the computers of the day and featured animated, interactive versions of classics like Aesop's Tortoise and the Hare, with voices and music. The books soared in popularity despite their relatively high cost — \$40 in the 1990s — and were

used by teachers as well as parents.

Broderbund moved to San Rafael from Portland in 1986, then to Novato in 1991, where it stayed until 1999 when it was acquired by The Learning Company and then Mattel, which closed local operations. Living Books tanked thereafter. Now, Mickey Mantle, Broderbund's former chief technical officer and a Novato resident, is reviving the books. They will become available via the iTunes app store within a week or so and will become available on various platforms this fall.

As a longtime alpha geek, "The minute I learned about the existence of the iPad, I ordered one. The first time I used the device, I said, 'This is the ideal platform to bring Living Books back to life,'" said Mantle, 63, whose parents named him Mickey when he was born in 1949, two years before the baseball player joined the New York Yankees and became famous.

Mantle founded a company, Wonderful, to do the job, along with Mark Schlichting, the books' original creator. The two have hired a dozen members of the original team to recreate the books for digital devices.

It's clear that Mantle still takes a childlike delight in his products. With a flourish, he fires up his iPad Retina tablet and displays the first screen of the 12-page "Tortoise and The Hare." In this animated version, the former is clad in an eyeball-singeing fuchsia racing singlet, the latter in an appropriately schlumpy blue shirt.

"Each app will have more than 1,000 interactive items," Mantle said. Children can elect to have the story read aloud via the audio function or read it on their own on the screen. Each screen

contains part of the story in a lavishly illustrated scene, with the story text as well.

Mantle clicks on a newspaper lying outside the Hare's house. The Turtle immediately pipes up, "Hey, Hare, did you forget to recycle that newspaper?" In response, an embarrassed hare shoots out of his house at the speed of light and tosses the paper into a recycling bin.

"These are exact replicas of the original Living Books," Mantle said, with the caveat that these apps will feature more interactivity and technology that allow readers to switch to a different language anywhere in the story.

Wonderful is developing apps in six languages. The apps can be purchased through the Apple iTunes app store within a week or so; the basic two-language edition, in English and Spanish, is \$4.99, with classroom versions and versions with other languages also available.

A local child development and toy expert applauded the Broderbund revival.

"I'm glad they're making these products accessible," said Stevanne Auerbach, a Berkeley educator known for her annual list of approved toys released during the holidays under her professional title, "Dr. Toy." Auerbach said she followed the Broderbund products in the past.

"Children learn through different modalities. There is research indicating that children with autism have learned successfully through products displayed on tablets," Auerbach said. "It's a good idea to make learning more accessible to children. If it's fun and interesting for them to learn, so much the better."

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