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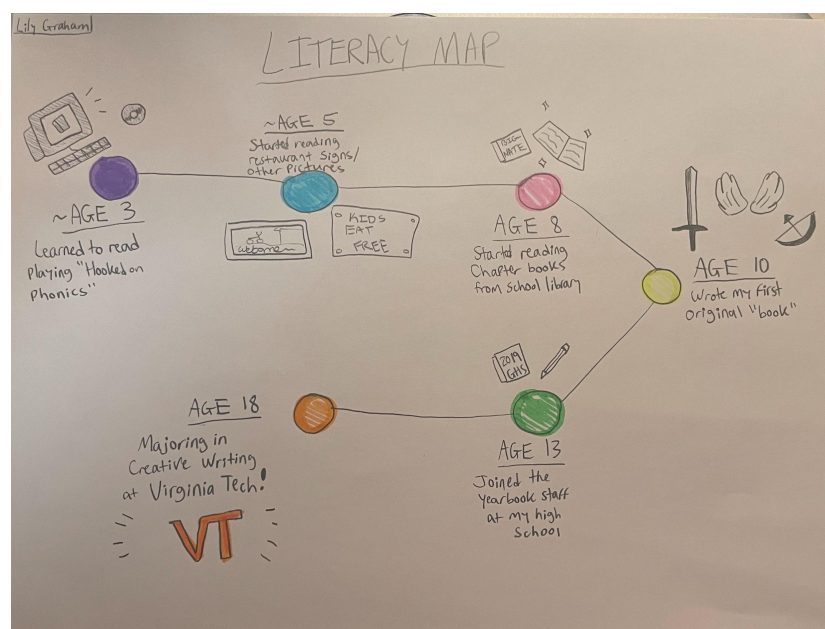
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The Gradual Click: A Childhood Journey to Literacy

As far as I know, no one remembers the exact moment where they learned to read. It's most likely impossible to pinpoint an exact time where, as a child, you could start to conjure mental images from words, and stories you read would play out like movies in your head. Learning to read is a process; there isn't a specific moment where it just clicks. It's more so like a drawn out, gradual click, presented via a series of events that play out in your childhood that (hopefully) lead to you becoming literate, and these events are usually a lot more easier to recall. For my life particularly, I can remember my process for learning to read and understand words fairly vividly, as my ability to read ended up becoming a vital part of my life. It all started when I was four years old, going onto my mom's computer and playing *Hooked on Phonics*.



[Boost One - Figure] Figure 1: A sketched out map of my literacy journey. It's a process, and it clicks over time.

My mom, always encouraging me to learn new things, really wanted me to learn to read before I started kindergarten. For some reason, she had a lot of faith in me, and I think she was hoping that I would become some sort of kid genius and blow every other five year old out of the water once I got to elementary school. In an attempt to put this plan into action, she dug up a certain CD-ROM game that had a bright blue disc and was called *Hooked on Phonics*. She told me that the game had previously belonged to my older siblings, having been used by them when they were in second grade. Seeing as it had succeeded in helping them read better, the game was passed down in the hopes that it would teach me. I remember the disc came in a similarly blue box, filled with all sorts of learning materials. And so, in the short, stone house we lived in on Fisher Avenue, in front of her gray and blocky Gateway 2000 computer - a relic of the 90's, in its own right - I would sit and I would play, sorting through letters and words for hours at a time.

I actually remember it being a really fun game. It was laid out in stages, progressing forwards and upwards as if you were on a path. You had to pass one stage to get to the next one, and each level had a different character teaching you a different set of letters or words. It would get progressively more difficult as you progressed, or about as difficult as a game for small children could get, going from individual letters to words and then to short phrases. I would breeze through the levels and end up replaying it several times. After several full run-throughs of *Hooked on Phonics*, it was safe to say I became very familiar with all the different letters and how to use them to form words. After a while, it would stop even being a learning game for me, instead becoming a game I would just play when I was bored. Looking back on it now, I still have an appreciation for that dinky little CD-ROM game, because it made me feel like learning could be fun. Through this newfound interest in learning and discovery, I came out at the end

finally knowing how to read, which very quickly became a skill that I was very excited about and eager to start using in my everyday life.

Flash forward to a few years later. At this point, I was now five years old, and had yet to blow any other elementary schoolers out of the water. However, this was not due to a lack of trying. To show anyone and everyone that I could read, I started reading anything and everything that could be read. When I would go out to dinner with my parents, or even just pass by restaurants in the car with them, I would make an effort to read as many of the signs on the wall or outside as I could. My mom still frequently recounts to me that one time that we were passing by a pizza restaurant, where I proudly pointed at a banner hung next to the door and said, “Look, Mom! Kids eat free on Sunday!” To this day, she tells me how impressed she was that I knew what it said and what it meant. It gave me a sense of pride in myself, because I knew that I was developing in my literacy, and that I was on the right track to becoming even better if I just kept practicing.

However, reading random things to people wasn't always totally successful. One time I remember I was sitting in the living room - dim, yellow lights surrounded me as I sat on a dark red couch, peering into a small TV screen. A commercial came on for some animated movie, I can't remember which. In bright, flashy letters and peppy narration, it told me the movie would be coming out in theaters soon. After reading and hearing what it said, I passed along this information to my mom. She was more confused, and then when I repeated it, indifferent. It wasn't even a movie that I would have cared to see - I just wanted to show her that I could understand it. I think, as I got older, the flexing of my reading expertise became less and less impressive to my parents. I remember being a little sad that reading assorted words wasn't very praiseworthy anymore, but it only motivated me to move onto bigger and better things.

When I was ten years old, I wrote my first full-length original story. This came after I had graduated up to reading chapter books about two years prior, and was inspired by epic adventure series, such as the *Percy Jackson* and *Harry Potter* books, and wanted to write my own sort of “chosen hero” story. By this time, my mom had a newer computer, and this is the one that I used to create a Word document that would soon hold my story. I added to it constantly - eventually amassing about twelve chapters for the whole thing. However, I consider it some sort of a blessing that the computer used to compose the story has long since broken and the document is lost, because from what I remember, the story was not actually very good. Still, as a child, it felt nice to create something that I considered to be the ultimate goal, the thing I’d been working towards ever since learning to read and write.

I think a lot about those days, about my younger self, tapping away on the keyboard at the computer. The reason I was already so well versed with computers is because I spent a lot of time on it browsing the Internet. I can confidently say that this contributed greatly to the development of my digital literacy, because it taught me how to interpret text and interact with content in online spaces. However, I have to admit; I was not often monitored when using the computer or the Internet, and this caused me to occasionally stumble across things that my young brain wasn’t quite ready for. Needless to say, I learned a lot of obscenities and even some adult topics.

Surprisingly enough, this is an experience that a lot of Gen Z young adults who grew up with Internet access relate to and even bond over. I’ve had several friends over the years who’ve told me about some scary video they saw when they were a kid, or a rude word they discovered the meaning of the hard way (by using it in front of their parents). It raises the question - how literate is *too* literate for a certain age? Is the positive experience of a child expanding their

vocabulary negated by the content the child is learning? Speaking personally, I consider myself to now be a functional young adult, and I don't believe these experiences had too much of a negative effect on me, but I must acknowledge the fact that they had a fairly prominent hand in shaping me into who I am today.

It is hard to understate just how crucial the formative years of learning to read and engage with literary content end up being as a child blossoms into adulthood. A positive relationship with literacy can branch out into all sorts of things, like a passion for creativity and a love of learning, both of which have definitely been the case for me. With each landmark moment in my journey to literacy, I grew more and more enamored with the concept of language and all the art that could be made with words and communication. The gradual building of that passion has led me to where I am now, studying creative writing in college and hoping to pursue a career as an author someday. When I look back on all of my memories from that angle, I realize that all of those experiences, positive and negative, have led me to where I need to be - and that's when it all makes sense. That's when I really feel the "click" that I'd been waiting for.