

Eating Genre for Breakfast: The Cereal Box Experience

Michael Soares

From the store aisle to your bowl, the seemingly innocuous journey of breakfast cereal is in fact fraught with implication for genre studies. Placement of the box on the shelf as well as the information on that box is a case study of marketing in overdrive as companies compete to get their cereal into your shopping cart. The popular cereals are those who successfully anticipate consumer uptake, ranging from colorful cartoon mascots placed eye-level for children to “healthy” cereals placed above the fray for conscientious, if not unsuspecting, adults. Masters of multi-modality and context, cereal companies use tools such as the practical (if not dystopian) planograms as well as the cereal box itself to zero in on potential customers, targeting not only their children but their own childhoods, effectively placing genres on the breakfast table in the “Cereal Box Experience.”

“The truth is, all of us look forward to cereal for excitement and fun. Deep down, everyone is cuckoo for Cocoa Puffs and every other breakfast Cereal.”—Chuck McGann, original voice of “Sonny” the Cocoa Puffs cuckoo bird.



Figure 1. Big Brother is watching you buy cereal.

Abbie pushed by her brothers and ran to the Cinnabon cereal. “This is the one I want, Daddy!”

“Why do you want this box, sweetheart?”

“Because they look delicious.”

Choosing cereal is an experience that evolves throughout one’s life. As a child, the process was almost ceremonial, the perfect selection a rapturous, quasi-religious event. Childhood memories of stalking the cereal aisle are a shared experience which come flooding back to us as we enter its familiar domain. Predictably, and perhaps unfortunately, when we “grow up” the tricks are not for kids anymore. The older we grow, our motivations change and the cereal aisle is revealed as a dystopian nightmare of competing propaganda. Despite this, no matter one’s view, what is not in dispute is cereal’s enduring popularity and mystique. Merely typing the words “cereal box” into eBay’s search engine results in thousands of auctions featuring relics from one of everyone’s favorite childhood traditions. Cereal is in your face as it jockeys to get into your bowl. Forget about the prize inside the box: the real surprise is what is found *outside*, both printed on the box itself as well as the forces leading the buyer to it. As a genre, the cereal box warrants serious interrogation, from *what* is on the box and *why* someone is buying it, to *how* the cereal box gets to its specific location on the shelf and *who* decides which cereal goes where.

Cereals are fighting for the consumer’s attention starting with the design of the box to placement of the product on the shelf. Interrogating the cereal box genre transforms a walk down the cereal aisle into an exercise of inquiry. Which cereals are placed for adults? Children? The health conscious? How do consumers read the box in the aisle and what effect does it have on their purchasing decisions? What are the antecedent genres (those genres we already understand and draw upon to help us understand new ones) which lead us to how we read and act upon that reading? Analyzing the placement of the product as an activity system (all the elements involved in an activity and how they function together) reveals boundaries of the cereal box genre that most people may never consider. The array of information on a cereal box, as well as store circulars showcasing cereal bargains, creates a sea of text through which a buyer must wade before making a purchase based upon his or her “reading.” Other documents, such as “planograms” showing where cereal boxes are placed on grocery store shelves, illustrate a hierarchy of power and demonstrate the complexity of cereal box-related genres and their profound effect on us in the grocery aisle.

I clearly remember the excitement of the cereal box experience as a child, and now I am the purchasing power behind my children’s cereal

choices. From the perspective of a parent, my understanding of this genre is immensely more immediate and relevant. Accordingly, in order to study the cereal box as a genre, I devised an experiment in three parts. First, I recruited my wife to send a Facebook message to all her “mom” friends requesting a variety of cereal boxes, several dozen of which promptly arrived and were spread out on the kitchen floor for close study. Next, I interviewed local grocery store managers and researched the cereal box phenomenon on-line and in the library. Finally, I took my three children to the grocery store to allow them the one-time opportunity to choose any box of cereal they wanted. What follows are the kid tested, father approved results.

Breakfast of Champions: The Triumph of Multi-modality

Abbie hoists the cereal box triumphantly and I do not interfere with her decision, but I ask her again—out of all the cereal boxes in this aisle, why did you choose this one? She turns the box over and shows me the back. Recently, Abbie has watched parts of the 2012 Olympics on TV, and the back of the Cinnabon box features pictures of the athletes, effectively equating sugary cereal with Olympic greatness. So begins the story of *my* cereal buying experiment, but as it turns out, the story began long before my children, or I, were born. As far back as the early 1900s, cereal makers were conniving to draw attention to their products, creating iconic imagery and generation-transcending catch phrases, all in effort to strong-arm and maneuver their products in the marketplace. According to Scott and Crawford, authors of *Cerealizing America: The Unsweetened Story of American Breakfast Cereal*, “the originators of the ready-to-eat breakfast cereal industry were crusading eccentrics, men who mixed philosophy with food technology to create a breakfast revolution” (90). In short, cereal has been a serious business for a long time and continues to be so. The successful use of multi-modality, when the text is dependent upon input from the reader, is demonstrated in the cereal box experience by the industry’s careful orchestration of the many elements influencing the buyer to purchase the box that makes it to the breakfast table.



Figure 2. Abbie—future Olympian.

Reading the back of the cereal box is a breakfast tradition, so it is not a stretch to consider the cereal box as text with six sides, each carefully designed for a purpose. Of course, the front side is the workhorse because the reader's first contact with the box is a large visually appealing picture, which is a prominent feature of the genre. Although there is usually a glorified photo of the actual cereal product, often accompanied by fruit in the bowl that is not actually inside the box, more often than not, the front features a cartoon character, especially for the boxes at children's eye-levels. Depending on the buyer, a cartoon leprechaun, tiger, bumblebee, or sea captain is all it takes to make a purchasing decision; one does not even need to read the cereal name to know what is being bought. The average cereal box measures 7-8 inches by 10-11 inches with the "name" brands tending to run larger, perhaps using their box size to demonstrate their supposed superiority. The average graphic, including the cereal photo and/or cartoon mascot, measures from 5 to almost 8 inches long, while the average cereal name "title" measures anywhere from a few inches to nearly seven across. Frequently one will observe a small chart near the top of the box, encapsulating information about calories, fat, sodium, and other nutrients such as calcium or vitamin D. The genius of this feature is that it distracts the customer from the more explicit yet mystifying "Nutritional Facts" box located on the side panel, listing the inclusion of such inauspicious-sounding ingredients as "Trisodium Phosphate" and "BHT" which is "added to preserve freshness." Ultimately, the most consistent bit of additional information on the front of the boxes is the nutritional value "blurb" hawking the benefits of the particular cereal. Out of several dozen cereal boxes spread across my kitchen floor, at least two-thirds of them featured the words "Whole Grain" splayed gratuitously across the front cover. According to CNN correspondent Alexandra Sifferlin, unless the cereal claims "100% Whole Grain," one should assume the grain is refined which, I take it, is undesirable. The most fascinating aspect of the "grain claim" is that despite the fact that I work in an academic setting, not one person I know can actually tell me what the difference is between a whole or refined grain, yet that lack of knowledge does not stop us from agreeing that "Whole Grain" is somehow very appealing.

Catcher in the Rice Krispies: Audience and Context

Isaac walked down the aisle, carefully considering every box. Closing in on six feet tall, he towered above the gimmicky cereals and stared directly into the sea of "healthy" cereal choices. However, Isaac is no fool—he knows an opportunity when he sees one. Occasionally, he picked up a cereal box, inspected it, and then set it back down, each time glancing incredulously

back towards me, waiting for a reaction. He received none. Finally, after much contemplation and with a defiant look in his eye, Isaac handed me the box of *Chocolate* Lucky Charms. Isaac will be fifteen in a few months. He is a high school freshman who firmly and erroneously thinks he is getting his driver's license the day he turns sixteen. As he pushes towards adulthood, Isaac is also pushing the boundaries of authority, making bold choices and testing limits. When it comes to choosing cereal, it does not get much bolder than a chocolatized version of one of breakfast's most sugary cereals. Isaac read the cereal box and then made his brazen selection, obeying a primal adolescent urge to go against his progenitors.

Like the angsty Holden Caulfield from *The Catcher in the Rye*, wandering the streets of New York and sorting out his adolescent detachment, Isaac wanders the cereal aisle, reading the *Bildungsroman* of text. What Isaac does not realize is that the cereal industry is light years ahead of him, subtly and not so subtly manipulating his choice by directing not just how he reads a cereal box, but also how he reads the entire cereal aisle. He responds to this particular cereal box because he is a teenager, and although he *thinks* he is following his nose, he is actually being led by it.



Figure 3. Isaac—against the grain.

My Grain Headache: Activity System and Power Hierarchy

An activity system coordinates multiple functions to create meaning and the cereal industry means to sell you its products, the process beginning with the circular ad, which reaches consumers long before they even set foot into the store. According to Aaron Miller, customer service manager at a local grocery store (and my former student), even in the community of Bloomington/Normal competition is fierce. With at least fourteen competitor grocery stores, “This puts great importance on our weekly ad, which breaks on Mondays. Cereal is a great draw for our weekly ad because everybody eats it. A lot of the time it is on the front page, and if it is a hot enough price bargain shoppers will come in just for it.” Large cereal corporations such as Kellogg™ possess what is called “expert power,” which is derived from “knowledge, experience, and reputation,” exerted to “obtain preferential treatment” in the marketplace, including “distribution access and...setting

prices and margins for its products” (Harris 65). Flexing power as such establishes a particular brand in the hierarchy of the cereal aisle and impacts the activity system of grocery store managers mediating/negotiating between producers and consumers.

Artifacts produced by the activity system are impacted as well. Among the genres I encountered during my research, none were as foreign and interesting to me as the “planogram.” I discovered the existence of this genre artifact when the guy stocking cereal at Dollar General told me that he had no control over what goes where on the shelf. He said that they have to follow “whatever corporate sends us on the computer, dude. On a planogram.” The planogram is a document that instructs stockers *exactly* where to place the products. In fact, there are “planogram specialists” who are trained in merchandising. Kellogg™ even offers a planogram on its corporate website. Planograms are extremely detailed, sometimes secretive documents created at the corporate level, which demonstrates how much power is inherent in product placement. Miller explains: “Inside the grocery store the cereal aisle is like Marketing 101. Give the consumer what they want. The kids’ cereals with all the colorful characters are on the bottom shelves for a reason: so the kids can see them.” Abbie is 45 inches tall. Average planograms start with a 6-inch gap from floor to bottom shelf, then five shelves in 14- or 15-inch increments, shooting all the way up past 80 inches. Of course, the first three shelves are reserved for enticingly colorful and correspondingly sugary cereals which place the Flintstones and Tony the Tiger at eye level for Abbie.

According to Mike Rees, another grocery store manager (and my neighbor), planograms are also color-coded to show that certain products, often premium cereals for example, are meant to be emphasized on the shelf. At Rees’s store, they use black and white planograms with various shades of gray to denote hierarchy. Rees tells me that planograms are very expensive, and the black and white versions are significantly cheaper, especially since his store prints them out to hand to stockers. A great many of the planograms I was able to locate online featured vivid colors, but there was one feature that most if not all of the planograms shared: the dire copyright warning. Planograms are serious documents outlining serious placement strategies for which companies have paid out serious money. One particularly cranky document contends that its contents are strictly confidential and that infringement is punishable under the law. So as to not bring out the tiger in a planogram specialist scorned, I created my own faux-planogram, a synthesis of the many authentic ones I observed, pictured in Figure 4.

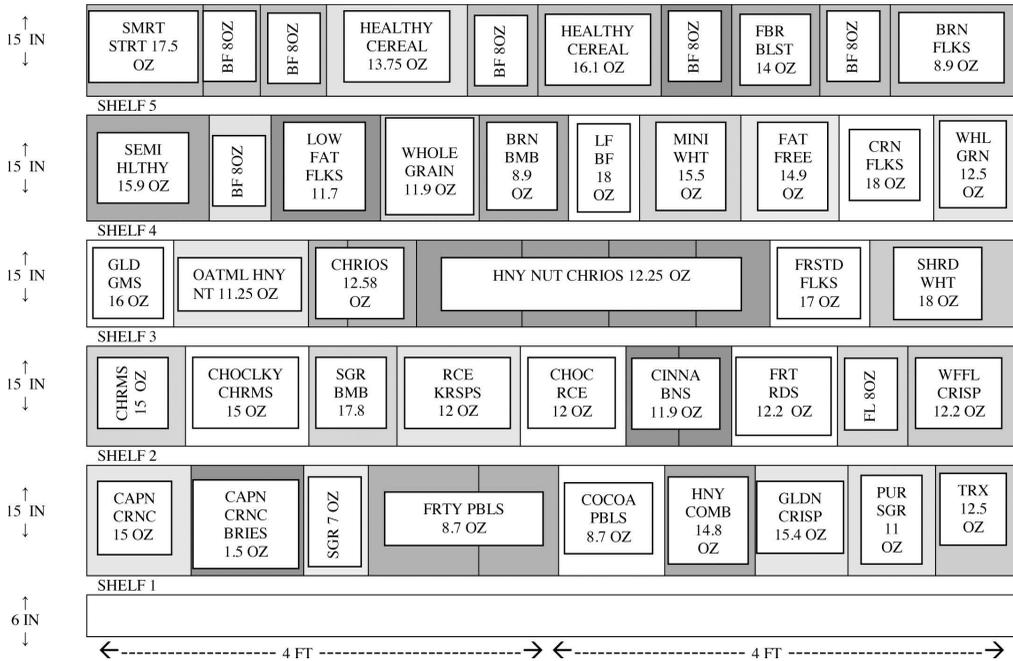


Figure 4. Model planogram—a “real” planogram would include Stock Keeping Unit (SKU) numbers, Universal Product Codes (UPCs), and product dimensions.

Familiarity and Nostalgia: Magically Delicious Antecedent Genres

Alexander snapped, crackled and popped down the aisle, resituating his glasses on his face and peering excitedly at each box. Eagerly he grasped a box here, a box there, and turned them around to see what was on the back. He measures in at 49 inches, so he is eye to eye with the same boxes as Abbie. As a first grader, Alexander has very basic reading skills but nonetheless employs a sophisticated system for making his selection. He will take an unfamiliar element and attempt to reconcile it with that which is familiar to him, as evidenced when he recently asked me, “Do ninjas go to Sunday school?” Having some familiarity with the cereal in question—and being an admirer of its mascot who is a frequent visitor on our television screen in commercials during our Saturday morning cartoon ritual—Alexander chooses a cereal and cartoon combination that has made him happy in the past: a box of Lucky Charms goes into our cart.

After much consideration, Alexander decided to base his choice on “the familiar.” Memory of “the familiar” often breeds nostalgia for those old enough to experience it; manipulated by companies employing cross-marketing strategies, nostalgia is a powerful tool used to sell cereal. Perhaps cereal’s most effective nostalgia strategy has been to connect the genre of cereal box with the antecedent genre of television shows, and in particular, the sub-genre of cartoons.

A child responds to a box with a cartoon drawing on it. Little do they know that the cartoon characters present on the box were created specifically to draw them in. In fact, much of the same talent who created the cartoons of Saturday morning fame were responsible for cereal mascots including Jay Ward, creator of *Rocky and Bullwinkle*, who voiced Cap'n Crunch and introduced him to the cereal world. Cartoon characters hawking cereal has long been profitable for the cereal industry. For example, in 1969 Hanna-Barbera, who for years had a relationship using its characters to promote Kellogg's™ products, merely needed to send out a mailing to “potential licenses around the world” to find a marketing partner for its new prime-time television show. The studio had recently added Pebbles and Bamm-Bamm to *The Flintstones* in order to score a “kid” audience. Despite the fact that the show was at the time sponsored by Winston™ cigarettes, Post™ and Hanna-Barbera struck up a deal to name a cereal “Fruity Pebbles” and plastered the Flintstones all over the box (Bruce and Crawford 195). Over forty years later, my kids wouldn't know who the heck the Flintstones were if it weren't for the cereal. As Bruce and Crawford point out, “The key point to remember in discussing nutrition and breakfast cereal is that when people buy cereal, they aren't buying a nutritional commodity. They are buying a dream” (263).

Yes, I buy into that dream. Nostalgia as a genre has propelled some of our greatest writers and continues to provide that tingle of excitement when I think about some of my childhood cereal memories. What I remember the most about the Mr. T cereal was not how bad it tasted (and it was terrible tasting), but that it was 1985 and I believed that through the power of eating this cereal I was an honorary member of the A-Team. What I remember the most about the C3-

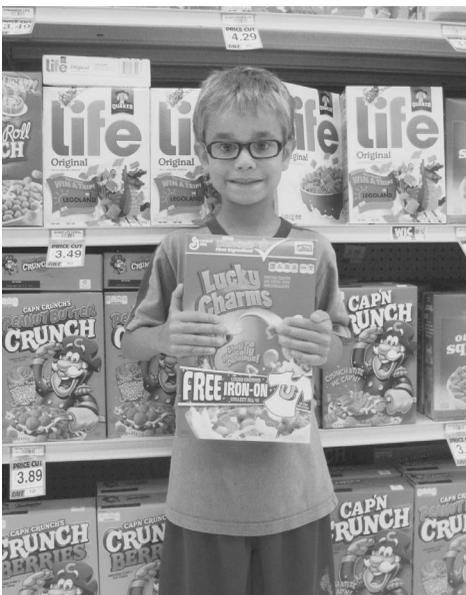


Figure 5: Alexander—Sunday ninja.

PO cereal was that it came out before VCRs and my only ability to relive *Star Wars* was to play with my action figures, leaf through my old bent up Scholastic Book Club paperbacks, and scour the back of this cereal box for any clues as to what was happening with my heroes. Ultimately, the cereal buying experiment itself probably stems from a childhood fantasy of my own, and one probably fulfilled, as evidenced by my memory of eating C3-PO and Mr. T cereal. Cereal marketers who “treated adults like big kids got great results,” and they realized early on to follow “this group of consumers, some eighty million strong from cradle to grave, referred to in the market segment as ‘the pig in the python,’ a population bulge slowly working its way up the demographic timeline” (Bruce and Crawford 249).

Placement: Cereal and Writing

Many other genre situations were revealed during my research that I do not have time to explore here, like the “healthy” cereal placed on the high shelves and the time of year those cereals nearly sell out (after New Year’s resolutions are made). Among the other interesting genres are “the end cap,” which is an art in itself, and the in-store promotional texts including shelf tags which inform the buyer not just about the price, but also whether a cereal is “low sugar” or “gluten free.” Miller wrote at length about the cross-merchandising throughout the aisle with “clip strips hanging down with toys of all kinds” and how cereal “just happens” to share space with the candy aisle. Kellogg™ complicated matters when they sent me a 200 page investor’s kit, and as mesmerizing as all this information is, at the end of the day I am just a dad buying (and eating) cereal with my kids. As an English teacher, I also see fascinating correlations between the cereal box experience and the act of writing. Like the placement of cereal in the aisle, the placement of information in writing is vital and we can learn quite a bit from a trip to buy Golden Grahams. The cereal box genre takes the power it wields with text to stir our hearts and minds, and when this power is modeled by students, it can turn good writing into grrrrreat!

Works Cited

- Bruce, Scott and Bill Crawford. *Cerealizing America: The Unsweetened Story of American Breakfast Cereal*. Boston: Faber and Faber, 1995. Print.
- Harris, Brian F. *Shared Monopoly and the Cereal Industry: An Empirical Investigation of the Effects of the FTC’s Antitrust Proposals*. East Lansing: Michigan State U., 1979. Print.
- Miller, Aaron. Email interview. 7 Sept. 2012.
- Rees, Mike. Personal interview. 27 Sept. 2012.
- Sifferlin, Alexandra. “How to Choose a Healthy Breakfast Cereal.” *CNN.com*. 6 Jul. 2012. Web. 22 Sept. 2012. <http://www.cnn.com/2012/07/06/health/time-healthy-breakfast-cereal/index.html>.



Michel Soares has been an English teacher for seventeen years and a dad for fifteen. Although he calls Massachusetts home, after he came to ISU for a Bachelor's in English Education and a Master's in Literature, he ended up staying. Now he is raising three kids here. Pictured is Michael holding his treasured autographed photo of Thurl Ravencroft, voice of Tony the Tiger.