



# *Symposium for festival programmers a Transbook event*

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## Questioning the Digital Switch

For the first time this year, the Bologna Children's Book Fair had a pavilion entirely dedicated to children's digital media, providing further evidence of interest in these new creative tools. While adopting digital technology now seems a given, going from print to screen is less evident. Cléa Dieudonné, Silvia Borando and Christoph Niemann shared their experiences in this realm at three conferences hosted by Hamelin Associazione Culturale.

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**Christoph Niemann** author illustrator **GERMANY**  
**Silvia Borando** publisher at Minibombo **ITALY**  
**Cléa Dieudonné** author illustrator **FRANCE**



**Christoph Niemann** presented his *Chomp* application. This German illustrator started out in traditional illustration but quickly saw the potential of digital applications. In his view, the art of illustration is first and foremost a conceptual representation that deconstructs reality and reconstructs it in another form. The reader carries out 90% of the work by interpreting the meaning of an illustration. Digital apps, and 3D in particular, call into question this approach and philosophy.

**Silvia Borando** works at Minibombo, a small Italian publishing company that has published three titles in both print and digital formats: *Il libro bianco*, *Dalla Chioma*, and *Forme in gioco*. Additional content for these titles is available online. She spoke about how a single principle or idea can become content that is then adapted for different media.

**Cléa Dieudonné** didn't begin her career in children's literature, but as a web designer. She used her skills to adapt Vincent Godeau's pop-up book, *Avec quelques briques*, into an app. Her research continues with a project to develop an app for an existing L'Agrume title, *Mégalopolis*.

These three approaches are indicative of the general trends shaping the transition from print to digital.

#### A NEW RAPPORT BETWEEN TEXT AND IMAGE

The album – without a doubt the biggest genre of children's literature – is defined by very specific features: the impact of the images, the complementarity between written content and illustration, the book as a physical object, etc. Therefore, creating or adapting a physical book for an application involves a deconstruction of these fundamentals and the development of a new type of narration that is compatible with a digital format.

Printed albums use different materials (paper, cardboard, fabric) and formats (square, rectangular, round, oblong, small, large, etc.) depending on the narrative goals of the authors. Oppositely, an app is used on a tablet only, the rectangular shape of which never or rarely changes, thereby standardizing the format. Innovation lies not in the format but in the progression of the content and the reader's interaction with it.

The art of the album lies in the interaction between illustration and text. The text can be repetitive, complementary, or contradict the images. Examples of apps presented here often included no text or a necessarily reduced amount. Minibombo no doubt chose to turn into apps albums which did not have text to begin with due to the constraints of reduced text. In Christoph Niemann's app *Chomp*, there is nothing to read; it is the animation that is innovative. Cléa Dieudonné alone left very brief indications in *Avec quelques briques* to guide the story and provide instructions for the games.

Like any story, an album uses all the narrative codes: a disturbing

element, dramatic tension, unforeseen development, climax and resolution. The story is also paced by the pages to be turned. Apps sometimes operate following a different logic due to their more or less recognised lineage from video games. In the case of *Chomp* and the apps developed by Minibombo, the reader navigates through short sequences which, at a push, can be stand-alone items. In the *Avec quelques briques* app, Cléa Dieudonné adapted a more traditional story. Instead of using virtual pages, turned between each sequence, transitions are more gentle: the reader zooms in, the picture moves, or a colour appears on the screen to take the reader to another part of the story.

At the other end of the spectrum, Cléa Dieudonné's printed work *Megalopolis* is inspired by the web page, which is read by scrolling down. This story also reads from top to bottom by unrolling a single, three metre-long sheet in the paper album. Ms Dieudonné is currently developing a digital, 'night' version of the album to be read in conjunction with the 'day' version. This new story is not identical to the print one, though the main concept is the same and the setting is the same 'megalopolis'.

Christoph Niemann skilfully summed up the reasons for this discrepancy between paper books and applications: traditional narrative codes do not match the expectations of an app. Reading books demands considerable involvement from the reader, who is alone and concentrated in a way they are not when using an app, which is the product of web culture, where entertainment and interactivity reign, and boredom is forbidden. The symposium participants highlighted three principles guiding their children's apps: simplicity, interactivity, and play.

## THE IMPORTANCE OF SIMPLICITY

Every book developer faces the challenge of being an artist and being a publisher, according to Christoph Niemann. The artist invents something intricate and intelligent that may not be adaptable to the app's format and is even less understandable to the reader. The initial idea needs to be simplified without discarding its substance; the essence of the idea must be kept and anything superfluous which could scramble the initial message must be eliminated.

Simplicity is also the motto of Minibombo: the publisher's apps are easy-to-use, and since repetition is central, there are no instructions on how to proceed. Simplicity is a prerequisite for an intuitive understanding of interaction within the story.

## INTERACTIVITY

Cléa Dieudonné included interactive games throughout *Avec quelques briques*: every sequence begins with some calm reading, followed by an interactive, simple, limited and short game which the reader must play. Once completed, the game takes the reader to another sequence in the story. These interactive features invite the reader to draw, swipe and touch the screen.

Christoph Niemann took the opposite approach: for him, interactivity takes away his control over his creation, but is an opportunity for the reader to try new things not originally intended by the author. In *Chomp*, the German artist resolves this contradiction by allowing the reader to do one thing only: play with the facial expression inserted into the animation. This solution shows that it is the reader himself – not the author – who is funny. Perhaps the best definition of interactivity is where the reader becomes the author – within boundaries.

## PLAY AND IMMERSION

Simplicity and interactivity are two prerequisites for play – an essential component of a reader's interest and immersion in an application. Immersion is also helped by sound design. Cléa Dieudonné asked a

house music producer, Benoit B, to design a synthetic, abstract soundtrack, intentionally far removed from traditional children's music. The result is surprising but goes well with the overall minimalist atmosphere of the work. The music and sounds in the app change and adapt as the story evolves.

## A BIGGER TEAM

Creating an app requires a more complex 'production line' than a book and involves professionals whose skills were not known in traditional publishing. Silvia Borando listed the order in which each person intervenes at Minibombo:

Illustrator > animator > developer > sound designer > graphic designer

Cléa Dieudonné and Christoph Niemann both stressed the importance of developing a very good rapport with the developer, so that he or she can translate the initial idea into an app – an iterative process that is long and demanding.

These real-life examples provide proof that the transition from paper to screen is an ongoing and intercultural arbitration between two radically different sectors which nevertheless offer complementary content to children.



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FOR THE DIGITAL TRANSITION OF THE CHILDREN'S PUBLISHING SECTOR

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