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INTERACTIVE WRITING FOR CHILDREN: SUCCESS STORIES

The digital book market has not varied much in terms of volume (e-books represented only 3.1% of all literature published in France in 2017), but it has progressively changed in recent years.

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Transbook
children's literature on the move



This market is more diverse in terms of both the people and projects involved. Best-sellers are no longer the only works to be adapted to digital formats, e-books or applications. Independent publishers are able to develop digital literary projects with as much success as major players, and external ones such as Netflix are becoming interested in the market.

NEW SYNERGIES

In recent past, most digital books were nearly identical adaptations of the paper works which inspired them. In 2013, when Yip Yip studios published its first interactive book, the sector was still completely new. Quite pragmatically, the studio transposed the original work page-by-page into an application format. This first experience provided insight on adapting books into application formats. Thanks to better cooperation between various players along the production chain, and a clearer understanding of what audiences want, this model has changed considerably since. Aksel Koie, Art Director at Step in Books, shared a lucid assessment of past experience. Before "Mur", he worked on native, digital-only projects on several occasions. Though reviews were very good, the projects were not commercially successful. For «Mur», he decided to work with a physical book concept which incorporated augmented reality. The app was downloadable free of charge but could only be used with the book. "Mur" was an instant success: it won the 2017 Bologna Ragazzi Digital Award and was adapted in over 10 countries. For Mr Koie, this success is attributable to the quality and creativity of the project and to synergies between the formats used.

Digital projects designed for use exclusively on a tablet or smartphone are becoming increasingly rare. The use of digital formats is now expanding the development of physical experiences. "Phallaina", a "scrolling graphic novel" by Marietta Ren, produced by French studio Small Bang, is an excellent example. This work was fully designed as a multi-platform, physical/digital experience. A hit in different cities, the fresco-like title features an immersive sound design. Even more surprising, the book is no longer the go-to departure point for the digital/physical format relationship. The Mexican studio Ocho Gallos decided to flip this relationship for its "Retrato Hablado" app. The user creates portraits using the app and can print them to build a personalised collection of illustrations.

In terms of narration, this innovation provides greater creative freedom for digital projects. It would be unthinkable now to create an identical digital version of a paper book.

"Mur" author Anne Vasko shared a perfect illustration of this shift in perspective by talking about her experience working with Step In Books to create the app inspired by "Mur". The project aimed not only to transcribe the entire book, but to focus on singular moments in the story and expand them so that children could pause and better understand what the hero is feeling.

PROJECTS: DIFFERENT, MORE BUT JUST AS INTERACTIVE

Another shift that has significantly affected the sector in recent years is the nature of the projects undertaken. The original diptych of e-book and app has been enriched by several other formats. The five projects presented at the From Paper to Screen conference included an augmented reality application, a virtual reality experience, a multi-platform web series and two 'traditional' apps. The web series "Tout Garni" illustrates well this expansion in the range of available formats. Editions La Pastèque developed a rather special project to celebrate their 20th anniversary. They asked André Marois to create a script for an interactive, 12-episode series about the life of Arthur the pizza delivery man. Each episode is entrusted to an author/illustrator, who is free to choose the format and how they bring the story to life. The result is a surprising adventure composed of mini-games, comic strips, horizontal scrolling, as well as social media and virtual reality components.

Above and beyond their differences, these examples demonstrate a common drive to give readers a multi-sensory experience. What will their role be? To what extent will they write history? The linear structure of storytelling has been overstepped; authors seek to truly redefine the narrative structure unique to every story. In this sense, virtual reality represents real progress. "Little Earth", the interactive experience inspired by Chris Haughton's book "Goodnight Everyone" and created by Red Rabbit Studio, is a perfect example of this ambition. To teach children about global warming, authors can show in the app what can be observed in the real world – and what we need to protect. The experience frees readers from time and space restrictions and gives them an up-close view of complex subjects, such as seasonal changes and global cycles.

This expansion and the creative freedom it offers benefits the

entire sector. For one, it is now easier to differentiate between projects. There is something for everyone in this diverse creative output, which includes virtual reality, interactive series and augmented reality applications. Also, there is a knock-on emulation effect: authors feel less inhibited than they did a few years ago. These examples of success, as unique as they are innovative, are good for everyone. They are a sign that one can opt for an original approach and develop high-quality projects and find one's place on the digital book market.

A SECTOR IN SEARCH OF A SUSTAINABLE BUSINESS MODEL

It would nevertheless be an overstatement to say that digital books are becoming the norm. In France, e-books still represent a very small percentage of published literature. The innovative nature and popularity of the most ambitious projects earn them significant exposure, but they are still difficult to launch.

"Tout Garni", a digital project led by Editions La Pastèque, remarkable for its quality and inventiveness, was a notable hit in 2017. It is important to point out, however, that it is a completely experimental digital venture, and not based on a viable business model. One aim of the project was to introduce La Pastèque to audiences which do not usually go to bookshops. It was designed as a "digital business card" for the publisher. From this angle, the operation was a success: traffic on La Pastèque's Facebook page increased by 21.6%, and its Instagram account saw a 36% increase in visitors. Vali Fugulin, one of the project's producers, admits that without support from SODEC, a Quebec government cultural agency which provided €80,000 in funding, the project would not have been possible.

Virtual reality technology is a good example of this paradox. Works which are based on it have enormous educational value, but download platforms for virtual reality products don't have a children's category. The impact of this technology on children's health is still a highly sensitive issue. Generally, products are used very sporadically in a controlled environment. Given the high costs of production and retail cost of the equipment needed to use the technology, it is difficult to imagine the wide-

scale commercialisation of this type of project.

In this context, it is understandable that certain publishers remain averse to investing financially in virtual reality projects.

It is interesting to see that attitudes have moved past the fear that digital technology will replace or copy existing books. These new formats transform reading into a multi-sensory experience, and digital technology opens doors to new creativity in physical formats. For example, one episode in the digital "Tout Garni" series was displayed on the facade of a Montreal library. In comparison, the first digital ventures to appear a few years ago were met with controversy. Today, however, synergies exist between different formats, which mutually enrich one another, and experiences blend together. The goal is no longer to achieve a full and faithful adaptation, but to offer a different kind of high-quality project which changes the reading experience. This makes sense, given that it remains difficult today to develop an exclusively digital project that would be viable, from a digital standpoint.



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