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Illustration for The Globe and Mail by Graham Roumieu

Graham Roumieu

Publishing

For some kids, a book is just an iPad that doesn't work

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At the age of 2, Calvin Wang's son seems to have learned a truism that is already ricocheting around the Internet: A book is an iPad that doesn't work.

Wang designs interactive storybooks for the iPad. He was inspired, he says, by watching his daughter interact with a movable cardboard book. Since then, Loud Crow, his Vancouver-based firm, has turned an array of children's picture books that take the pop-up concept into the digital age. Books such as Beatrix Potter's *Peter Rabbit* now respond to touch by moving, twirling, speaking and noise-making.

Having experienced the app, he says, his son is puzzled by the fact that creatures in the original cardboard books don't move. "When he opens the book, the first thing he does is start tapping the creature in the book."

Turning children's literature into iPad apps is a new and potentially lucrative business; successful creators have seen products fly off the virtual shelves, and venture capitalists are showing interest. But traditional publishers face challenges entering this market: Interactive applications are expensive to make, difficult to perfect and tough to market in the App Store environment. And even children's authors are asking: Does a product that blurs the line between a book and a game destroy the joy of reading? And is one more screen what young children need in their lives?

Adaptations of kids books have been around almost as long as the iPad itself, a device so entrenched in the public consciousness that it seems as though it has always been a fixture on the landscape even though it has been on the market only since April, 2010, a mere 19 months. The first to make a splash was an adaptation of *Alice in Wonderland*, simply called Alice. The creation of a laid-off journalist and a former financial-sector programmer, the \$8.99 app took Lewis Carroll's text and the iconic original illustrations from John Tenniel – both of which have passed into the public domain – and used the iPad's innovative capabilities to turn them into tactile experiences.

When the iPad is flipped, Alice grows or shrinks. When the device is tipped, the queen's crown teeters, or even falls off its pillow. Because the iPad can sense acceleration, developers could endow objects on-screen with realistic physics – the kind that young users find especially intuitive.

Chris Stevens, the app's co-creator, says it hardly sold at all for the first couple of days. Then, he says, he released a YouTube video of the app, went to bed and woke up the next morning to see that 500,000 had seen it: This new medium's potential had caught the public imagination. The app would later turn up in *The New York Times* and on *Oprah*.

"It was the right market to get some attention," he recalls. "There was some excitement about the idea that the iPad might be the future of publishing."

The Alice app would be the first of a bumper crop, mostly coming from the heady world of new-media app developers. It was one of the inspirations for works that followed, including Wang's growing business in Vancouver. (This week, Loud Crow announced that it had snagged the rights to adapt *Peanuts* TV specials, including iconic entries such as *A Charlie Brown Christmas*, into the app format.)

But for all the hubbub, traditional children's publishers are approaching the emerging market with caution.

One challenge is economics: Flashy, full-colour, animated interactive projects that run on high-end tablets are a different creature from eBooks, which typically aren't interactive and can be read on a variety of devices, such as simple black-and-white Kindle or Kobo readers. The eBooks adhere to popular standards, making them relatively simple to make, whereas each children's app is a unique creation that requires attention from authors, designers and programmers.

However, publishers can typically charge more for eBooks than they can for apps, which consumers are used to buying for less than \$10. For instance, Loud Crow's *Peter Rabbit* books cost \$3.99 in the App Store.

"The interactive apps cost a lot of money, need to be updated frequently and the price point is incredibly low," says Barbara Howson, vice-president of sales at House of Anansi and Greenwood books. All the same, Greenwood is currently working on an interactive adaptation of one title, Cybèle Young's *A Few Blocks*.

"I think we're in early days for kids books, in terms of demand and technology," says Denise Anderson, director of marketing and publicity for Scholastic Canada. The publisher has embraced eBooks, with 400-odd titles already available in the format. As for interactive apps, few are currently available from the publisher, but she expects that to change within a year.

"Our mandate is to get books into the hands of children, however they're delivered."

So far, many of the interactive apps that have appeared in the marketplace have been adapted from books that are already cross-platform properties, such as *Stella and Sam*, a series of children's books by Montreal author Marie-Louise Gay, which has been turned into a successful animated TV show.

For Gay, it's important to distinguish between books and games – and the app, she says, is primarily a game.

Where it comes to replacing books themselves with apps, she worries that the immersiveness of the technology can break up the shared experience of a child learning to read with a parent.

“You could actually put an iPad in a baby’s crib, and the pages will turn by themselves,” she says. Apps that read stories aloud and present interactive widgets threaten children’s ability to explore pages at their own pace, turning a social experience into an isolated pursuit, she says.

“That’s something that’s dangerous, because it’s like putting a child in front of a TV.”

That is a sentiment that has some support, even within the app world. The best interactive kids apps are the ones that actively depart from the source material, says Jason Krogh, the founder of Zinc Roe, the Toronto developer behind the *Stella and Sam* app, among others.

“The least successful examples take the book, put it on the screen, and they make hot spots so that when you press it, something happens,” he says. That’s why his firm is pushing interactive children’s technology in a new direction: letting kids tell their own stories. A new app called DoodleCast encourages kids to draw on the iPad screen, while making a real-time recording of what they’re saying aloud. After all, a child’s scribbles can be visually indecipherable, but its meaning comes clear as they explain it aloud.

“If you’ve ever drawn with a four-year-old, there’s always a narrative. They’re telling you about their day,” he says.

Kids books have gone through the looking glass, indeed.

Ivor Tossell is The Globe and Mail’s technology culture columnist.

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