

Lessons in App-Craft

One night, a prosperous publisher was dreaming up an exciting new app ...

So began the talk by John Cromie of Touch Press that you can watch at <http://youtu.be/R82og144EG8>.

John's story, called "the publisher, the app, and his budget" describes how a grand app idea can end with a sadly if it is approached with traditional thinking. His talk was one of two, behind-the-scenes presentations on what Cromie calls "app-craft" given at the first ever Dust or Magic Bologna Masterclass, held the day before the Bologna Children's Book Fair. A second presentation approached the topic from a fiction angle, given by Kate Wilson of Nosy Crow. Wilson also provided a generous look into the Nosy Crow creative process. Note that the notes in this article are loosely transcribed from the talks, and should not be taken as direct quotes from either speaker without their permission.

Non-Fiction Case Study: Touch Press

JOHN CROMIE is the co-founder and chief technology officer at Touch Press. He's been making CD-ROMs for many years which has prepared him well to lead the team of engineers at Touch Press. Some main points:

- If you have a craft, you must also have a medium (a potter has clay, for example). App-crafters have a new and mostly unexplored medium that has really come into being in the last 12 months, thanks to instantly responsive multi-touch screens with no lag; high speed solid state drives and always on connectivity, not to mention all sorts of sensors and a compact form. What we do with these devices isn't television, books or the web. It's something that is new and unique.
- Go native. While there are a lot of app development environments, like Unity, that you can choose, the Touch Press solution is to use the native SDK so that nothing stands between your creative team and what is possible on that platform. Anything that gets between the ideas and the possibilities presents a new set of constraints.
- The biggest enemy to an app-crafter is an attitude of "it's good enough, lets get it out the door."



- As the technology improves, we, as a larger culture, are also evolving in our expectations of what apps can do, which explains why the notion of skeuomorphism (making screen objects resemble real objects) is starting to fade for the first time. We need to start thinking about an "app" as a much broader thing.
- Understand your medium. A carpenter understands wood and a set of tools, and the limits of what wood can do. The same is true for app makers.
- Interactions between people and apps can be intimate experiences, and this type of special interaction must be understood in the design process.
- Every app is an original work even though it may be based on existing content.
- App-craft requires a creative team with multiple levels of expertise, and each team member must work in sync with the others. This includes knowing each person's limits, and understanding when to back away from a task that someone else might be better qualified to handle. The best attribute for a team member is a passion for both the content and the audience. In other words, a bird lover is likely to make a better app about birds.
- Passionate engineers are those that try their best to come up with a viable answer to the question "what if;" for example, "what if we added another language" or "what if we could put every Disney film on a single screen." It's also someone who never admits "it's good enough."
- Creative teams work incredibly hard, under inspirational leadership and they hate the word "impossible."
- Sweat the detail. (Cromie showed a globe with hand painted tiles, where you could see the brush strokes, as an example).
- Make apps for "all ages." A two year old child can enjoy spinning a responsive globe, or watching text sparkle.
- Save some room for polish, and tidy up the loose ends. Polish is what you do when you've done everything you plan to do, and you have some time left. This is time that needs to be built into the budget.



Kate Wilson

Managing Director,
Nosy Crow
Fiction Case Study



Dust or Magic

Fiction Case Study: Nosy Crow

KATE WILSON, Managing Director of Nosy Crow, is a passionate champion for reading, and the role that reading can play to empower a child. Her enthusiasm was baked into every aspect of her talk; and she started by reminding the group “there are no experts, only explorers.” Nosy Crow is a 15 person company that has published 100 print books and 12 apps that have inspired the field of children’s appmakers with their uncompromising quality. Some main points:

- Fairy tales are extraordinarily robust, which is why we like to turn them into apps. You can bend them and you can twist them, whether it’s in a book, film or app -- and they don’t break. There’s a good reason they’ve been going for 100’s of years.
- Today’s children come to an iPad with an expectation about screens, and reading must not be the most boring option for them. We’re trying to create new kinds of reading experiences that present different types of reading opportunities in a non-linear way.
- Making our apps is not like a relay race, where one person hands off a job to another. The process is fluid and dynamic, and requires a lot of give-take and revision.
- When I design, I try to empower the child. How scary should we make it? That type of decision affects the level of complexity and the interaction, and it must be just right for the intended audience.
- Nosy Crow apps start with original source material. Little Red Riding Hood began with a close look at ways the story has been told and retold over the years. The idea of giving the girl a choice in the path she takes to get to Grandma’s house came



from came from one of the classic early versions of the story. Finding these things takes research.

- Nosy Crow infuses fiction with real elements. The clouds in Jack and the Beanstalk come from photographs of real clouds; and a well where Jack finds a key is made from stones that were photographed at a castle in North Wales.
- An iPad screen is roughly the size of one page of a board book. That’s not very big, and can feel very limiting to a publisher who is used to a large format printed page. That’s why Nosy Crow has implemented several page expanding features, such as the ability to scroll or zoom. We also use motion driven 3D effects to help to make a child feel welcome.
- We have two levels of writing. One has the main story, with a beginning, middle and an end. On top of that, we float non-linear writing which consists of conversations between the characters that, if we’re doing it right, increase your understanding of the characters, but won’t interfere with the story.
- Imaginative engagement already exists in a book. Our app design invites them further into the experience.
- Like Touch Press, we prefer to use native tools to increase our control over the medium. It’s harder, but we’ve been able to create a box of code with each app that gets better and better.
- It is so important to test with children. We keep lists of the bugs to fix on a collaborative list. We’ve learned that left and right handed children touch the screen differently, and we’ve had to adjust such things as which direction characters enter a scene.
- Making an app is a collaborative and collective process, rather than based on a single individual’s talents (Wilson frequently seconded Cromie’s message about the need for creative teams working together). The work is anonymous in a lot of ways, and that’s quite an interesting concept.

