The Art and the Science of the Children's eBook

Let's take a closer look at the 2013 BolognaRagazzi Digital Award judging notes

by Warren Buckleitner

Throughout the ages, children's storytellers have tapped into the state-of-the-art to practice their craft. Whether it was achieved with charcoal drawings and shadows from a torch, or color ink in the case of Beatrix Potter, the goal is always the same: to educate and delight a child. Today's state-of-the-art technology comes in the form of a slim glass tablet with day-long batteries, multi-touch screens and the ability to access the Internet. Gone are keyboards, wires and complexity. A 21st century child has two kinds of bookshelves: one with traditional printed books, plus a virtual bookshelf that is in the cloud. These titles are stored in a virtual closet managed by iTunes, Google Play or Amazon, or perhaps in one of many content management services that are popping up. These stores reach across borders, permitting a storyteller's ideas to flow around the world at the speed of light, often in your choice of language. These are exciting times.

The BolognaRagazzi Digital Award was established in 2012 to identify best practice in this emerging category of commercial products, on a global scale. The six winners serve as guideposts for others. But the prize initiative digs up a lot more than just a list of winners. As we made our journey through this year's entries, we made some notes on what worked or didn't work. If you're in the digital storytelling business you can learn from someone else's mistakes. We also made a video (at http://youtu.be/Ea0VL0-Jiw4) in which we discussed the entries.

eBook, Defined: "Narrative Driven Interactive Media"

We understand that an "eBook" can be many things to different people. For the purposes of this prize, we define an ebook as "narrative driven interactive media" or an interactive work based around some sort of story. We didn't consider products with no story involved. We also didn't consider non-interactive products, such as digitized printed books presented as PDFs or on e-readers. This year, we broke the entries into fiction and nonfiction.

FAQs about the Prize

Who can enter? This is a free, public, annual contest sponsored and paid for by the Bologna Children's Book Fair and organized by *Children's Technology Review*. Any author or publisher can enter, and there is no entry fee. Only recent products are considered (within the past year).

Who picks the winners? Four jurors, myself included, each have one vote: Warren Buckleitner, USA; André Letria, Portugal; Chris Meade, UK and Cristina Mussinelli, Italy.

How many products were considered? For the 2013 edition, there were 234 entries from 32 countries. All entries ran on either Android, Kindle or iOS.

http://youtu.be/Ea0VL0-Jiw4

How many winners? There were two winners (one fiction, one nonfiction), four mentions (two fiction, two nonfiction) and ten finalists (five fiction, five nonfiction). The winners and mentions were included in the ten finalists.

Why a Product Didn't Win

In many contests, it is common to end by issuing a press release and some trophies, and then start thinking about next year. Not with this one. We are equally interested in understanding these fascinating products from an objective vantage point. We want to know -- and share -- what's working and what's not. So we want to be just as clear about what counts as dust as well as what gets the prize. In that spirit, here are some common attributes of the many non-winning products we encountered.

• **Sprinkled with hot spots**, as in "it's been sprinkled" with animated hot spots that may not support to the story. Said Chris Meade "there were a lot of things being trotted out that were nothing more than some illustrations for you to jab." THE LESSON: Make sure the interactivity "does work" for the narrative.

• **Static graphics.** Worse from a child's point of view, are items on the screen that look like they should do something, inviting a child's curious touch, but responding with stillness. THE LESSON: If you put a balloon in an illustration, make sure you can pop it.

• **Page flippers** is a term that came up more than once in the juror meeting, as in "it's just another page flipper." It came to stand for old thinking in a new age. Page flippers were very common in this year's entries. Sometimes they even had their own paper rustling sound. Such a navigation choice is an instant flag that says "not very innovative." THE LESSON: Think outside the page.

• **Free.** Free products were treated with a healthy dose of suspicion. We'd ask "what's the catch?" Some free products act

like a spring-loaded snake, reading to jump at you with an offer or a distracting web page. THE LESSON: If you have a "free trial" version, keep the in-app purchases away from young children.

• **Noisy.** Achieving a psychological balance between screen and child initiation is an art that is instantly violated when sound can't be controlled. Jurors noted many apps that start like a three-ring circus, throwing music, sound effects and moving graphics, and removing a child's ability to control the experience. THE LESSON: Make sure you have a mute button.

• **Anonymous**. Sometimes it was hard to find out who made the app. THE LESSON: Make the answer to the question "who made this app" easy to answer.

• **Nothing new**. Many ebooks blend together into a collective mush of medium quality stories with limited features and perhaps a jigsaw puzzle, a coloring page or a game of concentration. There's so much more the medium can do. THE LESSON: try to stay a step ahead on the innovation wave. It's far easier to get noticed.

• **No help for the emerging reader.** How does the ebook help a child who can't read? We were impressed by labeling strategies, closed captioning options, and touch and hear techniques to help a child build a bridge (or a scaffold) toward becoming a reader. THE LESSON: create hooks for success for all developmental levels.

Attributes of Winners

Each other juror might have his or her own list of winning attributes; these are mine.
• Innovative. Thinks outside the page; ideas haven't been done before. Said André "Imagination and authenticity count for a lot."
• Narrative. The value of a good story can't be understated.
• Pulls the child into the story. There are many ways to pull a child's ideas into the experience, using the camera, for example.
• Beautiful. Today's tablets have clear, bright screens that are good vehicles for delivering high quality experiences.
• Technically sound. No bugs, snags, crashes or delivery worries.
• Social. There are opportunities for more than one player to participate, simultaneously.
• Made by a real person. Good apps make it possible to learn more about the people behind the work. See, for example Identikat.
• Well crafted. The animation and sounds dance perfectly with the story.
• Text scaffolding. Helping readers of all levels participate with the language by decoding the print. See We are Alaska.
• Work on various screen sizes. We saw some titles like the Nutcracker that were designed with small or large screens in mind.
• Ethical. Priced reasonably, with commercial links and/or prompts for additional content kept behind a firewall to protect children from frustration and wasted playtime.
• Scary. See iPoe.

The Winners

So, at the end of the contest, the jurors were required to identify the products that they thought deserved the honor of the 2013 BolognaRagazzi Digital Prize. Per the Bolognafiere's requirement, we were allowed two winners (one fiction, one nonfiction), four mentions (two fiction, two nonfiction) and four additional titles, to make up the list of ten finalists (five fiction, five nonfiction). Here are the results with the juror's comments.

Fiction

WINNER: **Four Little Corners by Dada Company, Spain**
This delightful story is about helping a square peg as it tries desperately to fit through a round hole, in order to be with friends. This book-inspired app demonstrates that the translation from print to digital needn't be sophisticated, as long as a good story is involved. The underlying message -- that childhood can be a time when fitting in is difficult -- struck a chord with the jurors, who noted " "Geometric forms have never been so moving or funny."
http://bit.ly/VrPSPk (Android)
https://itunes.apple.com/app/four-little-corners/id598573155 (Apple)

MENTION: **Monster's Socks** by Martin Hughes, UK
Wonderful, whimsical illustrations meet a good story, and an especially clever scroll-like navigation technique. The story, about a child-like monster in search of his socks – is expertly delivered on the touch screen, where pages are replaced by two simple arrows, letting you move with fluid ease forward or backward through the adventure. You help by making a

bridge, sailing a boat or flying home from the moon.
https://play.google.com/store/apps/details?id=air.monster-socks&hl=en (Android)
http://itunes.apple.com/us/app/monsters-socks/id521546698?mt=8 (Apple)

MENTION: **Rita the Lizard** by Irene Blasco Studio, Spain
This ancient tale of friendship and identity is delivered with luscious illustrations and state-of-the-art interactive elements that extend the ideas of the story beyond the traditional page. You can swipe your way up the neck of a giraffe, or explore the rich foliage of a jungle scene. Responsive and playful, the jurors liked the ability to toggle between four languages or record the narration.
Link: https://itunes.apple.com/us/app/rita-la-lagartija/id568650448?l=es&mt=8

Non-Fiction

WINNER: **War Horse** by Touch Press, UK
This towering achievement in the interactive non-fiction category is based on the historical interpretation of WWI, as told by the Michael Morpurgo novel. The app expertly mixes traditional text, musical performance and 360 degree photography techniques with a live author reading. Jurors appreciated the multiple ways to explore a complicated social topic, from either the Allied or German point of view.
https://itunes.apple.com/us/app/war-horse-interactive-edition/id557865146?mt=8

MENTION: **Endless Alphabet** by Callaway Digital Arts, USA
Interactive alphabet books abound, both in print and on touch screens. Few, however, are this playful and so informally educationally. Children discover an own ensemble of singing letters who work together to link word bits to words, to build meaning. Jurors appreciated the social play opportunities of this app.
Link: https://itunes.apple.com/us/app/endless-alphabet/id591626572?mt=8

MENTION: **Rounds: Franklin the Frog** by Nosy Crow, UK
Nosy Crow's "rounds" firmly demonstrates how a digital work can masterfully help children think outside the all-too-typical beginning, middle and end format. They first meet a frog named Franklin, who swims, hops and hibernates his way through a complete life cycle, in a way that ends with a beginning. It gently introduces some profound ideas that can ignite the curiosity of a future scientist.
Link: https://itunes.apple.com/us/app/rounds-franklin-frog/id547240957?mt=8

Four Additional Finalists
The judges made a top ten list: In addition to the two winners and four mentions, there were four additional finalists:

Bats! Furry Fliers of the Night, $2.99, by Bookerella, USA
http://itunes.apple.com/us/app/bats!-furry-fliers-night/id494297887?mt=8
This well crafted non-fiction app is an interactive exploration of a mammal that catches the attention of every child. For ages 5-12.

IdentiKat, $0.99, by Lastrego & Testa Multimedia S.r.l., Italy
http://j.mp/YoJlao
Even a dog lover will like this richly illustrated cat collage toolkit, complete with an endless supply of exotic materials from "Grandma's scrap box." For ages 3-up.

Voyage of Ulysses, The, $3.99, by Elastico Srl, Italy
http://itunes.apple.com/us/app/the-voyage-of ulysses/id538571921?l=it&ls=1&mt=8
A set of ancient stories come to life on tablet technology, by way of 26 surprise-filled screens. For ages 7-14.

Where Do Balloons Go?, $5.99, by Auryn, Inc.
https://itunes.apple.com/us/app/where-do-balloons-go-uplifting/id522189097?mt=8
This app explores a simple question with beautiful art and clever interactive techniques. There's even a balloon theatre, for answering the question your way. For ages 3-8.