
Nosy Crow: A Case Study of How an Independent Publisher is Shaping the Children's Book Industry through Emerging Technologies and Book Apps

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Abstract

It is an exciting time for the book industry as new technologies emerge, children's print sales increase and creative partnerships are forged. Nosy Crow, a small independent publisher, is at the forefront of new technologies, using audio developments and book apps to encourage children to read and to keep them engaged in the written word. As a winner 14 prestigious awards and the owners of a rapidly growing and highly profitable portfolio, Nosy Crow's work is very much impacting the industry. This study looks to examine what Nosy Crow are looking to accomplish, why and how they go about achieving it and the impact they are making on the current state of the industry and on the young reading culture.

Keywords: Digital publishing; book apps; Nosy Crow; Technology; Independent publisher.

Introduction

Nosy Crow is a small, award-winning, independent publisher based in the UK. Founded only five years ago, in January 2011, with the aim of creating books and apps that encourage children to read for pleasure, they are now one of the country's fastest growing publishing companies. The secret to their success is that they embrace emerging technologies and use them in a unique and creative manner.

In 2015, Nosy Crow broke the one million sales mark for the first time with *The Rescue Princess* series, written by Paula Harrison and illustrated by Sharon Tancredi (Eyre 2015). In addition to record breaking sales, Nosy Crow have won over 14 prestigious awards, including the 2016 Independent Publishers Guild Independent Publisher of the Year Award and Children's Publisher of the Year Awards (Nosy Crow 2016a). Nosy Crow is continuing to make themselves known in the industry.

The purpose of this case study is to examine not only what makes Nosy Crow so successful, but how they do it and indeed how they have influenced both readers and publishers in the industry.

What They Do

When founding the company in 2010, Managing Director Kate Wilson said, "Nosy Crow is small, nimble and responsive and we plan to make a lot of noise in the industry. [...] we can concentrate on creativity, innovation and readers' needs as new markets and opportunities emerge" (Horn 2010). This is in fact what they have done over the last five and a half years.

Their strategy is simple: all paperback picture books come with a free digital audio reading called Stories Aloud and there is an ever-growing library of digital editions of the print books that include audio-enhancements. When the Stories Aloud programme first started in 2012, Digital Product and Marketing Manager Tom Bonnicks said that the technology was designed for young readers who want to read alone, but haven't achieved the necessary competency just yet (Williams 2012).

In addition to Stories Aloud, Nosy Crow has focused on apps about which they have said, "Our apps are innovative, multimedia, highly interactive [...] not existing books squashed onto screens, but instead are specially created to take advantage of the devices to tell stories and provide information to children in new and engaging ways" (Nosy Crow 2016a). The first two apps Nosy Crow created were *Three Little Pigs* and *Cinderella*. About which,

Wilson said, "When we saw Edward's illustrations, we knew that we didn't want to squash books onto a phone, and this was a brilliant example of how the capabilities of the touch-screen device transformed and enhanced the reading experience" (Page 2010). With beautiful illustrations and style, these stories told the classic tales.

The third app created was of an original story. *Bizzy Bear On the Farm* is aimed at ages two to four. The app allows children to play with Bizzy, using the touchscreen to pick apples, collect eggs and drive the tractor. According to Wilson, "Parents will enjoy seeing their children listen to directions, complete tasks and feel a sense of accomplishment as they help Bizzy Bear do his farm chores" (Jones 2011). Similar to the books, the app features chunky tabs to push and pull plus the added bonuses of sound effects and music. It was a successful entry into the field for Nosy Crow's first original work.

Nosy Crow continued to expand from book apps to game apps. In 2012 Nosy Crow launched its first free game app, *The Grunts: Beard of Bees*, which was based on the book series by Philip Ardagh and Axel Scheffler. This divergence from book apps was an experiment for Nosy Crow. Wilson said, "The book is for children of 7+ and that means that we wanted to explore a different kind of gameplay. It's fantastic to be able to use the app-building talents of the team to support a new publication and lead children to the book [...]" (Allen 2012). More apps have followed, including the popular *My Brother is a Superhero* book game app – a 2016 award-winner and bestseller.

Why They Do It

Nosy Crow's mission is to get children excited about reading. Their mission is to create apps that "combine age-appropriate stories with beautiful and witty illustration, rich animation, and original music to enhance the story and get children excited about reading" (Nosy Crow 2016b). In a 2010 blog post, Wilson described her inspiration in founding the company. She said, "From the moment I saw a touch-screen device, I was excited about the potential for apps to become reading experiences for children" (Utroske 2013). Wilson went on to

describe her experience at the Bookseller's Children's Conference in September 2010. Research was shared about young children's engagement with digital media. The statistics gave overwhelming evidence that it was becoming a digital world for children at a young age, and parents were welcoming the "interactive and engaging entertainment for their children without their intervention" (Wilson 2010).

Whilst the majority of the industry scowled at these statements or decided that if they had to go digital they would make book apps exactly the same as print books, Wilson took a different approach. She said:

At Nosy Crow, we love books. We love the smell of them. We love the feel of them. We love the way that everything changes when you turn a page. Some of the books we will publish really have to happen on the printed page: they are very physical things. But, while we love books, we love reading more. And we profoundly believe in the potential for literacy and, specifically, reading for pleasure, to transform lives. We know that reading for pleasure correlates with increased attainment in reading and writing; that reading for pleasure fosters creativity and imagination; that reading for pleasure develops good social attitudes; that reading for pleasure contributes to knowledge and understanding of the world and that reading for pleasure contributes to self-esteem. (2010)

She concluded by saying that as publishers, their job is to create reading experiences in both print and for touch-screen devices and to use those devices to tell stories in a unique and engaging way (Wilson 2010).

In a 2013 interview, Wilson went on to say, "We set out to make engaging digital reading experiences for children. We have not shied away from making new kinds of reading experiences for children, creating things that are 'native' to touchscreen devices from the outset, rather than adapting pre-existing print titles" (Utroske 2013). This is a unique way to approach the market. Many big publishers take books first then create an app very similar to the print edition.

From a practical perspective, Bonnick explains that sometimes Nosy Crow does things the other way around. It has always been the aim to turn apps into picture books, and although adapted from one medium to the other, the books are standalone products that demonstrate the power of print. Bonnick said, "Reading print is a very different experience from using apps. It's about reusing material in different ways and extending the life of content" (Eyre 2014a). When asked how the apps affect children reading print and in fact print sales, Bonnick responded by saying:

Although we can't quantify exactly how far downloads of the app translated into sales of the print book, there are certainly other metrics that we can measure: we know exactly how many people have downloaded and used the app, and in what parts of the world, thereby exposing themselves to the "brand"; we know how many bought the iBook edition (and other Nosy Crow apps) from within the app; we know how many people shared the app on Facebook and Twitter, helping to promote the book - and so we know that, by these measures, how an app performs in relation to print sales. It certainly expands its reach to a large, global audience, and increasing engagement with the book and with Nosy Crow. (2016)

As Bonnick stated, Nosy Crow's motivation behind creating apps is twofold: to encourage young readers and add value to print books, but also they work well as a marketing tool to increase book sales – especially if they are free apps as is the case with some of Nosy Crow's titles.

Implications for the Readers

There are many uncertainties on implications of touchscreens, ebooks and digital devices on child development. However, technology is not going away. In his book, *Born Reading*, author and editor Jason Boog cited a research paper using eight different scientific studies, and explained the single conclusion: interactive reading at a young age can raise your child's

IQ by more than six points (2014). Interactive reading was seen as equivalent to vitamins and a healthy diet in terms of mental development.

Reading apps such as those Nosy Crow is developing help children to become media-savvy and teach them analyse complex stories while helping them to choose the best books, media, movies and games in a world cluttered with useless media (Boog, 2014).

Additionally, Harvard Children's Literature professor, Maria Tatar says that in reading, "You are exploring a new world. It opens up possibilities that go hand-in-hand with cognitive gains. It opens up curiosity, language and learning how to use media. Once you have access to that, you can do anything" (Boog 2014).

Although these studies demonstrate the positive effects of book apps, there are a number of parents, researches and doctors who question the amount of screen time a child accrues. When asked about the controversy of ebooks and book apps, Bonnicks said:

I don't believe there's anything inherently bad about a child spending time with a tablet device, but it's something to be used in moderation. I think one of the biggest factors, though, is the kind of screen time children are experiencing. Is it supervised or unsupervised? Shared screen time with a parent, or solitary? Game apps or reading apps? Is screen time used as a 'reward' for good behaviour, or as an educational device to aid learning? And of course, just as with print books, there are good apps and bad apps available, and so the kind of content children consume is critical: the number of minutes and hours a child spends using an iPad is just one piece of a bigger picture. (2016)

Whilst so many of the aforementioned factors are unknown and controlled within the home, Wilson, Bonnicks and Nosy Crow do everything in their power to make safe, educational and engaging app content. Using Gerard Genette's *Paratexts: Thresholds of Interpretation*, an examination of what exactly Nosy Crow is doing can take place.

Genette suggests that the changes wrought by publisher to the physical form of the book constitute important interventions. He argues that the publisher's paratexts affect the

meaning of the story to the audience (1997). Examining a recent award-winning publication, *My Brother is a Superhero*, the paratext can be broken this down into epitextual and peritextual elements, both of which are examples of how Nosy Crow is unique in the industry. Concerning the paperback, the peritext elements include yellow fore-edge painting, a flip-book illustration throughout interior pages and an embossed glittery cover. As with other Nosy Crow publications, the epitext elements that contribute to the reader's experience include the free game app in which the player becomes the superhero who saves the world, much in line with the protagonist in the prose. According to Bonnicks in a personal interview, "we try, in our apps, to create really unique reading experiences of a kind that could only exist in a digital format – by using interactivity, non-linear story-telling, multi-branching narratives, and other elements that are really tied to the digital platform" (2016).

Bonnicks and Wilson have both also expressed that a book app should never exactly replicate the experience of reading a print book. They strive to find a way to taking advantage of the technological opportunities of a touchscreen in a way that is sympathetic to and supportive of the narrative in order to enhance story, rather than detracting from it (Bonnicks 2016). This is echoed in Milad Doueiri's publication, *Digital Cultures* in which he states, "Every time a successful digital tool tries to mimic a conventional fixed object (in this instance a book) it somewhat fails" (2011). Recognising that, Nosy Crow will continue to create unique experiences.

Those unique experiences are more than just revenue to Nosy Crow. According to sociologist Pierre Bourdieu's theory, it could be argued that Nosy Crow operates on the basis of symbolic capital. Although as a successful business, monetary capital is also of importance, Nosy Crow is content with growing their reputation as a publisher that has a "degree of accumulated prestige, celebrity and honour" (Bourdieu 1993). They pride themselves on doing things differently. The effect of this symbolic capital can be seen within how Nosy Crow has influenced the industry.

Implications for the Industry

As George Landow stated in *Hypertext: The Convergence of Contemporary Critical Theory and Technology*, 'digital writing' redefined both the text and the act of reading (1991). To take his statement a bit further, book apps such as those Nosy Crow has created in both peritext and epitextual forms, have redefined books as well as the reading experience. This can be seen in the industry as more and more publishers are turning to apps. In 2015, Penguin Random House joined the digital revolution by publishing *The Twits* game app as a marketing tool based on Roald Dahl's beloved children's book. This was a divergence from the existing Roald Dahl's story book text app.

Others in the industry have noticed Nosy Crow's unique approach as well. Karen Lotz, president and publisher of Candlewick Press said, "Kate Wilson's exceptional depth of experience in global children's publishing and her innovative vision for our industry's future both shine" (Neill 2011). And when joining the company in 2014 as the Head of Sales, Catherin Stokes said, "The opportunity to join such a fast-growing and dynamic publishing company, that has made such an impact on the children's market, was one I couldn't miss" (Shaffi 2014).

Additionally, recent research conducted by the National Literacy Trust revealed an increase in the number of children reading daily in 2015. Bonnicks states, "I find it encouraging that children's publishers have taken an industry-wide anxiety around digital and alchemised it into a celebration of print" (2015). The children's publishing industry has responded to the digital market by demonstrating the values of print in unique ways. Whether it is costly production values, unusual formats, and innovative finishes and techniques, it has worked. Print sales rose 9% and there has been a resurgence of bookshop windows filled with picture books (Bonnicks 2015). Bonnicks adds that at Nosy Crow, the same approach is taken in digital publishing – constantly looking for new technologies and for things digital can do that print cannot in order to engage and excite young readers (2015).

Nosy Crow even aims to keep booksellers engaged in the digital revolution as well. In reference to the Stories Aloud programme, Kate Wilson said it was a way of involving all booksellers in "the world of digital content" and that "Every bookseller who stocks one of our picture book paperbacks will be offering their customer free digital content when they sell a copy" (Williams 2012).

Looking to the Future

There are many unknown factors for the future of the book industry, especially children's books, print and emerging technologies. According to Angus Phillips, author of 'Does the Book Have a Future' in *A Companion to the History of the Book*, the UK the government has directed money towards academic e-learning platforms in place of textbooks. He also examines whether this means that all books will go digital, or if print will continue to exist, but in a different manner. Phillips observed that similar to extras on DVDs, there could be added value to ebooks and the digitalisation of print (Phillips 2009). The epitextual elements that Nosy Crow applies to their library, including free marketing game apps, are just those added-value extras.

To further that, in the uncertain time for the print market, Boyd Tonkin wrote, "The book market certainly needs to expand. What it requires is creative innovation [...] publishers have to think harder about how to reach the hordes or critical consumers of film, TV, internet and pop culture who should be reading books" (Phillips 2009). Although directed towards children, Nosy Crow has indeed used creative innovation to make reading available to this generation, specifically to those who have access to digital content as opposed to print. With both interactive ebooks and free book game apps, Nosy Crow may even turn that generation into print consumers with the print books being the companion pieces to the digital.

By 2017, Nosy Crow is slated to publish 36 titles annually and has had consistent year-on-year sales rises through Nielsen Bookdata (Eyre 2015b). The publisher had sales of nearly

£1.6m in 2014, a 447% rise on sales in its first year (£292,000 in 2011). Its TCM revenue for the first half of 2015 was nearly £800,000, 34% up on the same period in 2014. Their fiction titles were up 122% by August 2015 over a comparable period in 2014 (Eyre 2015b).

It certainly looks like a promising future, not only for Nosy Crow, but for technology within the book industry. Nosy Crow is a fine example of those willing to change with emerging technologies to keep young readers engaged and involved. Their work is very much shaping the industry.

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