

Beyond the TV screen

HOW CREATIVITY FINDS NEW WAYS IN MULTIPLE DEVICES

Paulien Dresscher

This article summarizes some best-practice examples in different devices for children that were presented at the Cinekid MediaLab and were discussed at the Hot & Cool Play panel of the Cinekid festival 2014.

Our media landscape, as well as the immediate environment of our children, is changing rapidly. The constant recalibration of the concept of the screen, how we interact with it but also how this is influencing the way we tell our stories and build experiences is a process that changes the way we work, live and learn. In order to foster our own creativity within this changing environment but also to promote the creativity of the child in a sustainable way, it is beneficial to take a closer look at the medium-specific issues that are arising (Ill. 1). A few important aspects surface: Firstly, we can see a movement in the environment of gaming, in which general “play” is becoming increasingly important. Rule-based games with losers and winners are slowly being outnumbered by more open worlds where children can make up their own rules and regulations: you can make your own world and explore someone else’s. Secondly, we see how screens are changing, they become bigger, smarter, and more interactive, but at the same time thinner, sharper, more flexible, and basically everything can become a screen nowadays. Furthermore, the digital world is slowly moving beyond the screen and is finding new domains in the physical world where human-computer interfacing gets more and more intuitive.

CREATIVE PLAY WITH IPAD AND TABLET

One of the major developments in the area of media content for young children is the mesmerizing rise of the app. Both at home as well as at school, apps have rapidly become an important way of digital interaction. One of the most popular and best-reviewed companies for children’s apps is the Swedish company Toca Boca. Willow Mellbratt, play designer for Toca Boca, explains the approach Toca Boca pursues in developing apps and play: “Usually children’s lives are directed by adults: they decide when to sleep, when to wake up and what to eat. Time for play is also something which is scheduled by parents. However, from a kid’s perspective, play can happen anytime, anywhere! For Toca Boca the kernel is not to replace this daily play by digital devices but rather to look for ways



Ill. 1: In the MiniAppLab children can play around with various games and apps

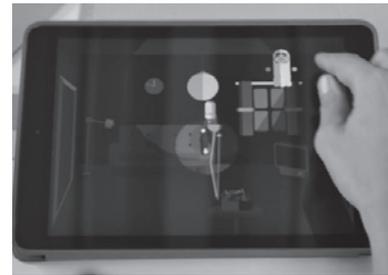
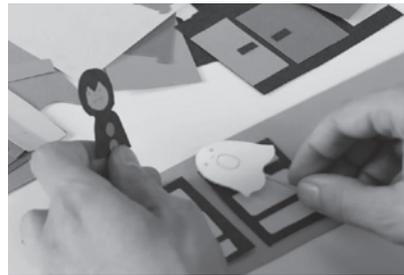


Ill. 2 and 3: Playful and creative testing: in the Toca Hair Salon app, children can give characters a new haircut by e.g. combing, cutting, shaving or coloring the hair

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Screenshots from www.youtube.com
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Ill. 4-6: Creative approach towards *Toca Boo*: the play designers at Toca Boca extend their ideas by reenacting the play pattern with cardboard sets and asking children about their experience, e.g. the best hiding places for a ghost in a house

to enhance their play.” Therefore they see their apps not as games as such but rather as toys: children are not being told what to do with them and there are not many restrictions: children can just pick up the app and start playing around to find out for themselves what the options are.

Within this open form of play Toca Boca distinguishes 3 different forms of play: role-playing, where children assume the role of characters and collaboratively create stories; creative play, where children design a certain outcome (Ill. 2-3); and exploratory play in which they are investigating and exploring what is going on.

Toca Boo

But even for a digital children’s media pioneer like Toca Boca, the company’s methods are not all digital. The design process is partially done with real paper and scissors: possible scenarios are being played through with paper and cardboard sets before they take the step to the actual design (Ill. 4-6). But at Toca Boca, it is not their artists or designers who are in charge; the kids are the ones who are the play experts and they therefore try to bring them in as much as possible while designing the apps. They organize workshops in which they invite children to try out new ideas and new characters. They do a lot of paper prototyping and watching and observing the children while they are playing, without asking any questions.

Toca Pet Doctor

Last year, Toca Boca won the Cinekid Lion for Best App of the Year for Early Learning with their app *Toca Pet Doctor*. In this funny, beautiful and sweet app, 2- to 6-year-olds are being encouraged to take care of different animals, e.g. by helping to unknot an angry worm (Ill. 7) or to clean a puppy.

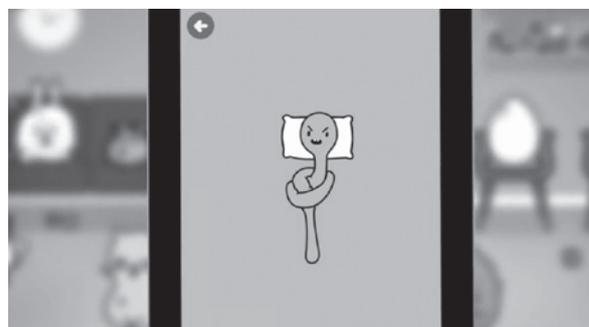
Blek

For slightly older children (but also challenging for grown-ups) another amazing app at display in the Cinekid MediaLab was *Blek* (Ill. 8), an original but rather abstract puzzle game that redefines boundaries of gesture creation on a touch screen. The game has a simple goal: the user has to shape a line that collects all colored circles while avoiding black holes on its route. The line is started by drawing a gesture that keeps repeating itself. *Blek* is a minimalistic and beautiful game with an enchanting soundtrack by composer and vocalist Erin Gee. With this game we see how the medium-specific interface of the tablet inspires an entirely new game form that is equally complex and intuitive.

MOBILE GAMES AS INCENTIVE FOR ADDITIONAL PHYSICAL ACTIVITY

Bounden

Adriaan de Jongh, founder of Game Oven, is aiming at enabling real-life interactions with games based on folk games. For him, interaction and the social element is key. In his perception gaming is something utterly social: people have to reach out and touch each other’s hands, dance together or push each other away. They really have to play together. De Jongh uses technology to drive people to connect to each other in funny or confronting interactions. His latest game *Bounden*, winner of the Cinekid Lion for Best New Media Production, is a perfect example of this. The app was developed in collaboration with the Dutch National Ballet and is an unpredictable,



Ill. 7: Winner of the Cinekid Lion for Best App of the Year for Early Learning: in the *Toca Pet Doctor* app, children are encouraged to help different animals, e.g. by unknotting a twisted worm

Screenshot from tocaboca.com © Toca Boca, Sweden/US

RESEARCH

intimate game. Two people each hold one end of a smartphone and follow instructions by imitating the movements of a small dot on the screen (Ill. 9). With this game, a new form of choreography is born, re-interpreted over and over again by all its users.

A BODY FLIGHT SIMULATOR TO EXPERIENCE THE FLIGHT OF BIRDS

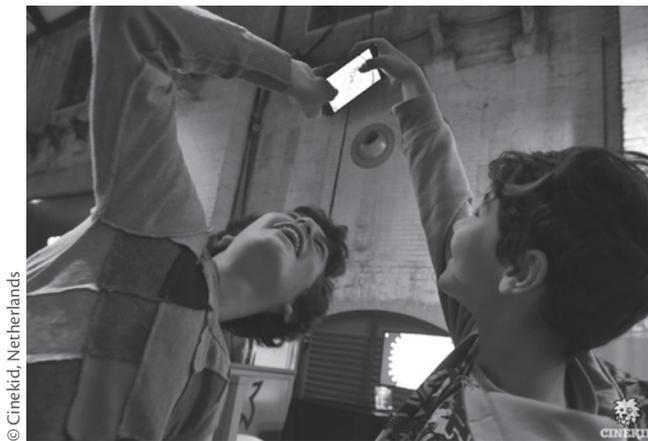
Birdly

Another example of a very active game in which you need your full body in an utterly new way was the Oculus Rift game *Birdly*, an installation that elaborated on the ancient dream of flying (Ill. 10). In this research project from the University of Zurich, Switzerland, children could mount a large wooden simulator that made it possible to embody a red kite flying over Los Angeles. The user could control the simulator with hands and arms, directly correlating to the wings and primary feathers of the bird. These inputs were reflected in the flight model of the bird and displayed physically by the simulator through tilting, rolling and heaving movements. Visualized through the Oculus Rift, the participant is embedded in a virtual landscape where his or her body becomes the body of the red kite.



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Ill. 8: In *Blek*, the user has to create a line that collects all colored circles avoiding black holes on its route. The knack: the drawn gesture keeps repeating itself, moving forward



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Ill. 9: A couple dances in *Bounden*: 2 people each hold one end of a smartphone and follow instructions by imitating the movements of a small dot on the screen



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Ill. 10: Exploring the experience of a bird in flight: connecting the digital and the physical world in *Birdly*

Meanwhile, a completely new way of using the body could be perfected. The children learned how to avoid the skyscrapers, how to make sharp turns or perfectly aim for the Swiss flag that brought them to the next level; straight to the Himalayas.

After the years in which console games with bulky controllers and large hefty screens were the most popular among game developers and kids, we now see a growing need to connect the digital and the physical world and allow gamers to play together in an active and basic form of play: active, sweaty and engaged.

PRODUCING TECHNOLOGY ONESELF

Technology Will Save Us DIY kits

Bethany Koby, CEO and founder of Technology Will Save Us, and her designers develop DIY gadget kits in which you learn new technical skills, make cool things and begin your own journey as a tech maker. An important element of the New Media environment is the maker culture, a movement in which the user is becoming slowly the “producer”: a person who is not just using stuff, but also takes on the role of a producer.

The company finds itself right in the middle of this development and is founded on 3 principles: First, children learn best by doing, by using their hands



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Ill. 11: *Becoming creative with technology: children playing with the DIY Electro Dough Kit*

and experiencing challenges and successes for themselves.

Second, the connection to the maker culture: the company is traveling on the shoulders of the online and offline movement.

Third, a key concern of *Technology Will Save Us* is coding. As one of the first countries in the world, England made coding part of the official curriculum.

This acknowledgement of the crucial importance of coding in society as one

of the “new literacies” is great, however teachers are seriously worried because they have no particular knowledge in this area. The DIY kits of *Technology Will Save Us* (Ill. 11), that were also part of the workshops of the MediaLab, can help them approach this issue. Important for Koby and her colleagues is that their kits not just raise awareness but that the children actually start to understand how programming can help them build new things and understand how things work.

CINEKID FESTIVAL

Founded in 1986, Cinekid is a foundation that organizes several national and international projects in commissions throughout the year. The main project is the 10-day annual media festival for children combined with an international professionals conference in Amsterdam. During this festival the Cinekid MediaLab new media program takes place: a 1,200 m² digital and interactive playground attended by over 10,000 visitors. Besides the regular projects such as the MiniAppLab and the MiniMediaAcademy, the MediaLab commissions several new interactive works every year and awards the New Media Cinekid Lion for Best New Media Production and the App of the Year. The New Media department is also well represented at the Cinekid for Professionals conference. In 2014, the seminar Hot & Cool Play was the place to stay up-to-date with the current state of the art in creativity and play: several professionals who were part of the MediaLab program were sharing their thoughts on how they worked and what inspired them. Part of the MediaLab is the MiniAppLab, a quiet space filled with tablets and dedicated to the app called Cinekid AppLab: an online curating app in which the best apps for kids are being reviewed and categorized every month in order to guide adults to find the best apps. For the professionals, parents and teachers it is inspiring to see how children deal with the intuitive interfaces and how happy they are to just play around with all the content at hand.

WHERE ARE WE HEADED?

According to Koby, the provocative title “*Technology Will Save Us*” does not aim at teaching that technology is really going to save us, but that we have to learn to work with technology in order to be able to save ourselves. And this is exactly the kernel of the MediaLab: in the midst of all the great installations, games, performances and master classes reside the workshops. These workshops are basically the back-end and spine of all the wonderful, amazing, mind puzzling front-ends on display. They are multi-, cross- and trans-disciplinary combining different tools, skills and approaches: the boundaries between the different

media are blurring, between art, science and technology but also between creativity and commerce. All in all, this is the technological profile of our age, which makes room for new common grounds in which creativity is challenged in new ways. For us as makers, the future of creative development will be found in new ways of interaction, new ways of storytelling enabled by collaboration between the different fields: collaborations between storytellers and designers, between coders and editors, between creative professionals and technologists. Meanwhile, in the MediaLab we are trying to give a taste of what is to come: it is hands-on, innovative, in progress, brand-new and everything can be discovered in a playful and open way. ■

THE AUTHOR

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