

# DIGITAL NARRATIVES FOR CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE

Digital Narratives Observatory  
Report 2026

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# 1. Foreword

A child listens to an audiobook on the way to school, swipes through an interactive story on a tablet during a rainy afternoon, builds a world inside a videogame on a Sunday morning, and curls up with a printed picture book before falling asleep. In a single week, this reader has moved through several forms of narrative – each with its own language, its own logic, and its own way of drawing the reader in. This is not a glimpse of the future. For a growing number of children and young people, it is already the everyday reality of reading.

For those who create, publish, and promote stories for young readers, this is not a minor change. Interactive picture books, transmedia storytelling, immersive experiences, and AI-mediated compositions are not simply adding to the shelf. New text formats and platforms are redefining the role of the traditional book itself, extending storytelling across new languages and practices. This narrative shift is reshaping both story forms and the reader's role within the reading experience.

What does it mean to read a story across digital environments? What forms do digital narratives take? How do they engage the reader, through participation, exploration, and co-creation? And what criteria helps us to recognise meaningful and engaging digital narratives beyond technical innovations or relying on interactivity and design trends?

The Digital Narratives Observatory was created to address these questions. Promoted by Associazione Literacy Italia and the Bologna Children's Book Fair, it has three different aims: to observe and map the characteristics of emerging digital narrative forms; to foster dialogue between research, publishing, and educational practice; and to provide orientation tools and evaluative frameworks for those who create, publish, promote, and teach stories in an increasingly digital context.

In its first year, the Observatory has pursued these aims through several initiatives, also in collaboration with NORLA (Norwegian Literature Abroad). A round table at the Bologna Children's Book Fair 2026 brought together researchers, publishers, and representatives of the European Commission to explore digital narrative ecosystems and reading practices in the age of artificial intelligence. A dedicated session for educators addressing the practical challenges of integrating digital narratives into classroom and library settings. And this report – *Digital Narratives for Children and Young People Observatory Report 2026*—offers the results of a survey conducted with exhibitors at the Bologna Children's Book Fair in February-March 2026, providing a snapshot of how children's publishers are engaging with digital narratives. It also proposes an interpretive framework, drawing on international research and Crossmedia award-winning titles, to help publishers, educators, and librarians navigate the field: offering understandings about text formats, reader skills and experiences, and the promise of new genres.

It is the first Report to combine research with current trends and trajectories to respond to an evolving narrative landscape. Much remains to be explored – from accessibility and inclusive design to the training of teachers and librarians who mediate children's encounters with digital stories. The Observatory intends to grow with the field it observes, and future editions will extend this work in new directions.

**Methodological note.** This report combines multiple sources and levels of analysis. It draws on an original survey conducted with exhibitors at the Bologna Children’s Book Fair (2026), on a selective review of international research on children’s reading and digital narratives, and on an interpretive analysis of projects recognised by the BolognaRagazzi CrossMedia Awards. It is also developed in dialogue with ongoing academic research in the field, including contributions forthcoming in the monographic issue Mascia, T. & Rowsell, J. (Eds.). (2026, forthcoming). *Digital Narratives: Between Literary Experience and Digital Literacies*. Scholé, 1/2026).

## 2. A changing reading ecosystem

Across the world, children's enjoyment of reading is declining. In the United Kingdom, only around one in three children and young people say they enjoy reading in their free time – the lowest level recorded in two decades of monitoring.<sup>1</sup> The trend is international: across the PISA cycles in which reading was the major domain, the majority of participating countries recorded a decreasing number of students reading for enjoyment.<sup>2</sup>

The causes of declining engagement are complex and cannot be reduced to an either/or contrast between print and screen. A recent international position paper identifies several interconnected factors.<sup>3</sup> To begin with, the decline in adult reading in many countries may be creating an intergenerational cycle: without reading role models in homes, schools, and wider society, children find it harder to develop the reading habits. As well, access to and extensive use of digital media competes for children's time and attention, creating an appetite for instant gratification that can reduce cognitive patience and the ability to engage in deep reading and reflection. Within education, an overemphasis on teaching and assessing the mechanics of reading – at the expense of nurturing the desire to read – has contributed to reduced engagement in book reading. Overcrowded curricula leave little space for children to consolidate their learning and pursue their interests through wider, self-chosen reading. And in some countries, poverty, the limited availability of texts, and reductions in library services further exacerbate the decline.<sup>4</sup> Finally, it is worth considering that our experience of time is shaped by a logic of general acceleration:<sup>5</sup> when everything moves quickly and free time becomes scarcer in our daily lives, understanding what we read – and reading with depth – becomes increasingly difficult.<sup>6</sup>

The result is a troubling imbalance: considerable effort in teaching children how to read and far less attention to whether they want to. And literacy does not develop in a single setting – it takes shape across homes, schools, libraries, and communities, yet these contexts too often work in isolation with each other without a shared strategy for supporting children's reading lives.<sup>7</sup>

And yet, within this challenging landscape, something else is happening. What it means to read is itself changing. Many children now move between languages and scripts, between print and screen, between algorithmically curated feeds and a story read aloud at bedtime. Digital technologies and artificial intelligence are no longer external to their reading lives – they are part of the environments in which reading is learned, practised, and understood<sup>8</sup>. In this context, meaningful reading can no longer be reduced to decoding and comprehension within a single format<sup>9</sup>. It also involves navigating across media and modalities, evaluating sources critically, and developing an awareness of how digital systems shape what becomes visible and what remains hidden.

Children's reading lives are already expanding well beyond the printed page. They listen to audiobooks and podcasts, scroll through webtoons and graphic novels, explore stories inside interactive apps and videogames. Research suggests that when young people can choose formats that connect with their interests, they are more likely to sustain a positive relationship with reading – and that print and digital are not rivals but complementary practices, each with distinct strengths.<sup>10</sup>

Policy is beginning to reflect this understanding. The European Commission's Action Plan on Basic Skills (2025) broadens literacy beyond print to include visual, audio, and digital materials, and explicitly proposes initiatives – including a European Literacy Coalition – to encourage reading for pleasure.<sup>11</sup> In the UK, the National Year of Reading 2026 redefines reading as a dynamic practice across print, digital, and audio formats.<sup>12</sup> Schools, in turn, are being challenged to broaden their vision of literacy and to embrace the more inclusive framework of New Literacies<sup>13</sup>.

Digital narratives, then, are already part of millions of children's reading lives. But who is shaping this space? With what criteria, what vision of quality, and what attention is there to young readers? These are not questions that can be left unanswered – or left for others to answer.



**Reading is changing, not because technology demands it, but because readers are changing how they encounter stories**



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# 3. Moving beyond a horizontal approach

A child building a world inside a videogame, a ten-year-old following a webtoon series chapter by chapter, a teenager scrolling through social media between classes – these are all digital activities, but they are entirely different experiences. They engage distinct senses, work through different languages, and make their own demands on the reader. Yet when we talk about children and digital technologies, these differences tend to disappear. Public debate, policy guidelines, and even research often group them under a single label – screen time – as though the medium is all that matters.<sup>1</sup> This is what a horizontal approach to the digital looks like: everything that happens on a screen is treated as one thing.

The consequences are not only conceptual. When all screen-based activities are measured the same way, the policies built on those measures cannot distinguish between an hour spent on social media and an hour spent inside a digital narrative. National guidelines end up treating a webtoon, an interactive story, and a video feed as equivalent – and the digital experiences most worth supporting become invisible. A vertical approach starts from the opposite premise: each form of digital experience needs to be understood in its own terms – what it does, how it works, and what it asks of the reader. Understanding how digital narratives for young readers are evolving – which forms are emerging, what they offer, and what they demand – requires this kind of approach. This is the perspective the Observatory adopts.

Research has begun to explore some of these forms, but from a particular angle. Most studies comparing reading on paper and on screen adopt a cognitive perspective – measuring comprehension, recall, attention.<sup>2</sup>



**When all screen-based activities are measured the same way, the policies built on those measures cannot distinguish between an hour spent on social media and an hour spent inside a narrative.**

This is important work, but reading is also a social and cultural practice, involving emotions, imagination, and identity.<sup>3</sup> When the format changes – when a story becomes interactive, multimodal, or collaborative – these dimensions change too, in ways that cognitive measures alone do not capture.

Meanwhile, the professionals who work with children's stories every day face questions that have no ready-made answers. Publishers are experimenting with new narrative forms, but without consolidated models. Which formats will prove sustainable over time? How should rights be managed when a story lives across books, games, and platforms? How can small and medium-sized publishers navigate a space increasingly shaped by large international groups and technology companies?<sup>4</sup> Educators and librarians face a different challenge: helping children orient themselves in narrative environments that are hybrid, multimodal, and increasingly shaped by algorithms – and doing so without shared tools or training.<sup>5</sup>

The *BolognaRagazzi CrossMedia Award*, established in 2021 and now in its sixth edition, already recognises works at the intersection of narrative quality and digital innovation. The prize is articulated in two categories; the second – Digital Reading Experience – is dedicated to born-digital works that live entirely on screen or in audio form, where the educational and informational dimension of the projects emerges most clearly. The Observatory complements this work. It interprets emerging trends in research on digital narratives and brings them into discussion among publishers, researchers, and educators – offering frameworks for understanding how different formats engage the reader, criteria for

recognising quality, and orientation for professionals working in a landscape that offers few established reference points.<sup>6</sup>

The report is also in dialogue with a dedicated body of academic research. A special issue of *Scholé. Journal of Education and Cultural Studies* (1/2026), the scientific journal published by Morcelliana, brings together a set of peer-reviewed studies on digital narratives between literary experience and digital literacies. Where relevant, this report builds also on those findings, although the issue was not yet publicly available at the time of writing.<sup>7</sup>



<sup>1</sup> Kucirkova, N.I., Livingstone, S. & Radesky, J.S. (2023). Faulty screen time measures hamper national policies. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 14, 1243396.

<sup>2</sup> Furenes, M. I., Kucirkova, N., & Bus, A. G. (2021). A comparison of children's reading on paper versus screen: A meta-analysis. *Review of Educational Research*, 91(4), 483–517. <https://doi.org/10.3102/0034654321998074>

<sup>3</sup> Mascia, T. & Aerila, J.-A. (2026, forthcoming), *Linking Literacy and Life: Reading Cultures and Reading for Pleasure*. Springer.

<sup>4</sup> These questions are drawn from the Observatory's founding brief and reflect concerns expressed by exhibitors at the Bologna Children's Book Fair.

<sup>5</sup> European Commission (2025). *Communication on the Action Plan on Basic Skills (COM(2025) 88 final)*.

<sup>6</sup> The BolognaRagazzi CrossMedia Award archive is analysed in Sections 7 and 8.

<sup>7</sup> Mascia, T., & Rowsell, J. (Eds.). (2026, forthcoming). *Digital narratives: Between literary experience and digital literacies* [Special issue]. *Scholé. Journal of Education and Cultural Studie*

# 4. A growing field without clear boundaries

Digital narratives for children do not yet form a clearly defined market category.<sup>1</sup> There is no single figure that captures the size of the sector, because the sector itself is still being defined. Audiobooks, e-books, interactive books, narrative apps, and immersive experiences are measured separately, using different definitions and methodologies. The field exists in practice, but it is not yet fully mapped in statistical terms.

For this reason, the figures presented here should not be read as a single, unified market size. Rather, they should be understood as selected indicators drawn from publicly available sources, pointing to the direction of change across measurable segments. Taken together, they show consistent trends across the areas that can currently be observed: the ecosystem of digital narratives for children is expanding.<sup>2</sup>

## SELECTED MARKET AND USAGE INDICATORS (PUBLICLY AVAILABLE SOURCES)<sup>3</sup>.

Segment	Latest published value	Growth trend
US digital audio – publisher revenue (AAP) <sup>4</sup>	~2.4 billion USD (2024)	+22.5% annual
US e-books – publisher revenue (AAP) <sup>4</sup>	~2.1 billion USD (2024)	+1.5% annual
UK audiobook market (Publishers Association) <sup>5</sup>	~268 million GBP (2024)	+31% annual
European audiobook share (FEP) <sup>6</sup>	4.2% of total book sales (2024)	fastest-growing format
Digital lending – libraries and schools (OverDrive) <sup>7</sup>	739.5 million checkouts (2024)	+17% annual
Children’s and YA digital borrowing (OverDrive) <sup>8</sup>	157.8 million checkouts (2024)	approximately 21% of total

*These figures are drawn from different sources, with different scopes and definitions, and are not directly comparable. They should be interpreted as indicators rather than as components of a single market total.<sup>3</sup>*

What is consistent across all datasets is the direction of change. Growth is particularly strong in audio. In the United States, digital audio revenues grew by 22.5% in 2024, while e-books increased by only 1.5%.<sup>4</sup> In the United Kingdom, audiobook revenue rose by 31%, becoming the most dynamic area of consumer digital publishing.<sup>5</sup> At the European level, audiobooks still represent a relatively small share of total book sales, but they are widely identified as the fastest-growing format.<sup>6</sup>

Usage data confirms the same trend. Digital borrowing and reading are increasing across both public libraries and schools. OverDrive reported more than 739 million digital loans globally in 2024, a 17% increase over the previous year.<sup>7</sup> Within this figure, children's and young adult borrowing accounted for a very substantial share, confirming the strong position of younger audiences within digital reading ecosystems.<sup>8</sup> School-based platforms such as Sora also indicate steady growth in reading sessions and

audiobook use, suggesting that digital narrative consumption is expanding not only in commercial markets but also in educational settings.<sup>9</sup>

Industry signals point in the same direction. At the Bologna Children's Book Fair 2025, Audible reported a 28% year-on-year increase in its children's listening segment.<sup>10</sup> While this is company-level data rather than a sector-wide measure, it is consistent with broader developments in audio publishing.

Taken together, these indicators suggest that the economic foundations of digital narratives for children are already substantial and continue to expand. At the same time, the lack of a unified category – and the fact that each format is still measured separately – highlights a structural gap between industry practice and market definition. The sector is growing faster than the frameworks used to describe it.

The market is moving. But what are publishers actually doing within it?



**Taken together, these indicators show consistent trends across the areas that can currently be observed: the ecosystem of digital narratives for children is expanding.**



1. The absence of a unified market category emerges from the way publishing statistics are currently organized by format rather than by narrative function. For example, the AAP StatShot (USA) reports digital audio and e-books as separate revenue lines; the Publishers Association (UK) tracks audiobooks within consumer digital sales; the Federation of European Publishers aggregates audiobook share at continental level. None of these frameworks captures digital narratives for children as a category.

2. The claim concerns direction rather than exact market size: across publishing revenues, digital lending, and platform use, the trend is consistently upward, with particularly strong growth in audio.

3. The indicators presented are drawn from publicly available sources with different scopes and methodologies; they are therefore not directly comparable and should be interpreted as signals of change rather than as components of a single market total.

4. Association of American Publishers (2025). *AAP StatShot Annual Report*. <https://publishers.org/news/aap-statshot-annual-report-publishing-revenues-totaled-32-5-billion-for-calendar-year-2024/>

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that this figure is "largely underestimated" due to subscription-based sales being difficult to capture. In the same dataset, children's books accounted for 14.6% of total European publishers' revenue in 2024. [https://www.fep-fee.eu/IMG/pdf/european\\_book\\_publishing\\_statistics\\_2024.pdf?2537/15506c73c209e42f3847467669cf81d5cd4ba6b9](https://www.fep-fee.eu/IMG/pdf/european_book_publishing_statistics_2024.pdf?2537/15506c73c209e42f3847467669cf81d5cd4ba6b9)

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10. At the Bologna Children's Book Fair 2025, Audible reported a 28% year-on-year increase in its children's listening segment (Publishers Weekly, 7 April 2025). <https://www.publishersweekly.com/pw/by-topic/childrens/childrens-industry-news/article/97491-bologna-book-fair-2025-audiobook-publishers-look-to-balance-growth-with-creativity.html>

# 5. Findings from the BCBF 2026 publishers survey

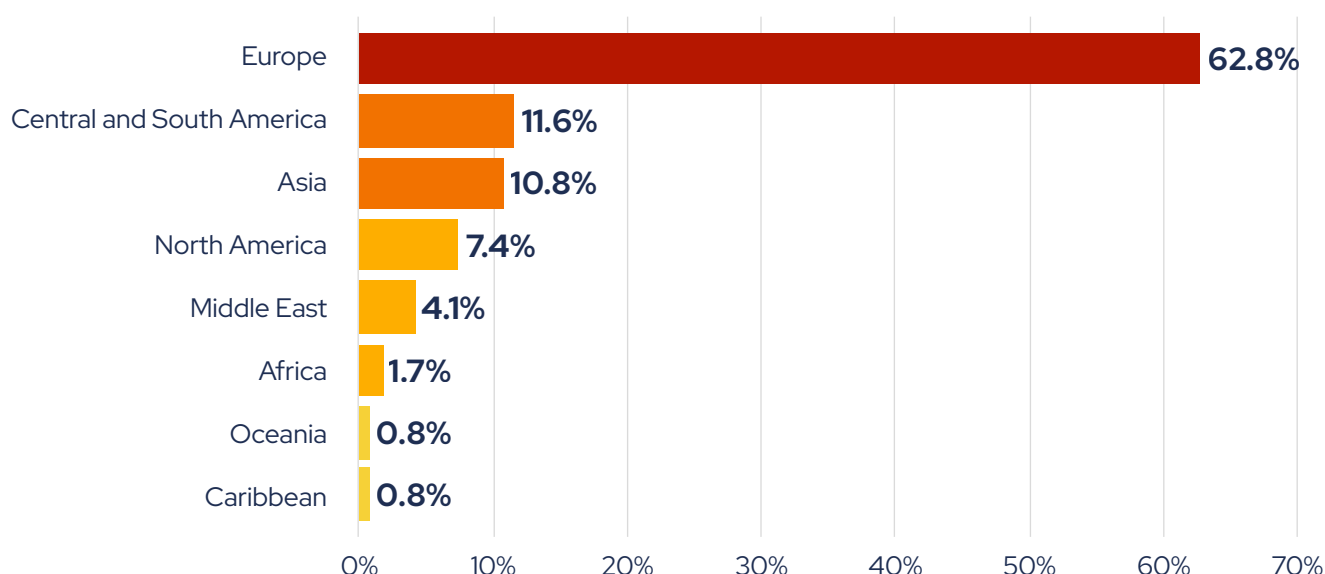
The Digital Narratives Observatory conducted an online survey among exhibitors at the Bologna Children’s Book Fair in early 2026. The anonymous questionnaire gathered 121 responses from children’s publishers across several world regions, with a clear European majority (62.8%), followed by Central and South America and Asia

(11.6% each) and North America (7.4%). The survey is not statistically representative of the global publishing industry; rather, it offers an informative snapshot of how children’s publishers are approaching digital narratives and of the kinds of support they say they still need.

<b>SURVEY SIZE</b>	121 responses from publishers
<b>MAIN REGION</b>	62.8% of respondents are based in Europe
<b>ALREADY ACTIVE</b>	56.2% experiments or strategic commitment
<b>TOP FORMATS</b>	46.3% / 45.5% audio and enhanced e-books
<b>TOP BARRIER</b>	47.1% uncertainty about market demand
<b>DOMINANT OUTLOOK</b>	47.9% books and digital will coexist

*Methodological note.* Percentages are based on the respondent total (n = 121). For multiple-response questions, each option is treated as a binary mention; totals therefore do not sum to 100%. A small number of open-text answers were reassigned to an existing category when their substantive meaning clearly matched one of the questionnaire options; residual answers were retained as "Other".

**TABLE 5.1. GEOGRAPHICAL DISTRIBUTION OF RESPONDENTS**



Note. Source: Digital Narratives Observatory survey of BCBF exhibitors, Feb-Mar 2026.

The sample is largely European, but not exclusively so. Responses also came from Latin America, Asia, North America, the Middle East,

Africa and Oceania, which gives the survey an international horizon while still reflecting the strong European presence at the Fair.

## A field in transition

### PUBLISHERS' POSITION REGARDING DIGITAL NARRATIVES (n = 121)

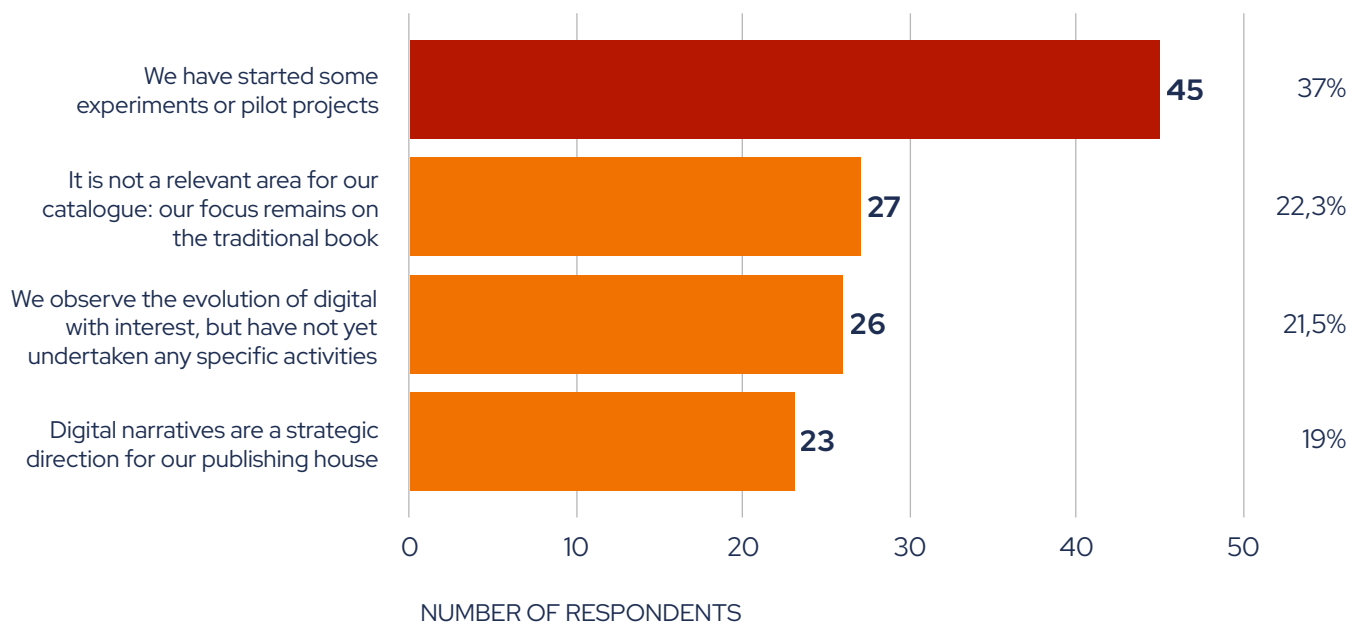


Figure 5.1. How publishers position themselves regarding digital narratives.

Note. Source: Digital Narratives Observatory survey of BCBF exhibitors, Feb-Mar 2026.

The first message is clear: the field is moving, but it is moving more through exploration than through settled strategy. More than a third of respondents (37.2%) say they have already started experiments or pilot projects, and a further 19.0% describe digital narratives as a strategic direction for their publishing house. At the same time, 21.5% are still observing the field with interest without having acted, while 22.3% continue to regard digital narratives as outside the core of their catalogue. Digital narratives are no longer a marginal issue for children's publishing – but they have not yet become a settled model either. The sector is therefore neither fully committed nor clearly resistant; it is better understood as a field in transition, marked by different speeds and different thresholds of engagement.



# Activity is concentrated in familiar formats

## AREAS IN WHICH PUBLISHERS ARE ACTIVE OR CONSIDERING ACTIVITY

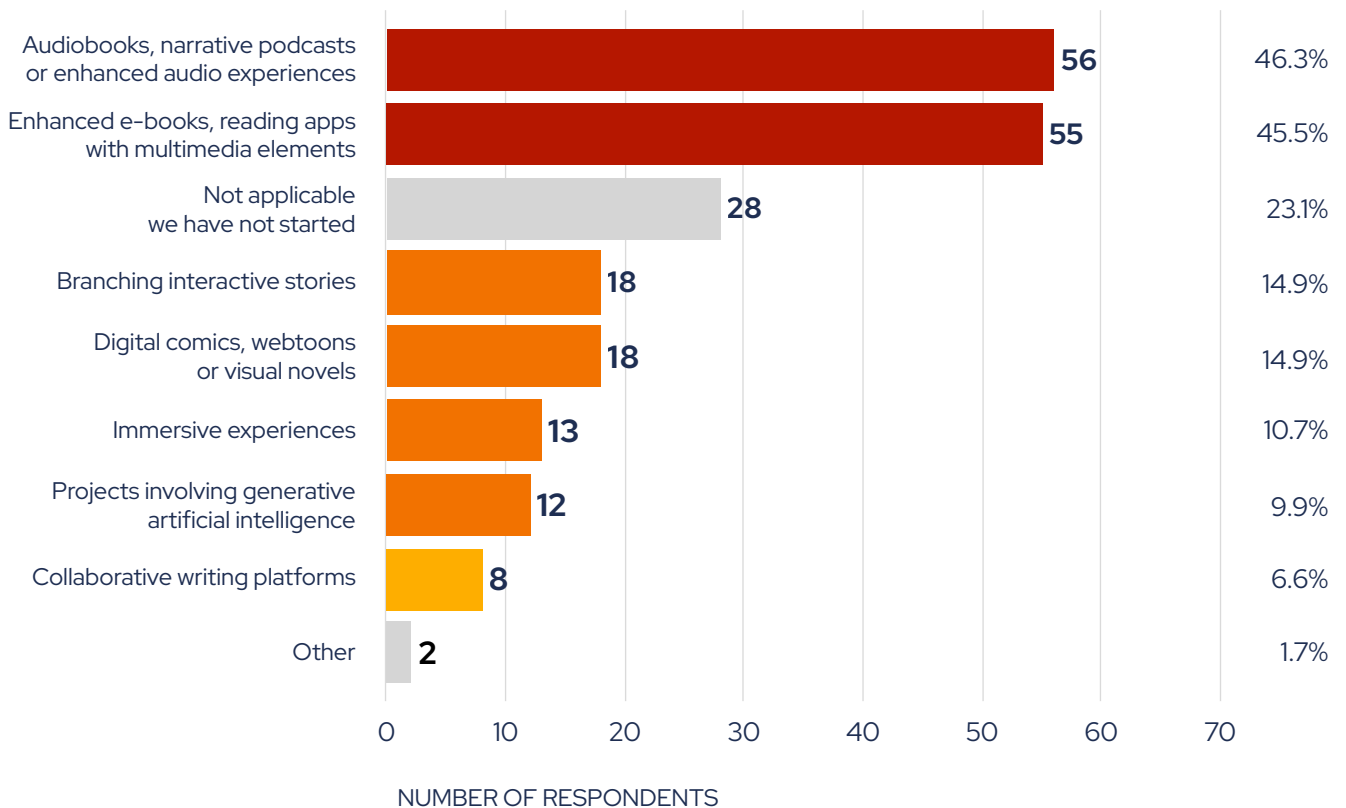


Figure 5.2. Areas in which publishers are active or considering activity.

Note. Source: Digital Narratives Observatory survey of BCBF exhibitors, Feb-Mar 2026. Multiple responses were allowed; percentages refer to the full sample (n = 121) and do not sum to 100%.

Publisher activity is concentrated where the transition from print is easiest to manage. The most common areas are audiobooks, narrative podcasts and enhanced audio experiences (46.3%) and enhanced e-books or reading apps with multimedia elements (45.5%). Nearly a quarter of respondents (23.1%) say they have not yet started activity in any of the proposed areas. More experimental forms remain much less common: branching interactive stories and digital comics or webtoons each stand at 14.9%, immersive experiences at 10.7%, projects involving generative AI at 9.9%, and collaborative writing platforms at 6.6%. This pattern suggests that most publishers are entering the field through formats that extend familiar editorial and design practices, while the more disruptive, participatory or co-creative forms remain comparatively marginal.

This pattern matters. It suggests that most publishers are not beginning with the most disruptive forms of digital narrative, but with those that extend familiar editorial practices into new media. Audio and enriched e-books feel legible within the established culture of publishing; immersive, interactive, and co-creative forms require a more radical shift in workflow, partnerships, skills, and editorial imagination. The field is moving – but it is moving first through formats that preserve a visible link with the book.

# Four broad publisher profiles



Read together rather than one question at a time, the responses suggest four broad interpretive profiles. These should be understood as heuristic groupings rather than as fixed market segments: they are used here to make the diversity of positions in the sector easier to read.

Profile	Indicative share	Typical stance	What tends to matter most
Cautious non-starters	~23%	Little or no activity; print remains the main reference point.	Reassurance on sustainability, rights, and child-appropriate use.
Supported experimenters	~36%	Already testing formats, especially audio and enhanced e-books.	Guidance, trusted partners, and lower-risk ways to experiment.
Pragmatic adopters	~30%	Selective use of digital formats, often in support of the printed catalogue.	Workable models that complement print rather than transform the whole list.
Advanced innovators	~11%	Broadest experimentation, including interactive, collaborative and AI-related forms.	Design possibilities, specialised partners, and room for narrative innovation.

*Note. Exploratory interpretive grouping based on combined response patterns across the questionnaire. The percentages are indicative and are intended as a heuristic aid rather than as definitive market segmentation.*

Taken together, the profiles suggest that the sector is not simply split between publishers “for” and “against” digital. Instead, it ranges from tentative observation to cautious

experimentation to selective adoption and finally to full advanced innovation. This is why the survey is better understood as a map of different orientations and degrees of change than as a binary conflict between print and digital.

*Lenguas que cuentan, BCBF 2026  
CrossMedia Awards, “Special Mention”*



# The barriers are economic, organisational and cultural

## MAIN CHALLENGES ASSOCIATED WITH DIGITAL NARRATIVES

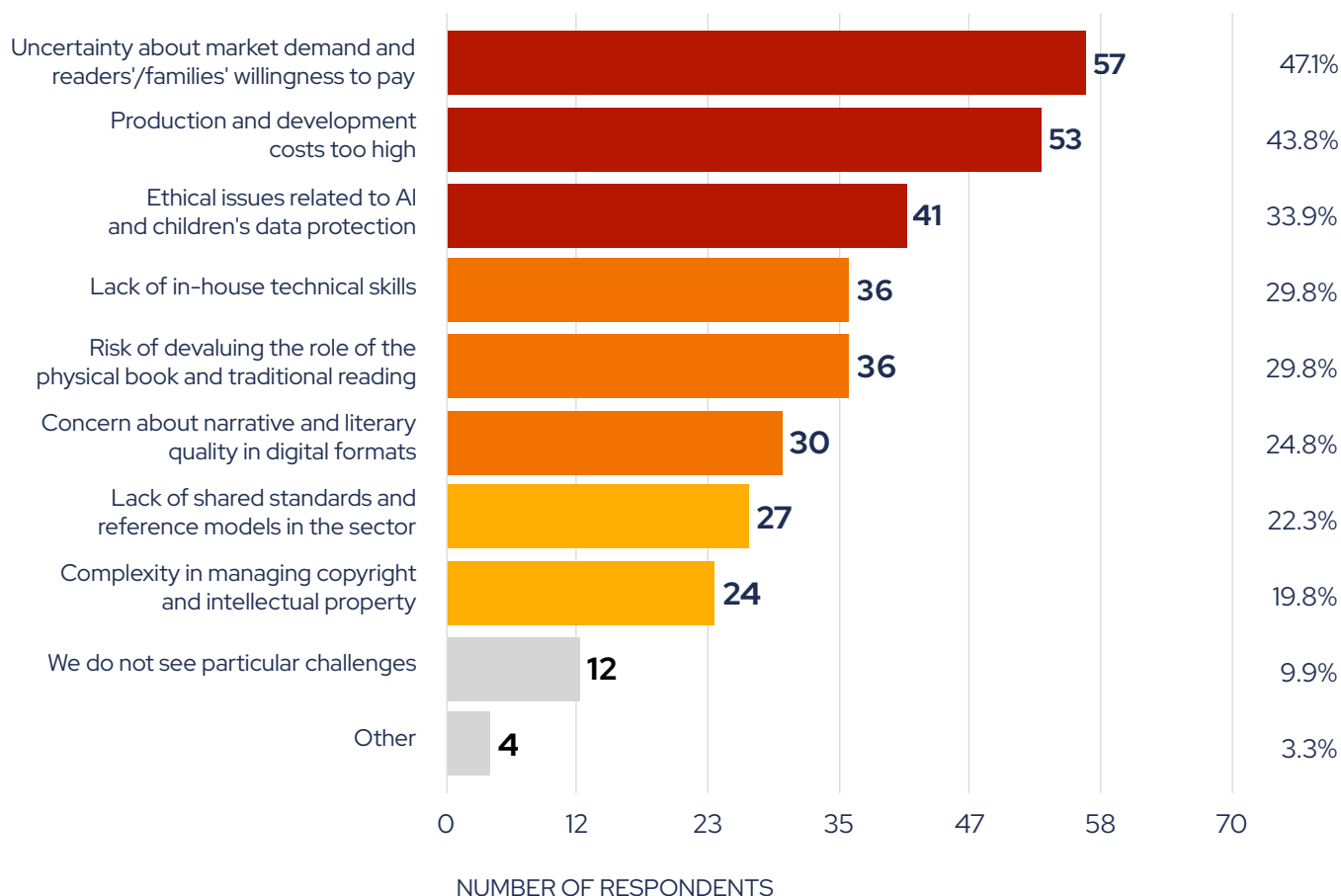


Figure 5.3. Main challenges associated with digital narratives.

Note. Source: Digital Narratives Observatory survey of BCBF exhibitors, Feb-Mar 2026. The questionnaire invited respondents to select up to three options; in the analysis each option is treated as a binary mention. Percentages refer to the full sample (n = 121) and do not sum to 100%.

The barriers publishers identify do not point to one single problem. The first layer is economic and market-related: uncertainty about demand comes first (47.1%), followed by production and development costs (43.8%). A second layer concerns competence and governance: 33.9% mention ethical issues connected to AI and children’s data protection, 29.8% point to a lack of in-house technical skills, and 22.3% refer to the absence of shared standards and reference models. There is also a more cultural layer of concern: nearly 30% fear that digital narratives may devalue the role of the physical book and traditional reading, and 24.8% worry about narrative and literary quality in digital formats. The key question is therefore not only “Can we do this?” but also “What happens to the story, to

the reader, and to the identity of children’s publishing if we do?”

These responses describe a sector that is uncertain not only about how to enter the digital space, but also about whether doing so is compatible with its core values. The fear of devaluing the book is particularly significant: it suggests that many publishers still frame digital as a threat rather than a complement. Reframing this relationship – showing concretely how digital can sustain and grow traditional business – may be the single most important contribution the sector needs. As one respondent put it plainly: “the most important point is to understand that a digital presence for your brands is also crucial to sustaining and growing revenue in the traditional business”.

# Publishers foresee complementarity, but need clearer models

## HOW PUBLISHERS EXPECT THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN BOOKS AND DIGITAL NARRATIVES TO EVOLVE

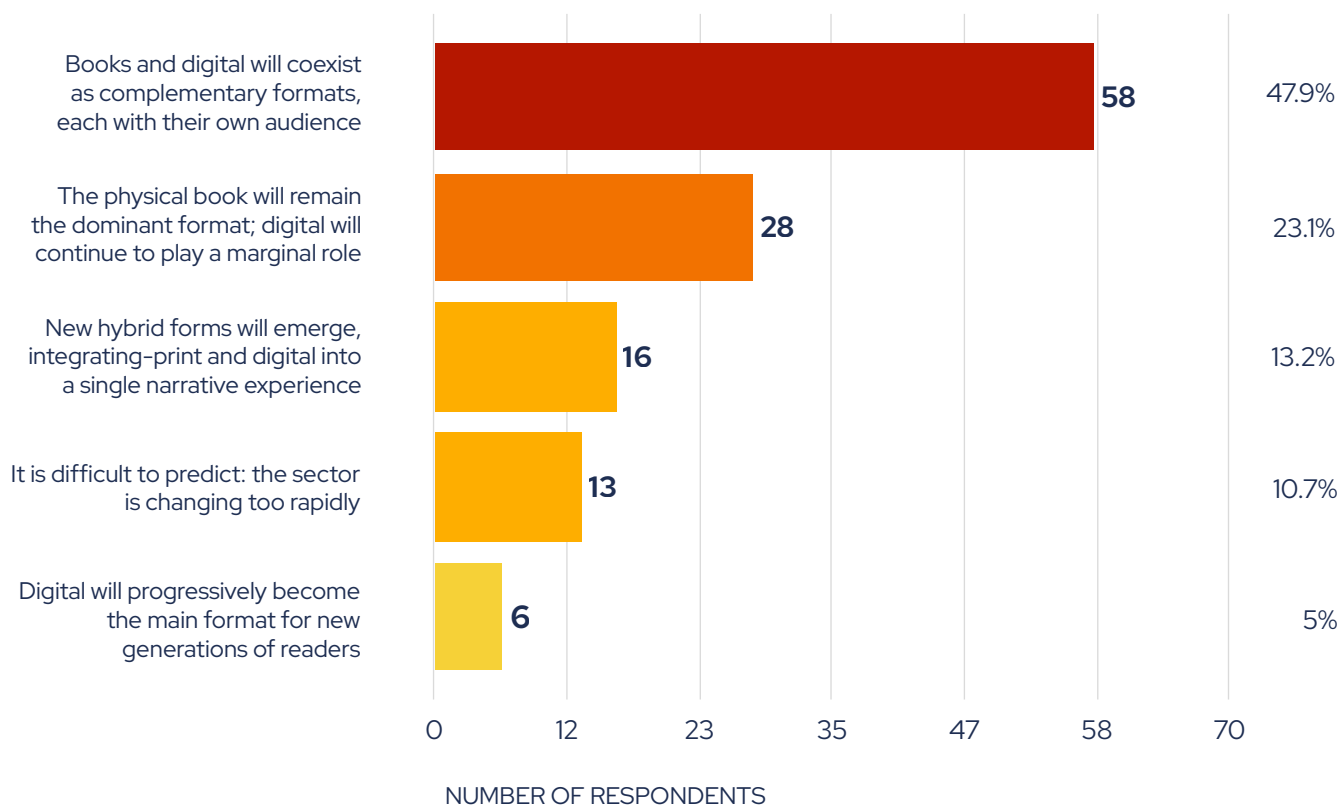


Figure 5.4. How publishers expect the relationship between books and digital narratives to evolve in the next 3–5 years.  
Note. Source: Digital Narratives Observatory survey of BCBF exhibitors, Feb–Mar 2026.

The emerging horizon is not replacement, but coexistence. Almost half of respondents (47.9%) expect books and digital narratives to coexist as complementary formats, each with its own audience. A further 23.1% believe the physical book will remain dominant; 13.2% anticipate new hybrid forms; 10.7% say the sector is changing too quickly to predict; and only 5.0% expect digital texts to become the main format for new generations of readers. This does not mean the same thing for everyone: for some, coexistence implies that digital remains secondary, whereas for others it opens the way for more fluid story worlds moving between page, screen, sound and play.

The open-ended responses illustrate how this complementarity is already being tested in

practice. One Colombian publisher describes a partnership with MakeMake, a digital platform specialising in children’s literature, through which part of its catalogue is available digitally without abandoning its editorial focus. A Spanish publisher combines a printed book with a QR code leading to a private online space with games, colouring pages and audio. An Italian publisher uses an interactive pen as a bridge between the printed page and multimedia content. An Irish studio with a long history in digital storytelling describes a shift from interactive pop-up book apps toward sandbox play, where children are not just consuming stories but imagining them. These examples are illustrative rather than representative, but they show that complementarity is already being explored through concrete editorial models.

# What publishers ask for – and what the sector can do

## MAIN CHALLENGES ASSOCIATED WITH DIGITAL NARRATIVES

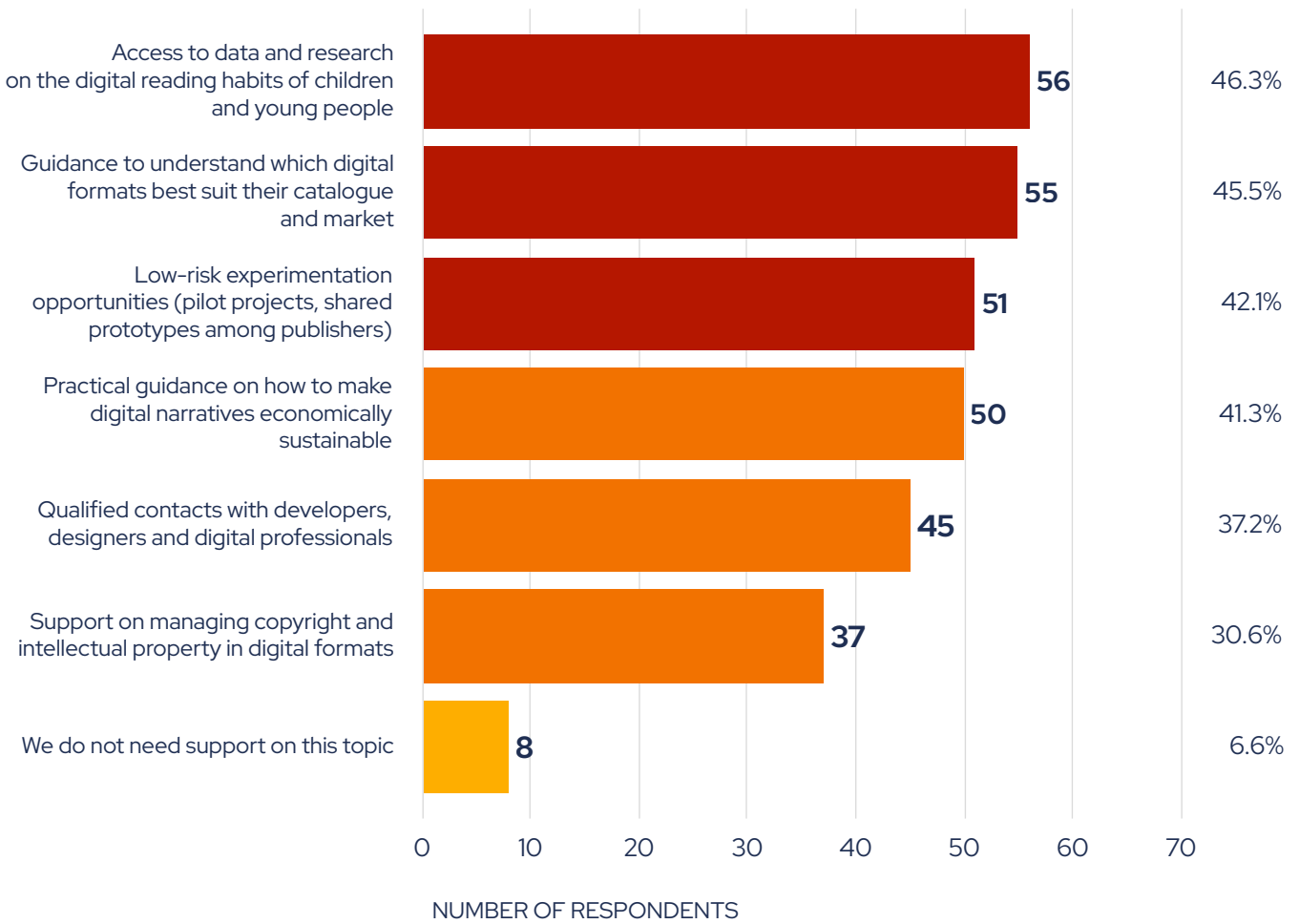


Figure 5.5. What would help the publishing sector better navigate digital narratives.

Note. Source: Digital Narratives Observatory survey of BCBF exhibitors, Feb-Mar 2026. The questionnaire invited respondents to select up to three options; in the analysis each option is treated as a binary mention. Percentages refer to the full sample (n = 121) and do not sum to 100%.

What publishers ask for is equally revealing. The sector is not asking primarily for slogans about innovation; it is asking for data and research (46.3%), guidance on formats (45.5%), low-risk opportunities to experiment (42.1%), practical help with economic sustainability (41.3%), and access to qualified partners (37.2%). The pattern that emerges is not one of indifference, but of a sector asking for pathways: better evidence, stronger mediation, and safer ways to test projects before committing substantial resources.

Yoto, BCBF 2025, BolognaRagazzi CrossMedia Awards, Digital Reading Experience Winner



## Voices from the field



**The most important point is actually to understand that a digital presence for your brands is also crucial to sustaining and growing revenue in the traditional business.**



**The opportunity for the industry is to embrace this continuum. The most compelling work will come from treating story worlds as systems that can live across print, digital, audio, and play.**



**For us the main challenge is to ensure that any digital extension preserves the depth, rhythm, and visual sensitivity that define the picture book as an artistic object.**



**There is no good democratic practice for making digital products for children accessible to small publishers. The market is centralised, with large publishers stifling experimentation.**

*Note. Selected verbatim excerpts from the open-ended responses to the Observatory survey (BCBF 2026).*

One concern runs through many of the responses: the wellbeing of children. Publishers worry about screen time, attention, data protection, and the broader effects of digital environments on young readers. Taken together, the survey suggests not a simple divide between print and digital, but a landscape moving at different speeds and under different conditions; the central need is not abstract enthusiasm for innovation, but better orientation: clearer models, more evidence, stronger partnerships, and shared criteria for quality.



**The most compelling work will come from treating story worlds as systems that can live across print, digital, audio, and play**

*BCBF Publisher survey respondent*

# 6. Emerging formats: a mapping

The landscape of digital narratives for children is not a single field. It is a set of formats, each with their own logic, their own possibilities, and their own unanswered questions. The categories below are practical, not definitive. Many projects combine two or more formats, and the borders

between them are still moving. The aim here is to clarify the main forms that currently matter in children's publishing – drawing on the Observatory's analysis, the BCBF survey data, and existing research on the classification of digital children's literature.<sup>3</sup>



## **Audiobooks and narrative podcasts**

Audio is the format publishers know best. In the BCBF survey, 46.3% of respondents indicate activity or interest in this area – more than any other. The category is broad: classic audiobooks, serialised fiction podcasts, and story-led audio productions built on voice, music, and sound design. What they share is a simple premise. A child can enter a story without opening a page – at bedtime, on a journey, in a waiting room. Yoto, winner of the 2025 CrossMedia Award for Digital Reading Experience, packages audiobooks and podcasts in a screen-free, child-friendly audio system.<sup>1</sup> The opportunity is reach: audio can broaden how, where, and with whom stories are experienced. The challenge is discoverability. In a crowded audio environment, publishers need more than narration alone to make a project distinctive and sustainable.



## **Enriched e-books and narrative apps**

The second most active area in the survey (45.5%) is enriched e-books and narrative apps. These are digital books that combine text and illustration with animation, sound, touch, or small interactive elements. For many publishers, they represent the closest bridge between the printed book and the digital world – a way to extend the picturebook experience without abandoning the logic of the book. Five Years Old Memories by Komitsu, a special mention at the 2025 CrossMedia Awards, turns small childhood memories into interactive animated episodes built from hand-drawn images and real audio recordings.<sup>2</sup> When the design works, sound and movement add emotional texture that the page alone cannot carry. When it does not, interactivity becomes decoration – and research consistently confirms the difference.<sup>4</sup> There is also a harder problem. High-quality apps cost a great deal to make and tend to disappear when business models fail or operating systems change. Unlike a book on a shelf, an app exists only as long as its platform supports it.<sup>5</sup>



## **Webtoons and digital comics**

Explored by 14.9% of respondents. Webtoons are comics designed for vertical scrolling on a smartphone – not comics adapted to a screen, but stories born for it. The downward scroll changes everything: pacing, suspense, panel spacing, visual rhythm. Hooky began on WEBTOON and is now a bestselling print graphic-novel series – a clear case of a mobile-native comic migrating back into bookshops.<sup>6</sup> The opportunity is audience building: a story can find readers digitally before being reformatted for print or extended elsewhere. The challenge is that scrolling syntax, episode length, and page composition do not automatically transfer from one medium to another.



### Branching interactive stories

Stories in which the reader chooses between options that change the route through the plot. The format gives the reader a sense of agency that linear narrative does not: instead of following events, the reader navigates between possible paths. *Heroes of Tomorrow: Hidden Potential*, released by Choice of Games in 2026, is a text-based interactive novel in which the reader leads a team of teen heroes and choices shape the unfolding story.<sup>7</sup> The opportunity is replayability: one narrative world can support multiple reading paths. The challenge is design. Branching only works when choices feel meaningful and when different paths remain narratively coherent – not when options multiply without consequence.



### Immersive experiences (AR/VR and adjacent story installations)

Reported by 10.7% of respondents. These are narratives experienced by entering, moving through, or acting inside a story environment. In children's publishing, the most visible current cases are not always headset-based VR. They often include installations, projection environments, and interactive museum or library spaces. *Star Papa*, winner of the 2025 CrossMedia Award for CrossMedia Projects, transforms a picturebook into an immersive video experience using tactile interaction, voice activation, and sound effects.<sup>8</sup> The opportunity is embodied, collective storytelling – readers do not just imagine a world, they move within it. The challenge is access: immersive projects require specialised production, equipment, and space, which makes them harder to scale than audio or app-based forms.



### Narratives generated or co-created with AI

Generative AI enters this field from two directions. It can support creation behind the scenes – helping authors prototype, test variations, explore possibilities. It can also become part of the reading experience itself, generating or adapting story material in response to the child's prompts, preferences, or drawings. *No Imagination Allowed*, recognised at the 2026 CrossMedia Awards, uses AI to animate children's drawings and turn them into films and digital exhibitions.<sup>9</sup> The opportunity is co-creation: a child's idea can quickly expand into a richer story world. The challenge is trust. AI systems produce fluent but sometimes weak, generic, or inaccurate material. Strong human oversight, age-appropriate safeguards, and careful data handling are essential. Research on child-AI co-creation is promising but still emerging; broad claims about educational benefit would be premature.<sup>10</sup>



### Collaborative writing platforms

The least explored format in the survey (6.6%). Digital environments in which two or more participants build a story together, in real time or turn by turn. The format shifts storytelling from single authorship towards participation and community. *StoryWeaver* (Pratham Books) is an open-licensed multilingual platform where educators, translators and authors create, adapt and share children's stories in over 320 languages; the *Fonfon Creative Workshop* (Éditions Fonfon) lets children aged 4–12 build multimodal stories from the visual worlds of published picturebooks.<sup>11</sup> The opportunity is participation: collaborative platforms can turn storytelling into a shared practice. The challenge is moderation and editorial care, especially when young users publish, comment, or work together online.

Mapping formats is necessary, but not sufficient. Different technologies can produce similar experiences, and the same technology can support very different kinds of reading. To understand what really changes in digital narratives, the focus now needs to shift from the technology to the reader.



**What this journey has made clear is that digital narrative is not simply an adaptation of publishing, it is a new layer of it. It introduces agency, play, and participation as core storytelling mechanics, challenging traditional assumptions about authorship, linearity, and what constitutes a "finished" story**

*BCBF Publisher survey respondent*



1. Bologna Children's Book Fair, Digital Reading Experience 2025. The 2025 Bologna Ragazzi CrossMedia Award for Digital Reading Experience was awarded to *Yoto*, a screen-free audio system for children offering audiobooks, music and podcasts.

2. Bologna Children's Book Fair, Digital Reading Experience 2025, Special Mention. *Five Years Old Memories / Komitsu*, an interactive animated app built from hand-drawn illustrations and real audio recordings of childhood memories.

3. For a systematic classification of digital children's literature formats, see Mascia, T. & Aerila, J.-A. (2023), Exploring the field of digital children's literature and its opportunities for literacy education. *Nuova Secondaria Ricerca*, 9, 124–137.

4. Nardi, A. (2026, forthcoming). Children's Digital Books: Evidence-Based Design to Nurture Reading for Pleasure. *Scholé*, 1/2026; see also Kucirkova, N. (2019), Children's Reading With Digital Books: Past Moving Quickly to the Future. *Child Development Perspectives*, 13(4), 208–214. <https://doi.org/10.1111/cdep.12339>; Mascia, T. (2023), Nuove dimensioni della lettura. Promuovere la partecipazione e l'apprendimento attivo con la letteratura digitale per l'infanzia. *Digitalia*, 18(2), 221–233.

5. Antoniazzi, A. (2026, forthcoming). The Rise and Fall of Narrative Apps for Children. *Scholé*, 1/2026. Historical analysis of the rise and decline of children's narrative apps, including the effects of market fragility and technological obsolescence.

6. On webtoon culture see Jin, D.Y. (2019), Snack Culture's Dream of Big-Screen Culture: Korean Webtoons' Transmedia Storytelling. *International Journal of Communication*, 13, 2094–2115. On the crossover between vertical-scroll comics and print, see "Webtoons and Webcomics Keep Scrolling into Print", *Publishers Weekly*, 27 November 2023. *Hooky* (Miriam Bonastre Tur, WEBTOON, 2015–2020; print editions from 2021) is a current example of a mobile-native comic migrating to bestselling graphic novels.

7. Choice of Games describes itself as the world's largest publishing house for interactive novels. *Heroes of Tomorrow: Hidden Potential* was released in February 2026 as a text-based interactive novel centred on teen superheroes.

8. Bologna Children's Book Fair, CrossMedia Projects 2025, Winner. *Star Papa* (Book Gorae / K3I Co., Ltd., South Korea), an immersive video experience that uses motion capture and projection technologies to transform a picture book into a group interactive installation.

9. Bologna Children's Book Fair, CrossMedia Projects 2026, Special Mention. *No Imagination Allowed* (Roi Books / Red Dog Culture House, South Korea), a participatory project that uses artificial intelligence to animate children's drawings and transform them into films and digital exhibitions.

10. On AI-supported child story co-creation, see Ye et al. (2025), Colin: A Multimodal Human-AI Co-Creation Storytelling System to Support Children's Multi-Level Narrative Skills. *CHI '25 Extended Abstracts*, ACM. On the need to read AI output critically rather than treat fluency as reliability, see Bluijs, S. & Van de Ven, I. (2026, forthcoming). 'In Chat We Trust': Large Language Models as Unreliable Narrators. *Scholé*, 1/2026.

11. Pratham Books, StoryWeaver ([storyweaver.org.in](http://storyweaver.org.in)): an open-licensed multilingual platform where educators, translators and authors create, adapt and share children's stories in 320+ languages. Éditions Fonfon, Atelier de création Fonfon ([atelierfonfon.com](http://atelierfonfon.com); CrossMedia Award 2023): a platform where children aged 4–12 create multimodal stories using visual elements from published picture books. In both cases, the boundary between collaborative creation and co-authorship is fluid, which is why this area still appears experimentally defined rather than fully stabilised in publishing practice.



# 7. Not the technology, but the reader

The mapping of formats presented in the previous section is a useful starting point, but it is not enough. A podcast and an audiobook may use the same technology – audio – yet produce very different narrative experiences. A VR story and a VR educational simulation share a platform but demand entirely different things of the reader. AI can generate a personalised bedtime story or enable a child to co-author an illustrated narrative from scratch. Classifying digital narratives by the technology they employ tells us what tools are being used, but not what happens to the reader inside the story. Section 3 argued that understanding digital narratives requires a vertical approach – one that examines each form of engagement on its own terms, rather than

treating all screen-based experiences as equivalent. The framework proposed here is that vertical approach put into practice.

The Observatory proposes a different lens – one that looks not at the technology, but at how the relationship between reader and story is transformed. The framework identifies four modes of narrative engagement, drawn from international research and from the analysis of award-winning works in the field.<sup>1</sup> These are not rigid categories. Many works span more than one mode, and the boundaries between them are intentionally porous. They are an orienting tool – a way to begin understanding, concretely, what readers do when they enter a story.

## Media-enhanced reading

In this first mode, the story remains authored, shaped, and delivered by its creator. The reader receives it – as in traditional reading. What changes is the sensory experience: how the story is perceived, at what pace, through which channels.

A child scrolling through a webtoon performs a different gesture from turning a page. Suspense is created not by the page turn, but by the unseen content below the screen's edge. A child listening to a narrative podcast with immersive sound design is engaging with a story through voice, music, and ambient sound – an experience with its own imaginative grammar, distinct from silent reading. Enriched e-books, dramatised audiobooks, motion comics, and chat-style stories all belong here. The narrative structure is typically linear. What changes is the medium – and that change is not trivial. Writing for a scrolling reader, or a listening reader, means designing for a body that reads differently.<sup>2</sup>

### AN EXAMPLE

*Otthon* (Hungary, CrossMedia Award 2023) is a wordless picture book about a child moving house, transposed into a short animated film. The story is the same – but in the film it unfolds through image, movement, and a musical score that traces the emotional arc without a single word. The reader receives a richer sensory experience; the narrative remains entirely the author's.

### WHAT THE READER DOES

The reader receives the story through new sensory channels – scrolling, listening, watching, touching – but does not influence the plot.

# Traversing

In the second mode, the reader makes choices. The author has designed a branching or multi-linear structure – a set of possible paths through the narrative – and the reader selects which route to follow. The story bifurcates; the reader navigates.

The roots of this mode lie in the printed gamebook tradition, but digital media amplify the possibilities. Where a printed book might offer a dozen alternate endings, a digital narrative can contain hundreds of decision points, with consequences that accumulate and persist. The reader experiences agency – the sense that decisions matter.<sup>3</sup> Yet all paths have been pre-designed. The craft of this mode is architectural: planning multiple satisfying storylines, maintaining coherence across diverging paths, making each branch feel meaningful rather than arbitrary. Interactive fiction, visual novels, branching story apps, and interactive video narratives all belong here.

# Inhabiting

The reader is no longer choosing between paths – they are inside the story's world. The narrative is experienced by exploring a space, often in real time, rather than by following a predetermined sequence of events. Reading becomes something closer to inhabiting: the reader moves, looks around, discovers.

The distinction from traversing is subtle but important. Branching stories present explicit choices – option A or option B. Inhabitable narratives offer continuous, free-form interaction within an environment. The reader may wander in any direction. Story content is distributed spatially: an object found in a corner, a sound that draws attention, a change in lighting that signals the passage of time. The author designs a world more than a plot – and the reader assembles the narrative from the elements they encounter in their own sequence.<sup>4</sup> Research shows that this is not simply a spatial experience but a deeply relational one. In immersive story worlds staged in schools and museums, children develop bonds of empathy with fictional characters that shape how they navigate the space. They do not just move through a world; they develop ties to the beings they encounter within it.<sup>5</sup>

VR story experiences, AR narrative apps, location-based stories, and exploratory narrative games belong to this mode. The format demands spatial literacy and curiosity from the reader, and architectural thinking from the creator: how to guide attention through space without the traditional devices of sequential narrative.

## AN EXAMPLE

*Inanimate Alice* by Kate Pullinger is a transmedia narrative in which the reader navigates episodes through choices, puzzles, and interactive elements. The author has designed all the paths; the reader decides which one to walk.

## WHAT THE READER DOES

The reader shapes which story they experience, but not the content of the story itself.

## AN EXAMPLE

*Intraducibles* (Mexico, CrossMedia Award 2022) celebrates words from dozens of indigenous languages that have no translation, extended into street art murals across Mexican cities and a web platform with audio recordings of native speakers. The reader does not follow a sequence – they encounter fragments distributed across physical and digital spaces: a mural on a wall, a QR code that activates a voice in a disappearing language, a website that maps words to places. The story assembles differently for each person who moves through it.

## WHAT THE READER DOES

The reader explores, navigates, discovers. Their path through the story world is unique.

# Co-creating

The most radical transformation. The reader is no longer just receiving, choosing, or exploring a story – they are helping to create it. Authorship is distributed, negotiated, or shared between the reader and an algorithmic system, or among multiple readers. The story does not fully exist until the reader participates in generating it.<sup>6</sup>

A child conversing with a story-generating AI – proposing ideas, making decisions, drawing illustrations – is co-authoring a narrative that emerges from the interaction. A group of young writers contributing to a shared story on a collaborative platform is building a collective narrative. A child constructing a world in a sandbox game is engaging in a form of narrative play that blurs the line between reading and authorship. Research on children's spontaneous narrative practices suggests that this kind of co-creation is not limited to purpose-built platforms. Young children regularly combine digital and non-digital resources in their everyday storytelling – moving between a tablet, a set of toys, a drawing, and a spoken narrative without the separations adults tend to impose.

The four-mode framework does not invent this fluidity – it recognises it.<sup>7</sup>

This mode raises the most pressing questions in the field. Who is the author of a story co-created with a machine? How should such stories be evaluated – by literary criteria, by the quality of the interaction, through multimodality, by the child's creative engagement? How are children's data protected in AI-driven storytelling platforms? The possibilities are significant; so are the responsibilities.

## AN EXAMPLE

*Atelier de création Fonfon* (Canada, CrossMedia Award 2023) gives children aged 4 to 12 the tools to build their own stories – selecting characters and visual elements from published picture books, writing text, recording their own voice, sharing the result. The story does not exist until the child makes it. A different kind of co-creation is *Frontiers for Young Minds* (Switzerland, CrossMedia Award 2025), where young readers aged 8 to 15 participate in the peer review of scientific articles – shaping published content through critical evaluation rather than creative production.

## WHAT THE READER DOES

The reader generates, contributes, co-authors. The possibilities are significant; so are the questions of quality, ethics, and ownership.

*No Imagination Allowed, BCBF 2026  
BolognaRagazzi CrossMedia Awards,  
"Special Mention"*



## A comparative view

Mode	What the reader does	Narrative structure	Typical formats	Key example
<b>Media-Enhanced Reading</b>	Receives through new sensory channels	Linear, authored	Webtoons, podcasts, enriched e-books, audiobooks	<i>Otthon</i> (CrossMedia Award 2023)
<b>Traversing</b>	Chooses paths within pre-designed structures	Branching, multi-linear	Interactive fiction, visual novels, branching apps	<i>Inanimate Alice</i> (Pullinger)
<b>Inhabiting</b>	Explores a story world spatially	Distributed in space	VR/AR narratives, location-based stories, exploratory games	<i>Intraducibles</i> (CrossMedia Award 2022)
<b>Co-Creating</b>	Generates or co-authors the story	Emergent, collaborative	AI co-creation tools, collaborative platforms, sandbox games	<i>Atelier Fonfon</i> (CrossMedia Award 2023)

The BCBF survey data, read through this framework, reveal a pattern. Publisher activity is overwhelmingly concentrated in the first mode – audiobooks, enriched e-books, narrative podcasts. These are formats that change the sensory channel through which a story reaches the reader, but not the reader's role within it. Traversing, Inhabiting, and Co-Creating remain almost entirely unexplored. The tendency to remain close to familiar formats reflects real constraints – they are easier to produce, closer to existing workflows, and more immediately sustainable. But the works recognised by the CrossMedia Awards show that narrative quality does not diminish as the reader's role deepens.

A child navigating a branching story is exercising literary judgement. A child exploring a narrative space is assembling meaning from fragments – the same interpretive work that a complex picture book demands. A child co-creating a story is not abandoning literature; they are practising it from the inside. These modes of engagement will continue to develop, with or without the involvement of children's publishing. If publishers and educators do not shape these spaces with attention to narrative quality, they will be shaped by other actors – with different priorities and less regard for the reader's experience. The framework makes this choice visible.

## CrossMedia Award matrix

The Observatory has tested this framework against one of the few sustained, jury-curated archives of crossmedia works for children: the *BolognaRagazzi CrossMedia Awards* (2021–2025). The matrix below maps winners and special mentions onto the four modes. The corpus is selective, not exhaustive – the award categories are themselves book-centred, and the full archive includes projects (such as the AR-

based Zoog, 2024) that fall outside the present working set. One recognised project, *I love English 5–8 year olds* (France, 2025), has been excluded from the matrix because its primarily educational and language-learning function places it outside the narrative focus of this framework. What the matrix offers is not a definitive measure of the field, but a map of concentration and scarcity.<sup>9</sup>

Title / Year	Media-Enhanced Reading	Traversing	Inhabiting	Co-Creating
<i>The Snail and the Whale</i> (UK, 2021)	●			
<i>Hilda and the Troll</i> (UK, 2021)	●			
<i>Tutto il Contrario</i> (Italy, 2021)	●	●		
<i>Les quatre nouvelles saisons d'en sortant de l'école</i> (France, 2022)	●			
<i>The Tiger Who Came to Tea</i> (UK, 2022)	●			
<i>Sulla sfortunata vita dei vermi</i> (Italy, 2022)	●			
<i>Un point c'est tout</i> (France, 2022)	●	●		
<i>Intraducibles</i> (Mexico, 2022)	●		●	●
<i>Otthon</i> (Hungary, 2023)	●			
<i>Atelier de création Fonfon</i> (Canada, 2023)				●
<i>El Deafo</i> (USA, 2023)	●			
<i>The Tree of Ecstasy and Unbearable Sadness</i> (Australia, 2023)	●			
<i>Culottées</i> (France, 2023)	●			
<i>1001 Languages</i> (Germany, 2023)	●			●
<i>Sam &amp; Julia</i> (Netherlands, 2024)	●		●	
<i>MakeMake Digital Library</i> (Colombia, 2024)	●			
<i>The Day I Became a Bird</i> (France, 2024)	●			
<i>The Imaginary</i> (UK, 2024)	●			
<i>The Paper Boat</i> (Canada, 2024)	●			
<i>Star Papa</i> (South Korea, 2025)			●	
<i>Yoto Player</i> (UK, 2025)	●			
<i>Nuestras resistencias</i> (Mexico, 2025)	●			
<i>Mihail Sebastian</i> (Germany, 2025)	●			
<i>Frontiers for Young Minds</i> (Switzerland, 2025)				●

● Primary or defining mode ● Significant secondary dimension

Source: Digital Narratives Observatory (2026). Working matrix based on project descriptions and jury motivations from the BolognaRagazzi CrossMedia Awards archives (Bologna Children's Book Fair / Mamamò, 2021–2025).

In the present corpus, 19 of 24 projects (79%) have Media-Enhanced Reading as their primary mode. Traversing appears as a primary mode in two cases – *Tutto il Contrario* and *Un point c'est tout* – both projects in which the reader's choices shape the route through the narrative. Co-Creating appears as a primary mode in three cases: *Atelier de création Fonfon*, *1001 Languages*, and *Frontiers for Young Minds*. Inhabiting appears as a primary mode in one case, *Star Papa*, and as a secondary dimension in *Intraducibles* and *Sam & Julia*. Sixteen projects

show no substantial presence in the Traversing, Inhabiting, or Co-Creating columns at all.

Read alongside the publisher survey, the convergence is clear: the field has developed relatively robust languages of audio, animation, and digital enhancement, while branching, inhabiting, and co-creative narrative remain comparatively rare in recognised practice. The empty cells in the matrix are not a limitation of the framework. They are the finding.

## Sixth edition with a radical break

The sixth edition of the award should be read less as a radical break than as an intensification of previously marginal tendencies. *Eu, Alfonsina* (Portugal) makes bodily movement the interface of narration: the visitor pedals a bicycle to advance the animated story of Alfonsina Strada. The body itself becomes the reading interface. *La maison des histoires* (France), developed by L'école des Loisirs, transforms literary encounter into a sensory, collective, and spatial environment – a space where stories are inhabited rather than simply received. *No Imagination Allowed* (South Korea) places children's drawings at the centre of a participatory process in which AI animates and extends their imaginative production into film and digital exhibition.

None of these cases, on its own, establishes a stable trend. Taken together, however, they make newly visible a widening perimeter of recognised practice: embodied interaction, spatial storytelling, and technologically mediated co-creation appear with greater clarity than in the earlier corpus. This widening should still be described cautiously. It does not cancel the dominance of Media-Enhanced Reading, and it remains to be seen whether such projects will migrate from museums, installations, and exceptional initiatives into ordinary publishing workflows.



Across six editions, the archive suggests four tendencies that recur with sufficient consistency to warrant mention – not as universal criteria, but as features the jury has repeatedly valued.

**Medium-specific coherence:** the new medium adds something meaningful while preserving the aesthetic or emotional logic of the source work.

**Purposeful multimodality:** sound, animation, or interface deepen comprehension, atmosphere, or access rather than merely decorate the experience.

**Structured participation:** where participation is recognised, it is recognised most strongly where children's contribution is consequential – they build, translate, review, or reshape the work.

**Inclusion and public cultural value:** multilingual access, cultural preservation, and the democratisation of knowledge are central to the symbolic weight of many recognised works.

These four modes are not a hierarchy – one is not superior to another. Nor are they mutually exclusive – many of the most interesting works operate across two or more modes simultaneously. What they offer is a shared vocabulary for distinguishing between fundamentally different transformations of the reader's experience. They are the vertical analysis that the field has been lacking: a way to stop talking about “digital narratives” as if they were a

single thing, and to begin understanding what each form actually does.<sup>8</sup>

The matrix reveals where recognised practice is already dense, where it remains thin, and where the boundaries of children's digital narrative are beginning to move. What these patterns look like when examined in a single, concrete case – and what questions they raise about authorship, participation, and the role of AI – is the subject of the next section.

## THE FOUR MODES OF DIGITAL NARRATIVE ENGAGEMENT

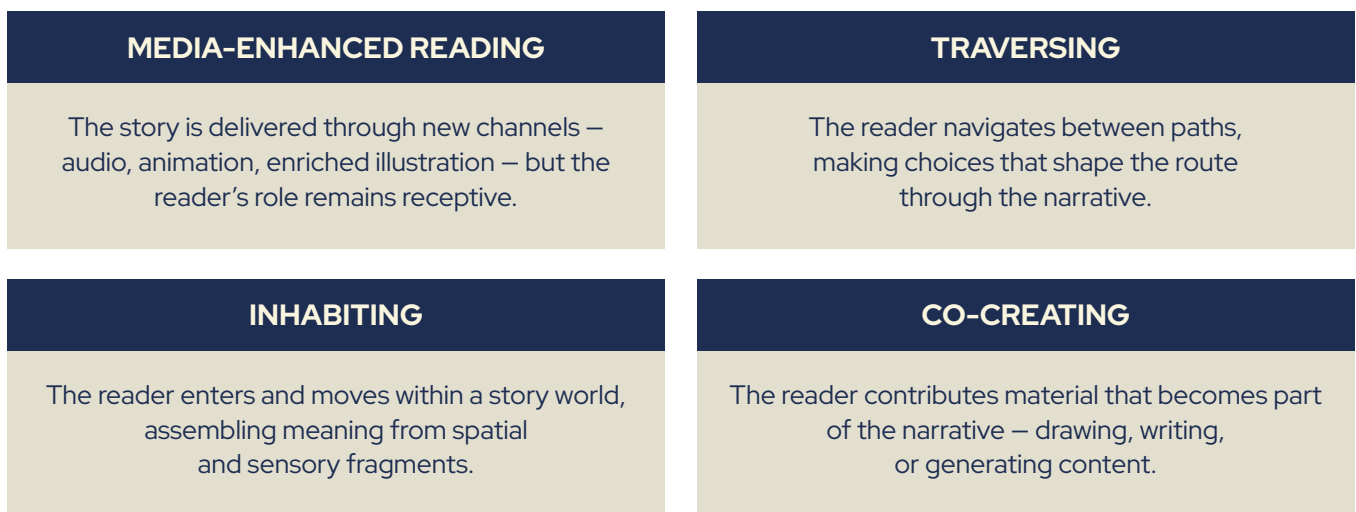


Figure: Four modes of digital narrative engagement. Source: Digital Narratives Observatory (2026).



1. The framework draws on the concept of *story-as-event*, developed in Mascia, T. & Rowsell, J. (2026), Introduction to *Scholé* (1/2026, forthcoming), adapting Burnett, C. & Merchant, G. (2020), *Undoing the Digital: Sociomaterialism and Literacy Education*, Routledge. If the story is an event – an encounter generated as people, technologies, spaces, and materials come into relation – then what matters most is not the technology that delivers it, but the nature of the encounter it makes possible.

2. Unsworth, L. (2006). *E-literature for Children: Enhancing Digital Literacy Learning*. Routledge.

3. Murray, J. (1997/2017). *Hamlet on the Holodeck: The Future of Narrative in Cyberspace* (updated ed.). MIT Press. The concept of agency – the “satisfying power to take meaningful action and see the results” – is central to understanding how interactivity transforms the reading experience.

4. The concept of narrative architecture, in which the author designs a world with story potential rather than a fixed plot, draws on Jenkins, H. (2004). *Game Design as Narrative Architecture*. In *First Person: New Media as Story, Performance, and Game* (eds. Wardrip-Fruin & Harrigan). MIT Press; and on theories of spatial storytelling developed in Nitsche, M. (2008). *Video Game Spaces: Image, Play, and Structure in 3D Worlds*. MIT Press.

5. Osborne, G. (2026, forthcoming). Children's Negotiation of Parasocial Relationships in Immersive Story Worlds. *Scholé*, 1/2026. The Storyhaven project, conducted with 30 children aged 10–11 in a UK primary school, explored children's parasocial relationships and embodied participation in immersive story worlds.

6. Aarseth, E. (1997). *Cybertext: Perspectives on Ergodic Literature*. Johns Hopkins University Press. The foundational distinction between texts that require non-trivial effort to be traversed and those that do not – a framework that underpins the analysis of all four modes.

7. Scott, F. (2026, forthcoming). Synthesised Storying: Young Children's Everyday Narratives in Postdigital Playscapes. *Scholé*, 1/2026. The concept of synthesised storying describes how children assemble narrative meaning across digital and non-digital resources in postdigital play environments.

8. The four-mode framework responds directly to the call for “vertical assessments” of digital experiences articulated in Kucirkova NI, Livingstone S and Radesky JS (2023) Faulty screen time measures hamper national policies: here is a way to address it. *Front. Psychol.* 14:1243396. doi: 10.3389/fpsyg.2023.1243396. See also Rettberg, S. (2019). *Electronic Literature*. Polity Press.

9. Digital Narratives Observatory (2026), Digital Narrative Matrix: BolognaRagazzi CrossMedia Awards 2021–2025. Working matrix based on project descriptions and jury motivations from the BolognaRagazzi CrossMedia Awards archives (Bologna Children's Book Fair / Mamamò, 2021–2025). The modal attributions were reviewed in consultation with Mamamò, curatorial partner of the award. The sixth edition (2026) is discussed separately here because its results became available during the final drafting of this report.

## 8. A case study: *No imagination allowed*

Among the projects recognised in 2026, one is especially revealing – not because it offers a model for the field, but because it makes visible, in a single case, tensions that digital narratives for children can no longer avoid.

*No Imagination Allowed* (Roi Books / Red Dog Culture House, South Korea) received a Special Mention in the BolognaRagazzi CrossMedia Awards 2026 (CrossMedia Projects). The jury describes it as a participatory project that places children at the centre of the story, treats boredom as a driver of imagination, and uses children's drawings as seeds for new worlds. Artificial intelligence, in the jury's formulation, functions as amplification rather than substitution – animating children's illustrations and translating them into film and digital exhibition.<sup>1</sup>

The project originated from a children's competition promoted through KT's Genie TV Kidsland platform, under the programme *Book Drawn Together 2*. Children between roughly three and twelve years old were invited to draw

an imaginary animal they would like to meet. The programme included workshops in multiple locations – among them Kyobo Book Centre, a rural elementary school in Hwacheon, and a children's hospital in Yangsan – reaching contexts well beyond the typical urban, well-resourced settings of digital innovation.<sup>2</sup>

The numbers give the process a concrete shape. Over 600 drawings were submitted. After professional review, 50 were selected and developed into an online exhibition using AI-based creative tools. A nationwide public vote then chose 20 characters to enter the picture book. Illustrator Lee Kyung-Guk gathered those 20 creatures and re-illustrated them into a single authored narrative, published by Roi Books on 5 May 2025 – Children's Day in Korea. The crossmedia extensions followed: an animated book produced with animation studio Red Dog Culture House and distributed on Genie TV, and an AI media-art series based on the 50 shortlisted works.<sup>3</sup>

*No Imagination Allowed*, BCBF 2026 BolognaRagazzi CrossMedia Awards, "Special Mention"



Rainbow Flower Elephant (Child Artist: Park Chaemin)



Figure: *No Imagination Allowed* – Production Pipeline. Source: Digital Narratives Observatory (2026), based on BCBF award documentation, KT press communications, and project materials.

What matters here is the structure of the process. A child draws a creature on paper. An illustrator absorbs that drawing into a printed book. AI-based tools transform selected drawings into animation and exhibition. Workshops invite other children into the same cycle of invention and response. The result is not a migration from page to screen. It is a loop – paper and screen, child and algorithm, hand-drawn image and animated movement feed back into each other continuously. The pattern resembles, in its structure, what happens when someone converses with a generative AI system: each turn reshapes the terms of the exchange. Here, though, the interlocutors include children, an illustrator, a publishing house, an animation studio, and a set of AI tools, and the medium shifts between paper, print, screen, and physical workshop space at every step.

In the framework proposed in the previous section, *No Imagination Allowed* belongs most clearly to Co-Creating. The children's contributions are not ornamental – without their drawings, the project would not exist in the form it takes. But the case also complicates the category. Children do not control the process. Their submissions are curated through professional review and public voting. Narrative coherence is established by an adult illustrator. The most radical transformation – turning a still drawing into a moving image – is performed by AI tools under conditions the children did not set. Participation is real, but it is shaped by editorial

and technological frames that children do not govern. The jury's phrase for this is co-creation. A more precise description might be distributed creativity, in which agency is genuine but asymmetric.

This is where the jury's formula – AI as amplification, not substitution – is both useful and incomplete. It is useful because it names an aspiration worth taking seriously: technology here is presented as extending what children imagine, not replacing it. But amplification is not neutral. To animate a child's drawing is to interpret it – to add movement, timing, atmosphere, and narrative context that the child



*No Imagination Allowed*, BCBF 2026, BolognaRagazzi CrossMedia Awards, "Special Mention"

did not choose. The still creature becomes a moving character in a scene someone else designed. The distance between the two is a creative act, and in this case it is performed by a system whose tools, models, and training data are not specified in any publicly available documentation.

That absence of specification is not, in itself, an accusation. It is a gap – and the gap matters because of who is involved. The drawings submitted by children became inputs for a published book, an animated series, a digital exhibition, and an AI media-art project – cultural and commercial products with audiences far beyond the original workshop. The public materials do not detail the terms of consent, the conditions of credit, or the protections in place for children's creative contributions. This is not unusual – most projects of this kind operate in a similar documentary silence. But the silence becomes significant precisely when the contributors are minors and when AI mediates the passage from workshop artefact to distributed cultural product.

International frameworks already offer reference points. UNICEF's guidance on AI and children's rights emphasises child-centred governance, meaningful participation, and transparency in data-driven systems. The UNESCO Recommendation on AI Ethics stresses accountability when AI operates in educational and cultural contexts. The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child establishes the child's right to be heard on matters that concern them and places the child's best interest at the centre of any process involving minors. None of these instruments settles the specific questions this project raises. But they indicate that the field –

children's digital narrative – is entering territory where aesthetic evaluation alone is no longer sufficient.<sup>4</sup>

*No Imagination Allowed* is not a cautionary tale. It is an interesting project that does something genuinely new with the relationship between children's creativity, an author's craft, and the technologies available to extend both. But it concentrates, in a single case, tensions the field will have to navigate: between amplification and appropriation, between participation and extraction, between creative possibility and the frameworks – legal, ethical, critical – that have not yet caught up. The traditional criteria of children's literature apply to the book. They apply only partially to the animation. They barely apply at all to the workshop process or the AI-mediated exhibition. The four recurring features identified in the previous section offer orientation, but they were derived from a corpus dominated by Media-Enhanced Reading. Whether they hold when authorship is distributed and the creative loop crosses between paper and screen at every turn is something the next editions of this award, and the next reports of this Observatory, will have to test.



1. BolognaRagazzi CrossMedia Awards 2026, CrossMedia Projects, Special Mention: *No Imagination Allowed*. Jury motivation and project description published on the Bologna Children's Book Fair official website.

2. KT Corporation, press communications on the "Book Drawn Together 2" programme (2024–2025). Workshop locations and participation details.

3. Project overview released in connection with the BCBF 2026 Special Mention; corroborated by Digital Today (Korea), reporting on publication date, Genie TV distribution, and AI media-art series.

4. UNICEF (2021). *Policy Guidance on AI for Children 2.0*. <https://www.unicef.org/innocenti/media/1341/file/UNICEF-Global-Insight-policy-guidance-AI-children-2.0-2021.pdf>; UNESCO (2021), *Recommendation on the Ethics of Artificial Intelligence*. <https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000381137>; *UN Convention on the Rights of the Child*, <https://www.unicef.org/child-rights-convention/convention-text>.

# 9. What this first report makes visible

What this first report makes visible is not simply the expansion of digital formats, but a change in the conditions of reading itself. As the survey suggests and as the case studies illustrate, digital narratives for children and young people are no longer a marginal topic for publishing, education, or library work. At the same time, they do not yet form a stable field with shared models, agreed criteria, or clear boundaries. The picture that emerges is therefore not one of simple replacement, but of transition: stories are now encountered across page, sound, screen, space, and interaction, while the professional languages used to describe these experiences are still being formed.

What changes most, in interpretive terms, is the reader's position. One of the report's central arguments is that "digital narrative" is not a useful category if it is treated as a single block. A podcast, a webtoon, an immersive installation, and an AI-

mediated co-creative project may all be digital, yet they invite different kinds of attention, agency, movement, and meaning-making. Research on how children respond to AI suggests that their engagement is not primarily technical but affective: curiosity, fascination, fear, and creative resistance appear simultaneously.<sup>1</sup> The framework proposed in this report helps make those differences visible by asking not only what medium is involved, but what kind of narrative encounter is being created. For publishers, authors, illustrators, teachers, and librarians, this changes the terms of evaluation. The key question is not whether technology has been added to a story, but what kind of reading experience the work makes possible?

How is the sector responding to this change? Mostly through forms that remain close to established editorial practice. As the survey suggests, experimentation is strongest where



continuity with the book is easiest to recognise, above all in audio and enriched digital books, while more participatory, immersive, and co-creative forms remain less consolidated. This matters because it moves the discussion beyond the false choice between print and digital. The emerging horizon is not substitution, but complementarity: the book remains central, yet increasingly within a wider narrative ecology in which stories may travel between print, sound, screen, and play. The important issue is no longer which medium will win, but what each medium can contribute to the life of a story.

What becomes harder, but also more important, is judgement. As the awards archive and the *No Imagination Allowed* case study both suggest, the deeper the reader's participation, the less adequate it becomes to evaluate a work only in terms of technical novelty or only in terms of traditional literary criteria. Questions of authorship, mediation, consent, access, and responsibility move closer to the centre of critical judgement, not outside it. This calls for greater precision.

In digital narratives for children, quality increasingly depends on how narrative design, reader experience, and conditions of participation hold together.

What remains open, then, is not whether digital narratives belong to children's reading cultures, but how the field will learn to interpret and evaluate them as their forms diversify. This report does not propose to settle those questions, and it does not need to. Its first contribution is to make the terrain more legible: to identify where practice is already dense, where it remains thin, and which distinctions are needed if the conversation is to move beyond enthusiasm and anxiety alike. The role of the Observatory, in future editions, is to continue that work of orientation: to connect research and professional practice, to refine shared criteria as new forms emerge, and to follow the field without pretending that it is already stable. The task ahead is not to choose between old and new languages of story, but to see more clearly what kinds of reading—and what kinds of readers—are now being formed across them.



1. Potter, J., Yamada-Rice, D., Dare, E., Love, S., Main, A. & Nash, R. (2026, forthcoming). 'My Imaginary Friend Worries About the Environment and the End of the World': 'AI Literacy' and Children's Affective Response to, and Evolving Knowledge of, AI. *Scholé*, 1/2026. Participatory arts-based research with over 250 children exploring affective and critical dimensions of AI literacy.

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