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Interview

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INTERVIEW

Where Comics and Cultural Heritage Meet: A Conversation with Damien Sueur and Yannis Koikas on BDnF: The Comics Factory

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The Bibliothèque nationale de France (BnF; French National Library) recently launched a free comics creation desktop and mobile application, "BDnF". Designed and produced by the BnF, BDnF is a digital creation tool for making comics and other multimedia stories, mixing illustration and text. BDnF allows users to engage creatively in specific aspects of comics (narrative construction, temporality, space, text/drawing/synergy, etc.). A key feature of the application is its integration of a wide variety of educational and iconographic resources, and in particular of the digital collections of the BnF. Initially launched in French, the English language option was launched in May 2020. This article introduces the application to an English-speaking audience through a conversation with Damien Sueur, Digital Production Manager at the Digital Publishing Department, and Yannis Koikas, Head of the Digital Publishing Department at the Bibliothèque nationale de France.

Introduction

The Bibliothèque nationale de France (BnF; French National Library) recently launched a free comics creation desktop and mobile application, "BDnF" (BnF 2020a). Designed and produced by the BnF, BDnF is a digital creation tool for making comics and other multimedia stories, mixing illustration and text. Initially launched in French, the English language option was launched in May 2020. BDnF allows users to engage creatively in specific aspects of comics (narrative construction, temporality,

space, text/drawing/synergy, etc.). A key feature of the application is its integration of a wide variety of educational and iconographic resources [see https://bdnf.bnf.fr/EN/educational_resources.html], and in particular of the digital collections of the BnF. We were interested in documenting the perspectives from two key figures behind the development of the app. This article introduces the application to an English-speaking audience through a conversation with Damien Sueur, Digital Production Manager at the Digital Publishing Department, and Yannis Koikas, Head of the Digital Publishing Department at the Bibliothèque nationale de France. We hope that by documenting the app's developers' views on their own work not only do we contribute to fostering wider awareness of the BDnF amongst the journal's readers, but also provide insights into the processes behind it, which may inspire international collaborations and further work with similar and or complementary methods and akin domains.

Methods

This interview is an output from a component of a larger study employing mixed methods (Creswell 2018) with a focus on empirical, qualitative, user-centred design methods (Blandford, Furniss and Makri 2016). This article documents an interview which is the result of a series of joint unstructured and semi-structured conversations conducted between the authors and Damien Sueur and Yannis Koikas via remote means between the 28th of April and 24th of June 2020. Various exchanges took place first on the 28th of April 2020 via Twitter Direct Messaging, then over email (starting on the 7th of May 2020) followed by a videoconference call that took the form of a four-way semi-structured interview (on the 2nd of June 2020).

During and after the videoconferencing call the interviewees gave verbal and written consent to be interviewed in written form for a future publication and the group agreed to conduct a semi-structured interview over a cloud-based shared word processing document. The authors and the interviewees worked together, both synchronously and asynchronously, on the written exchange presented below between the 2nd of June 2020 and the 24th of June 2020, adding questions and answers as required. The authors annotated the initial questions and responses including

references and copyedited the text. The interviewees contributed complementary final edits, and approved of the final version of the document for publication. The figures in this article have been included with permission.

The Conversation

Ernesto Priego (EP) *Thank you for consenting to this remote interview, Damien and Yannis. Could you please introduce yourselves and the role you played in BDnF: The Comics Factory (BnF 2020a; Figure 1)?*

Damien Sueur (DS) I have been working internationally in the audiovisual/digital world for ten years wearing different hats: photographer-videographer, editorial manager, production director. Over the years, I have become increasingly focused on developing projects for institutions or brands that wish to communicate about important social topics or issues. I particularly like working on projects with a strong educational dimension and dealing with cultural or scientific awareness. I was contracted by Yannis to be the digital production manager on this project, and my role has been to define the concept into details, write the specifications, coordinate the working group — teachers and their pupils, programmers and comics experts — and
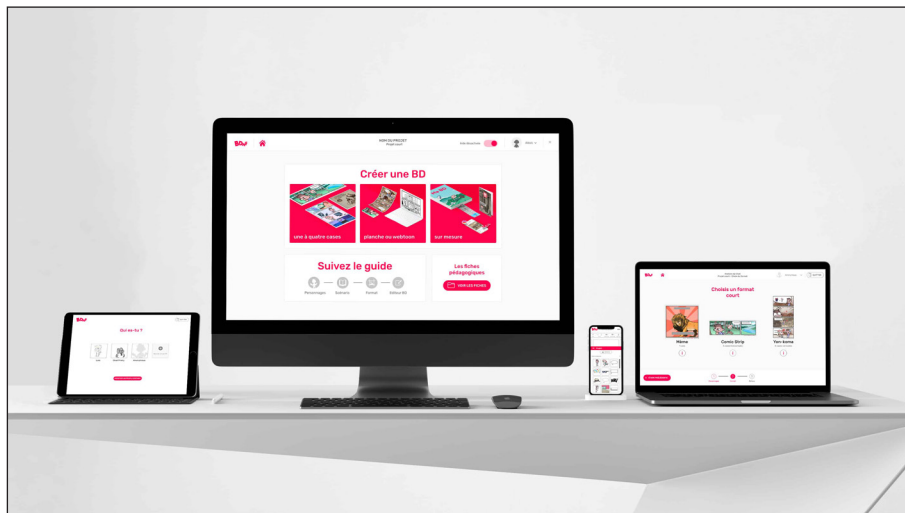

Figure 1: Promotional image for BDnF: The Comics Factory (BnF 2020a).© Bibliothèque nationale de France.

organize the production phase together with the company's staff that won the public procurement, Actimage [https://www.actimage.com/fr/]. I have had the pleasure to be assisted by Pierre-Emmanuel Jouanneau but also to get regular feedback from my other colleagues of the BnF's Digital Publishing Department (Éditions Multimédias), especially from Nathalie Ryser and Yannis Koikas who first thought out this project. Benjamin Arranger, head of the Publishing Department, was also of a great help to shape what BDnF has become. Above all, I can't thank enough teachers Noémie Martin and Clara Rabier who accompanied us all the way defining the concept, testing it with their students, who provided feedback. They were real driving forces behind the app and the educational resources that go with it (BnF 2020b).

Yannis Koikas (YK) For more than 20 years now I have worked in the cultural sector: first, in the field of publishing, then at the Institut du monde arabe (Institute of the Arab World) where I worked on mounting temporary exhibitions and redesigning the museum. After 8 years working in curation, I decided to devote myself more specifically to the field of digital and audiovisual mediation in museums. In the early 2000s, we launched the first webdocs and cultural sites and applications. The world of museums was in the midst of a period of change and innovation aimed at the general public! There I finally created the Digital and Audiovisual Media Department [see   https://www.imarabe.org/en/ressources/webdocs-sites-et-applications].   We created then the Institute's first audiovisual portal, which today offers nearly 1,000 videos; we launched the IMA's social networks (Facebook, Twitter, YouTube) and we published the institution's new website. At the same time, we set up partnerships with Arte [see https://www.arte.tv/] and Le Fresnoy design school [see https://www. lefresnoy.net/]. A nice time for digital creation!

I have now run the BnF's Digital Publishing Department for three years, with the objective of making resources available to the widest audience – we currently manage 101 cultural websites and lead three thematic portals – and digital tools – such as BDnF or the Fabricabrac app ((BnF 2017) – for re-appropriating works and collections from the BnF, and beyond culture and heritage in the broader sense. I am particularly proud of our latest productions: BDnF: The Comics Factory of course,

which we will discuss in a moment, but also the website and video game "Fantasy, a once and future genre" which will be available in English from September 2020 [see the French version at https://fantasy.bnf.fr/].

(EP) *It is very interesting to learn about what you were and have been working on previously and simultaneously to BDnF. (It is often valuable context we may miss when we are merely users of a resource or app). Could you give us some more background to the BDnF project?*

(DS) BDnF was developed in response to a call for innovative projects launched by the French Ministry of Education. The BDnF app is the result of close collaboration between the BnF's teams and classroom teachers, in order to meet their needs as fully as possible. The project was designed and tested at every stage by a focus group of both primary and secondary-school teachers who used the app in real classroom conditions and gave us their feedback, making the app uniquely suitable for classroom use.

Beyond the classroom, BDnF can be used by anyone regardless of age, whole families or individual comics fans, just for fun. There is plenty in it for budding comics creators too, because the creation tools make it easy to compose innovative formats.

At first, Yannis and one of our dear colleagues, Nathalie Ryser, shaped the first contours of this project and submitted an application to the call for innovative projects launched by the French Ministry of Education. A few months later, they won this call and that allowed Yannis to contract me as a digital manager on this project.

Previous to working for the BnF, I was working as a freelancer in London. Among my latest projects is the production of a documentary web series called *One Dollar* (Bophana Center 2020). Together with Oscar-nominated filmmaker, Rithy Panh [see Brzeski 2014] we developed an international multimedia project shedding light on the lives of people living on one dollar a day in Cambodia.

(YK) For many years, the Digital Publishing Department has been offering editorial cultural resources for the general public, and tools for playing and having fun with the heritage works curated in our collections. After having offered enriched books

to the general public, or image mediation, such as the BnF Album application, we wanted to keep up facilitating access to culture for young audiences.

Fabricabrac was the first project, released in 2017, to remix the works of the BnF in a fun way. Children are invited to compose their own poster by using old alphabets of the 19th century, to create imaginary worlds, from collections of maps and plans, or to give birth to fabulous creatures thanks to medieval imagery (BnF 2017; **Figure 2**).

When we thought about a new project with our partner, the French Ministry of Education, we took into account the democratization of social networks, especially for young people, who value and promote short formats and images, and their deep interests in sharing and commenting.

What could be better for the BnF, which will welcome in its future museum — at Richelieu's site — the largest collection of comics in Europe, around 8000 titles, than to offer young audiences a tool for creating stories in images, in comics? Beyond the creative tool we wanted to provide the keys for understanding the art of comics: how to design a panel? How to structure a visual narration on a book and on a digital

Figure 2: Promotional image for the *Fabricabrac app* (BnF 2017). © Bibliothèque nationale de France.

screen? These questions were the basis of our project. [On the Richelieu site, see https://www.bnf.fr/en/richelieu].

(EP) *In your own words, how would you explain what BDnF is, what it does and what you want it to achieve?*

(DS) BDnF is a tool to create comics, graphic novels, storyboards, any kind of narrative combining images and texts. It's perfect for kids who are learning the principles of storytelling. Its greatest asset is that it provides access to a wealth of extremely varied resources, allowing creators to switch back and forth between discovering archive materials and creating their own unique narratives. It's a virtual tool but we tried to build as many bridges as possible between the 'virtual' and the 'real' world. You can import your drawings and integrate them in your stories; create hybrid projects by mixing your own drawings or pictures with elements from the BnF's digital library Gallica. You can start a story on the app and finish it on paper. We didn't want to imprison users inside a digital tool but to leave the doors open and bring a physical resonance to it.

(YK) I think Damien has described BDnF perfectly. In the three years that followed the start of the project he's very much become our own specialist on comics and visual narration. Coming from the audiovisual sector, he brought his experience and knowledge of visual storytelling to the project. He's the BnF's own Scott McCloud! (1994; 2000; 2006).

(EP) *When it was first released, BDnF was logically available in French. Literally while we were initiating conversations that would lead to this interview the English version was released. Given the current political climate I found that a very kind, generous development. Why was it important to you that the app was also available in English?*

(DS) I studied International Relations and I lived many years abroad. I guess it's in my DNA to never think of projects having borders. I think Yannis is the same, this beautiful ability to broaden things and perspectives might come from his Greek blood [*laughter*].

We are grateful to our friends and partners at the French Institute who made the app known outside of France thanks to their powerful global networks. [The French Institute of the UK is at https://www.institut-francais.org.uk/].

And we have recently agreed we will translate the app into Spanish too. Hopefully we will keep up on adding more languages in the years to come. If any of your international readers would like to contribute to translating the app into their own languages, we would gladly welcome more people on board.

(YK) For sure, Damien is right! Since my arrival at the BnF, we have been trying to open up internationally, towards the English-speaking and Spanish-speaking world. And we are currently in talks with our Japanese partners for a possible translation into Japanese.

Damien's perfect knowledge of English and Spanish also allowed us to offer webinars to spread the app to the four corners of the globe. To date, competitions have flourished in Canada, Malaysia, India, Brazil and soon in Greece. And we want to continue to distribute the application and its educational learning components as widely as possible!

(EP) *Could you share with us some examples of comics created with the app, and discuss why you have chosen them?*

(DS) Of course! A few pilot projects are presented in the Gallery, https://bdnf.bnf. fr/EN/gallery.html and we will soon add a selection of projects made in an educational environment. One of my favourites is "Battling Siki contre Georges Carpentier", a 16-page historical comic (**Figures 3** and **4**) by Raphaël Meyssan. It tells a powerful story about racism that sadly still resonates at present time. It was made reusing resources from Gallica, the digital library of the French National Library [https://gallica.bnf.fr/].

(YK) We asked three authors to create these pilot projects. Raphael Meyssan in the historical category as Damien has just mentioned, but also both Un Faux Graphiste (**Figure 5**) and Adrien Martin (**Figure 6**) whose work is fundamentally different. We wanted them both to promote the application, showing three different examples of use and formats, but above all to show the public who love comics that this tool is intended to facilitate the creation of new stories in images.

Figures 3 and 4: Pages 1 and 2 of "Battling Siki contre Georges Carpentier", a 16-page comic by Raphaël Meyssan created using the BDnF application developed by the French National Library, reusing resources available via Gallica, the digital library of the French National Library. © Raphaël Meyssan.

Figure 5: "Dérives du cosplay", by Un Faux Graphiste, created using the BDnF application developed by the French National Library. © Un Faux Graphiste.

Figure 6: Two panels from an untitled 25-panel comic by Adrien Martin (2020) created using the BDnF application developed by the French National Library. © Adrien Martin.

This also allows us to clarify two important points: on the one hand that there is no need to know how to draw to use BDnF, on the other hand, that being an illustrator is a profession that implies a know-how. An application can make it possible to initiate the public into the art of comics but it will never replace the work of artists, budding or confirmed!

(EP) *These are very interesting examples. As someone who has experimented into reusing cultural heritage items from online digital collections to create comics (see for example Priego 2019a; 2019b; 2020), I find the possibility of embedding items from the BnF/Gallica into new comics or comics-like work via your app truly inspiring and empowering. Could you tell us about the copyright implications?*

(DS) It's a very interesting question that our law experts tackle through points 7.1 and 7.2 of the app's Terms and Conditions [see https://bdnf.bnf.fr/EN/terms_and_ conditions.html] Most of the collection items in Gallica are in the public domain but users need to check the copyright related to the work(s) they want to use.

Reusing contents from the Gallica site is regulated by the conditions of use of Gallica contents, accessible at the following address: http://gallica.bnf.fr/html/und/ conditions-dutilisation-des-contenus-de-gallica. Users must respect those conditions of use in the stories they create.

(YK) The BnF offers thanks to Gallica, its online digital library, nearly 7 million works of cultural heritage preserved in its collections. The vast majority of these works are free of copyright, and internet users are free to use or appropriate them as they see fit. However, we also keep works whose rights are not yet in the public domain or are linked to rights imposed by the rights holders. Each work thus has a file presenting precisely the use cases.

(EP) *I think it's great how the app and the act of making comics can also fulfil the function of educating users on questions of licensing and copyright when reusing digital collections available online. In that sense, Stuart and I have been in talks with you about using BDnF for comics co-design workshops here in London. You have worked very hard organising and leading your own workshops. Could you please describe what your workshops were like, the methods you followed, how many and what type of participants you workshopped with?*

(DS) We released the app at the last Angoulême International Comics Festival, on the 30th of January 2020 [see https://www.bdangouleme.com]. Back in December 2019, when we first showed the beta version of the app to the festival's staff, they were really enthusiastic and asked us to organize two workshops per day in the framework of the festival: one for schools and another one for a broader audience. We adapted both workshops depending on the age and the level of knowledge of the group. Groups were composed of a maximum of 25 people using the desktop version of the app.

As BDnF is a project intended for educational purposes; it's important to note that it was first designed for a full and optimal experience on desktop computers (Windows, Mac and soon Linux), then adapted for tablets (iOS and Android). We later developed a light version for mobile phones (iOS and Android).

Usually, we would start by a short introduction of the project and then a quick presentation of the different creation paths available. Most of the participants in the school workshops were aged between eight and thirteen, so we focused on the creation of comic strips because many of them had just learnt at school the three-act narrative structure. They were invited to build a narrative where the first panel represents the setting, the second one, the confrontation, and the third one, the resolution. Once they had done this, they were completely free to try another format. What was interesting to notice is that most of the older participants (13+) quickly wanted to jump to their smartphones and use the light version to add comics elements to their own pictures and share them with their friends.

As for the workshops opened to the general public, they were very heterogeneous and in a way this was our first surprise. I remember having in the same group parents with their two kids, a budding illustrator teenage girl, a grandfather interested in telling stories in comics to his grandchildren, and a mid-life coach who wanted to illustrate stories through comics. With them, we tried to have a one-to-one approach in order to better respond to their specific needs. It was also an audience we were less familiar with since the project hadn't been designed for them initially so we were very excited and interested in their feedback.

Both of the workshops demonstrated that the app is very user-friendly, people were quickly able to get started with little or no support. What they taught us is that there's a much wider audience for the tool beyond the primary and secondary-school spectrum; exciting!

(YK) On the one hand, the Digital Publishing Department offers digital projects through temporary exhibitions at the François Mitterrand site and soon *in situ* in the future museum in Richelieu. On the other hand, we do it via online resources on the open web. However, we are deeply convinced of the importance of human mediation to bring meaning, emotion and exchange. This additional "soul" seems essential: Damien and Pierre Emmanuel organized dozens of workshops, sometimes

also with teachers, and this allowed us to test the application of course, but also to improve the functionality of the tool, and finally to offer a tool as close as possible to the expectations and needs of these users.

(EP) *What are the next steps for BDnF?*

(DS) After four months of its initial release, we reached the milestone of 125,000 downloads and 300,000 visits on the website. We feel extremely grateful to see the community of users growing. Next autumn, thanks to the feedback we have received, we will release a new version of the app with improvements and new features. We will also start providing new image banks related to the school curriculum (for example The Middle Ages, Greek Myths, etc). The app will also be available on Linux this summer.

And in the future, we can dream of having a web version available, improve the mobile app (which is now a light version) and hopefully provide the ability to work on interactive open formats.

In France, we have several cultural institutions (museums, libraries) using BDnF to organize contests and promote their own collections. It would be fantastic if we could also build partnerships worldwide and have international cultural institutions joining the projects.

(YK) We are now very proud of the reception our comic book application has had from the general public and from schools. The application has been promoted by the Ministry of Culture, the Ministry of National Education but also by thousands of users, young budding comics creators. We now want to make the application available worldwide, first via the English version; soon we'll also release the Spanish version as well. And of course we now wish to improve the functionality of the tool, thanks to our community of fans, to multiply the contests, and why not, be able to offer a premium version in the future which allows to enhance digital comics, like what can be seen in Asia with the significant development of native digital comics.

(EP). *Thank you Damien and Yannis! We look forward to continue testing BDnF and to use it in our own comics co-design workshops. Looking forward to what's yet to come. À* **suivre...**

Competing Interests

The authors declare that they have no competing interests. The corresponding author is editor-in-chief of *The Comics Grid: Journal of Comics Scholarship*. At the time of writing, Stuart Scott was leading an independent pro-bono expert review of the BDnF app at City Interaction Lab with a team of volunteer graduate students from the pro-gramme of Human Computer Interaction Design, at City, University of London. The editorial processes of this submission were managed by another editor and complied with the guidelines on ethical editing and research established by the Committee on Publishing Ethics (COPE) and the UK Research Integrity Office (UKRIO).

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