The making of Bibblix – a library e-book app for children

Salomon Hellman
Stockholm Public Library, Stockholm, Sweden.
salomon.hellman@stockholm.se

Abstract:

When the use of e-books got popular at Swedish libraries, we felt that our way of displaying them in our regular web catalogue wasn't suitable for all our users. While working satisfactory with adult users it was badly customized for young users. We thought of various possible solutions to this problem and after consulting children we eventually decided to construct a customized e-book app for them. The app was first launched in 2016, with continuous improvements during the years following.

The app works on tablets and mobile phones and is exclusively for children 6-12 years. It's NOT for their parents or teachers or other adults. It's intended to feel like a friend for the child who uses it, and not be a tool for adults to select or control what the child is reading. Books are classified into categories like Fantasy, Mysteries, Friendship, Animals and Sports. Both categories and their symbols have been selected together with children, to avoid adult perspective taking over. A special target group we have had in mind is children who have ended up after in the literacy process. When browsing the app they can find the books that their friends who are more advanced readers are reading, and get recommendations of books on the same topic that are "easier".

By launching the Bibblix app we now have a unique and customized tool for children to use to find and read e-books. Also, the lending of e-books for children has increased significantly!

Keywords: E-books ; Reading apps ; Children's reading ; Digital tools

Background

When the use of e-books got popular at Swedish libraries, we started to feel that our way of displaying them in our regular web catalogue wasn't suitable for all our users. While working satisfactory with adult users we realized it was badly customized for young users. Something needed to be done to help children find their way to our e-books.

At the very start we did not know an app was what we should do, but through interviews with children – both readers and non-readers – we soon found out that was the way to go. Consulting children has been essential during the whole process of creating a tool both children and librarians can embrace. Before releasing the app approximately 200 kids were engaged for user tests in order for us to improve the app functionality and to ensure that the content is relevant for them.

The creation of the app has been conducted as a collaboration between the public libraries in three different cities in Sweden: Stockholm, Malmö and Katrineholm. While the first two are responsible for construction and ongoing operation the third one functions as a test library in our quest to give all public libraries in Sweden access to the app. To this day more than one hundred libraries have shown interest in joining the project. More about that further on.

The app

The app was first launched in 2016, with continuous improvements during the years following. The app works on tablets and mobile phones and is exclusively for children 6-12 years. Important, the app is NOT for their parents, teachers or other adults. It's intended to feel like a friend for the child who uses it, and not be a tool for adults to select or control what the child is reading. This has been an important principle throughout the process with the aim of keeping the focus on children and their needs.

Books are classified into categories like Fantasy, Mysteries, Friendship, Animals and Sports. Both categories and their symbols have been selected together with children, to avoid adult perspective taking over. A special target group we have had in mind is children who have ended up after in the literacy process. When browsing the app they can find the books that their friends who are more advanced readers are reading, and get recommendations of books on the same topic that are "easier". On the other hand, if they find a certain book too easy, they can also get recommendations on books that are more challenging.

The description texts attached to the books are written by librarians and should always be in the same style and level as the text in the book itself, in order to give the user a sample of the book. While description texts printed on children's books often have texts written for adults, the texts here aim right at the child user.

The daily work for us librarians is to ensure that new books keep popping up in the app regularly, so that the app always feels alive. We also put together lists with book tips on certain topics that hasn't got their own category, for instance Democracy, LGBT, Summer holidays. By doing so the content is always changing and we get the chance to highlight current events, changing seasons, and so on.

Results

We are very happy with what we have achieved with the app. We now have a unique and customized tool for children to use and we have increased the lending of e-books to children significantly. Collaborating with other municipalities on a task like this is very rewarding and by doing so I think we have laid the foundation to make the app a national concern in the near future.

Most important, the result would not be as good if we hadn't involved children in the process. That is the key to creating tools that they actually want and can manage to use.

Challenges

Letting libraries in other cities take part in the project and using the app has proven to be more difficult than we thought. This is partly due to Swedish laws regulating how different municipalities may cooperate. For instance, it's not allowed for one municipality to sell its services to another. Therefore, the app must be managed by another player in order to allow other municipalities to join. At the time of writing, such a solution seems to be on its way.

In our quest to create an app that children can use without the involvement of an adult, an annoying detail has been that the user needs an Adobe ID to read e-books with copy protection. To get an Adobe ID you must be at least 13 years old. To solve this problem we are now building our own integrated e-book reader in order to avoid unnecessary hassle for the user. We sure don't want to lose potential readers due to technical barriers!

In Stockholm we noticed that the app was well received in the central – wealthier – parts of the city, while it wasn't used as much in suburban areas. We have therefore made special efforts to market the app in suburban areas with happenings, author visits and competitions where children get the chance to win a tablet.

References
http://bibblix.se/