

## **Bridging the gutter: Hybrid storytelling for digital readers**

Dr Caroline Campbell

### **Abstract**

The topic of this practice-led paper is a recently completed multimedia design work inspired by my interests in storytelling for young adult readers and graphic narrative for mobile platforms. I reflect on my creative journey as an author-illustrator in creating and producing a hybrid text created in response to the arrival and docking of the Sea Shepherd's flagship, the *Steve Irwin*, in Wellington Harbour in 2010, and for which I have coined the term the screened book. I explain how the steps taken in conceptualising and designing this text involved traversing the traditional spatial format and domain of print comic books and graphic novels to production for the sensory and multimodal domain of mobile media. Through case study analysis of the self-authored sequential art and ambient soundscapes created under direction by digital technician and musician Luiz dos Santos, I examine the theory that the screened book created for young adult audiences offers sole and group readers an alternative experience to immersion in the printed book. I discuss how the visual and auditory narratives created for *Josie and Whales* bridge the gap, the domain interstice that allegedly exists between the tangible materiality of the picture book, comic book or graphic novel on the one hand, and the intangible materiality of digital text on the other. My lens for this self-reflexive unpacking is broad. In addition to encompassing Walter Benjamin's critical reflection on authorship and production, it encompasses the scholarly interest in the nexus between haptics, reading and hypertext fiction, consciousness and graphic narrative, and mobile media's agency in influencing contemporary authorial perspectives. In proposing the screened book as the seminal summation of this inquiry, I argue that the artifact is evocative of the notion of narrative experientiality and an educational tool in service of powerful ideas such as conservation, species preservation, the greening of place and coming of age.

**Keywords:** Screened book, hybrid text, haptic theory, narrative experientiality

## Introduction



Figure 1. Josie and the Whales: Cover

Norwegian literary professor Anne Mangen notes that reading is a “multi-sensory activity, entailing perceptual, cognitive and motor interactions with whatever is being read. With digital technology, reading manifests itself as being extensively multi-sensory – both in more explicit and more complex ways than ever before” (Mangen, 2008, p. 404). Mangen’s critical assessment of the sensory connectedness associated with the act of reading, and the materiality and technology of the artefact being read, primarily concerns the digital mediation of literary texts. It is, nevertheless, one of the many strands shaping my current practice-led inquiry into graphic narrative and mobile storytelling for young adult readers.<sup>1</sup> As a commissioned illustrator for children’s educational publication, and researcher into print culture, I have long

been interested in the performative role of the illustrated text and how the media, formats and materials selected as vehicles for the author’s word serve as prompts for the reader’s interaction, engagement and understanding of the text. Latterly, I have become interested in the challenges to that practice and to the medium, the printed book, as a result of the innovative developments in digital and mobile technologies and uptake in e-products in schools and at home. I have become intrigued by the storytelling possibilities afforded by this new technology and the potential for the author-illustrator to explore producing self-authored works that bridge the gap between print, sequential art for comic book design and film animation for mobile devices. This paper explores how graphic narrative for print media can be combined with digital technology and ambient sound so as to provide young readers with a reading experience alternative to immersion in the printed text. In it, I will reflect on my creative practitioner journey in creating a hybrid text for which I have coined the term the screened book and which is now published online (<https://itunes.apple.com/us/book/josie-and-the-whales/id977905931?ls=1&mt=11>) (see Figure 1). I explain how creating this self-authored artifact involved a series of innovative, critical steps: witnessing a key event; conceiving and designing an environmentally informed graphic narrative based on that event for print mediation

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<sup>1</sup> Graphic narrative is located within visual narrative and is defined by the linear techniques and drawing tools, and reproductive processes used in creating sequential art for the genres comic book and graphic novel. It also conforms to Andre Gaudreault’s notion of showing, or monstration.

and, significantly for the focus of this journal, adapting the narrative for the sensory and multimodal domain of mobile media, in this case the digital tablet.

## **Conceiving a tale of species preservation via creative practice**

The catalyst for this environmentally informed project was the arrival and docking of the Sea Shepherd Conservation Society's flagship, the *Steve Irwin*, in Wellington Harbour in the summer of 2010 (see Figure 2). Founded in 1977, the society is dedicated to green activism and protection of the world's oceans, environments and ecosystems, such as the Southern Ocean encircling Antarctica, from commercial exploitation. The arrival of the *Steve Irwin*, and associated mainstream and online reports of eco-warrior and Japanese whalers' activities and conflicts in this ocean, prompted me to reflect on the popular cultural mediation of Antarctica and how the contentious issue of southern hemisphere whaling could be visualised so as to appeal to both local and international young adult audiences ([www.stuff.co.nz](http://www.stuff.co.nz), [www.abc.net.au](http://www.abc.net.au)). Prior to this event, my design conceptualisation had loosely centred on visualising the southern-most continent based on my cultural unpacking of dominant literary tropes, adventure, discovery and exploration, and gendered types in early science fiction, early twentieth century popular culture and early twenty-first century adventure fiction for young adult readers (D'Ath, 2008; Evans, 1998; Gordon, 1901-2; McCaughrean, 2005; Mulvaney, 2003; Pearson, 1895-6; Russell, 1897-8; Verne 1975 [1899]). The historical and contemporary reading of heroic adventure on the ice proved thematically rich but revealed that women and girls rarely featured in either image or text and were rarely assigned agency. To exploit this gap in narrative and gender representation, I decided to create a New Zealand-based, enviro-fantasy comic book containing elements of magical realism for young adult readers. This genre contextualisation was underpinned by a desire to situate my author-illustrator project within graphic art tradition and was in turn informed by Walter Benjamin's essay on authorship and production as well as his writings on the illustrated press (Benjamin, 1970 [1934]). Core to determining the project medium and format was Benjamin's insightful appraisal of the composite, multi-panelled images produced by nineteenth century graphic artists for the illustrated press. For Benjamin, such images were radical in offering their audiences a reading experience counter to the Western linearity and typographic hierarchy of the mass-produced word. Instead of commencing at the top left corner of the printed page, readers of these illustrated pages could begin their reading in the middle, top or bottom of the page, or according to the prompts implicit in the graphic artist's design and arrangement of key and supporting elements (Curtis, 2002). Notionally



Figure 2. The *Steve Irwin*

of dominant literary tropes, adventure, discovery and exploration, and gendered types in early science fiction, early twentieth century popular culture and early twenty-first century adventure fiction for young adult readers (D'Ath, 2008; Evans, 1998; Gordon, 1901-2; McCaughrean, 2005; Mulvaney, 2003; Pearson, 1895-6; Russell, 1897-8; Verne 1975 [1899]). The historical and contemporary reading of heroic adventure on the ice proved thematically rich but revealed that women and girls rarely featured in either image or text and were rarely assigned agency. To exploit this gap in narrative and gender representation, I decided to create a New Zealand-based, enviro-fantasy comic book containing elements of magical realism for young adult readers. This genre contextualisation was underpinned by a desire to situate my author-illustrator project within graphic art tradition and was in turn informed by Walter Benjamin's essay on authorship and production as well as his writings on the illustrated press (Benjamin, 1970 [1934]). Core to determining the project medium and format was Benjamin's insightful appraisal of the composite, multi-panelled images produced by nineteenth century graphic artists for the illustrated press. For Benjamin, such images were radical in offering their audiences a reading experience counter to the Western linearity and typographic hierarchy of the mass-produced word. Instead of commencing at the top left corner of the printed page, readers of these illustrated pages could begin their reading in the middle, top or bottom of the page, or according to the prompts implicit in the graphic artist's design and arrangement of key and supporting elements (Curtis, 2002). Notionally

similar to the hypertext displayed on today's computer screens and portable reading devices, they could scan their iconography and typographic content for visual cues to their cultural significance and explicit and implicit meaning. Thus, while the arrival and docking of the *Steve Irwin* and inquiry into Antarctic literature were instrumental in shaping the genre, plot and thematic content of *Josie and the Whales*, Benjamin's musings were significant in influencing its initial look and feel. Satisfied with the conceptualisation, I nevertheless started to question its efficacy in conveying geo-political power relations and the tensions associated with the Southern Ocean whaling industry and eco-protection. After further inquiring into David Lewis's (2010) critical assessment of comic book narrative theory and the privileging of the verbal norm in graphic narratology, I revised the locally situated enviro-fantasy to visually and spatially conform to the convention of *bande dessinée* (a French term meaning drawn strips) strip narrative and sequential art. The resulting narrative, a nonviolent anti-whaling tale featuring a young female protagonist with special powers and her familiar, a pet kune kune pig, was thus reconceived to capture the visual language of this graphic spatio-temporality (see Figure 3).

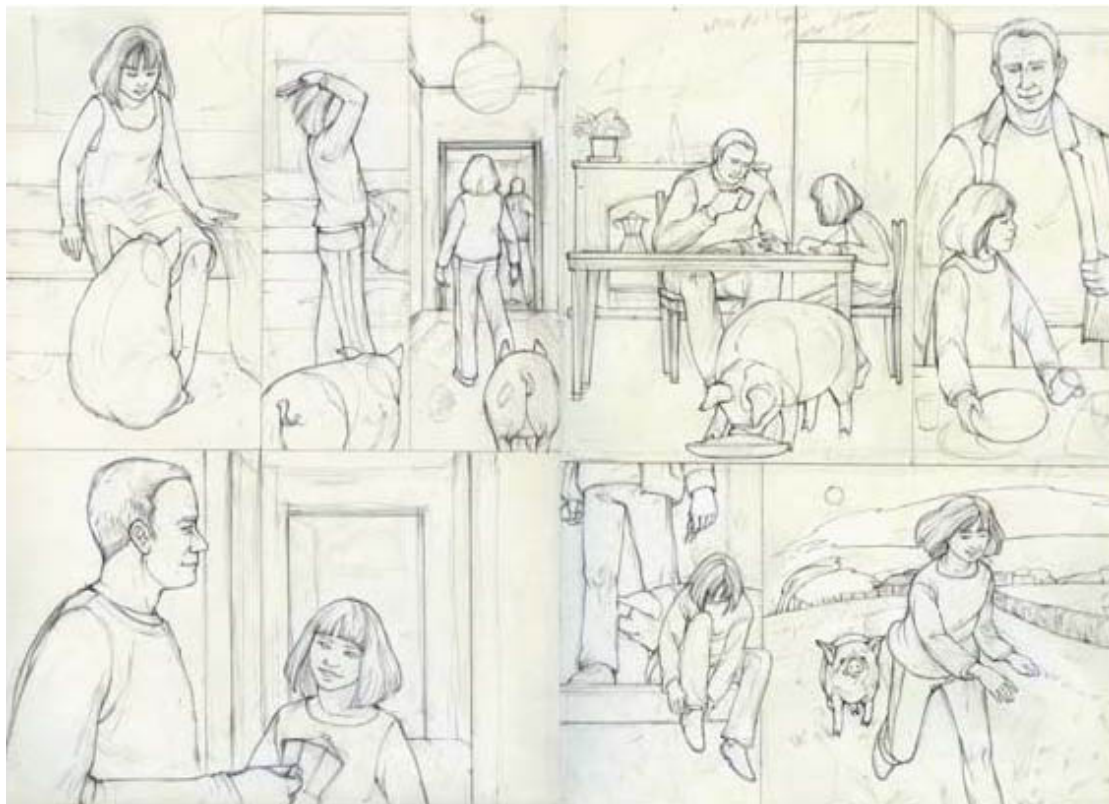


Figure 3. Comic book draft sequential art

As I began designing and fleshing out the characters and sequential art, I reflected on the possibility of creating a multimedia work for digital mediation. My focus shifted to accommodate this perspective and along with it my thinking regarding the material relationship between the text and its technological platform, and the reader's sensory experience of the text. Underpinning this shift in direction, and indeed one of the challenges, was creating a work that acknowledged the haptic perception and manual dexterity contended as vital to digital reading practices and mobile technologies, the surface reading theorised as core to "haptic looking," and vision as

a form of touching (Mangen, 2008; Trotter, 2008, p. 140; Garrett-Petts, 2000).<sup>2</sup> In addition, I set out to address the assertion that digital and print books offer readers two distinct phenomenological experiences, the former detached and indeterminate and the latter, tactile and rich as a consequence of readers being hermetically and phenomenologically “in touch with the material substrate of the text itself” (Mangen, 2008, p. 405). I thus conceived the screened book, a work conceptualised as addressing both the tangible and intangible and featuring narrative modalities germane to multimedia and mobile platforms. The sequential art and story were consequently modified to fit the physical format and dimensions and screen mobility of the digital tablet. The text, originally intended for print reading, was repurposed to accommodate the motor actions associated with digital reading (touch, tap, turn and swipe) and the interactivity afforded by digital technology. Within a short space of time what started out as a design exploration into print media comic book storytelling, strip narrative and sequential art evolved into a creative journey into the haptic, the visual and, meaningfully in terms of the artifact term, the auditory.

### Reformatting the graphic narrative to speak pig, whale, wind, sea and ice

This developmental stage involved reformatting the graphic narrative, originally devised to conform to the verbal-visual conventions and formal language of comic book design, for mobile screen reading and tablet mediation.<sup>3</sup>



Figure 4. Josie and the Whales: Trance

The minimal and less than fully resolved balloon-enclosed verbal captions, the *emanata* supporting the narrative imagery, were hence dropped in favour of the visual. In contradistinction, the comic book key structural elements, the panels and gutter, a space theorised as teasing out, collapsing, or breaking the narrative sequence, events and actions, became conceptualised as synonymous with the medium of film, especially celluloid film, and a tacit part of the screened book sequential art (Goggin & Hassler-Forest, 2010). The 62 single-page, black-line images were hand drawn using dip pen and ink on 300gm Magnani Art paper, the tool and medium ubiquitous to nineteenth century graphic art (see Figure 4). These

<sup>2</sup> Haptic perception is defined as involving “both the tactile perception through our skin and the perception of the position of our joints and muscles (commonly referred to as the kinaesthetic sense modality)” (Mangen, 2008, p. 416).

<sup>3</sup> See David Lewis (2010) for a comparative case study analysis of iconic American comic book creators’ perspectives regarding the privileging of communicative “channels” (word or image) in comic book storytelling and narrative reading.

images became the primary conveyer of meaning while additionally referencing the condensed storytelling format of late nineteenth century *bande dessinée* and illustrated press graphic artists. These structural and conceptual alterations to the narrative artwork transformed the text from a multi-panelled, verbal-visual composition for print into wordless sequential art for the mobile platform. While content with these modifications, I was curious as to how I could create a work that would stimulate young adult readers' sensory experience of the text and by extension their cognitive perception of the environmental issue of Southern Ocean whaling contained in the fabula. To facilitate this, and to augment the semiotic richness of the graphic narrative imagery, I decided to move out of the figurative domain of the visual and investigate a complementary but previously unrealised method of storytelling, namely, soundscape.

For this development I turned for technical assistance to fellow colleague, musician, and digital coder, Luiz dos Santos. In outlining the original concept and purpose of the screened book to him, I proposed the soundscape as an ancillary component to support the graphic narrative atmosphere, tone and intent, and further enhance the reading process and haptic looking experience through technology. In contradistinction to optic visuality, contended as dependent on a "degree of separation between the viewing subject and the object being viewed," haptic looking involves a different type of reading (Trotter, 2008, p. 140).<sup>4</sup> This type of looking entails readers moving over the surface with their eyes in order to discern the figural representation, the material form of the object being represented and thereby comprehend its symbolic role in the fabula. The soundscape was thus designed to augment this process at a symbolic level as well as a mimetic level, and to meet the criterion of immersion through being embedded in the screen text. Primarily conceptualised as replacing the comic book verbal text and diegetic dialogue, it was also conceived as complementing the graphic narrative genre styles of fantasy and magical realism.

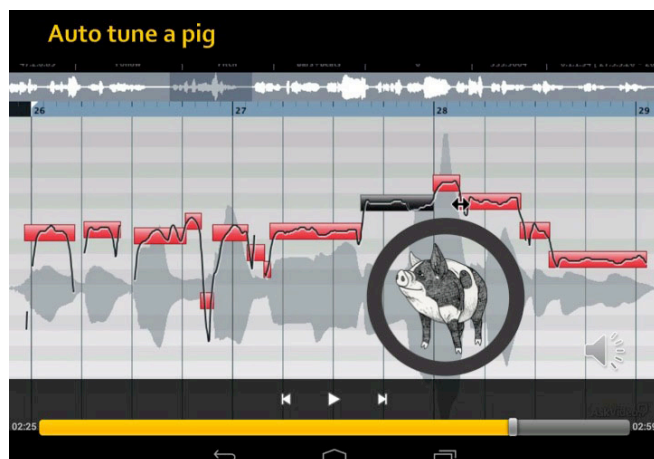


Figure 5. Auto tune a pig

Within the context of children's literature, magical realism is theorised as strategically employing the mundane and the ordinary, the Other, as well as animals and objects to draw "attention to relationships in terms of power and authority" and thereby raise awareness and bring about change in dominant attitudes and behaviours (Rosenberg, 2002, p. 18). It is also concerned with identity,

<sup>4</sup> David Trotter writes that the "nineteenth-century art historian Alois Riegl borrowed the term [haptics] from physiology in order to delineate a way of looking in which the eyes function to some extent like organs of touch" (Trotter, 2008, p. 140).

geography and place. Fantasy similarly engages in juxtaposing the normal with the abnormal, the real with the supernatural and additionally employs the strategy of subtlety to announce foreboding (Chanady, 1985). In keeping with these modes, my assistant was assigned the challenge of creating a multilayered soundscape that privileged the voice of the Other, figuratively symbolised in the visual narrative by the Japanese whale boats, the animals and birds, and Southern Ocean elemental forces. And which, moreover, was to be tonally sympathetic to the fabula imagery and character focalisation (see Figure 5). This involved preparing a recording plan that aligned with the visual narrative flow and pacing; recording real time sounds, such as pig snorts and grunts, sea gull mewing, the flow and return of the sea, and electronic composition to evoke the spatio-temporal ambience of the narrative. The latter underwent modification and was made less dramatic so as to signal the subtle tensions and foreboding associated with changes in scene, environments and encounters. The directed site-recorded, open-sourced and digitally manipulated soundscape designs are consequently ambient, elemental and, in respect to articulate human speech, wordless. Activated by a touch button icon positioned in the right-hand corner of the frame, in print the area generally set aside for the page number, they conjure up the domestic and wild spaces, the real and imaginary worlds, environments and ecologies of rural, littoral New Zealand and Antarctica.



*Figure 6. Brooking twins reading*

In addition to its operational function, the touch button was created to perform a specific structural role in assisting reader understanding and cognitive perception of the narrative topic. Designed to feature Mr Trundle, Josie's familiar and agent of stabilisation, it visually prompts readers to travel with their eyes and hands across the surface plane of each image and, through a tap of their

fingers, imaginatively enter into the mental and emotional states and subject perspectives of the narrative's key and secondary, animate and inanimate focalisers as well as their material presence (see Figure 6). This activation facilitates subject agency in the reader, the power to take meaningful action and through that action become an operator in the screened book's auditory and visual diegetic space (Lewis, 2010; Mangen, 2008). But can reading this hybrid text via haptic looking be argued as immersion as defined by critics of the digital page? And does reading this type of text enable interpretive understanding?

## **Immersion, hybridity and the screened book medium**

Mangen (2008) posits that for each of us immersion is a matter of degree and can encompass a range of experiential modes and levels of engagement and absorption. For example, immersion may broadly embrace experiential variances such as having a story read to us in an institutional setting, to being lost in the pages of a book in the comfort of our own home; watching a grand narrative being performed on stage, to witnessing its theatrical performance in the open arena; losing oneself in the collective experience of watching a film, to sole immersion as an online game player and avatar in a virtual world. While the former five require a certain level of imagination to fully enter the fictional world of the story, the latter is argued as deploying technology and, I would add, virtual mimesis to enhance the sense of agency in the participant. Moreover Mangen theorises that in reading an analogue text, the material components, the covers, pages and linguistic symbols partially withdraw, thus allowing us to intentionally direct our sensory focus to unpacking and understanding the narrative fiction rather than having it focused on the technology as such. Hence Mangen postulates our phenomenological experience of print reading is dominated by the hermeneutic, or the linguistic interpretation of the text, privileged here as the written word, rather than the perceptual. In contradistinction, the combined “intangibility of the text and the prevalent haptic affordances of the computer make our hermeneutic relation – and hence phenomenological immersion – highly vulnerable” (Mangen, 2008, 415). Hence Mangen (2008) concludes that our relation with the digital artifact is contingent on the lens of alterity, in that it is that which shapes our reading experience, rather than the hermeneutic.<sup>5</sup>

This argument, though, presupposes two binary forms of authorship and production; one that is exclusively analogue, material, textual and tactile and possibly never intended for digital mediation and the other inherently hyper, as in limitless and created using the coded language and software capability of the computer and associated tools. While the latter includes the fully immersive, alternative realities of game storytelling and virtual fan-worlds, it also includes mobile narratives emerging from participants’ phenomenological encounters with the “material world as narrative environment,” and which are composed from the “interplay between the physical space of the city and the transmitted fictional text” (Raley, 2010, p. 299). Consequently, for Rita Raley the real difference between storytelling for mobile mediation and storytelling for print is experiential and premised by the categories “experience, movement and environment,” and requiring “a range of cognitive and bodily” reading activities. In addition to visually processing the verbal text linguistic signs, these activities involve sensory and motor skills synonymous with interacting with digital technology and mobile devices. Consequently, Raley theorises that the

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<sup>5</sup> The case for reader immersion and hyper-textual vulnerability is critically examined in Nicholas Carr’s Pulitzer Prize winning work, *The Shallows* (2010).

<sup>6</sup> Mikkonen’s reference to film studies’ focus on viewers’ “engagement with characters whose minds and emotions are predominantly displayed through images, with little or no direct access to the character’s verbal thoughts” (Mikkonen, 2008, p. 3002) resonates with David Trotter’s argument regarding visual imagery, texture and haptic narrative.



act of reading a mobile narrative is one that is inherently participatory and tactile and can be categorised as performance.

As stated in the introduction and opening section of this paper, *Josie and the Whales* is proposed as a hybrid text and creative exploration into synthesising the verbal and the visual, screen and print, static image and animation, continuous and discontinuous image, pictorial and aural, reading and performance. Kevin Brooks, citing Mary E. Hocks, claims that hybridity is a key conceptual term that broadly describes the “visual-verbal compositions” or “media-to-media” relations designed and created for the Web (Brooks, 2009, p. 220). As the term the screened book implies, the author-illustrator project is designed to encompass both visual-verbal and media-to-media relations, while also facilitating partial immersion through reader activation of tactile and auditory components. The environmentally informed tale is mediated through the genre conventions of comic book or graphic narratology, and the fabula given additional dimension through the aural qualities of sound and the time-space properties of film. Further, by strategically employing visual-verbal modalities to expressively represent the mental and emotional states of the human and animal characters, the hybrid text responds to narrative theory’s increasing interest “in the representation of consciousness in narratives,” and especially the symbolic presentation of states of mind in graphic storytelling (Mikkonen, 2008, pp. 301-302).<sup>6</sup> In graphic storytelling, the diegetic rendering of a character’s thoughts, moods, states or sensations is primarily conveyed through the formal language of line, tone, shape, *emanata* and onomatopoeic expression. By replacing the diegesis verbal text with a thematic ambient soundscape, the screened book provides the reader with an alternative cognitive method for discerning the hermeneutics of the text and thereby the human and non-human consciousness of the key and secondary characters. In so doing, the digitally mediated tale supplements print-based and mobile formats through which powerful topical issues are communicated to young readers and national and international audiences. Picture-less storytelling, then, may enable hermeneutic immersion in the fabula. I maintain that by integrating image, touch and sound, graphic storytelling for the mobile platform provides readers with an immersive experience that is no less fulfilling for young imaginations.

## **Conclusion**

In this paper I set out to describe my journey as a creative practitioner in creating a locally situated, nonviolent, environmentally informed fantasy tale for young readers aged 8-12 years old. I explained that the journey began with my witnessing a vessel associated with a marine conservation society and that the subsequent conceptualisation and design of the tale, while initially situated within the popular cultural mode of expression comic book design, evolved in response to research into print and digital reading experience, haptic theory and genre. I further explained that

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<sup>6</sup> Mikkonen’s reference to film studies’ focus on viewers’ “engagement with characters whose minds and emotions are predominantly displayed through images, with little or no direct access to the character’s verbal thoughts” (Mikkonen, 2008, p. 3002) resonates with David Trotter’s argument regarding visual imagery, texture and haptic narrative.

in traversing traditional and contemporary platforms through which to mediate the tale's environmental message, my creative focus and intention shifted to inquiring into alternative sensory modes of expression more the domain of film animation and digital game worlds and fantasies. Stepping out as an author-illustrator into the format and seemingly limitless space of mobile media has been immensely rewarding. My practice-led investigation into harnessing traditional analogue techniques, digital technologies, and auditory and visual modalities to facilitate haptic looking and cognitive perception has proven creatively challenging. From my illustrator perspective, it has additionally proven that the hybrid text, the screened book, is a valid form for enabling reader immersion in the fabula, albeit in a different fashion and degree to immersion in the printed book. My journey into conceptualising, designing and producing a hybrid text for digital mediation has moreover shown that the screened book, *Josie and the Whales*, is but one form that such books might take. My practice-led inquiry into the screened book as a tool in the service of powerful environmental issues is thus continuing. My aim in these works is to continue to facilitate reader experience and immersion in the narrative, to similarly retain the intimate gesture of the hand drawn line, to further design for the spatial format and mobility of the digital tablet and mobile phone, and to continue to explore the diegetic nuancing through ambient sound. This time I am taking my cues from the continuous or progressive narrative form, the Japanese scroll or *emakimono*, used for centuries as a storytelling device and through which I wish to convey the impact of fresh water degradation on New Zealand's long-finned eel, the *tuna*.

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## **About the Author**

Dr Caroline Campbell is a practising illustrator and lecturer in the School of Design, College of Creative Arts, Massey University. Her past research applied an illustrator's lens to critically investigate the representation and mediation of identity, race, gender and war in late nineteenth and early twentieth century Australasian children's literature against the backdrop of socio-political change and emerging feminisms. Her current inquiry is practice-led and is located in the fields of visual language, graphic narrative and hybrid storytelling for children and young adults. At present she is expanding her recent exploration into haptic theory, immersion and design for the mobile platform. She is in the initial stages of designing and illustrating a second, wordless eco-fantasy for young readers. In addition to exploring the media interface between graphic narrative, continuous sequential art, space and sound, this environmentally informed work will interrogate the spatial dimension of the ancient narrative format, the scroll.

**Contact:** C.Campbell@massey.ac.nz

## **Supporting Material**

<https://itunes.apple.com/nz/book/josie-and-the-whales/id977905931?mt=11&ign-mpt=uo%3D4>

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