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The First “Children’s Classic” CD-ROM

by Bob Hughes of *The Guardian*, London

Big multimedia publishers can make encyclopedias, but they can't make magic—and even when magic is handed to them on a plate they sniff at it. They just don't get it. Meanwhile, the CD-ROM medium is being established without them by tiny teams pursuing personal visions. They come from unexpected quarters, and their works fit into no convenient categories, and they're fuelled as much by faith and passion, as by cash.

The Book of Lulu is a case in point. Its author, Romain Victor-Pujebet, took it to publisher after publisher and received rejection after rejection. Eventually, the French publishing giant, Hachette, agreed to back it, but then started asking for changes that made Victor-Pujebet despair. With uncanny appropriateness (for this is a kind of fairy tale) at this black hour he met a fairy godmother. She backed him totally, and in six furious months the work was finished. *Lulu* is now a worldwide phenomenon, winning awards and rave reviews in 29 countries.

What is it about *Lulu* and her kind, that makes big publishers so uneasy? I fell in love with *Lulu* at Cannes and the problem fascinated me.

On the face of it, *Lulu* appears to be a children's book translated to CD-ROM. You have pages that turn when clicked, text that reads itself to you, and pictures that come to life in delightful ways.

Lulu reaches emotions other CDs leave untouched. There is sentiment here on a scale few English-speaking authors would even dare to attempt. Visually, it is exquisite. It has wonderful haunting music (by Olivier Pryszyk). But that is not where the magic begins. In fact, *Lulu* is not a book. It is a play on the whole idea of books, the people who live in them, and the deep, yet impossible attachments we form with them—especially as children. There is no “real” *Book of Lulu* (and Victor-Pujebet insists there never will be). *Lulu*'s world only exists when the computer is on, and you are separated from it by the thick glass of your monitor screen. You cannot put it into your pocket and imagine you possess it. That is Romain's whole point: we can never possess the things and people we love. The story goes like this:

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The lonely little princess *Lulu* lives in a beautiful castle, in a beautiful book: the *Book of Lulu*. She combats boredom and solitude by reading fashion magazines, dressing up, and staging plays for imaginary audiences in the toy theatre she has made for herself in an unused garret in her parents' castle: an “imaginary universe of words and images, paper and ink.”

One day a spacecraft containing a robot, Mnemo, crash-lands in the chateau's grounds. Mnemo is trying to return to his home planet and his young master, Prince Megalo Polo (yes, a distant but distinct echo of St. Exupéry's lonely “Little Prince”). *Lulu* decides to help him and, together, they traverse deserts, jungles, Doré-esque regions of ice, and obstacles peculiar to books: at one point they become lost in the intricacies of the plot (they have rashly attempted to skip a chapter—to get water for the spacecraft's cooling system from the chapter on rainforests). These problems are overcome, but the greatest one remains: how can *Lulu*, a 2-dimensional being from a book, make the journey into space—which is by definition 3-dimensional? Mnemo realises he can achieve this by “extrudomorphosis”: a process, he explains, invented by the Italian renaissance painters to allow otherwise flat, paper characters to enter the 3-D world. A happy ending is achieved by playful subversion of physical laws.

While there is plenty of fun here, it is suffused with a poignant sense of unattainable beauty—underscored at every turn by subtle interplay between reader and the characters of the tale. Sometimes, when you click on them, they seem aware that someone has touched them but puzzled, then annoyed, because they cannot see who is doing it. One relates to them as through a one-way mirror: unseen intruders in their world.

The word “magical” comes all too easily, but here the word is almost technically correct. Victor-Pujebet started with an illustrative style that he found in a 19th-century book (the illustrator, alas, was unnamed—but he or she clearly was under the influence of Gustave Doré). In itself, this creates a feeling of a “lost world of perpetual summer.” The animations capitalise on this: the ones featuring Lulu herself are redrawn frame by frame from live-action sequences (of the 10-year-old Emilie Cornac) filmed in the TV studios at Castres. The technique is not new, but I have seldom seen it used so appropriately: in this context they seem like ghosts of another reality emerging from the page.

Is this too deep and subtle for children, you may ask? I imagine that's what the big publishers asked too. But none of the children who've borrowed my copy over the past year had any problem—although I often had problems getting the disk back. I think it is the first CD-ROM that qualifies for the label “children's classic”: it has depths that make age irrelevant; its greatest depths are conceptual and emotional; it is worthy of, and rewards, serious critical attention.

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Victor-Pujebet produced *Lulu* with Paris-based DadaMedia, and the fairy-godmother who made it possible was Aleen Stein. Stein is familiar with the role but does not really relish it: it involves too many dealings with banks and other big, uncomprehending enti-

ties. Still, it is a role she plays well, and the whole industry has benefited from her efforts. With her husband Bob she founded the Voyager Company in the 1980s. Together, they backed Robert Winter, to give us the “Voyager Guide to Beethoven's 9th Symphony.” For nearly two clear years, that was the only CD-ROM worth paying money for—and almost single-handedly it proved the medium's viability. They went on from there to become the “first name in multimedia.” Their (sadly rare) talent was “putting the author front and center stage.” They'd find people with great stories to tell, then back them to the hilt. In 1995 Aleen split from Voyager and set up her own company, Organa, in New York.

Like most of Aleen Stein's other proteges, Victor-Pujebet has no obvious multimedia credentials. Previously he led a rather adventurous life as a photographer and musician, in Paris, New York, and travelling throughout the Americas and Africa. Then, when his daughter Lola was born he settled in Castres, near Toulouse, and devoted himself to fatherhood full-time. When Lola was three he bought her a computer—a Mac—and started making toys for her in Hypercard (Apple's pioneering authoring application). As he played with the Mac, *Lulu* began to evolve.

Romain's story was almost an exact repeat of one told to me the previous year by fellow Stein proteges, Domestic Funk Productions (Alan Snow, Nick Batt and Dave Furrow). During 1993 and 94, they took their *P.A.W.S.* dog-simulator round all of the publishing houses. “What is it like?” said the publishing execs. “Well, it isn't like anything really,” they said—and the corporate eyes glazed over. “Well,” said the execs, “Could you make it teach spelling, or French? We might consider it then.” Stein liked *P.A.W.S.* just the way it was; it became the first offering from her new Organa publishing house; took the *Milia d'Or* at Cannes in 1995, and is now firmly established in the small canon of long-running multimedia masterpieces. After *P.A.W.S.* won its *Milia D'Or*, various publishers asked the team “why didn't you show us this?” to which they invariably replied, “We did.”

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What's crucial to *Lulu's* success, for me anyway, is that it is so very much “of a piece.” There is one “handwriting” and one sensibility throughout. When big companies are involved, this is one of the first casualties.... By contrast, Stein gave Romain the freedom and support to create something that he simply loved....