Geist Mobilized:
App Development in Canadian Literary Publications

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Abstract

This report explores the process taken by Geist magazine in their development of a new digital and mobile edition of their magazine. Beyond the simple process, this report looks at the dialogue between content producers and tech developers as they work together to provide a better, more engaging reading experience for tablet and smartphones. As magazines begin to implement new digital strategies, they have to find the balance between what they want, what their readers want and what can actually be done on mobile devices. Geist is in a transition period, looking towards the future and developing new strategies that will allow them to expand their brand and hopefully reach new audiences in fulfillment of their mandate.

Keywords: digital, app, Geist, magazine, publishing
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Introduction

In early 2014, *Geist*, a Vancouver-based magazine, entered into a partnership with Contentment, a London based software as a service (SaaS) company dedicated to providing app production software and services to publishers and brands. In the summer of 2014, I completed a three month internship at Contentment and worked with their team there to help develop the backbone that would eventually be *Geist’s* new app. Upon returning to Vancouver, I trained *Geist’s* production team to use Contentment’s software and witnessed how a dialogue can be opened up between tech developers and content producers in order to produce a unique product.

This report aims to examine the process *Geist* is currently undergoing as they make the transition from literary print magazine to multi-platform content producers and distributors. The publishing industry is currently in a state of constant change. Digital technology and mobile reading devices have changed the way publishers develop digital strategies. Magazine publishing is in a particularly exciting (and potentially scary) transition as these technologies—and the software they support—are evolving to allow greater flexibility and higher levels of engagement. There are dozens of new companies coming up with methods to help publishers develop digital and mobile editions that go beyond print reproduction in order to engage readers on multiple devices. Thus, new channels are being opened up and made available to publishers.

With *Geist* as an example, I will look at a number of the issues facing existing publications as they attempt the transformation from a basic replica edition (or print edition) into an engaging and attractive digital app that aims to serve an as-of-yet unreached readership, as well as the existing audience.
Through an analysis of both the development process and the final app, this report will consider the issues facing magazines making similar transitions and provide insight into the relationship between development, content and reader in a digital age. *Geist* is still in the experimental phase of their app development, but it is already possible to see the logic and mindful attention to platform differences in their strategy.

Many magazines, especially smaller magazines, are in the same position that *Geist* was in 2010: they are looking for a digital and mobile solution that is both affordable and practical for their staff and readers. Text-heavy books and long-form journalism were guided into this brave new world by eReaders, devices specifically designed with the aesthetic and the reading experience of books in mind. Magazines have not been as fortunate. Working with existing—and often conflicting or vastly different—software and hardware, magazines have taken longer to adapt to the digital age. New software companies, such as Contentment, are beginning to pave the way for magazines and provide aesthetically pleasing, affordable and user-friendly digital editions.
Chapter 1. Going Digital

In 2010, when Apple launched the iPad, the web had already been flooded with rumours of the tablet’s imminent arrival. No publisher wanted to be caught unprepared. With the promise of a new and exciting way to engage with readers, magazines began searching for mobile solutions that would provide readers with something different for tablets. In November of 2009, Condé Nast—one of the world’s largest magazine publishers—joined forces with Adobe to create a digital version of WIRED with plans to eventually convert all 18 of their national (USA) titles. While the tablets were not yet on the market, Condé Nast said it was confident that we would be seeing “multiple versions of machines featuring large color touchscreens and wireless connections.” The launch of the iPad marked the beginning of increasing tablet popularity. Soon every major electronic company would have their own version. And with tablets in the hands of readers, magazines started developing new digital strategies to incorporate this new platform.

1.1. In Canada

Canadian magazines were certainly not immune to the early rumors. Like Condé Nast, Magazines Canada knew change was coming and that digital editions were going to become increasingly popular and their members were going to be looking for a mobile solution.

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2 Ibid.
Even after the iPad was made available to consumers, there were only a few digital authoring or conversion tool options for publishers and a very sparse reference guide for them to glean any sort of recommendation on which tool would work best. Large corporations, like Condé Nast, were able to sign deals with Adobe—an already trusted name in the publishing industry—but smaller publications could not afford the high price tag of Adobe’s new mobile publishing software, Digital Publishing Suite (DPS). In addition to publishers not having the money, there was no proof that mobile editions provided any return on investment. Tablets had simply not been around long enough for publishers to know how readers would engage with a tablet (or even a smartphone) edition of their magazine. Publishers of all sizes were taking a gamble with tablet editions. No one knew if they were going to succeed.

In December 2009, just one month before Apple officially announced the iPad, Magazines Canada announced that they would be launching a digital magazine newsstand powered by Zinio. Zinio promised “to serve Canada’s communities with the best-possible reading experience” by enabling consumers “to browse, buy and interact with the magazines [...] they love, from multiple locations and devices.”³ With the Zinio partnership, Magazines Canada promised their members a digital publishing package that included “customer service support, a best practices guide for promoting your digital title, marketing templates and tools, as well as ecommerce capabilities” with no upfront cost to the publisher.⁴ This partnership assured Canadian magazines a quick, affordable and easy way to get their content onto mobile devices and browsers.

1.2. Where did Geist Stand

Vancouver-based magazine, Geist, is an example of a small Canadian publication looking for an affordable mobile publishing solution for multiple devices. Geist is “a Canadian literary magazine of ideas and culture” that publishes narrative fiction and nonfiction as well as poetry, photography, essays and reviews on a quarterly basis; their mandate “is to find and encourage a wide audience for new and established Canadian writers and artists of merit.” With a print run of roughly 7,000 per issue, Geist is still considered a small circulation magazine, but a “biggie in terms of the Canadian lit scene.” With over 20 years of experience in the literary magazine industry, it is unsurprising that Geist wanted to expand their reach beyond the printed page in an attempt to bolster readership and further promote their published authors and artists.

Geist, like many other Canadian magazines—including Canadian Living, Cottage Life, Elle Canada, The Hockey News, Maclean’s, The Walrus and more—signed on with Zinio and Magazines Canada because it made sense at the time. In a continuing effort to add as many titles to the Canadian digital newsstand, Magazines Canada published semi-regular blog posts to remind their members about what they were offering. One such reminder stated: “Magazines Canada invites you to generate additional revenue and increase readership by creating a digital edition of your magazine—at no cost to you!” The deal meant that publishers would get their content onto the digital newsstand quickly and effortlessly without the high price tag that other solution providers put on their products. Michal Kozlowski, the assistant publisher at Geist, said that one of the motivating factors for Geist was that Magazines Canada “would handle everything—marketing, fulfilment, delivery, e-

5 Geist. “About Geist.”
6 AnnMarie MacKinnon, interview with the author.
7 Magazines Canada, “Magazines Canada Launches Digital Newsstand.”
8 Magazines Canada, “Get Your Title on the Magazine Canada Digital Newsstand!”
commerce, etc.” Zinio also provided publishers with a hassle free conversion method that made the mobilization of a magazine relatively fast and easy.

Zinio creates PDF replica editions—a straight conversion of the print magazine to the mobile screen. These editions are easily created through a simple uploading process of the existing PDF files used in print production. Zinio allows publishers to then add internal and external links to their magazine. PDF replicas are often used as a first step in a mobile publishing plan because they are so easy to create and distribute. But replica editions do not always produce the best user experience. The print layout of a magazine does not translate well to small mobile screens and often requires the reader to zoom in quite a bit and consequently scroll down and across the page to get the full article.

*Geist*, and many other Magazines Canada members, never felt like Magazines Canada or Zinio provided them with the digital service that they wanted for their magazine. There were problems from the start. At *Geist*, the antagonistic feeling towards Magazines Canada was apparent very early on. Kozlowski stated, “It was hell from the beginning and never got much better. At any gathering of Mags Canada members during that time you were guaranteed to overhear a conversation in which the names of our Zinio reps were invoked in anger.” Kozlowski later added that, while Magazines Canada handled everything, “they handled everything wrong.” There were a number of major concerns that started coming up as things progressed.

Joining the Canadian digital newsstand meant that publishers were beholden to Zinio’s regulations. One such regulation mandates that publishers could not distribute single copies or subscriptions of a paid circulation magazine for free to

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9 Michal Kozlowski, email to author, November 17, 2014.
10 Michal Kozlowski, email to author, November 13, 2014.
11 Michal Kozlowski, email to author, November 17, 2014.
any readers. In order to send free copies publishers would have to pay Zinio $0.20 per copy.\textsuperscript{12} “[This] is actually in direct contravention of our goal of finding readers for writers,” said AnnMarie MacKinnon, \textit{Geist’s} operations manager, “we need to be able to give the magazine away for free.”\textsuperscript{13} For \textit{Geist} to fulfill their mandate, it is important for them to be able to distribute free copies of the magazines to prospective reviewers and partnered publications. Due to Zinio’s regulations, \textit{Geist} had used Issuu, another digital distribution company. Issuu allows publishers to easily upload PDF files of their magazine and is completely free for readers.\textsuperscript{14} While Issuu still cost \textit{Geist}, the cost was set and their readers could access it for free using a web link. MacKinnon explained that with Issuu, they were able to send out as many links with free access to \textit{Geist} as they wanted.\textsuperscript{15} Having to manage and work with two digital distribution companies made this just one of the many concerns that \textit{Geist} had with Zinio.

The biggest problem they had was a failure to see any real return on their investment. As mentioned earlier, the deal with Magazines Canada meant that there were no upfront costs to publishers; however, any profit from digital sales was divided between the three parties. “It’s not that making money is the be-all-end-all but you don’t want to be out of pocket on it.”\textsuperscript{16} \textit{Geist} was not necessarily looking for a monetary return, but what they did really want to see was an increase in their circulation numbers. According to Shannon Emmerson, a consultant hired by \textit{Geist}, they were not getting the increase they had hoped for.\textsuperscript{17} Without the boost in circulation that \textit{Geist} was looking for, Zinio made little financial sense for the magazine.

\textsuperscript{12} Michal Kozlowski, interview with author.
\textsuperscript{13} AnnMarie MacKinnon, interview with author.
\textsuperscript{14} Issuu, issuu.com.
\textsuperscript{15} AnnMarie MacKinnon, interview with author.
\textsuperscript{16} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{17} Shannon Emmerson, interview with author.
A major contributor to the failed return was how subscription renewals were handled. While *Geist* saw 70% of the profit for new subscriptions, they only got 20% of the renewal profit.\textsuperscript{18} For most, if not all magazines, renewals form a crucial part of their financial backbone. “Much of publishing is built on renewal rates.”\textsuperscript{19} As a company, Zinio does not allow its clients to handle their own renewal efforts—it is all done as part of the Zinio package. MacKinnon explained that, “if we [*Geist*] can’t do our own renewal, it doesn’t make much sense. We’re never going to break even. We’re always going to lose money on this digital edition.”\textsuperscript{20} Unable to manage their magazine in the way they wanted it run, the team at *Geist* decided in early 2014 to take a new approach to their digital edition.

### 1.3. A Much Needed Change

After two, two-year contracts with Magazines Canada and Zinio, *Geist* still believes that there are benefits to having a digital edition as part of their publishing repertoire, particularly in reference to expanding readership.\textsuperscript{21} Emmerson believes that a lot of *Geist’s* readers would be interested in a well-made digital edition. She states that “according to all the research out there, everybody is trying to read on mobile platforms.”\textsuperscript{22} A recent reader survey from *Geist* confirms that “there is this little pocket of people, [...] a sort of psychosocial demographic that is all about being able to read on the go.”\textsuperscript{23} MacKinnon points out that these readers are distinct from *Geist’s* print readers: “they have different interests, different lifestyles, different

\textsuperscript{18} Michal Kozlowski, interview with author.
\textsuperscript{19} Sammye Johnson and Patricia Prijatel, The Magazine From Cover to Cover (New York: Oxford University Press), 179.
\textsuperscript{20} AnnMarie MacKinnon, interview with author.
\textsuperscript{21} Michal Kozlowski, email to author, November 13, 2014.
\textsuperscript{22} Shannon Emmerson, interview with author.
\textsuperscript{23} AnnMarie MacKinnon, interview with author.
lives, so it would be nice to provide them with what they need as readers." While Zinio proved to be more trouble than it was worth, Geist still remained interested in developing a new digital edition that their mobile audience could enjoy.

1.4. The Mobile Audience

As Emmerson pointed out, there is research shows a growing trend in tablet usage and mobile reading. Every year Magazine Canada publishes a Digital Fact Book as a tool for publishers to gain insight into what readers are looking for across digital devices. It offers statistics on who is using smartphones and tablets, what they are using them for and to what extent they are engaging with content. It is important to note that reading on mobile devices is still a relatively new activity, and we are still learning how to gauge reader engagement with content on these devices.

In the past, mobile reading has always come second to desktop or laptop browser reading, but according to the 2014 Digital Fact Book, there has been a recent shift from PC to mobile reading. The total internet pages viewed on a PC in Canada dropped from 99,110 to 78,505 from the end of 2012 to the end of 2013.25 There has also been an increase in digital subscriptions—in 2013 digital subscriptions went up by 5.2% (from 22,076 to 23,233).26 This is all good news for magazines. While these shifts in reading habits are slow, they are happening. And as publishers offer more engaging mobile editions, the shifts will hopefully start to happen faster. Research also shows that, not only are more Canadians reading on tablets and smartphones, but they are also beginning to immerse themselves, spend more time and engage more with content on their devices. Readers spend an

24 AnnMarie MacKinnon, interview with author.
26 Ibid, 16.
“average of 98.3 seconds” on the first story they read on a tablet, in comparison with an average of 10-20 seconds usually spent on web pages.\textsuperscript{27}

The research done by Magazines Canada and affiliated programs seems to confirm what Geist’s reader survey told them about their audience: there is an increasing number of readers that are using their tablets and smartphones to access information, news and entertainment. PDF replica editions, like those produced by Zinio, may satisfy the occasional mobile reader but can be tedious for those who read on the tablet and/or smartphone all the time. The pinching-to-zoom and multi-directional scrolling take away from the reading experience. In order to attract the growing number of mobile readers, magazines should be focusing on optimizing their content in a way that is engaging rather than distracting or inhibiting.

Chapter 2. A New Solution

In order to best serve this new audience, Geist knew that they had to give readers something other than a PDF replica. They wanted to work with a different software, one that allowed them to create the app themselves. Geist had a plethora of options to choose from. Since 2010, there has been a proliferation of digital publishing software companies emerging into the market. Geist was unsure what other digital options were available to them and what each company could provide. Consultants, including Shannon Emmerson, were brought on to help Geist with “discovery work” based on what they wanted to accomplish with their mobile edition. The main goal for them was to find a solution that allowed them to develop the app in-house in a way that was easy (or relatively easy) to incorporate with their existing workflow while maintaining extensibility.

There were two primary categories of software that Geist considered: HTML5 based software and InDesign based software. HTML5 allows for responsive and flexible design that can be published across various platforms. HTML5 language is much simpler than earlier iterations of HTML and contains better support for audio and video tags, making it easier than before to create enhanced publications. InDesign based software, on the other hand, uses PDF technology to develop designs for a specific platform and then adds interactivity using plug-ins. It differs from PDF replicas in that the experience is designed specifically for a mobile device rather than taken and copied from print. Geist looked at two companies for each category:

28 AnnMarie MacKinnon, interview with author.
29 Ibid.
Contentment and Woopie, which are HTML5 based, and Adobe DPS and Mag+, which use InDesign.

2.1. Looking at Digital Publishing Solutions

The publishing industry is in the midst of a very unique time, a time where anyone can make a revolutionary difference that shapes the future of mobile publishing. There remain a number of companies still offering to create PDF replicas and enhance PDF editions of magazines, but these are not the ones making waves in the industry. Digital startups and software companies are the new players in the publishing industry. They offer new and exciting ways for publishers to get their magazines onto the smartphones and tablets of devout readers. There are a number of different companies, both big and small, that say they have the best offer, the best product, the best tools, the best price, the best service and the best apps. Yet, the fragmentations of offerings and obtuse pricing plans make it difficult for publishers to make proper comparisons. There is no one-size-fits-all solution, which leaves publishers, with limited knowledge of the market, trying to evaluate contracts, pricing models, customer service, creative control and total costs of the upfront and ongoing market. The task of finding a software company that provides the best service and output for a given publication is, in and of itself, a very daunting task.

2.1.1. Contentment

Contentment is a London based SaaS business started by Michael Kowalski in 2011 as response to his disappointment with other digital publishing software companies. Contentment’s mobile publishing platform, Padify, is an HTML5 browser-based software that allows publishers and brands to create responsive digital editions and distribute them as hybrid apps in the Apple App Store, the Google Play Store and browsers. This means that publishers are able to get their magazines into various tablets and smartphones with a single design while taking
advantage of specific hardware and software functionality. Contentment’s clients can either author content directly in Padify or import existing files using HTML5, CSS and Javascript. As a browser-hosted software, Padify does not require any downloads and all assets (images, videos, copy, etc.) are hosted online in their proprietary cloud.

2.1.2. **Woopie**

Woopie, much like Contentment, is a SaaS with an HTML5 based platform and is browser hosted. The Dublin based company was founded in 2012 by Stewart Curry and Martha Rotter. I was lucky enough to speak with Martha Rotter via Skype and to be taken on a walkthrough of their key features. From my initial impression, Woopie appears much like Contentment in terms of the features, design tools and the basic enhancement elements they offer, though Woopie has a larger distribution network. They offer clients the ability to publish to iTunes and Android—just like Contentment—but also to mobi, ePub, kf8 and print.

Despite this, neither *Geist* nor Emmerson felt like Woopie would be a good match for the magazine. The decision to work with Contentment over Woopie was based on Emmerson discussing the platform with other professionals in the field. Russell Clark of *DIVER*, who consulted with Emmerson, “actually used/uses Woopie for his maga[zine] and had a lot of problems with it, from a usability perspective.” According to Clark, Woopie was “hard to learn, [had] design limitations,” and he was, overall, dissatisfied with his experience.

Woopie’s website is currently unavailable, and there is, therefore, little information about their clients, pricing and features. When last available, Woopie’s

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30 LinkedIn. “Woopie.”
31 Crunchbase. “Woopie.”
32 Shannon Emmerson, email to author.
33 Ibid.
website indicated that they were still in beta testing and offering their solutions on a case by case basis.34

2.1.3. Adobe DPS

Established in 1982 by John Warnock and Chuck Geschke,35 Adobe is the grandfather of publishing software. Since its conception, Adobe has focused on providing publishers and designers the solutions they need to create beautiful publications. From Illustrator and Photoshop, to InDesign and Dreamweaver, Adobe cornered the publishing market; it is now almost universally used in the publishing industry. At MAX 2010, “Adobe’s annual worldwide conference,” Adobe announced their newest publishing endeavour: Adobe Digital Publishing Suite (DPS).36 Adobe DPS began by setting mobile solution standards high:

Publishers will be able to efficiently author both fixed and adaptive layouts, natively build new levels of interactivity directly in InDesign, distribute and monetize their digital editions, and optimize their editorial and advertising content for a complete end-to-end digital publishing workflow.37

Thanks to the emergence of new technology including e-readers, smartphones and tablets, there was suddenly a demand in the market for a new type of reading. At that point in time Adobe was already working with some of the world’s largest publishers, including Martha Stewart Living Omnimedia and Condé Nast (WIRED and The New Yorker).38

The high profile name, powerful software and extensive digital tools do not, however, come cheap. In the early years, the Professional Edition of DPS was

34 Woop.ie. Currently unavailable, last accessed August 2014.
35 Adobe. “History of Adobe.”
37 Ibid.
38 Ibid.
expected to run “$699 per month plus a per-issue fee, which scales with publisher volume,” and that was after the software purchase. While the monthly price of Adobe has gone down—the Professional Edition now runs $495 per month or $4,800 per year—users are still required to purchase Adobe Creative Cloud (an additional $69.99 per month for businesses), a minimum of 1,000 downloads (another $400), and cover the same per-issue fee as in 2010. Enterprise licences are available for larger publisher or media companies with multiple publications, with pricing done on a case by case basis.

Price aside, Adobe’s software products remain some of the most powerful publishing tools on the market. Even the early releases of DPS included “Hyperlink, 360 Viewer, Slideshow, Audio, and Video overlay types [...] method to create interactive objects.” The user interface is already one of everyday use for most publishers; however, depending on the familiarity with InDesign, there can be a steep learning curve. For new users it is almost impossible to get acquainted with anything beyond the basic design tools. Despite the extensive documentation and tutorials available in books and online, it can take a long time for design builds to becomes time efficient in InDesign. Additionally, publishers have to develop multiple designs for different screen sizes and orientations to cater to the native app output that DPS offers.

Designer familiarity and its ubiquitous position in the publishing industry, makes Adobe DPS an obvious choice—a comfortable choice—for many publishers. Using what you are accustomed to, however, can often hold you back. As mentioned earlier, one of the biggest issues facing magazine publishers is letting go of the page. While DPS is capable of creating a magazine app that goes beyond the pages of a

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40 Adobe. “My Cart.”
41 Adobe. “Get Started with the Creative Cloud in Just Minutes.”
traditional print magazine, InDesign’s core functions operate with pagination. It is also important to note that DPS does not use HTML5 at the base level. Rather, it still uses a PDF format optimized for iPads, primarily, which does not always translate well onto the iPhone let alone other devices. HTML5 elements can be added for interactivity purposes. It can be difficult to imagine something beyond the borders of the page when the page is always in front of you, although not impossible.

2.1.4. **Mag+**

Mag+ is a newer mobile SaaS—launched in 2011—that aims to allow publishers the comfort of InDesign while giving them additional tools that help them break away from the page. Mag+ is an InDesign plug-in. Companies like Mag+ are targeting publishers who have been using Adobe for their print publication and want to expand into the mobile marketplace.

Downloading the Mag+ plug-in, publishers implement a set of additional tools to their InDesign roster similar to those available through Adobe DPS, varying, in the most part, only in how they are laid out on the screen. What Mag+ offers that is truly different from DPS, are a selection of templates that, while still technically InDesign pages, encourage outside-the-box thinking required to design on the infinite and reflowable canvas of the screen.

In just three years, Mag+ has managed to attain big name clients including *New York Magazine, WebMD, MAD Magazine, Maxim* and United Airlines’ *Hemisphere Magazine*. Again, the actual use of their software to publish a magazine app does not come cheap. A Mag+ licence costs between $499 and $2,999 per month or $999 for a single issue, and that is in addition to the InDesign software or Creative Cloud.

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43 Mag+. “Mag+: Company Profile,” *LinkedIn.*
44 Mag+. “Clients.”
subscription.\textsuperscript{45} The software, however, can be downloaded and demoed for free before a magazine commits to a payment plan.

\section{2.2. Choosing Contentment}

After careful consideration of the four main candidates, \textit{Geist} decided that Contentment provided the best software/service combination for their magazine. Built on Emmerson’s advice and experience with other magazines that had made similar transitions, the recommendation was that \textit{Geist} should look at mainly HTML5 software. Their primary concerns with Adobe DPS and Mag+ were that both developed mobile editions based on PDF technology and paginated articles, while the reviews Emmerson had gotten about Woopie seemed to be more problematic than helpful.

In the summer of 2014, I spent 13 weeks as the digital publishing intern at Contentment. I worked with both the administration—developing social media marketing strategies and researching competitors—and with the production team. My work on the production team focused on developing responsive templates for \textit{Geist’s} digital edition and putting together the first couple issues. My time at Contentment allowed me to understand the relationship between the software (Padify) and the service the company provides.

Like most new software, Padify is not without its learning curve. The user interface allows clients to adjust the size and orientation of their workspace in a way that imitates the varying sizes and responsive nature of tablets and smartphones. At first, this highly flexible blank page seems a rather daunting space to confront. While the tools and widgets are relatively easy to use, it can be difficult to get accustomed to the idea of designing in responsive, reflowable sections rather

\textsuperscript{45} Mag+. “Features & Clients.”
than on a stagnant page. These barriers to entry are, however, very much intentional. Padify was designed with the intention of getting publishers to work with the experienced mobile UI/UX designers and developers at Contentment. The tools available in Padify are designed to be used in conjunction with custom built, flexible templates developed by Padify designers.

**The Padify Workflow**

When clients first sign up for the service, Contentment’s design team starts developing versatile custom templates for the client to use and adapt for their publication. By spending dedicated hours reading and getting to know the publications they are developing for, the Contentment staff create mobile templates that will function across devices and flow through orientations while maintaining brand identity—or in the case of a mobile-first publication, establish a brand identity. Templates are then filled with content from the publication to create a sample to be submitted to the publisher for approval. Tweaks and adjustments are made based on the publisher’s input and preferences until the final product is satisfactory.

The goal here is to find a balance between what the publisher wants, what the readers will engage with and what Contentment’s staff knows can be done with their software. At this point, the app can be viewed using Contentment’s proprietary Preflight app. Any small adjustments that need to be made for the different orientations and/or screen sizes can then be easily made by the design team before the developers finalize the app.

Once the sample is approved and tested for basic functionality, the Padify-designed app is passed off to a team of developers who then work to wrap the responsive content in a native container for iOS and/or Android devices. The app is tested on tablets and smartphones for both operating systems to ensure full and proper functionality. Adjustments are made at both the design and developer levels.
as testing moves forward. Once all of the bugs have been worked out and the client has set up their developer accounts, the app is submitted to Apple and/or Google for approval, a process taking up to two weeks. Upon approval, the app is able to go live on an established launched date. The sample issue created by the Contentment staff is available in the branded storefront as a sample issue that the publisher can then use as promotional material.

After the first issue is completed and approved, Contentment sets up an appointment with their client to train their staff on how to use Padify and the custom templates. The goal of the training sessions is to get the client’s staff to the point that they can continue to develop the app in-office using Padify.

**Contentment Price Plan**

Clients are taken on a case by case basis and price plans are worked out for them based on their needs, specifications and number of required apps. For a single app publication, publishers can expect to pay a several thousand dollar start-up fee followed by monthly installments for continued use of the software and general support. The start-up fee covers the cost of design and template development and publisher training. Developer accounts for Apple and Google are not included in Contentment’s fees.

**Startup Growth**

Contentment has managed to develop a successful workflow that works for their small 12 person team. They have managed to attract the attention of big name clients including Dennis Publishing—who recently confirmed that they are reinvesting in the company—and Condé Nast—not yet a client, but they have

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46 Confidentiality prevents me from providing further detail on pricing options.

47 Michael Kowalski, e-mail message to Contentment staff, September 19, 2014.
requested a sample. The company is starting to make a name for itself in the publishing industry, but like any successful startup, there are growing pains.

As an intern, my time at Contentment was predominantly divided between production, competitive analysis and social marketing. Working in these three departments gave me a chance to understand the different components of the company, how they work together and where there is room to improve.

In the production department, I spent a lot of time working with Padify. The development team at Contentment is constantly working on ways to smooth out the user interface and remove any bugs that come up during production. Many of the interface bugs go unnoticed by the production team as they are overcome almost by second nature. As a newcomer, however, these bugs would often take me some time to figure out and work around. While the developers work on eliminating these bugs, the Contentment staff is great at responding to client issues and, unlike some of their competitors, client support is built into the service package.

Michael Kowalski, founder and CEO, and Christian Price, commercial director, frequently attend industry events promoting and demoing Padify and what Contentment has to offer. No doubt, this face-to-face approach is what has lead to a number of their current clients and requested samples; Padify often speaks for itself when put up against competitors. Despite attracting attention at conferences and trade shows, Contentment’s social marketing campaign falls short of their competitors. During my time at the company I started posting on LinkedIn and Twitter and set up new pages on Facebook and Google+. Regular and active posting proved to be an asset to the company. To give an example, once Contentment’s LinkedIn page was active, the company saw a 40% increase in organic growth in just

48 Michael Kowalski, e-mail message to Contentment staff, September 19, 2014.
two months. Contentment is currently looking to expand their team to include a sales manager and/or a community director who would take on the task of expanding their social media campaigns to draw further attention and entice new clients.

Overall, Contentment—though still small and with lots of room to grow—is definitely on the cutting edge of mobile publishing technology. Contentment is one of the only companies offering publishers hybrid apps, which are designed to function responsibly but wrapped in a native container to take full advantage of device functionality. Currently, Contentment publishes apps for the iPhone, iPad and browsers. Geist will be the first Android app created with the likelihood of more, and the future promises further expansion into Kindle and Microsoft platforms.

**Contentment & Geist**

The initial decision to partner with Contentment on their mobile edition was primarily due to the type of apps Contentment produced. The more they learned about Padify, the clearer it became that a design once, publish everywhere system that incorporated native app functionality was the way to go. Beyond what Contentment offered as a product, their service is what proved to set them apart from the other, larger companies. According to Emmerson it was clear from “all their dealing with them” that the team at Contentment “knew the product intimately.”

“...In all of our correspondence with them, they were just so passionate. [...] You can’t really underestimate that.” While there are drawbacks to working with a start-up, primarily the uncertainty of where they are at with their own business, there are often just as many perks. As Emmerson pointed out, the passion

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50 Shannon Emmerson, interview with author.
51 Ibid.
to succeed as a start-up is invaluable in how it is carried through to client interactions.
Chapter 3. The App

While the Geist app is still in development and has no official launch date, I am able to view, test and demonstrate the app using Contentment’s Preflight app, which they developed for their clients as a way to view their app before it goes live. The basic concept behind the Geist app maintains the aesthetic and overall feel of Geist as a print magazine.

Design

The design of the app was developed with the print version of Geist in mind, taking the primary fonts families and weights to maintain brand identity. As a literary magazine, Geist has a variety of different types of articles ranging from longer narrative non-fiction and photo essays to shorter, reader entries and poetry. Each type of article fits into three primary templates to provide a cohesive unity throughout the issue. The contrast between black and white was toned down to cater to the longer on-screen reading experience and create the illusion of the higher quality paper Geist uses for their print edition.

Content & Publication Schedule

Geist, as a mobile app, will remain a quarterly publication for the foreseeable future and the content is replicated from the print edition. Future publication plans are discussed later in the report.

App Functionality & Navigation
As the app currently stands, navigation is simple. The menu is readily available. A back button that will return readers to the table of contents is clear at the top of each page. A “Back to Top” button lies at the bottom of each page—useful especially for the longer articles—and there are little to no interactive elements. Slideshows are used for photo essays, are indicated by small dots below the primary image and incorporate an additional side-sweep function.

3.1. The Build

The templates for Geist’s app were developed collaboratively between Rob Boynes, a freelance UI/UX designer who frequently works with Contentment, Giles Cunningham, Contentment’s lead designer, and myself. My familiarity with Geist, allowed me to provide insight into the relationship between the print design and the content so that a similar relationship could be carried into the mobile edition. The three of us worked together to develop the concepts and mockups for different editorial types including narratives, poetry, letters/reviews and photography that could be built in Padify and provide a seamless reading experience. These mockups were then sent to Geist for their approval. Once approved, Padify templates were built and a sample edition was put together.

From there the process of building the app followed the same general Contentment workflow outlined above. There were a series of emails sent back and forth between Contentment and Geist to make small adjustments to the design and functionality of the app.

3.2. Problems on the Way

Throughout the digitization process, Geist came up against a few barriers, most of which could be attributed to one basic problem. “It’s a translation thing”,

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said MacKinnon. "We are cultural publishers, we are book nerds, we are not developers." This is a common issue for publishers making the jump to digital publishing—mobile in particular. When only a website was needed and screens were all roughly the same size, things were more standardized and the language gap between developers and publishers was much easier to bridge. Mobile technology, however, has developed in a way that diversifies and complicates the way content is viewed and how readers engage with it.

In this new digital creative world we find two languages attempting to understand each other. One language is that of publishers—like Geist—who are accustomed to designing page layouts and working with longer publishing schedules. The other is developer language, which speaks using various types of code and designs responsively with no particular screen size in mind. When one talks to the other, we get the first saying things like, “I want it to go like this when I poke it”, and the other knowing it will not work but without the words to explain why. New coding language, such as HTML5, have allowed the two a more fluid conversation, but the issue of translation from analogue to digital is still there. For Geist, it "was the biggest challenge."

The designers and developers at Contentment are very familiar with how different types of content work—and in some cases, how they do not work—across mobile screen sizes and devices. It is, therefore, their goal to provide their clients with the mobile version of their magazines that functions best on whichever screen it can be viewed. In some cases this may mean they eliminate certain elements in order to show the publisher the best possible version before moving forward with any changes. The first Geist built in Padify was streamlined in order to ensure quality and some items were left out.

52 AnnMarie MacKinnon, interview with author.
53 Ibid.
54 Ibid.
Advertising

Currently, Geist’s digital edition aims to replicate the content of their print version, including all static image advertisements. Including static image ads in a digital edition is a simple process. But static advertising is generally less engaging than those enhanced for tablet viewing. Mobile readers spend, on average, 90% more time on ads designed for mobile than print.\(^{55}\) Print ads, simply put, do not work on mobile devices. They are often awkwardly sized and/or difficult to read. Unfortunately, publications very rarely have control over the design of an ad, but if they are putting out mobile editions they can encourage advertisers to provide responsive or HTML5 ads similar to those they provide for websites.

Advertising is probably one of the more difficult content pieces to translate seamlessly across platforms. But because advertising is one of the primary sources of revenue for most magazines, they are essential for keeping the publication running.

On one hand the responsive digital advertising has to exist, or at least has to have the potential to exist. Some digital software companies, including Contentment, are beginning to market their services to brands and advertisers, primarily targeting those used by their existing magazine clients. Contentment recently announced AdVenture, a new product designed to develop interactive, mobile friendly advertising. Publishers, on the other hand, must promote their new platform as a viable option for advertisers. Geist and other publications in a similar situation have to sell the value of digital ad placements in their new app. There is a lot of potential in digital advertising (ecommerce alone could be a huge incentive for companies) but publication have to make those option available to their advertisers.

As a print publication, *Geist* uses incredibly high resolution images because print is high resolution, meaning it has large file sizes. Most of Contentment’s app builds, including *Geist*, are done using print assets. The problem is that screens are much lower resolution than print, and the software run by mobile devices are not designed to function with extremely high resolution images. During the first stages of building the app, I was charged with resizing the images for the sample edition. Bringing the images down to as low as 25% of the original size and changing the file type from .tiff to .jpg helped with the load time but still did not eliminate the issue.

**Map & Cryptic Crossword**

The quarterly “Caught Mapping” map of Canada offers readers a humorous look at our country and is often used as promotional material for the magazine. Much like the advertising, the map is a static image and when put on a digital platform, the size of the font is determined by the size of the image rather than the screen, making it very hard to read on smaller screens such as on Apple’s iPhone or on an Android smartphone.

The most problematic example of where translation broke down between the page and the screen during the *Geist* app development was with the crossword.

Every issue, *Geist* runs a Cryptic Crossword Contest. Readers who complete the puzzle can send in their copy and are entered for a chance to win a one-year subscription. During the development process, the instinct at Contentment was to leave the crossword out of the digital edition because on a user level it simply did not work. When this was presented to *Geist* they felt strongly that the crossword had to be included. It was important to them that their digital readers still be able to participate in what has becomes part of the *Geist* brand.

While reader engagement is important to the team at Contentment, they also want to provide their clients with the digital magazine that their clients want.
Contentment’s developers came up with an interactive crossword that can be filled in on mobile devices. The results, however, did not function well across platforms. When viewed on a smartphone, the whole crossword does not fit on a screen; cells are awkwardly stretched out; letters are cut off and difficult to read; progress is lost when the app is closed; and there is no easy way to print the completed crossword to participate in the contest. The latter two issues remain true across platforms.

*Geist* decided to keep the map and crossword in the app for now because of the role it plays in the brand as a whole. They are considering alternatives that they could offer their digital readers as a replacement to these elements. Contentment is also working on finding a better solution for the crossword, and there is potential to develop the map in a similar fashion using HTML5.
Chapter 4. Analysing Geist’s App

In the previous section, we looked at how the Geist app was built and many of the development and design issues that arose during that process. Beyond the technical issues of building an app, the editorial and publishing plans of a magazine have a huge say in how well an app version is going to do on the market. As mentioned earlier, as of yet, there is no formula for mobile success in the magazine industry. Therefore, to see how Geist’s stands to fare on the marketplace, we can look at what others have done. We can examine how they have failed and succeeded, and we can derive a base on which to stand Geist.

4.1. In Context: Industry Failure and Success

The publishing industry is in a state of flux, especially on the digital side of things. Websites and social media have slowly found their place in the industry and are beginning to settle. Mobile publishing—on smartphones and tablets—is a much newer element and publishers are still working on figuring out where mobile editions and apps fit into their business. The reality of the situation is that mobile devices have not been around long enough—the iPhone came out in 2008 and the iPad in 2010—for publishers to fully understand what their readers want from a mobile edition. This uncertainty, alongside the need to publish, has lead to a tumultuous industry full of “half-way-there” solutions, total flops and rare success stories.
4.1.1. The Daily

Taking the time, spending the money and hiring a dedicated digital team does not always mean that success is going to follow. In early 2011, Rupert Murdoch’s The Daily—a daily news magazine—launched one of the very first native iPad magazine apps.

When The Daily’s app first went into production, it was doing so with a dedicated staff\(^{56}\) and—reportedly—a $30 million budget.\(^{57}\) With such a backing, Murdoch’s mobile endeavour was expected to, at the very least, be something more than just a news magazine. Unfortunately, in an attempt to set the standard, The Daily barely managed to get out of the gate. Less than two years after the fact, News Corp. announced that they were shutting things down for The Daily.\(^{58}\)

There was a lot of speculation and finger pointing when The Daily started to show signs of struggle in the Summer of 2012. Some say that the biggest problem was the lackluster editorial in an age of free information. It was “commodity news — i.e. the news that you can get everywhere, in real-time and for free.”\(^{59}\) Others said that because it was iPad-only “it was trapped in a dead-end digital zone.”\(^{60}\) One reporter, Shane Richmond, the head of technology (editorial) for the Telegraph Media Group, wrote, “It’s not a 'native' iPad experience at all, it’s a news magazine

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\(^{56}\) Shane Richmond, “Will Rupert Murdoch’s The Daily save media or is it his next MySpace?” The Telegraph, February (2011).

\(^{57}\) Emily Barnet, “Richard Branson launching Virgin iPad magazine to rival Murdoch,” The Telegraph, November (2010).


\(^{60}\) Hamish McKenzie, “The Daily is dead but not for the reasons you might think,” Pandodaily, December (2012).
torn up and stuffed, page-by-page onto the iPad screen.”61 What most critics do agree upon, more or less, is that *The Daily* was never actually made for the iPad.

Despite an entirely separate digital team, the *The Daily* was always modelled for print. It was based on the idea that—like when buying a newspaper—a reader wants to pay once for all of the sections. The app was, therefore, too big, too bulky, too impersonal for the iPad. *The Daily* attempted to take advantage of the native iPad functions to personalize the experience but instead made it clear that they are not in tune with their audience. The same reporter from the Telegraph Media Group expressed his frustration with the localization function: “After asking to use my location, it gives me the weather for New York anyway. I’m not saying it should know the weather in London[...] but displaying useless information is worse than none at all.”62 As Richmond correctly points out, a native app should only take advantage of native functionality when they can do it right.

### 4.1.2. *The Magazine*

*The Daily* is rarely spoken or written about without being compared to Marco Arment’s highly successful, *The Magazine*.

Marco Arment, known as the co-founder of Tumblr and founder of Instapaper, launched *The Magazine* in October 2012 and within two weeks it was already making money.63 *The Magazine: For Geeks Like Us*, as it was originally named in the app store, was the polar opposite of *The Daily*. Arment started the project by himself and with absolutely no external funding.

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62 Ibid.
Arment did, however, have some key skills and connections that helped form the success of *The Magazine*. For starters, Arment is a web and iOS developer and programmer. He was also already well known in the tech and content distribution industries thanks to his work with Tumblr and Instapaper. Together, these attributes allowed Arment to forgo many of the expensive startup costs associated with starting a mobile-first magazine; there was no need for him to pay someone else to program the app, and he already had a large pool of contributors who were willing to back him up and help promote the magazine.

*The Magazine* editorial is highly focused, the number of articles is kept to a minimum—roughly five medium-length articles per issue—and there are no digital add-ons to distract the reader.

Arment sold *The Magazine* in the summer of 2013 to executive editor, Glenn Fleishman, in the hopes that Fleishman would start “improving, adding to, and changing *The Magazine* for the better.”Unfortunately, December 17, 2014 will mark the last subscription issue of the *The Magazine*. According to Fleishman, *The Magazine* has seen a decline in subscription since February of 2013. “The sad truth has been that, while profitable from week one, [...] we couldn’t replace departing subscribers with new ones fast enough.”

### 4.2. Drawing the Baseline

*The Daily* and *The Magazine* are two of the more extreme examples, with most mobile magazine apps falling somewhere in the middle, but they give a clear picture of digital and editorial elements that do and do not work. I think there are

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64 *The Magazine,* “We Answer Your Questions,” accessed on October 2, 2014.

65 Fleishman, Glenn, “The Magazine is making a book (again) and shutting down (what?!),” October (2014).

66 Ibid.
three main elements that can be attributed to the success of *The Magazine* and the failure of *The Daily*: highly focused editorial content, regular but not excessive updates, and simple design and navigation.

**Highly focused editorial**

In the magazine industry it is important to have a defined niche, as to be distinguished from the competition. For a magazine app this distinction is even more important because apps are more closely competing with the web. In order to add value to an app, the editorial has to be focused enough to allow the quality of the writing and reporting to stand above what is available on the web for free. Readers subscribed to *The Magazine* because they knew they were getting focused, high quality opinion pieces on tech news from industry experts, while *The Daily* lost readers because their content was available for free on the web.

**Publish a little a lot**

Readers generally expect a print magazine to be published once a month with articles that vary in length and detail, which allows them to enjoy the time they spend with the magazine. On the web, readers expect short, up-to-the-minute news feeds that they can take in while on the go. Apps offer a middle ground. Readers expect apps, as a digital media connected to the web, to be more up to date than print, but they also enjoy taking their time with it and relaxing the same way they do with a print magazine.67 Getting a reader's attention is just the first step. Apps require high loyalty and returning users. Magazines must create a habitual behaviour in their readers to get them to keep going back to the app while

67 *Magazines Canada, Digital Magazines Fact Book* (Toronto: Magazines Canada, 2013), 40: “73% of tablet owners use the device while in bed and 96% use it on the sofa, mirroring the consumption habits familiar to printed magazines.”
refraining from bombarding them with push notifications. Having a balance between the two is key to maintaining that loyalty.

**Simplicity wins**

*The Daily’s* failure shows us that adding too many bells and whistles—unless done extremely well—to your app is like pushing the self destruct button. In any genre or subsection of the app store it is always simplicity that wins out. Even the most successful app games are much more simplistic than their web or console counterparts: think *Candy Crush* versus *World of Warcraft*. *The Magazine* did not overwhelm their readers with interactive elements and even tested the market before deciding to add pictures to their articles. It is better to slowly introduce readers to new elements, giving them time to get acquainted or decide they do not like them, than to put it all out there at once. Overwhelming readers and giving them too many options is only going to push them away.

**Opportunity**

Beyond the three concepts listed above, I think, it is important to note that within the publishing industry there is the unique opportunity for small and startup publications to pave the way for larger publications. It may, in fact, mean a longer lifespan for smaller publications and that larger magazines and newspapers may be better off breaking up into sections to provide more focused apps to their readers.

### 4.3. In Comparison & Looking Forward

After looking at how other magazines have, both successfully and unsuccessfully, taken on the mobile issue, we can now look at where *Geist* stands.

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Geist’s readers are not The Daily’s or The Magazine’s readers, but we can discern from them a general sense of how magazines should approach mobile reading. It is important to note that Geist’s app has still not been made available to the public, so it is difficult to say how their readers are going to approach the new reading experience. Looking at each component in turn, we can see where Geist is now, where they hope to go and how they may go about it in the best way.

**Design**

The result, as seen above, melds the capabilities of the screen with the elegant design of Geist’s print edition. When Arment first put The Magazine together, he worked with Pacific Helm, a design studio based in San Francisco, to create an entirely new publication, which is part of the reason The Magazine worked so well on the iPad. For Geist, and other existing magazines, it is a little harder. Existing magazines must maintain their brand image, an image established in print, but allow it to morph into the infinite canvas of the screen. By taking certain elements such as typography, colour palette and white space and then subtly turning down the black and white contrast on the screen, the team at Contentment maintained Geist’s identity and high quality appearance on a reflowable scrolling screen.

The subtle variation in the templates allow readers to enjoy different types of work—narrative, poetry, photography—without any disruption to their reading experience. The different elements flow together as one cohesive unit, while the toned down whites make the reading experience more enjoyable than the stark—almost blue—whites typically seen on mobile devices. Overall, Geist’s print design has translated well onto the scrolling pages of handheld devices.

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70 Pacific Helm. “Pacific Helm Home Page.”
Content & Publications Schedule

In keeping with the content, the mobile edition of *Geist* will also be released on a quarterly basis. It is difficult for an existing quarterly, or monthly, magazine to establish a secondary publishing schedule. *The Magazine*, was able to start bi-weekly and it worked well for their audience. The team at *Geist* is already aware that the audience they are targeting has different reading habits than their print audience, but are still discovering what those differences are. Once *Geist’s* app goes live, they will need time to communicate with their mobile audience to see what publication schedule will work for them. It is possible that publishing quarterly will be sufficient, but digital editions typically require more frequent updates in order to keep readers engaged with the app.

While the mobile edition is planned to remain a quarterly magazine, *Geist* has plans for additional publications to cater to their mobile audience. Thanks to the versatility of Padify, one of the things they plan on doing in the long run is digitizing their back issues. They have considered a number of ways in which they could do this, including straight back issues or eBooks based on certain topics they cover or that are centered around a particular author.71 Shannon Emmerson also mentioned that they were talking about developing a type of “content marketing” for Geist in the form of writer’s guides or practical eBooks.72 “It’s not even so much about the magazine, it’s about using a digital technology to reach a digital audience in order to build their subscriptions.”73 These, in conjunction with their current quarterly publication, give Geist further flexibility to speak to their mobile audience in a new way, giving them something different and useful beyond the print issue.

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71 AnnMarie MacKinnon, interview with author.
72 Shannon Emmerson, interview with the author.
73 Ibid.
**App Functionality & Navigation**

There is not much to say about the current navigation of the app. *Geist* and Contentment both seem to understand that simplicity wins when it comes to user interfaces. Keeping the navigation close to how a print magazine works, seems to be the best possible solution for mobile editions. In consideration of how *Geist* plans to move forward with additional or different content for mobile readers, maintaining the current branding and simplicity will serve them well. The best option may be to embed additional content directly into the page, avoiding too many pop-overs and external links.

The loading lag caused by images, as mentioned earlier, could be highly problematic for *Geist* in the long run. Once the images have been reduced, the time it takes for a page to load can often be longer than what most people are willing to spend on a page in the mobile format. If, as planned, *Geist* moves forward with adding further functionality to their app—additional images, videos of poets reading their poems, etc.—images may have to be further reduced in size. Once they have figured out what size works, the process should be easy to incorporate into the workflow. Page load times may still have to be tested individually for each issue before the issue goes live.

As mentioned above, it is difficult to say how successful *Geist*'s app will be. The team at *Geist* still has to be trained to use Padify and integrate the process into their workflow, as well as promote and distribute the app. What can be said about *Geist*, is that as a print magazine, they have, for the most part, begun the process of breaking away from their print mandate. I think in time we will see *Geist*, and other magazines of a similar size, adapt their content and workflow to better suit mobile reading. As coding in HTML5 and CSS3, and UI/UX design become more ubiquitous skills amongst designers and young publishers, I think we will see more small publications migrating to mobile editions and/or mobile-first publications. It is not
about deciding who has done it best and following by example, but rather, it is about determining what is the best for readers.
Conclusion

When iPads hit the market in 2010 there was a genuine and heated debate going on in the publishing industry as to whether the tablet could be the “platform that would save the industry from declining readership and dropping revenue.” A month after the first iPad was sold, writer and Google Ventures partner, MG Siegler wrote, “a few of my favorite early apps on the iPad have been the magazine and newspaper apps.” After just two years, however, the tone began to change. Siegler, despite his initial excitement for magazine apps, wrote a followup article in December 2012: “Why Magazine Apps Sucks.” In this article his view on magazine apps takes a rather pessimistic turn.

Magazines, like newspapers, are dying. Neither tablets, smartphones, or the web are going to save them. Some of the best and most popular will continue to exist for a quite a while, but they’re all going to the grave at their own pace.

From 2010 to 2012 the magazine industry had managed to prove to the technology industry that they were not up to the task of creating meaningful, engaging, worthwhile mobile editions. But that does not mean that things cannot and are not changing.

Now, another two years later, the companies leading the way are digital startup and software companies like Contentment. Contentment founder and CEO,

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74 Amy-Mae Elliott, ”Is Developing a Mobile App Worth the Cost?,” Mashable, October (2010).
75 Siegler, MG, ”Disposable Content On The Non-Disposable iPad,” TechCrunch, May (2010).
77 Ibid.
Michael Kowalski has heard time and time again from his counterparts in the publishing industry that “high costs and low returns meant that digital is ‘not working’ and they would therefore not be rolling out digital editions of any more titles.”78 In his op-ed piece “Are Digital Editions Already Dead?”, Kowalski points out that “mobile hasn’t worked’ for the simple reason publishers haven’t actually tried it yet.”79 Taking the print strategy for content and distribution, even with a responsive app container, does not produce a true mobile product. It’s a print product in a new package.

*Geist* is one of the few smaller magazines that has been lucky enough to afford, in large part due to a grant from the Canada Council, the opportunity to explore the “Wild West” that is mobile publishing.80 As Geist continues to move forward, they are “starting to look at the print magazine as a different publishing platform from the electronic” and doing so in such a way that, “editorially it is a different publication.”81 It is a slow process. They are essentially working on creating an entirely new product, but they have the motivation to do something different and explore what can be done with the software.

A digital edition or app should act as a companion or diversifying element for the overall editorial strategy, one also based in either print or on the web. The PDF replicas that we have seen so much of are more of a unfortunate alternative than an addition to the brand. Apps should be more—or in some cases less—than just a replica: “if you can make an app useful and give me some value behind that content,
I’ll use the app every day, and I might even pay you for it.”82 Existing magazines should be looking for ways to enhance their brand and provide something that their readers would be willing to pay for, and new magazines should be starting with it. And I think that Geist is able and willing to be one such publication. As AnnMarie MacKinnon points out, “it is a really exciting time, it feels like there is no wrong way to do it.”83

Even with small publications spending dedicated hours on app development, it is really difficult to say how far apps are going to take the magazine industry. There are a lot of uncertain variables still in play that could make or break the usefulness and validity of app publications; design, advertising, publication schedules, navigation and readability are all just part of what is going on in the industry. On a whole different level we can see these two industries—magazine publishing and tech development—coming together in a space that neither one fully understands. Publishers have a great understanding—or should have a great understanding—of content creation and curating it in an effective manner, but they do not necessarily have the money or the experience to create something lasting in a digital format. Developers can help publishers create a small piece of the technical puzzle and help them create the product. But what developers cannot do, and publishers seem to be struggling to do, is create habit forming behaviour in readers that can attract advertisers and begin to generate the revenue that advertising provides in print.

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