

SEMINAR: PRODUCING THE NEW WAY: Cross media projects for children

Greg Childs opens the session with the remark that Cinekid, which organizes the seminar, is one of the organisations which for some time have recognised the importance of cross-media. Children are often the forerunners when it comes to new technologies, so the goal of the seminar should be to show both the possibilities and challenges of cross-medial projects for children. “When I work on cross-medial projects”, says Childs, “I try to think of what children can do, want to do, and possibly will do with a project. The important part is that nothing *has* to be interactive. You have to know what the needs of the audience are.” He therefore feels that it is important to have a good idea as to why and how a project should be interactive: “Do you have to push a button, does it require participation and do your actions influence the programme?” Cross-medial projects also require new production processes, and when it comes to money, how do you interest advertisers in your projects when the appropriate models of audience measurement are not yet fully developed? To answer questions like this it is a good idea to look at the do’s and don’ts of multimedia productions. To get an idea of the possibilities and challenges, Cinekid has invited four guests who are currently working on successful cross-media projects.

The first of these guests is Frank Geusebroek, Dutch Business Developer with Endemol. He was one of the people behind the successful project *Get close to...the Sugababes*, a UK show exclusively filmed for, and broadcast on, mobile handsets. Endemol is still first and foremost a television production company, and it is always looking for alternative media to present itself on, and for new ways to reach a large audience. Not only was *Get close to...* a 6-week series for a new medium (mobile handsets), but it was also highly interactive. The singers from the Sugababes girls band filmed their own lives with their Nokias, and Endemol filmed additional items with a film crew. All of this was then edited into a show that could be downloaded from the download portal of O2, a mobile phone operator. The interactive part consisted of a quiz, and the possibility for fans to post questions for their idols. The questions were presented to the Sugababes and some were answered. The fans could also influence the bands actions by asking the girls to wear particular clothes, or by suggesting what they should sing during a performance.

Because this project was the first of its kind, it resulted in a lot of free publicity for Endemol, for O2, and of course for the Sugababes themselves. “The impact of this publicity was very important.”, says Geusebroek.

“If that is the case”, asks Childs, “how was the girls management involved, and how did they control the published material?”. Geusebroek says that all footage was edited, and that there was a 36-hour delay between the time of recording and the moment of publishing. But for such projects in general, Geusebroek feels that the internet is for a great deal self-regulating. “This medium has to have a certain level of freedom, until of course a certain line is crossed.”

The most important problem for a project like *Get close too...* is that there is no real market for them in smaller countries like Holland. “Because Holland is so small, such projects have no priority with mobile phone operators.” Larger countries such as Spain are interested in the project, where a project involving a local idol has already taken place.

A totally different approach to cross-medial programmes comes from Xenophile Media, a Canadian production company specialized in cross-medial projects. Patrick Crowe presents their project *Total drama island*, an animated parody of the successful reality-series *Survivor*. In the programme’s 26 episodes the audience follows the experiences of a group of adolescents which, besides competing in outrageous competition and eating inedible summer

camp food, must survive a weekly vote-off. The programme's website supports and complements the television show, and viewers can visit the virtual campsite where they can create their own camper (an avatar), find bio's of the contestants and compete with other viewers/campers in the same challenges the campers have had to face on television. During the last episode of the show, participants can even win a cameo next to their avatar. By winning web games they can also earn 'marshmallows' to buy upgrades for their avatars or virtual collectibles. All this is hosted by the same (animated) game show host that hosts the television programme.

Crowe says that the key to making a combination of web and television broadcasts work, and to luring the viewers into interacting with the show, is to use incentives. During the programme there is constant information about the website provided on the leaderboard in the lower third of the screen. Subscribers also get a 'customised' tabloid about the show via e-mail. "The important thing is to encourage and reward registration on internet", says Crowe, "and after that to track the players movements and send them prompts and updates so that they are rewarded for their interaction." For Xenophile this recipe is working. In Canada the programme had more than 100,000 registered users, with as many as 10,000 players online at the same time. Some 60% of the viewers also registered. Crowe says that one of the most important that make such a project successful is to integrate the other platform into the television programme right from the earliest concept stage. Although broadcasters are still a little wary of projects like these, Crowe thinks they are more used to the idea than, say, three years ago. "They should be, because kids these days only watch television occasionally. And when they watch television they're often using another platform at the same time."

While Xenophile is using mostly new media for their cross-medial projects, the Belgian company SanctaMedia choose to use more traditional media like theatre and magazines in their cross-medial project *W@=D@*. *W@=D@* is primarily a television show about world cultures in which two boys travel around the world to bring some cultural artefacts, once owned by a grandfather of one of the boys, back to their own cultures. In so doing, the boys learn about different world cultures.

Linked to the television programme was an internet site with background information on the show. In the television programme the viewers were also prompted by a 'docuclipalert' to find online video clips on the subject shown. A magazine, printed by Sanoma and sold by bookstores and newsagents, also provided additional information about the cultures visited. For theatres around the country, theatre company *Het Paleis* adapted legends from the different cultures for theatre. In this way the different platforms could enrich and enhance the information given in the television show. CEO Kristoff Leue says that the content of all the platform was conceived by a team of only eight people. "It was the only way to work on such a project", says Leue. "This way each media could stand alone, but they always shared the same vision because they were made by the same team." It was a successful project, but Leue is still disappointed that the (logical) connection with the Belgian school system failed. "It didn't fit into the educational outlines defined by the Ministry." The show was recently re-broadcast by the Belgian network, but the broadcaster forgot that there were cross-medial references to a website that was no longer online. "That is a typical problem. Partners don't always grasp the concept of cross-medial programmes. You have to get them to think cross-medial."

Slightly less intercultural than *W@=D@*, but also about a trip around the world, is the animation series *Kika and Bob*, made by Submarine. In the series, Kika and Bob the fireman are trying to get home after having been blown to the other side of the world while trying to rescue Kika's cat Tiger from a church steeple during a typhoon. The series is combined with a website where viewers can play games inspired by the episodes of the series, but can also feed

Tiger. Tiger is still stuck on the church steeple, and visitors can play games to earn cat food to feed him with. While the television series is centred around the adventures of Kika and Bob, the website is centred around Tiger. Bruno Felix, director of Submarine, agrees with Patrick Crowe that you have to have an incentive to invite viewers to your website. For this reason, every episode of *Kika and Bob* ends with a shot of Tiger on the steeple. Also important when thinking of cross-medial projects, says Felix, is to keep the idea simple. “Or you will be contradicted by your own ideas.” This idea can also be found in the design of *Kika and Bob*. “By using animation you can blend the aesthetics of the show with the online game-interface.” Another reason to keep both website and series simple is to make sales to foreign broadcasting companies easier. They only have to dub the series and translate the website, which the company can then run on its own servers. In the case of *Total Drama Island* the complex website is integrated in the Xenophile computer system, which makes selling the series more difficult.

All these projects are based on assumptions about how children relate to new media. The international research project MEDIAPPRO researched the attitudes of children to new media in different countries, and Thierry De Smedt, coordinator of the project, says there were some interesting results. One of the most interesting results was that, contrary to the general assumption, young people do not use internet to meet people all over the world, or to explore the world at large. Online they form little communities of friends (tribes), with whom they chat, or whose blogs they visit. The youngsters are also not ignorant of the dangers of the internet, like unwanted contacts with adults or identity theft. It is because of these dangers that they stick so close to home when roaming the net.

Another finding of MEDIAPPRO is that children use different platforms simultaneously. They send a text message, listen to music, check their mail and watch TV all at the same time. But the internet is not transforming children into little ‘cyborgs’ that can only communicate in the virtual world, and they use different media as and when they see fit. “It concerns us as producers to know these kinds of things”, says Childs in a reaction to De Smedts findings, and Geusebroek says: “It is good to know that you are communicating with tribes.” “It is interesting that the young people are not at all adventurous”, says Crowe, “That is a big marketing issue.”

To close the session, Childs asks about the do’s and don’ts of cross-medial production. One ‘do’ that the panel agrees upon is that it is important to build a strong brand, and to differentiate your content for the various media you are using. Although Felix also warns that “you should stand out in one medium and pitch on that, and it is a good idea to interest partners.” “In any case, we should use more media”, says Crowe, “we have to let our experience grow.” Childs: “We didn’t hear the word ‘conversion’ a lot today, and what we see is that the audience does that for themselves when using different media simultaneously and in different ways. The important thing is that we, as makers, learn the different practice of making different media. We should do that ourselves, and with partners.”