

Cinekid Transmedia Seminar: Creative Development and Production Models

Over the past few years storytelling has emerged in a new form which has an impact on children. Transmedia storytelling uses television, the web, games and print to reach a young audience. This new approach confronts makers with a range of new issues and questions. What are the important elements in creating successful transmedia projects? What are the insights with regard to scriptwriting, production models and management? The Cinekid Transmedia seminar goes in search of answers.

Introduction by Ian Ginn

Ian Ginn is a creative producer and writer with experience in the field of interactive media and education. He is currently developing two transmedia projects and is also supporting the Amsterdam University of Applied Sciences in establishing a transmedia educational track. Ginn explains that this seminar is about four questions: what is transmedia storytelling? Why is it here? How are others doing it? And how do we measure the success of transmedia projects?

Looking for a definition

What is transmedia storytelling? Ginn starts with an overview and a definition of the concept of transmedia as stated by Henry Jenkins, a well-known scholar in the field of new media and fan culture. According to Jenkins, transmedia is:

... the integration of entertainment experiences across a range of media platforms. Stories like Heroes or Lost ... spread from television into comics, the web, computer or alternate reality games, toys and other commodities ... picking up new consumers as they go...¹

Some people see transmedia as an extension of a linear narrative, Ginn says. Other people see transmedia as a way of creating new formats. According to Ginn, transmedia is a new mode of storytelling. "The grammar of film was established quite quickly, we are still using it today. But the modes of storytelling have changed over the years. Transmedia is triggered by a digital generation that is ready for it. And the infrastructure and platforms are ready to spread these new modes of storytelling."

Understanding transmedia

Ginn notes that quite often transmedia projects with a lot of potential never get off the ground. Most of the time these projects are not fully understood. "The people that are running broadcast and media companies still don't get the fact that audiences, especially those under fifteen, understand, experience and want different media and entertainment experiences than the ones we have had until now. If you can't understand that, you're always going to miss."

But how do kids look at the internet? They see it as a series of portals, Ginn says. "Broadband is a standard, and kids have PCs, so broadcasters are extending their offering to the web." The website Miniclip is one of the world's the most successful free gaming sites. One of the most popular games on Miniclip is Club Penguin, which is owned by Disney. For kids, Ginn says, this means more choice and less loyalty to one 'place' on the internet. "It is another portal for the kids. That's the way they experience the screen. When children look at the television today, they see it as just another portal."

PlayStation 1 and 3

To explain the history of transmedia, Ginn gives an overview of influential technologies, platforms and business models. According to Ginn, the introduction of Sony's PlayStation in

¹ http://www.convergenceculture.org/weblog/2009/09/transmedia_storytelling_and_en.php

1994 changed not only the personal computer, but also the way we experienced television. Fifteen years later this is going to happen again. The 3rd generation PlayStation 3 is a Blue-ray player, has a hard disk recorder, has broadband networking and connects to a world wide network of multiplayer games. But for Ginn the most important thing is that Sony owns hours of quality content, like films and television series. It is an enormous opportunity for Sony because they have 100 million of these players, each connected to the web.

World of Warcraft as a new business model

World of Warcraft is not only a game, Ginn says. The most interesting element is their business model. The game is free to download and can be played on trial for 10 days. After that period you pay 13 euros per month. Children can buy scratch cards which give them access to their monthly fix. World of Warcraft already 15 million players world wide, and the company earns some 75 million euros per month. Ginn juxtaposes this figures against the fact that in the Netherlands many broadcasters have to base their broadcaster budgets on audience numbers. The Dutch government doesn't count children as part of the audience. "There is a kind of miss-match there", says Ginn. "The internet is open, innovation happens. If we don't understand what is going on, we will be missing our targets."

Hazel Grian

The next speaker, Hazel Grian, talks about interactive storytelling, transmedia and alternative reality games. She doesn't have a background in television or console games, but works as a writer, actor and stand-up comedian. Grian gives an overview of what she has done the past three years in scriptwriting for transmedia projects.

The Rabbit Hole

The Rabbit Hole was an alternate reality game about a fictional character called Eva McGill. It involved putting the audience in the position of a detective. Grian's team e-mailed people from the community to inform them that there were flyers on the street with a picture of a missing cat. At the bottom of the flyer was a URL that took the players to Eva's blog. On the blog, players could read background stories to get an idea of what had already happened. Grian: "It doesn't always have to be high-tech. This is stuff people can relate to and people can recognize as something with a little story behind it."

As part of the alternate reality game, Grian and her team organized a live event in Bristol. Several fans turned up, and they were met by Pat and Dave, two 'paranormal detectives' who were actually actors and part of the Rabbit Hole project. They took the fans through the city where they even caught a glimpse of Eva. At the end of the project, which lasted eight months, some of the players received postcards from Eva. Grain: "They found that incredible. Also the e-mail they got from the characters, the chit chat, the in between things, the live event. It was those things that created the magic for the players."

Kate Modern

There are differences between transmedia projects when it comes to aims, scale and technology. For the interactive soap opera *Kate Modern*, Grain was asked to be the writer and story developer. The main platform for *Kate Modern* was Bebo, a social network site. Each character had their own profile. Players could make comments and receive reactions from the characters. "What made it a powerful project was the combination of a constant flow of online chit chat and a driving drama with a traditional story arc", Grian says.

Star Trek

For the first Star Trek movie, Grian created what she called an 'old school ARG', with a lot of difficult puzzles and live events in Madrid and Berlin. The players had to follow a puzzle trail consisting of different elements spread across the internet. Grian and her team used the official Star Trek forum, e-mail, Facebook and Twitter to create a transmedia experience.

Again, the transmedia project was not so much about high-end technology. Grian: “We managed it in a very simple way, despite the big production values behind the movie and even behind the ARG. It was about creating a realistic and fun dialogue between things that people were using everyday, like e-mail and the real world.”

Marc Goodchild

Next speaker is Mark Goodchild, Head of Children’s Interactive and On-Demand for CBBC, BBC’s Children’s channel. For the Cinekid seminar Goodchild talks about transmedia production models from a broadcaster’s point of view. Transmedia is about putting the user into the story as one of the characters, Goodchild states. Children are used to this ‘game mechanic’, and recent research showed that last year, for the first time, the amount of hours children were spending each day on the internet and game consoles overtook television.

Four reasons to create cross media

Why, and how, should broadcasters create cross media projects? Firstly there are audience expectations around channel-defining brands, Goodchild says. Children expect to find something online which is of good quality. Secondly, broadcasters have to offer something that is ‘native’ to the web: connectivity and personalisation. This is something the web can do, which television can’t. Thirdly, broadcasters have to come up with interactive innovations that match traditional, linear brands. Goodchild: “Take for example Star Trek. It has always been multi-media, it’s a universe. We are looking for the same situation around brands where there is in potential already a wider universe that we have already created. We can use interactive technologies to create new transmedia experiences”. And fourthly, it is important to look for 360 degree properties where one platform, be it television, games or internet cannot work without the other one.

Successful productions

What, on the production side, is the key to successful cross media projects? For Goodchild, audience focus is very important. As is planning, which in many productions proves to be lacking, says Goodchild. Particularly when working with a linear television production. These have their own deadlines and working processes, Goodchild explains. So everything has to be integrated at the start of the production. Goodchild: “For one of our cross media projects, the people from television decided to change the soundscape and the audio design two weeks before transmission. This might seem trivial to the television colleagues, but it had a huge impact on the people working for the web.”

There is no website anymore

CBBC’s strategy is to give basic video-on-demand support for every television programme. Goodchild: “We try to ban the word ‘website’ all together. It’s more about having an experience and checking as to whether it’s the right experience for the right platform.” For the traditional linear television show *M.I.-High*, which is about three children working as undercover spies, the CBBC rolled out an extra narrative. All the key characters are in the ARG, but now children can join the team as one of the agents. We encourage kids to work together to get to the next step, rewarding collaboration says Goodchild. Around 300.000 children were playing the ARG. A new bit of the story unfolded each week in line with the television show.

Bamzooki: engaging audiences

The television programme and website *Bamzooki* is an example of the strength of user-generated content and new audience behaviour. Bamzooki allows children to create their own 3D creatures in an online toolkit and submit them for the television show. In the show they can enter a contest with the creatures created by other kids. The original programme ran for three seasons and then stopped, but children could still make use of the online toolkit. But CBBC found out that the audience have continued to use the website and actually started to

take ownership of the Bamzooki universe. Children posted fan material on YouTube, and last summer a school in Wales set up a tournament with 16 other schools to have a virtual contest. Goodchild: “The fact that the children took over the ownership of the universe inspires us to come back with a new Bamzooki television show to match their aspirations.”

Jeff Gomez

Jeff Gomez, CEO of Starlight Runner Entertainment, has been telling stories across multiple media platforms since the early 1990’s. He worked for several companies and shows like Nintendo and Magic: the Gathering, and also created the transmedia universe for the Pirates of the Caribbean series. In this seminar Gomez focused on the maintenance of transmedia story telling.

For Gomez, a transmedia project starts with looking at the intellectual property and examining what is fundamentally powerful. Gomez: “You have to examine your intellectual property to see how this can accommodate a hundred or a thousand hours of new content across every conceivable media platform - in a way that allows you to weave a narrative tapestry of content.”

The need for a canon

But how do you weave a coherent narrative tapestry? Transmedia is not about a linear narrative with a beginning, a middle and an end, Gomez explains. Transmedia creates an immersive world that has a past, a present and a future. Gomez: “A world that is rich enough to exist beyond the boundaries of the screen is going to generate hundreds of thousands of stories for you.” Therefore you have to prepare yourself well and create a ‘canon’. A canon is an official recognized set of characters, story points, locations and objects. You have to recognize this canon, protect it and explain to everyone involved that they have to observe the guidelines, Gomez says. “You can’t have a world where anything goes.”

How do you work with a canon? First you have to have a person at the top who is in charge and decides, supported by a group of advisors, Gomez says. And to follow the canon through the roll-out of your transmedia project, you also need a set of guidelines. These are foundational documents which can sometimes be confidential. Gomez also stresses the importance of rewarding the people that support the overall superstructure of transmedia implementation, for example with cross-promotion advertising.

The launch

A good transmedia project starts with a launch platform, Gomez says. For many Hollywood studio films the launch platform is the internet. Also important is the driving platform, for example the feature film. Around the driving platforms are several so called ‘pods’. An example of these pods are the webisodes of Dexter, says Gomez. The driving platform is every Dexter season of 12 episodes and tells everything you need to know about Dexter. But the webisodes bring extra depth to the character. Gomez: “The animated webisodes reveal secrets about Dexter’s back story: how he became a serial killer. It resonates with the storyline in the driving platform, the television series. If you look at the webisodes, your experience of the season will be deeply enriched.”

The clearing house

According to Gomez, the most important element in transmedia maintenance is the clearing house. The clearing house consists of one or more teams of people who provide the creative guidance for the franchise as a whole. This maintenance can be a kind of complicated endeavour because there are different divisions or licensors, all who are involved in the transmedia experience, Gomez says. Also different storylines can generate conflict, That is why there need to be a system for providing solutions to creative disputes.

Case 1: SpangaS (Gemma Derksen and Wilko van Ipperen)

Gemma Derksen and Wilko van Ipperen both work for the Dutch broadcaster NCRV. Wilko is head of the internet department and Gemma Derksen is head of the drama department. They present *SpangaS*, a daily drama series situated at a high school in the Netherlands.

Derksen describes *SpangaS* as a reflection on the multicultural society, complete with characters with different ethical or religious backgrounds. Research showed that the target group, children between 10 and 12, want to step into a completely different world after school. And this world has to be bigger than television, explains Derksen. This is why *SpangaS* is a crossmedia drama concept, integrating the television series, internet, books and film.

Extending SpangaS

The story of *SpangaS* actually starts after the broadcast of the daily episode, Van Ipperen explains. Each episode ends with a sort of confession by one of the main characters, looking straight into the camera. When you go to the website you immediately see this confession on the homepage. "It is a brand extension", Van Ipperen says. "The characters of the series also blog on the *SpangaS* site and kids can react and comment. Sometimes, but not always, the characters reply because there are many reactions from the children."

SpangaS always want to make a connection with the real world, says Van Ipperen. The fictional Spangalas school participated in the 'real' teacher of the year contest. A teacher from Spangalas colleges was also nominated for this contest and the pupils could vote for him. The 'real life' winner of the teacher of the year contest even got a small role in an episode of *SpangaS*. Besides this, other contests and organisations, like the Heart Foundation and an NGO, also participate in the series.

Interaction

The *SpangaS* website has 65.000 unique visitors a week and more than 25 percent stays longer than 20 minutes. Van Ipperen says this is quite exceptional. Since *SpangaS* started in 2007 more than 9,5 million people have watched the stream, and on the website children can react on the forum, take tests, play games and create their own content based on the *SpangaS* storylines. Van Ipperen: "children can make their own photo comic with video stills from the *SpangaS* series. We also asked kids to make their own version of the introduction tune. They do so en masse."

Visitors can create a profile on the *SpangaS* website and become friends. It is just like a regular social network, Van Ipperen says. There are about 85,000 profile pages. Children can not only become friends with their 'real world' friends, but also with the fictional characters in *SpangaS*. The forum has about 2,500 posts a day, and children can talk about issues related to the series, or about their personal lives. This is also useful for the scriptwriters. A forum topic about divorce, for instance, became a source of inspiration for one of the episodes.

Further improvement

On television, *SpangaS* has a 40% market share of the target group, which is very high. According to Derksen, it is a success because it was a crossmedia concept from the start. The crossmedia concept is expanding. There is a print magazine that focuses on behind-the-scenes activity, and each character has their own novel with original content. There's also a DVD, a feature film called *SpangaS on Survival* and a *SpangaS* narrow casting channel on high school screens featuring news, polls and short video clips. In the years to come Derksen en Van Ipperen want to further improve and extend these crossmedia channels.

Case 2: Crimeville (Ida Brinck-Lund)

Ida Brinck-Lund is owner of Art of Crime, a company which recently introduced a new transmedia project called *Crimeville*. Brinck-Lund talked about the business opportunities for new transmedia projects. She believes that transmedia is only possible when we think about the gaps in the market.

Product research

How do you create a transmedia product? Brinck-Lund: “We were looking to the market and were thinking: we need to do something for the girls that is not pink Barbie, and for the guys something that is neither adventure or football.” Brinck-Lund found out that in the crime-fiction section there are a lot of books and series like CSI. But there is only one game. Brinck-Lund: “We thought, let’s combine all these elements into one, which was the starting point for our product.”

Brinck-Lund stresses the importance of a really strong crossmedia promotion from the beginning. This means that you don’t have one product which you make your money from. It is important to have a really strong main driver, which can be internet or television.

Crime mysteries for children

Brinck-Lund and her team developed Crimeville, an interactive universe of crime mysteries for children, distributed via multiple media platforms. In the Crimeville cartoon strip kids can pick a prank and try to figure out who did it. There is also an online community where children can have their own avatar walking around the town of Crimeville, solving crimes and pranks, picking up evidence and playing mini games. There is a Crimeville magazine and 26 episodes of 6-minute television programmes. And there is a role playing trading card game. Brinck-Lund: “The trading card game actually emerged from the mobile game and it is the core of the whole community”. Next to that, user engagement is very important in the Crimeville story lines. Children have to deduce evidence and find out who set up the prank, thus solving the crime.

Production and organisation

The most important thing, says Brinck-Lund, is that Crimeville is really thought through at every single level. For the production this means that you have one operator that goes through every platform and makes sure that everything is connected. Which is of course the really difficult part, Brinck-Lund says. And how do you organize your team to execute a large project such as Crimeville? Brinck-Lund: “You have to find each person’s individual talent. The people who are very good in colorizing, they colorize absolute everything. We have a guy who is amazing at developing, so he gets that role. And that’s the way we do it”. It looks simple once you found out how you do it, Brinck-Lund says, but the starting process was difficult. In Denmark some companies are beginning to have staff members called crossmedia producer or media conductor. Brinck-Lund: “You need one person or one team that controls the brand and make sure that you hit the right values, the right everything, all the time.”

Panel discussion

Advanced technologies

Someone in the audience wanted to know whether the panel thought that their productions should embrace new technologies such as augmented reality right from the start, or that they should integrate them once things were happening on a larger scale?

Gomez says that during the past few years Starlight Runner has being approached by many companies asking to build narratives to introduce and support new technologies in an entertaining and engaging way. Gomez: “This is a strategy that I haven’t seen since the advent of the big dot-com and internet wave. I think it’s a trend that’s going to continue and

increase. Not just for my company, but for so many people that we ultimately arrive at something like inter-operability, in which different features found on your television or DVD, blue ray or computer are coupled so that the narrative can take advantage of the different technologies.” And Grian replies: “I probably wouldn’t develop something just around a new cool technology. We work in synergy, in partnership with each other. We have partnerships with companies, for example HP. They use transmedia as a research tool, more than as a marketing tool. It’s all about learning and experimentation.”

Broadcasters and producers

Brinck-Lund stresses the gap between what producers need and what broadcasters want. How do we get co-operation between broadcasters and producers, she wants to know. Grian notes that the opportunities not only come from broadcasters. They might also come from companies or NGO’s. Goodchild: “As a broadcaster we are not only looking at television. Public broadcasters can do a revenue split. Our first question is: what is your business model?”

Low-tech campaigns

What about producers from lower-income countries like Indonesia. The technology penetration rate can then be close to zero. What can they do with transmedia and multiple media platforms? What would be the advice of the panel?

Gomez: “My advice for them would be to use their imaginations, use the technology and the traditional media that is at hand to tell stories across different platforms. If you are a filmmaker who would like to think about how the story can extend beyond the screen, think about mobile, think about a texting campaign.”

Ginn adds that the reason that Cinekid asked both Gomez and Grian is because they come from two different worlds. Gomez works with high-end technology and Grian is a master in using low-tech methods such as sending postcards to players. Grain adds: “Transmedia is about story, character, interaction and the love you have for the world you create. Plus the love you have for your audience. You have to give people what they want.”

Ginn has one final conclusion: “Transmedia is complex. But pre-production and a commitment to the complexity of the roll out is what really makes the difference.”