

Cinekid Conference - How to Get to Know Kids

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'More than hundred years after its invention, we are bringing the wonders of the kinetoscope to a new audience.' Carolien Gehrels, councillor for Culture in Amsterdam, travelled back in time at the opening session of the Cinekids Conference, titled *Revealing the Secrets*. But she focussed on the future too. 'Children are the professionals and politicians of tomorrow. We have to make sure they develop media literacy.'

Research, technical innovation, psychology and techniques for creating quality television and animation - those were the main topics of an entire day of sessions on children and media. Before the six keynote speakers started their presentations, Cinekid manager Sannette Naeyé underlined the importance of raising media awareness by quoting the *New York Times*. The article she referred to in its turn quoted an American research report which showed that children between 8 and 18 years of age on average spend 11 hours per day on using media. 'But children are not happy with what is offered online. There is an enormous quest for content.'

Humour

To look for what makes kids happy, that is one of Gary Pope's main objectives. He is one of the founders of Kid Industries, which develops marketing strategies specifically for brands aiming at families. The company has 14 juniors, aged 10 to 12, in its board of directors. 'We make children's content our goal.' He explained how, for a child, there are three corners to insight: humour, development and a story. He analysed the development of a child's sense of humour, distinguishing eight types of humour, including sarcasm, verbal and physical humour, slapstick and innuendo. Pope showed one of the many commercials made by his company for a toy brand, emphasising the importance of humour when trying to reach children. 'There is a joke in the middle of the commercial. At first the client refused it, because they were afraid children would not understand it. We showed it to a panel of 50 children and every single child remembered precisely that bit of the commercial.'

Micropets

'Children see the world differently because they have less experience', Pope stated. 'Sometimes they need our help to put things together.' Pope explained how effective it can be to bring a subject to a child's attention from multiple perspectives, using the example of the relaunch of the Micropets (a toy) in the UK. They were reintroduced through commercials, stickers, and a website on which you had to break a code if you wanted to purchase a limited edition toy. 'It was hugely successful. And it was the mums who were on the internet trying to break the code! By integrating all these different forms of media we got people to really want the product.'

Someone in the audience asked whether humour is the only trick. 'Research shows that we learn 15 percent more when we are laughing while learning,' Pope responded. 'So I do not see why not to use it.' He also advised the audience to embrace new technologies and media. 'With all these new media surrounding us, will we ever see the wide-eyed look of surprise in a child again?', someone asked. 'I do not think so', said Pope. 'The other day my youngest daughter tried to change channels at the television by swiping the screen.'

Pope's company also explores new technologies: for a cereal brand they developed a marketing strategy including Augmented Reality. At the bottom of a cereal pack you would find a marker, and when holding it in front of the webcam, you could connect with different characters on a website. 'A physical experience. And that is the most powerful experience there is.'

Gimmick

Someone who will fully agree to that is next speaker James Alliban, an interactive artist and specialist in Augmented Reality. He works with the Skive agency which develops and builds AR applications and games. 'Augmenting reality is combining real life with the virtual world', Alliban explained. 'Now it is still mainly a gimmick. But its possibilities are endless.' He showed a short science fiction-like film about how Augmented Reality may change society in about ten years time, and then came back to the real world.

Augmented Reality usually works with a so-called marker, which contains data to be deciphered by software. Today such technology is used in several iPhone and other applications, where you use the phone as a looking glass and virtual information is mapped over physical objects. This can give you extra details about buildings you are looking at, or information about the surroundings.

Powerful

'Augmented Reality can create a lot of opportunities in different fields of society, like marketing, retail, education, art, the medical world, the army, et cetera. You can bring your product literally to consumers' homes. It is a very powerful experience.'

There are a few innovative bands that are using AR, like the Lost Valentinos (www.lostvalentinos.com). Online you can download a marker, which you can print and then use in front of your webcam, letting the band members play inside your room – on your shoulder, on your desk, or wherever you put your marker. Of course this technology is already incorporated by the gaming industry: Alliban showed an example where kids are actually playing with a virtual dog in the living room. And there is the iPhone application The Hidden Park, developed to stimulate children to play outside. It is a map of any park you choose: children have to solve puzzles and riddles, must look for clues and magical creatures in the park, which appear in pictures they take.

Contact Lenses

'In the future people will be using goggles for their Augmented Reality experiences', Alliban predicted. 'They are testing contact lenses for AR purposes already.'

Education can become much more fun, he said. 'You will be reading a book which has all these applications.' Role-playing games, like murder mystery weekends, can become hyper-real experiences.

'Augmented Reality can offer you an experience which is as close to reality as it can get', he concluded. He left the question whether that is necessarily a good thing open for discussion. 'Some fear that AR may be confused with reality. That people may create false memories. And there is the issue of violent computer games. How will AR affect children, given that it is such a lifelike experience? And at what age should children be exposed to Augmented Reality?'

In answer to a question from the audience about the complexity of the matter, Alliban described a study which had shown that children need only very few instructions to use AR. 'They tested an educational application on children from 13 to 16 years old and the outcome was that it really enhanced their learning capacities. The technology can also be useful in teaching chemistry: practicals which are now prohibited because they are too dangerous, can be performed risk-free with Augmented Reality.'

Cybernaut

Rebekah Willet took the audience from virtual reality back to the past. Willet presented her research project 'Children's Playground Games and Songs in the New Media Age', which compared games and songs from the past with those heard today on playgrounds. Willet started off by stating that children are generally seen either as innocent, passive beings, or as cybernauts, internet savvy kids full of critique on the

media. 'But it is not that simple. Children have a fickle nature. They are active consumers who are not easy to manipulate. They like to adapt media to their own use.'

Willet explained that the way children play today is not so much different from the way children played in the past. 'But we think the children's world is dominated by cheap, commercial products attached to questionable ideals, that children lose their imagination and ability to play, and that all cultural heritage is threatened.'

Pop Stars

Willet researched the influence of media on the way children play and the way they incorporate new media. She distinguished different types of play in which references to media were found. Children perform – they imitate pop stars, make jokes, dance, fight – based on examples in the media. They trade objects – like collectable cards, use catch phrases or make references to media in make-believe.

'Media-based play has different functions', Willet stated. 'On the emotional level it gives children a sense of belonging. On a social level it allows them to gain experience with feelings of inclusion and exclusion.' She noticed that media-based play is very often gender specific: there are clear distinctions between boys and girls. 'The pedagogic function of these plays is that children learn about content of media. They learn how to work with media within structures of playgrounds and they develop media literacy.' Right at the end she had some advice for the professionals in the audience: 'Beware of simplistic arguments which either celebrate children's culture or position them as complete dupes. Provide resources which offer ways for children to deal with complex issues, in a way which is acceptable for parents. And support media literacy initiatives for the sake of children and adults.'

Small Budget

Computer Generated Imagery (CGI) used in animation was the main topic of Kevin Tod Haug's contribution. Tod Haug is one of the world's most appraised visual effects supervisors. He has worked on films like *Quantum of Solace*, *Finding Neverland* and *The Kite Runner*. After a spectacular overview of his work, Haug made the assumption that new computer techniques can help directors and producers to combine small budgets and big ideas.

'CGI takes care of what no one can do,' Tod Haug claimed. He showed a picture of a film set with several crew members. 'I would be the man sitting next to the director, invisible, but making sure that everything is being photographed properly so that we can do our job right.'

Inventive

In order to be able to do his job right, a visual effects supervisor has to be inventive. Tod Haug told the audience an anecdote about *Finding Neverland*. 'We hardly had any money at all for visual effects. But the director wanted all these fantasy sequences. There was sufficient money for three shots. We made the shots, added rough CGI elements and then showed the result to the producer. We said: "This is what it can look like, and this is what it will cost." And he agreed.' The producer agreed not only because the scenes looked stunning, but also because by doing it this way, he could save a lot of money on other departments, like art direction and props - a very strong argument in favour of using CGI.

Haug kept up his hands-on approach to the subject by giving some more practical advice. 'The most expensive way to add in visual effects is to hire us after the entire movie has already been shot. The cheapest way is to involve us from the beginning, to first figure out what you want and then find the easiest way to accomplish it. There is a lot of talent out there. There will always be small companies, started by experienced visual effects people who do not want to work for big companies any

longer. They will do anything in their first few months, just to make a name for themselves. If it is interesting enough, they will be happy to help you with your film.'

Good Television

What makes good children's television? This is the question Marie-Louise Mares asked 357 mothers of children between 3 and 13 years of age. Mares is an international expert in the effects of television content on young viewers. 'Mothers wanted TV to be funny, beautiful et cetera. And the children agreed. But when we asked children what the programmes they want to make would look like, they gave different answers. These had to be funny, comprehensible, had to be about something which could actually happen to them, something they would like to do or be, must have an unusual story, cool special effects, great gadgets, or teach them how to do certain things.' She also asked professionals the same question, and they had slightly different answers. They emphasised on the creative aspect, and on telling the story without worrying too much about comprehensibility.

Crying

Mares surprised the audience with her research on comprehensibility. 'The story inside the heads of children is way different from the one in our heads.' She showed a clip from *The Little Princess*, in which the protagonist is told by the cruel director of the girls' seminar where she lives that her father has died and that she is left penniless and alone in the world. 'I was watching this with a 5-year-old, and she asked: "Why is the girl crying?"'. Apparently, the whole tragic implication of the situation was lost on the kid. 'Your interpretation of a story has to do with memories', explained Mares. 'For kids to understand a story is hard work because they do not have all the references we have. They miss key elements.'

Three-Legged Dog

Mares listed the elements children in a preschool age miss in stories: emotions and motives, connections and inferences (reading between the lines), flashbacks and time shifts, sarcasm and irony, what is real or realistic, and getting the point. She went on to an experiment on 5 and 6 year old children, who were shown a story about Clifford The Big Red Dog. Clifford meets a three-legged dog and, after initial mistrust, befriends him. For the audience it was both hilarious and baffling to find out how little of the story the children actually understood or remembered from the story. The central message that disability should not stand friendships in the way, never came across. Mares summed up the main lessons to be learned from this: 'You have to be careful with metaphors. If you really want children to get it, then make things explicit. Furthermore, avoid focusing on the conflict instead of the solution. Do not use too many flashbacks, as they are a major challenge. Slow down! Use repetitions to get the message across. And avoid communicating key points through dialogue.'

Songs

For children who a bit older, 6 to 8 years old, Mares used the movie *The Sword in the Stone*, about King Arthur. 'Kids loved it but they had trouble understanding the story. In the film, parts of the story must be connected across many scenes. Children that age are unable to put things together in such way. Also, they simply cannot apprehend central plot points presented in rapid bits of dialogue or key lessons presented in songs. Children need more redundancy, more interval reminders of the connection between parts and more explicit statements of motives.' Mares' overall conclusion was that 'children need more help from us. They have a different sense of understanding. And to them, entertainment is more important than understanding the story.'

Pixar

Combining entertainment and a good story was never done any better than by acclaimed animation studio Pixar. Their movies have a quality about them which makes them loved all over the world and by people of all ages. David Freeman, screenwriter (for Sony Pictures, MGM, Paramount Pictures and others) and screenwriting instructor, deconstructed the Pixar productions and came up with a list of secret ingredients.

First of all Freeman showed several pictures of Pixar's working grounds, from which he concluded that it is a company unlike any other. 'It is designed in such way that people from different departments have to cross each other's working space, so that they must interact. Pixar is a shared experience. You get to design your own office. It is also highly personal: a closely knitted tribe of unique creative persons.'

Superheroes

Then Freeman proceeded to sketching the tools Pixar uses to 'build a bridge between what the audience feels when it sits down, and what you want them to feel.' One of the remarkable things about Pixar's approach is that 'to some of the movies, marketing would never approve. They stem from unmarketable initiatives, unlike some of their high concept ideas which are very catchy: out of work and out of shape superheroes (*The Incredibles*). But imagine having to pitch these ideas, like the one about a rat with deep ambivalence toward his rat family who wants to become a chef in Paris. You would get kicked out of the room. Or the idea about two robots who barely speak to each other or to anyone else, who save the human race from spending their eternity in a fun orbiting space ship. But there is more. One of the robots has a big dream: to someday hold someone's hand. Or this one: an old man and an obnoxious fat kid go to a distant land and rescue a rare bird from an evil guy and his talking dogs. The kid is not the main character; it is the old man. And you will love this part: he uses his walker... Did I mention the old man who is very depressed because his wife has just died? These ideas cannot be summarised in catchy one-liners. Pixar takes risks, and you never know what's gonna come next.'

Hollywood Rules

So 'do not follow Hollywood's rules' seems to be Pixar's first secret ingredient. The second typical Pixar characteristic is their visual storytelling. 'They bring so much across in just images. Like the house in *Up*, a metaphor for the old man's past, which he literally has to let go. And *Wall E* was initially intended as a film without any dialogues. They wanted to see how far they could go.'

Third character trait is the use of real underdogs. 'Characters who do not have the faintest chance of success. Like the rat who wants to be a chef in Paris.' The way in which characters are presented also distinguishes Pixar from their competitors. 'There are, as far as I could count, 75 different empathy techniques you can use to build a character. And they use them all, artfully. For example, their characters are interesting, have emotional depth, they are likeable or unlikeable, and they are genuine. It is easy for the audience to identify with them.'

Being Lonely

Freeman named thirteen of the 75 techniques or qualities a good character should have, using *Wall E* as a prime example. A short clip from the film showed the protagonist as self-sufficient, humanlike, having an aesthetic sense, clever, showing little human touches, an everyman, longing and lonely, having dreams, in danger and helping the helpless. 'In six minutes you will empathise with him to such extent that it will last throughout the rest of the film.'

Another secret is the sophisticated psychological insights Pixar shows. 'They never talk down to their audience. *Toy Story 3* for instance is about loss and emotional growth; difficult subject matter for children. They never use clichés to explain issues.'

Or they find a cliché and throw it away, like the bad teddy bear in *Toy Story 3*. We get to understand how the bear turned bad and in every other animation he would convert to being a nice bear again. But not with Pixar.'

Pixar is not afraid to let things get ugly, Freeman pointed out. 'They show harsh reality. In one of the scenes in *Toy Story 3* almost everyone dies. That scene just goes on forever and gets really nasty.'

Group

Technique number seven which is characteristic of Pixar is the way it presents the central issue in a movie. 'They echo it in more than one character or plotline. In *Toy Story 3*, the main theme is saying goodbye. That is what numerous characters in the film have to do at different times. In this way the message gets through.'

Freeman also showed how Pixar masters the technique of using poignant and funny scenes side by side. 'The secret is to slide into the poignant, coming from a funny scene, and then jump back into comedy or action. The other way around it does not work.'

Number nine on Freeman's list was the ever-present underlying motto of Pixar's that a group working together can win, like the fish that escape from the net in *Finding Nemo*, or the ants in *A Bug's Life*, who defeat the grasshoppers. 'This motto has a Brad Bird-addition,' Freeman said. (Brad Bird did *The Incredibles* and *Ratatouille*.) 'A person can be uniquely himself or herself and at the same time be part of a closely knit family.'

The last typical Pixar trademark is that in every film 'they toss in something wonderfully unexpected. It can be a floating house, like in *Up*, a big bird or evil talking dogs. In *Toy Story 3* I never saw this element coming: it was Buzz Lightyear speaking Spanish. With no translation and no subtitles. I laughed and laughed."

Epilogue

The epilogue of this session focussed on how that was said today could help writers, directors and producers to develop their businesses. David Kleeman, president of the American Center for Children and Media and moderator Greg Childs, former BBC-director and producer and now commissioner, talked about the lessons that could be learned. Kleeman pleaded for more transparency in a time where children's media are under growing attack. 'There is a saying that there are two things you do not want to see being made: law and sausages. For children's media it is the opposite. The more we can be transparent to parents, educators and other people dealing with children, the more we can inform them on how and why we are making decisions and what our goals are and the better we will be understood and accepted. And the more eager parents will be to share all this with their children.'

Quality

Kleeman also emphasised the importance of controlling quality. 'In children's productions good enough will not do. You really need to keep to the highest aesthetical values, because kids will notice.'

Greg Childs pointed out two main lessons. 'One is get to know kids as much as possible. Spend time with them, spend time watching them watch, play and be with each other. The second thing is to use your budget effectively. Be aware of your limitations. Use your budget where it has the greatest effect on children.'

Kleeman added: 'Find out where your particular audience spends their time, what devices they have in their lives, whether their parents let them use those devices. Figure that out and then focus your budget and your attention on what you do best, instead of trying to do everything on a mediocre level.'

Childs concluded on a light note: 'The big next question is then how to make your production into a playground play. How do you get your show to be copied in dancing and clapping games?' The answer from the audience was: take risks. Which drew

the focus back to Pixar. Kleeman: 'Part of their formula is to take risks.' Or, as David Freeman put it: 'They are brave.'