

Seminar Lost Without the Script

Thursday 28 October

On the second day of the Cinekid Conference, entitled Revealing the Secrets, the audience was brought up to speed on the latest developments in and insights into scriptwriting. The first two presentations focused on the contents of scripts; the last two on the business side of the trade.

Who Cares if a Rock Talks?

Karen Wallace (writer of over two 250 children's books and television programmes, such as Aardman's pre-school show *Timmy Time* and the Bafta Award winning series *Hoobs*) brought someone to her presentation: ... a rock. It interviewed her, asking her questions on story writing. When it asked Wallace "What's Your Story?", she answered by talking about her happy childhood in the countryside, where she had a world of time for the imagination. It still is a great source of inspiration for her writing. Wallace thinks good children's writers are in contact with their childhood and write what they would have wanted to read as a child.

Language is a key ingredient to a good story. Well-chosen words help create the world you have in mind. Reading the story aloud again and again will show you what is wrong. Polishing is essential. Another vital aspect is that stories, worlds, characters and emotions must be real and credible.

Wallace's first novel, *Climbing a Monkey Puzzle Tree* was a huge bestseller. It is about the years she spent at boarding school: a world she knows well. For *Timmy Time*, she and the other writers spent hours and hours in nurseries to study the children's behaviour.

There can be a story in everything, even in conversations overheard in a bus. Wallace told the audience that one day, she saw an old farmer who had three sheep in the back of his old car. Suddenly, she felt as if she was in a theatre play. And then all she needed to do was write down exactly what she saw and heard.

Neil Postman once wrote: "Children are the living messages we send to a time we will not see." Kids should not be patronised: if a story does not make the writer laugh, it will not make them laugh either. Media makers should engage kids, make them curious, should puzzle and amaze them. Back to the rock. Wallace revealed its name – Fluffy – and its story. Of course we care if it talks, she concluded. And this rock was in the minds of all the presentation guests now. That is the wonderful thing about being a storyteller.

Creating Emotional Engagement

David Freeman demonstrated how to deconstruct the character and story components which address the subconscious and cause emotional engagement. Next to being a screenwriter and videogame writer, Freeman teaches the screenwriting class *Beyond Structure* all over the world and is the author of the book *Creating Emotion in Games*.

Freeman says that a great character consists of seven different layers. Some of these layers are necessary, some are optional. The most important one is the character diamante, those personality traits which define how a character speaks, acts and sees the world. Every major character must have three to five personality traits of which at least one should be completely unique and unexpected.

To illustrate how this works Freeman showed a fragment of *Avatar*, namely the scene in which Jake and Neytiri first meet. Jake is fighting a pack of doglike creatures and she comes to his rescue. Although there is no dialogue, the following character traits of Neytiri are revealed: she is athletic/passionate, powerful/huntress, graceful/aesthetic, spiritual/high ethics, in harmony with nature/responsible for nature. Later on, two more traits are exposed: she is romantically shy and playful. This character diamante is the blueprint for all her dialogues and actions. What makes Neytiri interesting, are the skewed opposites: being a powerful huntress and at the same time shy around men, or being a powerful huntress and graceful and aesthetic.

Skewed opposites can be powerful. Someone at Electronic Arts saw a drawing of an angel by the artist Androïd Jones and immediately offered him a job as an art director. Why? Because Jones used two sets of skewed opposites in his drawing. His angel was both just/good, and powerful/frightening, and graceful and weird. Without knowing it, Jones used emotioneering techniques: techniques for creating emotional engagement which work on the subconscious to draw us into the character, story, dialogue or even architecture. In a world or architecture complete opposites *can* be used.

Game writing techniques can be useful in writing for film. But there are emotions in games which are not experienced in film. In film, emotions are caused by identification. In a video game, the player is creator and actor and is responsible for what he does. This makes players feel emotions like personal accomplishment and victory, frustration when they fail, guilt, freedom of choice, ownership through investing time and energy, but also experience teamwork or competitiveness.

How to Make Money Scriptwriting

How write a document which makes investors, broadcasters and studio executives want to buy into the creative vision of the writer? As the author of the bestseller *How to Make Money Scriptwriting*, Julian Friedmann knows the answer. He has been an agent for scriptwriters for more than 30 years. Friedmann is Joint Managing Director of London based Blake Friedmann Literary Agency, which represents 200 book and scriptwriters worldwide. His agency constantly refines the way it pitches and sells, and keeps learning by doing. Technology has always driven change in delivery systems, but it has not fundamentally changed storytelling. By focussing on new ways of storytelling, there is a danger that we forget the deep-seated need in us that we want to be gripped and held and moved by a compelling story. It does not matter if this happens through radio, a mobisode (drama on a mobile phone) or a short drama such as *Kate Modern*. It is striking how most web-based short form dramas have become incredibly rapidly old-fashioned. 2010 was the year of the iPad, but in two years we will be using different delivery systems.

If the fundamentals of storytelling have not changed, those of us who work in the business of story writing and selling have to find a way of presenting the material that works for editors, producers and broadcasters - the gate keepers. It is a buyer's market; producers who make one film a year are offered 9000 scripts. This means that you will have to find a way of getting through. Use the agenda of the buyer for your pitch. Show the buyer how they can sell your script – you have to know the market and the competition. A good concept is easy to pitch, easy to understand and easy to remember.

How to Write a Treatment

Some of the gatekeepers first look at the storyline, others at the characters. Therefore, use a content list so that people can chose. A treatment consists of four different categories.

- Pitch
On the back of a bestseller, you can read what kind of story it is, although the story itself is not told. Most of these descriptions consist of no more than ten lines. Sell the story, do not tell it. But do not oversell it either. The title must also work for someone who does not know anything about the story.
- Character biographies
Include these in a separate section: character information in the synopsis interrupts the flow of the story. The biographies can be very short: five lines, ten for a major character. Make clear the essential characteristics. No story, just reveal little personal insights. Too much detail slows down the reader's imagination. Use broad strokes to almost force them to picture what you are describing. The stronger they imagine the picture in their mind, the more they will believe in it.
- Statement of intent
This is what the writer really wants to achieve with his writings. The statement of intent can be less than a page.
- Storyline
The most difficult section. Write it in the present tense to give it immediacy. Do not give any details. Only tell there is a guy running along a beach when his dog finds a rotting hand. Not what kind of dog, or what shoes the guy is wearing. Again, force the reader to use his imagination.

Do not fill this three-page narrative synopsis with extraneous stuff that gets into the way. Try to give the readers a sense of the pace of your film. You can add fragments of dialogue to evoke the voices of the characters. However, do make sure that every character has its own vocabulary and sentence structure.

Producers do not want to pay for treatments. Nevertheless: invest time to really know your characters. What really works is to describe the story of the film as if various characters tell it to you. This is valuable because far too many genre stories are plot-driven and have relatively thin characters. All that happens in your story should happen because of who the characters are.

PAM, Portal for Audiovisual Makers

We are in the midst of a digital revolution: programmes are on all sorts of platforms. PAM (Portal for Audiovisual Makers) is preparing a model which settles all digital copyrights and emission rights. It is an initiative of *Anne Zeegers* (project manager PAM and coordinator Dutch Scriptwriters Guild), *Ike Bertels* (documentary maker and producer plus vice chair of the Dutch Directors Guild) and *Waldemar Torenstra* (Dutch actor and founder first actors guild ACT).

Dutch makers are asked to give up their rights in a buy-out form. PAM believes actors, directors and writers should creatively and financially reap the fruits of their work. The new media era presents us with infinite possibilities for distribution, altered viewing habits and a dramatic increase of content. Audiovisual archives are opened, digitalised and made accessible on the internet, and piracy is a continuing problem.

PAM aims for honest, efficient and transparent digital rights management. Therefore it has created one portal for audiovisual copyrights of writers, directors and actors. They mandate their rights to their collective licensee societies, who in their place deal with producers, broadcasters and distributors. They can then use materials without asking permission and they pay for what they use. Creative professionals receive their fees directly from the collective societies. The free use facilitates innovation and new developments. It simplifies the administration of rights, prevents piracy and regulates international rights.

Also the European Broadcasting Union (EBU) believes that collective licensing of copyrights is a good solution to the mass exploitation of TV productions. It has already proven its success in Scandinavian countries.

During the Summer of 2010, creative professionals and the industry were consulted on a new amendment to the copyright law. PAM wants to add a section on collective licensing for television programmes to the Dutch copyright law. It refers to the Swedish law in which such article is already included.