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Great Expectations:
The Present and Possible Bright Future of Cross-Platform Projects.

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LANDSCAPE

Over the past several years, the term "Cross-platform" has become more and more popular in the film and audio-visual industry. There are several different terms to describe more or less the same thing: trans-media, cross-media, cross-platform, multi-platform, new media. But what we mainly mean is an audio-visual project that can run on different platforms – i.e. TV, web, smartphones, tablets, but also in movie theatres, art galleries, museums, at happenings, live events, and as books.

Several circumstances helped the spreading of this new way of storytelling:

The digital revolution: Technological improvements have always been the starting point for new kinds of storytelling opportunities. After Gutenberg's printing revolution at the end of the 15th century, books were no longer a pleasure for the few, but became popular among all social classes. This led to great changes both economically and in terms of content. At the end of the 19th century, inventions in the fields of optics (lenses) and mechanics, together with vast improvements in transportation (steam engines, railways, steam ships), fueled the will to know more and to see the world. The invention of a machine capable of record moving images was then only a short step away, and gave birth to a new way of storytelling: cinematography – the art of recording movement.

We are now living in a similar moment in history. We have been using the Internet for about twenty years now. But only during the past few years have digital networks been able to support and transfer a vast amount of information in high definition.

Many new tools appeared on the markets, such as the Xbox, smartphones, tablets, PlayStation, etc.

As a consequence, **digital devices** have allowed us to experience storytelling in new ways. They have also revolutionized the way in which time is fragmented, especially for younger generations, who grew up in the digital world.

National Broadcasters and theatrical exhibitors are reaching smaller and older audiences every year. The young generations prefer to spend their free time on the web and social networks rather than waiting for feature films on prime time on Friday and Saturday evenings.

When licensing a film, all channels also acquire the catch-up rights – i.e. the license to webcast the program on their website, where they sometimes have more viewers than on the classical TV channels.
The digital landscape allows content to be available on demand anytime, anywhere, not just at home.

What became a critical issue for broadcasters – losing audiences and consequently advertising

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revenue – has recently opened up new opportunities. Cross-platforms are a way of regaining younger audiences not through classical television broadcasting, but by reaching them on the devices they use most.

NEW WAYS OF THINKING ABOUT STORYTELLING

Thinking and planning a cross-platform project that will be available on the web involves many challenges. Producing a one-off feature or TV- length film and putting it online on some VOD channel doesn't make the film become a cross-platform project simply because it is available on different platforms!

Every project has its own specificity and reasons, but there are some common points:

- Interactivity
- Different sources of information (audio, video, written materials, graphics, photography, installations, etc.)
- Possibilities to share information and experience it with other users
- Possibilities for the users to participate with new content (content user-generated)
- Live actions

Not every project needs to contain all these elements. Each one can be applied according to the kind of story that is being shared. But these are the specific points that we can use to differentiate cross-platforms from linear storytelling.

Interactivity: Web users are not the passive audience who watch TV with the lights off while sitting on the sofa. Web users are cyber-hyper-active people who feel the need to surf, click, choose and build their own ways of experiencing their environment. **At the same time, the interactivity has to be intuitive. The choices must be easy to guess, and not too numerous, otherwise the user will get lost!**

Cross-platform projects aim to build specific experiences for and with the users. The audience become an active part of the process. Cross-media thinking is based on finding ways to incorporate this engagement into the storytelling process.

Conversation is not one to many, but many to many.

The first projects created for the web show a low level of interactivity. Here are some examples:

Webdoc on ARTE: http://www.arte.tv/fr/6845158.html?en=1

Havana-Miami on ARTE (2010): http://havana-miami.arte.tv/

These have a basic level of interactivity. The user can choose to follow the story in a linear way or select scenes according to the TOPIC, PEOPLE, DATE, LOCATION and build the story through connections. Videos and written materials are present as additional information which rolls on.

And two years later:

Generation Solidarity on ARTE (2012): http://gensol.arte.tv/

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There's now a high level of interactivity in these stories about Europe united against crisis. Users can support the various initiatives and share them through social networks with direct links to Facebook and Twitter. Users can leave comments on each initiative. Users can suggest new initiatives to be added to the website. Videos are enriched by written information and information about the author of the initiative.
On the home page: **From the Web to TV**, the best initiatives are broadcast weekly on ARTE.

Note that the VIEWER has become the USER. This already highlights the trend from passive to active subject.

CHALLENGES:

- **Audience difficult to identify** (few TV channels, millions of websites – how to reach the audience?)
- The audience is always the core of all storytelling. In this case it is even more crucial not only to identify it, but also to involve it actively in the storytelling process. The audience is not a consumer but a co-creator of the work. The audience cannot be reached and conquered. It has to be involved and engaged.
- **Digital divide** (presence of Internet and IT technologies in remote areas, not only in developing countries, but also in western and technological world). Education in IT.
- **Mixed teams** (filmmakers, interactive designers, photographers, social media producers, graphic artists, information architects, writers, video and sound artists, musicians, etc. The author is no longer the VOICE OF GOD in the story, but a part of a specialized crew that combine different skills and knowledge to create the story together with the user)
- **Language barrier** (especially in the case of user-generated content)

FUNDING OPPORTUNITIES

TV: Because broadcasters are going to be an important factor in the production of cross platform projects, the way to finance them is not very different from film financing. ARTE TV is currently the primary broadcaster, but other channels are also supporting cross-platform projects from the development stage – i.e. RTBF and VRT (Belgium), Channel 4, BBC (UK), France Television (France), ITVS (USA), ABC and SBS (Australia), Scandinavian broadcasters and more.

Public funding: In terms of public funding, most national and regional film funds now have budgets dedicated to cross-platform/new media development. MEDIA Interactive is also a quite important source for European projects. There's also the UK tax scheme and the Canada tax credit. The National Film Board of Canada is a very important pioneer in financing cross platform work.

Private funding: This includes commercial partnerships, product placement, advertising, but also technologies (tech brand), publishers.

Other funding: Examples include the Tribeca Film Institute New Media Fund, which funds non-fiction interactive projects about social justice and equality. Every year, four to eight projects receive between $50,000-100,000 each plus a tutor, workshop participation, mentorship and support.

This year for the first time at DOKLeipzig there was a screening dedicated to cross-media. The same will happen at the next Tribeca Film Festival, where there will be a new cross-media

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competition with a jury and awards.

REVENUES POSSIBILITIES

- Directly from the audience: downloads, tickets for live events, purchase of games and applications, paid VOD.
- No advance money from distributors (YouTube and Google have recently begun to change this policy), and no advances from world sales.
- TV licenses, publishers, educational institutions.

Advertisers come on board once the website reaches a consistent level of traffic.

Cross-media projects begin with the relationship with the audience. The success of this interaction determines brand interest. Without a trusted relationship, there's no commercial value.

PRODUCTION WORKFLOW

Development: Includes research, acquisition of archival materials, building of the prototype. The prototype is the structure for the website; it's the most expensive part of the budget.

Production: Very minimal compared to film. Once the prototype is ready, the production generally requires less time and money.

Marketing campaign: Very expensive, long and time consuming, but crucial to reaching the audience.

The peculiarity of these kinds of projects is the relationship with the audience. That's why it's crucial to identify the audience at the beginning of the process. Distribution will be successful only if the audience is already involved in the project. This is not as important for films. It's helpful but not essential. You can launch your film and hope to catch the kindred souls that will love it through the right festival premiere and the buzz that follows. But reaching the audience is the absolute core of cross-media thinking. That's why the marketing campaign starts during project development and is aimed at a core audience that will spread the news virally.

TRANSMEDIA MARKETING AND DISTRIBUTION

Social media become the major tools for cross-media marketing strategies. This applies not only to cross-platform projects but also to films in general. Twitter, Facebook and others social networks provide a useful opportunity for spreading the word of mouth and building the fan base of the film.

Under marketing I also include crowd-funding opportunities because crowd-funding campaigns are very expensive in terms of time and energy, and the amount that can be collected is never very high, usually around $5000-20,000 for documentaries. This includes the fees for the crowdfunding platform that hosts the campaign as well as taxes. For a successful crowd-funding campaign, you need to have one or two people working on it full-time in order to reach the desired amount. With most crowdfunding websites, if you don't reach your goal, you don't get any of the money.

The crowd-funding campaign needs to be carefully planned. Some things you should consider:

- What amount does the filmmaker want to reach and can feasibly reach from his fan base?
- What will be the perks for those who support the film?

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- How will you convince the fan base to give you money for the film? How long will the campaign run? Forty days is typical. That's forty days of full-time work!
- When does the campaign have to be launched? It's usually not worthwhile to start a campaign at the very beginning of development because there's not enough information to share at that point, and it's difficult to keep the supporters engaged until the film is completed. Usually for films it's better to start right before completion so the fans will support the film's premiere or theatrical release. You can start earlier with cross-platform projects, but then you need to provide fresh material (videos, news, etc.) every day in order to attract the fan base and keep it engaged and attached to the project.

CASE STUDIES

Highrise
This is an award-winning project supported by the Canadian Film Board**.** It's a multi-year project about the living conditions in high-rise apartment buildings around the world. It began in Toronto, and the first outcome of the research was **Thousandth Tower:**
http://highrise.nfb.ca/thousandthtower/
Here six residents of a Toronto high-rise describe the place where they live through photos and words. The global research material was then incorporated into the interactive documentary **Out of My Window.** The project allows navigating in a 360˚ space in the different flats around the world. The sources of information are the 360 ˚ photography, music, words. There are also 3 music videos in 3 different cities.
http://interactive.nfb.ca/#/outmywindow

The project **Participate** allows high-rise residents from around the world to upload a picture of the view from their window along with a short text.

http://interactive.nfb.ca/outmywindow/participate/php/#/outmywindowparticipate

Back to Toronto, the original project evolved in a highly participatory way. The inhabitants of suburban high-rises were asked to imagine their neighbourhood in a most lively and inventive way. They were asked to reinvent the spaces in a way that could also improve the quality of their lives. Together with set designers, 3D photographers and architects, these places came to life virtually. Users could explore them as they currently are and as their residents hope to reinvent them.
http://highrise.nfb.ca/onemillionthtower

In watching these creations, the residents realized how their small participatory efforts could bring sensitive improvements to the everyday life of the community. The last video shows how they get the money to rebuild a little garden, and how this space is now full of plants and flowers, benches and toys for the children.

Talk about the power of imagination!

Highrise is a project that intends to generate new projects over the years, both on a local and global scale. It aims to bring together residents and multi-skilled crews from different backgrounds to stimulate participation and produce social change.

Mechanical figures – Inspired by Tesla – Supported by Taskovski Films

http://www.mechanicalfigures.net/
http://vimeo.com/channels/mechanicalfigures

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This is an interactive film with lots of small clips and films that will be recognized and gathered into a coherent cinematic piece of a few minutes based on strong abstract user input.

CONCLUSIONS

These are but a few examples of cross-platform projects. There are also phone applications, webdocs and performance and live events.

Cross-platforms projects have evolved quickly over the past few years. The possibilities for creating them are increasing, both technologically and financially. This new way of storytelling is enabled by social media and is largely based on audience participation, so the crucial question is how to identify the audience, how to reach it and how to engage it in the process.

At the same time, the landscape is changing. Every new device that appears on the market can lead to other creative possibilities. Even the near future could become very different from the present. That's why those who are already heading down this new path and are willing to accept the challenges of the immediate future can be considered pioneers who are tracing new ways and opening new doors to the ancient art of storytelling.

Here are a few websites to look at for more information:

www.arte.tv
www.powertothepixel.com
www.gamesforchanges.com
http://www.tribecafilminstitute.org/filmmakers/newmedia/
http://www.nfb.ca/interactive
http://highrise.nfb.ca/
http://highrise.nfb.ca/onemillionthtower
http://www.mechanicalfigures.net/"http://www.mechanicalfigures.net/
http://vimeo.com/channels/mechanicalfigures" http://vimeo.com/channels/mechanicalfigures
http://www.taskovskifilms.com/film/mechanical-figures-inspired-by-tesla/