

▶ GETTING BEYOND THE BUZZWORDS



Stitch Media's Victoria Ha

CFC Media Lab tackles convergent storytelling

BY EMILY CLAIRE AFAN

When it comes to creation in the interactive world, there's a huge difference between simply getting the job done and developing award-winning content. That may seem like an obvious distinction, but it's an essential observation shared by Adrian Belina of Toronto interactive studio Jam3, which was echoed throughout the Storytelling X.0 symposium as part of last month's FITC (Flash In the Can) technology and design festival in Toronto.

The inaugural symposium was programmed by Siobhan O'Flynn from the CFC Media Lab faculty with the goal of exploring how digital tech is changing the storytelling medium.

"Producing that award-winning content is what changes the game and brings real innovation," she says. "It's all about pulling out key principals and best practices. Technology's rate of change is so fast, we need to figure out how stories can be made coherent and meaningful."

Ana Serrano, director of the CFC Media Lab, feels that innovation isn't the mandate with many producers just yet, and hopes that the Media Lab will change that. Since it was founded in 1997, it's had more than 200 alumni and 100-plus projects, 30% of which have gone on to be commercialized.

"If you don't know how to tell stories in new media, you'd better learn how," she says. "Because we've been around so long, we're committed to storytelling. It's not so much about reinventing the wheel as it is about playing with the wheel."

Convergent media, transmedia and cross-

media seem to be the buzzwords among entertainment companies looking to tap into the latest industry trend of distributing content, and it was a topic heavily discussed at the Everything You Know Is New Again session.

Panelist Victoria Ha, a partner at Halifax's Stitch Media, says it's her job to assess the best fit for clients' needs and goals.

"Often clients will catch on to buzzwords, and we help figure out what they really want," she says. "Because some people just want to get it done and others do want to create that award-winning content. They are very different agendas and two very different strategies."

Ha adds that knowing your audience is integral, and stresses the importance of going beyond traditional methods of simply classifying them as male or female in the 18-34 age demo.

"It's more specific now and it's all about user behavior and habits," she notes, recommending that clients should instead be figuring out where their audience spends time and whether or not they would be dedicated enough to the engagement required to get the most out of an interactive experience.

"If your audience is older, they're probably not tweeting," says Ha. "And there's nothing wrong with going back to 'analog' methods like subway and radio ads."

James Milward, executive producer at Toronto's Secret Location, adds that, "Transmedia is about extending content with each platform and exploring those opportunities, as opposed to just having the same content. We help clients understand the potential and when it's appropriate." (For more on Secret Location's latest project, for *In Real Life*, see p. 16.)

As for determining how it's appropriate, Todd Denis from digital boutique Rival Schools says genre is paramount. Some content, and he cites popular TV series *Lost* as an example, contains the lofty "geek factor" where consumers will want to chase down the story to the point where they would even picket if the story's gone off-track.

"There's an art and craft that goes into storytelling, like gathering around the campfire to talk," he says. "Interactive helps us figure out which are the right campfires." •

▶ Avoiding failure

Still not sure how to navigate through interactive territory? The Everything You Know Is New Again session wrapped up with some words of advice to avoid colossal failure.

James Milward warns against projects where you suspect not everyone has the same expectations. "It's the kiss of death," he says. "If someone uses the words 'expand demographic,' then stay away."

Todd Denis says money is the primary reason for failure. "Every new component adds production costs and hours of work," he cautions. "Don't spread your resources too thin."

And Victoria Ha stresses the importance of marketing testing. "Audiences are always changing and a lot of these projects start a year before they actually launch," she states. "Always test, take the feedback and integrate it into the results. People forget to check in with the audience to see if they still care about what you're doing." — Emily Claire Afan

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