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Children's TV and the Internet – and beyond

Examples of TV brands reaching out successfully in the Internet and Games world

This article includes a personal selection of websites and other interactive applications connected to children's TV brands that provide what kids want, in innovative and engaging ways.

Back in 1998, I attended my first PRIX JEUNESSE INTERNATIONAL festival to participate in an info-session on the new phenomenon of broadcasters and producers building websites around their channel and programme brands. I spoke for Children's BBC and Jenny Buckland profiled some of the developments at ACTF in Australia. Even in those early days, some of the key elements which are now good practice on kids' websites were starting to emerge. Our sites reported from backstage, used programme talent to produce additional material, and I proudly presented the first game on a *bbc.co.uk* website. I also announced we would be opening a forum called "Chatterbox" in which kids could communicate with each other. At the time we were only beginning to think of the implications of that sort of audience engagement for an organisation like the BBC. 13 years on, it could be said that the web has changed out of all recognition: broadband connection speeds have made a huge difference to what can be delivered – and of course now it is about much more than simply delivering to young peo-

ple, it is also about them uploading their own content and participating in ever more sophisticated ways.

All the principles were there from the beginning. Kids want to have fun. They want to express themselves. They love TV brands, but they want more than just promotional content. They love stories, but they also want to have agency. Kids need to be safe, and that needs care and budgets. The Web also provides a prime opportunity for them to be challenged and to learn in more meaningful ways than via TV. They learn through experiencing ideas and situations rather than just passively watching, by interacting, participating, and experimenting. The websites listed here are all connected in some way to children's television brands. They are good examples of how to provide what kids want, in innovative and engaging ways. While the Internet is now without doubt the "second platform", there are others in which children's and youth brands can find their audience and offer them holistic experiences beyond the TV screen. Game consoles have been around for a long time, but the new economics of the games market have allowed a wider range of brands to have an impact – it is no longer all about the big game brands or the major movie franchises. Nintendo's Wii home console, casual online gaming and mobile consoles have opened up a whole new female, family, and younger children's

market. The expensive boxed-game distribution system is giving way to online delivery – with lower costs. And we are all casual gamers now (55 million players of *Farmville* on *Facebook* back this up). Mobile game devices seem glued to every younger kid's sticky hands, and (if they give their fingers a wipe first) many are swiping and tapping touch-screens on smart phones and tablet PCs.

The younger demographic

When it comes to online projects, many people forget the preschool demographic. But in truth some of the most ambitious and innovative work is being done for this demographic. On websites for all ages, play is of paramount importance. But there are different forms of play, and some of the most successful sites for preschoolers focus on playful exploration rather than what you might call conventional games. One of the nominees for last year's PRIX JEUNESSE Up-to-6 Interactivity Prize was the *Big and Small* website (Plug-In Media, UK, for the CBeebies). Every move of the mouse across the colourful and intricate screens produces a response of some sort. Some objects in the frame play little tricks on the user, others, when clicked, open up to mini games such as hand painting, making a band, getting the character Small to sleep – all delightful, easy to understand and navigate – and all guided

by the same voices used on the TV show. This and other CBeebies websites are models of brand consistency, making the transition from the passive viewing experience to interactive play seamless. That *Big and Small* should have won the interactive Children's BAFTA (British Academy Award) at the end of 2010 is no surprise.

The winner of the 2010 PRIX JEUNESSE under-6 category was the site for *Dinosaur Train* (PBS Kids, USA, see box on page 40). Once again it is a good example of how the tone and purpose of a programme can be reflected online. The focus is on the principal characters, and though there are games on the site, the key feature is a vast factual resource about dinosaurs which mirrors the learning in the TV programmes. In some ways this is a rather "old-fashioned" approach to online engagement, but you can see how fans of the programme – especially those "dinosaur collectors" in the audience would love it.

The next example takes both integration and play further. The TV animation *Tom and the Slice of Bread with Strawberry Jam and Honey* (Film Bilder Studio for SWR, Germany) is full of choices and decisions for the leading character, Tom, as he searches for his bread, jam, and honey. Full advantage was taken of this when the interactive version of the stories was released online. In "branching storylines" the young audience can play with the ideas in the story, select the next part of Tom's path, and discover if their decisions have led to success or back to the point of choice again. It is simple but incredibly satisfying – and it remains one of the few

branching storylines available online for really young children.

The social aspects of the Internet do not really work for younger kids, but that does not mean that they do not want to contribute to TV via the web. A truly cross-media project engaging really young kids (with their parents' help) is *PicMe* (Jam Media, Ireland) which has seen success on RTÉ (Ireland), Nick Junior (UK and Europe), and PBS Kids Sprout (USA). *PicMe* is innovative in that it allows its viewers to star in each short TV episode. Parents can upload a photo of their child to the *PicMe* website, from where it is incorporated into the TV animations. The activity encourages collaboration between child and parent, and it offers an enhanced version of the "birthday card moment" used by so many TV channels to offer their viewers their 30 seconds of fame.

Older children – play and learning

Research suggests that game play is a major feature of why 7- to 11-year-olds are online. But there are ways of integrating websites and their game play with the programme experience which set them apart from the run-

of-the-mill, and there are ways of utilising games to facilitate exploration and learning which are powerful and add meaning and purpose to play.

Amongst the sites which featured in the final line-up at the PRIX JEUNESSE 2010, *13 in De Oorlog* (NPS, Netherlands) is a fine example of a difficult subject (the Second World War) approached in an accessible way on TV. The series features the stories of 13 young people caught up in the war in the Netherlands. This extends to the online space in an even more accessible way – through an intriguing detective game.

Similarly, the *Horrible Histories* (CBBC, UK) site uses a rich video game to offer the humour of the TV show with many opportunities to learn along the way. It feels just like the TV experience, but it takes you through a series of conversations using video content which not only progress the game, but teaches you history along the way (www.bbc.co.uk/cbbc/horriblehistories/game.shtml).

In terms of brand extension, *Horrible Histories* is an example of the potential for crossover into the games market, with PC, Wii, and Nintendo DS versions of *Ruthless Romans* released in 2010.

The winner in the 7-11 interactive category at the PRIX JEUNESSE was *Klangkiste*, the site of the WDR orchestra, big band, and choirs (see box). This site is a technical tour de force, with wonderful use of Flash mini movies teaching you everything you need to know about the orchestra etc. – though there is little chance to discover through play, which might be an educational opportunity missed.

Teens and social drama

The winner in the PRIX JEUNESSE 12-15 interactive category was *Routes* (Channel 4, UK, see box) which set about re-inventing the factual format and using every interactive means possible to further its educational aims. *Routes* uses a scheduled approach to content so that the web experience is more like that of linear TV. The topic is DNA, and the website content is a blend of games, factual documentary, and fictional interactive mystery.

The blurring of the lines between reality and fiction is becoming more and more a feature of teen websites. Adults find it disturbing; Teens appear to find it perfectly acceptable – it suits their general world-picture!

Also in the Channel 4 stable of “soft education” websites are some formats which take the novel approach of starting online and graduating to a TV show only after the brand and the participants’ activity is well-established online first. The campaign site *Battlefront* (Channel 4, UK) is an example of this, as young activists compete to put an issue they feel passionate about in front of the teen audience, by whatever media and means they feel would work best – video being a feature of course – and a TV series being the end result, but not the starting point.

Interactive drama has a strong pull on the teen audience. Recent examples such as *Sophia’s Diary* ran to 3 series on *BEBO* and has been re-versioned in many territories across the world, including China (see www.bebo.com/sofiadiary). Public service versions of the same interactive and participa-

tory dramas have been made in Norway (*Sara and Mia*, NRK, Norway; <http://nrksuper.no/superstore/sara/>; <http://nrksuper.no/mia/>) and in New Zealand, *Reservoir Hill*, (TVNZ, New Zealand) which won the Digital Emmy for Children and Young People in April 2010 (<http://tvnz.co.nz/reservoir-hill>).

Interactive drama offers the audience much deeper engagement than its linear counterpart, because it allows them to share comments, recommend to their friends, vote, and, in some cases, influence the story outcomes. Sharing and recommendation amongst the teen audience are the point at which social media sites such as *BEBO* and *Facebook* meet broadcasters and producers. The Channel 4 (UK) philosophy is an interesting example of a change of heart by a broadcaster. For their “soft-learning” sites for teens they ensure that these are seeded, planted, and grown virally on the social media sites where kids and teens are, rather than where the channel feels they should be. Channel branding is minimal. But their association with sites frequented every minute of every day by teens ensures that the brands will cut through the cyber-babble and make an impact. Meanwhile the extent to which many of these teen content sites avoid a TV presence is also interesting.

Kids’ loyalty shifting

A phenomenon has been the growth of brands which are exclusively online. They market themselves in quite different ways from the traditional TV/online tie-ins, and some have become immensely and internationally successful. The potential of some of those brands has already been recognised by the major international kids’ broadcasters, with Nickelodeon buying up *Neopets* and Disney acquiring *Club Penguin*.

But even as the big broadcasters find their way in this space, there are still powerful independent brands enjoy-

ing huge success internationally, e.g. the social gaming site for younger children *Moshi Monsters* (Mind Candy, UK) and fashion/play phenomenon *Stardoll* (Stardoll AB, Sweden).

The statistics for *Moshi Monsters* and *Stardoll* are simply amazing. *Moshi* has in the region of 30 million registered members, playing educational games, customising their monsters, and chatting safely with online friends. *Stardoll* takes the simple concept of a paperdoll cut-out clothing game to over 50 million users in 236 countries. If you work in kids’ TV and do not know *Moshi* and *Stardoll*, you are seriously missing out on the lives your audience are living and the competition you face. And of course they will, all in different ways, have TV aspirations – in fact *Stardoll TV* has already launched... online.

Meaningful interactivity

Interactive participation can take many forms, from the simple act of voting for your favourite singer on a talent show, to building, creating, uploading, and sharing your own content. For me, the key questions are always, “Is the participation meaningful? Does it have a good effect on the user and can the user’s content

affect the overall content proposition in some way? Does the user's agency produce a perceptible result?" My final examples are of meaningful interactivity which carries across from the online space to the TV in a variety of ways – all aimed at the 7-12 demographic.

Total Drama Island (Xenophile Media and Jam3media for Teletoon, Canada, and subsequently Cartoon Network in various territories) is an animated parody of a reality show in which participants in a summer camp are "voted off" week by week. For broadcasters, who not only acquire the animation but buy into the full version of its website, *Total Drama Island (TDI)* online offers the world of the animation in which users can create their own avatar and compete in their own competition by playing micro-games on the site. If they rise to the top of the game play leader-board, their avatar will win the chance to appear in the final episode of the series. Meanwhile, though it would be impossible with a pre-produced animated series to allow the audience to actually vote for the weekly "evictions", online users do get the chance to vote in the final – through the simple mechanism of there being 2 final episodes. *TDI* is ambitious and has explored some of the key problems of meaningful interactive engagement – such as the point that audiences can only influence TV content when programmes are live or near live as a general rule. But they have also understood that with a little thought and additional work (and not too much additional expense) audiences can be offered sufficiently meaningful choices and power to encourage them to participate in large numbers. *TDI* has also cracked another conundrum – how to finance a complex and expensive website through international sales. The distributors (Cake Entertainment, UK) offer the website as part of the animation acquisition package, but with an additional charge to cover the web budget. Thus the cost of the

website is amortised in the same way as the cost of the animation.

Sites which encourage kids' creativity get high marks from this reviewer. Examples are:

Me and My Movie (CBBC, UK) is one of several sites around the world which encourage kids to make their own movies and animations and upload them YouTube-style to the library of content. *Me and My Movie* (www.bbc.co.uk/cbbc/mymovie) misses out slightly on the vital TV component, though it is connected via the programme *Blue Peter* to a competition which gains the winner a British Academy Award at the Children's BAFTAs.

In the Netherlands, the popular and long-running magazine show *Klokhuis* (NPR, Netherlands) has developed a suite of tools on its website to allow kids to build their own sketches – reflecting the comedy element of the TV show and using the regular characters, and their familiar roles and catch-phrases. The *Klokhuis* site also features a game constructor so that kids can build their own versions of online micro-games from a kit of parts (<http://oud.hetklokhuis.nl/doe>). Cartoon Network has taken this concept up internationally under its *Ben*

Ten brand. The *Ben Ten Game Creator* has recently been extended to the *Star Wars: the Clone Wars* and *Batman* brands. The Game Creator lets you not only build games but also upload them to Game-play Central where everyone else can play them. Though play is a serious business for kids – and learning the basics of games development might give some of them career access to a multi-billion dollar industry – a more serious participatory activity is available on the *Bugbears* (CBBC, UK) website. *Bugbears* allows users to upload audio about their feelings, concerns, worries, and observations on life. These are then moderated and fed through a semi-automated animation process to produce an entire world of little monsters speaking with the kids' voices. It is empowering and stimulating on many levels – as the kids can show their respect or sympathy by clicking on voting buttons. *Bugbears* was a finalist in the 7-11 interactive section of the 2010 PRIX JEUNESSE. The TV cross-over has yet to develop, but it is interesting that the BBC was prepared to build a brand online with no TV outlet.

And finally, after years of expensive software development, the BBC created *Bamzooki* (CBBC, UK). If you have never visited, or built a Zook, and raced it against the others on the site, you really should. It is the gold standard of creative involvement. Users build creatures which follow the laws of physics and are targeted on certain aims. This allows them to compete with others, both on the site and in a TV game show which is packed with technological

The PRIX JEUNESSE Interactivity Prize

Since 1964, PRIX JEUNESSE has been the premier prize in children's and youth television. Now, as young people seek entertainment and information from multiple media, the "PRIX JEUNESSE Interactivity Prize" honours applications (websites, interactive TV, games, mobile media, etc.) that reflect excellence in a broadcaster's multi-platform strategy for a children's TV programme or series in 3 age categories (Up to 6, 7-11 and 12-15).

Winners 2010

Up to 6

DINOSAUR TRAIN WEBSITE

FableVision Inc, Boston

The Jim Henson Company, Hollywood PBS, Arlington

7-11

WDR Klangkiste

Westdeutscher Rundfunk, Cologne

12-15

ROUTES

Channel 4 (on behalf of Oil Productions for the Welcome Trust), London

innovation and real audience engagement. The cost was enormous and in difficult times it is hard to see when work of this sort will be done by a national broadcaster again. But the principles behind it are purposeful and enabling, and the TV crossover potential is strong.

What next? Or rather ... what now?

Beyond online, many of the international broadcasters are taking advantage of placing their brands on game consoles – especially the mobile consoles – and turning their brands into apps for the iPhone and iPad. Cartoon Network had an unexpected runaway success with its simple but amusing Ben Ten Mouth Off which allows the user to lip-synch their own voice with alien mouths animated on the iPhone screen. There are literally thousands of games and other apps on the market which use children's and youth TV brands as their basis. The potential for educational apps has been taken up by companies like Zuztertu, which offers a comprehensive aggregation of educational games and learning apps for smart phones (<http://www.zuztertu.com>).

We have talked about convergence for a long time. But now devices have converged, with not only PCs but also phones, mobile and fixed game consoles all having Internet access and therefore social media potential. Content converges either as cross-media propositions, moving the audience from one platform to another to get the full experience, or transmedia approaches to a consistent story universe which can accommodate mul-

ti-ple stories in a variety of media. And the various industry sectors are converging, as broadcasters realise the power of multi-player gaming, as book publishers explore tablet PCs (like the iPad), as toy manufacturers venture into virtual worlds (watch out for *Lego Universe*, <http://universe.lego.com>, and *Playmobil World*) and as brands emerge to huge success through the viral power of the Internet with no movie or TV origin. These are powerful new forces.

For public service and local broadcasters cost is an issue, and there is evidence that some are reverting to a model whereby broadband Internet becomes simply another delivery method for TV content – rather than a means of developing a totally new relationship with the kids' audience: two-way, interactive, inclusive, and empowering. There are those who think that this will be broadcasters' final undoing. Denying the fundamental shift in audience relationship which the web implies, is to turn your back on progress, and on "what kids want". The alternative – embrace the multi-platform approach, take a holistic view of content and brands, enable interactivity, participation, and choice, and build the expertise or the partnerships to facilitate this – in short, adapt to survive. ■

NOTE

This article is the product of research undertaken annually for a talk on "Digital Kids" delivered to the German "Akademie für Kindermedien", with some additions from a contribution on cross-media children's content at the PRIX JEUNESSE Suitcase held for the children's department of the Turkish public broadcaster, TRT, in November 2010.

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