Arts & Business

Watershed

Background

A well known media centre in Bristol, digital technology is at the heart of Watershed's activities and major projects. As we shall see, Watershed has used digital technology to showcase their own work, in research and development projects to develop artistic practice, support the creative industries, as well as to push forward new types of physical and virtual experiences. At the centre of their work is the use of digital technology to tell new stories and to give a voice to those who have not previously had one. Watershed is unique in that it has been pioneering digital technology in the cultural sector since the organisation was established in 1982.

Watershed's Managing Director, Dick Penny, was approached by Professor David May, Head of Computer Sciences at Bristol University, who was at the time launching a project to experiment with ways the media industry could harness the potential of new broadband technology. Watershed's plan was to find a way to use this technology to engage with more people and share the knowledge. One of the initial outcomes was an interactive digital advent calendar, featuring submissions from across Bristol; from household names like Aardman, to community groups and schools. Although it crashed quite a few computers, the potential and spirit of collaborative innovation in the context of the internet was solid and Electric December has been growing in popularity every year since.

It was apparent that as the technology developed and users began to create their own content with greater ease and precision, that a dedicated home would be needed for Watershed's contribution to this. And so out of this original experiment, DShed was born.

Giving a voice

DShed invites people to explore the digital realm on their own. One of DShed's pioneering projects was DepicT, a short film competition. Another was 'Electric Pavilion', a virtual architectural structure with different rooms showcasing different perspectives from Bristol. Part of this was a project entitled Bristol Stories, which has been ongoing since 2005. This is a series of short user-generated media presentations describing the life of one of the City's inhabitants, based upon the idea that everyone has a unique story to tell.

Image provided by Watershed

For example, one story is told from the perspective of Damos Santanos, a young graffiti artist. In his own words he tells us of his motivations and passions for the art form. Not only does this artistically feed back into a larger artistic dynamic, but it engages communities by reflecting their own tales back at them. Damos' story might remind viewers of Banksy's influence on contemporary culture, creating an engaging dynamic which will appeal to younger generations without appearing at all contrived or controlled. Other stories include personal accounts of unlikely friendship, historical allegories and an unintentionally hilarious tale from a recent graduate trying his best to describe his new job at the city council handling the exciting world of vehicle management in car parks. Despite this former student's morbid glaze, each story adds to the larger symbol.

Watershed's Director, Dick Penny comments:

"What's so exciting about the Internet is the way it has disrupted historic power structures. Too many people in our communities have been either under-represented or simply misrepresented by traditional media, because they don't have the means to make themselves heard. But if you can give those people the means of production and publishing, if you can say to them, 'here are the tools, here's the know-how, make a film and say what you want to say about your life and we'll publish it': well, that has so many advantages. People feel more engaged and valued, which makes them more aspirational; and, critically, their input adds to the general pool of ideas and experiences, helping us all to come up with something fresh. That's what being human is about – sharing and learning cultural references and behaviours."

Pervasive Media Studio

This technological potential has also been harnessed by Watershed through relationships with businesses. These partnerships use technology as the platform/medium for collaboration which changes the dynamic of the relationship.

Through a partnership between Hewlett Packard Labs and the University of the West of England's Digital Cultures Research Centre, the Pervasive Media Studio was created. Opened in 2008 the Studio brings together IT, communications and the creative industries to produce content, applications and experiences of the future from gaming, performances through to communication. HP Lab's involvement comes through the corporate research arm of the business and through the partnership they explore theory and practice to the benefit of one another.

Considering our previous case study on Digital Theatre, perhaps the best example to focus on would be The Extended Theatre Experience. In spring 2009, technologists from HP Labs, digital media experts from Watershed and theatre practitioners from Bristol Old Vic worked together to create a piece of short theatre. Funded by the Technology Strategy Board, this project then experimented with new and innovative ways to capture the performance.

Miniature cameras were embedded within the production, hidden in the set, among props, as well as on the heads of the actors in order to make the audience feel part of the action. Contrary to the awkwardly comic images this inspires (of actors with large novelty devices strapped to their heads), the cameras were not at all intrusive due to the highly advanced equipment used. The highlight however was that these cameras were able to capture insights and details that could not be obtained from a live production. For example, the cameras were able to capture private viewpoints that would never have been available before, such as when an actor's presence or expression is hidden from the audience. This opened up an entirely new discussion about the nature of when an actor actually stops performing, as well as adding an element to the entertainment and emotional responses theatre can evoke.

A similar experiment was undertaken in a project entitled 'as if it were the last time.' Watershed studio resident Duncan Speakman invited the public to take part in what was essentially a walkthrough cinema performance, or a 'Subtlemob'. A Subtlemob functions much like a Flashmob, but instead of singing pop songs in unison or spraying one another with water pistols, participants were involved in something a bit more subtle: the cinema of everyday life; trying to be invisible rather than drawing attention. This is in itself quite provocative considering some of the enjoyable yet artificial uses of social media. After downloading the soundtrack and visiting the location at a specific time, people could take part in their own cinema, sometimes enacting scenes and following instructions, other times watching others. According to online feedback this was a huge success and managed to achieve a rare form of defamiliarisation with the city among its participants. Duncan Speakman is also a member of the Vauxhall Collective, an initiative of the car company to provide a platform for innovators in film, craft, design, photography, fine art and theatre, thus ensuring a corporate understanding was brought to the table.

Outcome

Watershed is a really fascinating model and a pioneer in seizing the opportunities that arise across so many aspects of digital technology and digital artistry. There are two key aspects for others to learn from the example of Watershed. The first is about the possibility of digital technology and how it can contribute to new developments in art and artistic practice. Watershed's innovative perspectives place them at the forefront of digital and cultural activity, with each of the projects discussed demonstrating a different aspect of a potential digital future.

From future developments in theatre, inter-disciplinary collaboration and (a thankfully non-spurious) interaction with youth; Watershed embodies the future of audiovisual literacy, exploiting the shift towards conversation and participation (rather than mere didactic presentation) that digital technologies enable.

The second aspect is to recognise the entrepreneurial and innovative possibilities that digital technologies afford around a closer working relationship between the cultural and commercial sectors.

The combination of digital disruption and the UK's global advantage in high-quality arts and broadcast provision provides huge opportunity for the work of Watershed. In particular, the Pervasive Media Studio, highlights advantages of a close relationship between content, application and experience: to engage more widely, to explore the pervasive power of 'prosumer' creative energy and to pioneer new forms of economic, cultural and social value.