

Case study:// digital action research experiment / macrobert



The macrobert team worked with digital producer Hannah Rudman, a resource provided by the Federation of Scottish Theatre's Digital Action Research project led by Hannah; and participated and shared plans, actions and reflections with the Action Research Group. This case study summarises that journey.

The experiment undertaken

In 2011, macrobert undertook an experiment, aiming to digitise content from their flagship show, the Christmas Pantomime (Jackie and the Beanstalk). macrobert has both live and digital arts under the same roof, and wanted to explore the meeting point between the two by streaming the live show simultaneously into the cinema (to attract the filmhouse audience to engage with live content in an environment they find comfortable).

The digital innovation was to film the live performance in the theatre's main house, with the help of University of Stirling undergraduates, and simultaneously stream it to the cinema. A later addition to the experiment emerged after Hannah negotiated a digital co-production with STV. The performance was to be also streamed live online, hosted and promoted by STV, encouraging the participation of audiences too far away or unable to attend and so to increase access, scale, reach, impact and legacy of the work.

macrobert's panto is accessible for a wide range of audiences and has a reputation for combining traditional panto with new ideas, and to coincide with their 40th birthday, macrobert planned to host a special performance of the panto on 17 December - this was also the date chosen for the cinema stream and live stream.

Results

The contracts with the creative and technical teams for the digital elements of the show were agreed. The technical production process of the cinema stream and live stream was planned and rehearsed successfully. The undergraduate film crew from University Of Stirling were recruited and rehearsed. The co-production and marketing strategy of the live stream with STV was negotiated and set up on their web platform successfully. The digital experiments were taken as seriously and professionally as any other macrobert production by all departments, and was fully supported by the board. New processes were created and new relationships with STV and the university's film and media courses were begun, and relationships with National Theatre Scotland were strengthened through NTS loaning kit and offering expertise and support for the kit.

However, neither the simultaneous stream to the cinema nor the live stream online took place. Just before the technical rehearsals for the streaming, both experiments were halted, as it turned out macrobert did not have all the nuanced BROADCAST rights required by the Performing Rights Society (PRS) secured for a potentially globally available digital performance. The PRS rights secured were adequate for a straight forward 4-camera digital filming with live edit of the panto - as performed live in house - was achieved by the film crew of undergraduates on the 17th December 2011 which macrobert will use for educational purposes.

Outcomes

Contractual

The contracts with creative and technical teams were achieved at the earliest stages, and included their agreement to the digital cinema and online stream, as well as additional filming for documentary-type content. Costs for this were agreed before the rehearsal period began.

PRS licensing for certain types of lyrics is different when those lyrics are deemed to be recorded for broadcast, rather than simply performed live. Whilst the license was adequate for the theatre, it was not for a "global broadcast" - the definition PRS gave macrobert's online live stream.

Key learning: cover off rights, license and contractual agreements at the earliest possible stage. If the project changes, scope the contractual risks of that immediately, and work to resolve them immediately. (A list of all the rights that should be acquired for a digital production are included as an Appendix to the **How To choose the right model for your digital development** guide that the FST has published on its website¹).

Technical

The technical aspects of the digital experiments were treated with great seriousness by an already stretched technical team. The role of in-house technical producer for the digital productions was created, and this role created and oversaw all the processes for the film crew and liaison between them, the in house technical team, and cast and crew. Technical filming kit was borrowed from National Theatre Scotland, with only a small amount of money spend on additional hires. macrobert had to think about the impact of the digital production on in-house processes. Questions they asked themselves included:

- Do we need extra kit/crew/runners?
- Will there need to be an additional health and safety check?
- Do the in-house technicians understand what the digital production team are doing, can they meet their technical requirements?
- Does the digital production have an impact on the live production that the crew, cast or live audience should be informed about?
- Does the digital production crew need special space (e.g. just outside the auditorium for live vision mixing) or access (e.g.?)
- Is the hired in/borrowed digital kit/crew covered by our insurance?
- Do we need extra technical rehearsals?

Key learning: test digital kit and digital processes new to the organisation in plenty of time. Have it on site early and make time to set it up, play with it and become familiar with it. Involve the digital kit and processes in technical and dress rehearsals if possible, otherwise set up specific technical rehearsals to integrate the digital production's needs.

¹ <http://www.scottishtheatres.com>

Artistic

Ideas enhancing the live pantomime with digital interaction from the planned online and cinema audiences were conceived and accepted by the creative and technical teams, but in the end were not rehearsed or realised due to the halting of the experiment. A pre-production scoping phase for any future digital experiment or production (to detail artistic, operational, and business model impacts) would be the method employed by macrobert in the future. Short timelines to fit the digital experiment in with the 2011 pantomime did not allow this to happen.

Key learning: treat the digital production with the same priority and status as any other production, and include it in all core planning and processes. (e.g. "Digital Panto" is a separate but equal production to "Panto")

Audience development



The audience (measured through ticket sales) for the cinema stream was disappointing early December, but this is no surprise, as a cinema audiences do not purchase tickets in advance as theatre goers do. Advertising was included in the cinema brochure, but no funds were available for further digital marketing to the cinema audience. As the experiment did not go ahead, no conclusions can be drawn about whether the method of streaming to the cinema would have broadened the appeal of the panto to macrobert's cinema audience.

Large online audiences would have definitely been achieved by the live online stream, as STV's involvement would have secured their marketing and promotional clout as well the dependability of their online platform.

Opportunities to show the pantomime to audiences for educational purposes are still available as the pantomime was filmed and live mixed, creating a digital version of the film for this.

Key learning: Appropriate budgets and appropriate channels must be used for digital projects - if you are looking for digital audiences, go to where they are. Spend money/time on online distribution channels (websites, social media, blogs), and build the time needing to spent into the overall production and marketing plan.

Organisational development

macrobert reported that a degree of cross team working was facilitated by this project, and that this was a key impact on the organisation, and will be engaged as a future mode of working, especially on any digital projects. All staff involved reported huge learning curves about technical, contractual, managerial, and operational aspects of digital projects. Increased confidence and capability was also reported. More time for planning, scoping and risk

management at the early stages - and throughout as the project changed - of this particular digital production was required. macrobert were opportunistic in undertaking this particular experiment, but that meant it overtook the timings of macrobert's traditional planning cycle. Had it been possible, early planning and scoping may have caught the PRS rights issue. However,

macrobert have learnt and reflected that digital and experimental projects are often complex and do change, so building in an expectation that they might change and this will demand management input and cross-team working as the project progresses was important.



Key learning: It is essential to give the digital production full production status, with exactly the same robust planning mechanisms; management processes; and full team commitment applied to it. Expect the project to change, and build contingency into budgets, timescales and operational infrastructure to cope with this.

Business model development

The cinema stream performance was going to recoup the cost of the production to macrobert. As the cinema stream did not go ahead, the cinema was available for extra performances of other films, which recovered macrobert's costs anyway. The STV hosting of the online live stream was provided in-kind, and the marketing and promotion they were going to do would have been a significant in-kind income, that would otherwise have cost macrobert a great of money (and possibly not have been achievable anyway). So the potential business model development opportunity ended up being a new collaborative relationship with new partners (Stirling University, STV, Envirodigital), which could have produced intangible assets (larger digital audiences, better awareness of macrobert's ethos and product, etc.).

Key learning: The business model may recoup initial outlay, but is most likely to result in more intangible benefits, such as increased digital capability, capacity, confidence and creativity in-house; wider audiences (demographically and geographically); and new and broader collaborative partnerships (in this case with a national broadcasting body, a university department, and specialist digital producer).

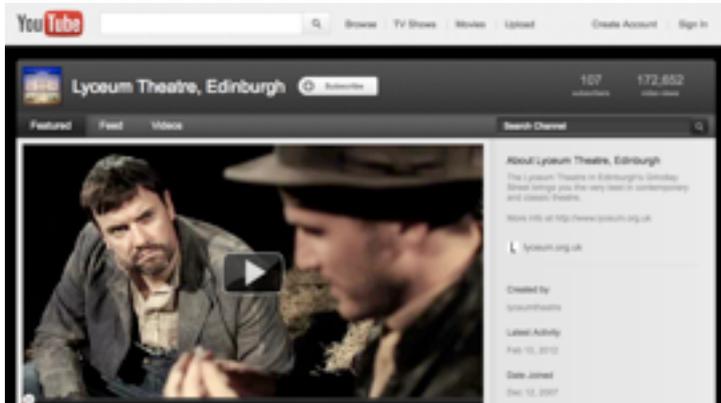
All images are screenshots of the digital film of the pantomime, which will be used for educational purposes.

<http://www.macrobert.org>

Glossary

Bandwidth: measure of available or consumed data communication resources, expressed as bit/second

Simulcast: simulcasting is a description of the technology that delivers NTLive! <http://ntlive.com> or the Met Opera (or recently The Traverse experimented simulcasting rehearsed new play readings - [read my case study](#)) into cinemas around the country. Simulcast uses satellite and digital broadcast systems and spectrum to deliver a live broadcast to cinemas equipped with



receivers and high spec digital data projectors and screens. Simulcasting produces an exquisite aesthetic (millions of colours, 5:1 surround sound) but requires a completely different level of production and delivery for this quality to be guaranteed. It is therefore extremely costly and out of range for many cultural organizations. It is high definition, and therefore the file sizes are too big to send and receive via standard broadband connections over the internet.

Webcast: A webcast is a media file distributed over the internet using streaming media technology to distribute a single linear content source to many simultaneous listeners/viewers. A webcast may either be distributed live, or on demand. Webcasting used to be defined as “broadcasting” over the internet, but that no longer quite fits: many webcasting platforms now offer tools that encourage online audience interaction - with the live event and with other onliners. Webcasting can be described as a live stream, because the same principles and set-up are in play, but I tend to differentiate between the terms: a live stream is a simple, live, stream from a camera; a webcast is a web broadcast, curated for the online user to receive the best possible experience.