

# Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

## Digital Distribution, Different Success

Richard Proper · Wednesday, February 12th, 2014

“Where is my audience?” These words have been uttered by content makers since the advent of the moving visual experience. The old world was filled with standard ways of reaching an audience – either by getting your work on television or, if you were lucky enough, to get a theatrical release. If you couldn’t get the decision makers to acquire your work you could barter for airtime, “four-wall” it at the local art-house cinema or duplicate 10,000 DVDs and self-distribute. Pay to play, as it was known. But that was *sooooo* last century.

The world of distribution has changed for the good in some ways, but it’s limping along in others. Rapid change in technology means that the outmoded models of reaching an audience are crashing all around us. If we consider an old, old world example, the telegraph was amazing in its day. A wonder of science and communication! Then someone declared that a new device would not only replace the telegraph, but every home would have one: the telephone was everything the telegraph was not. Easy to use, cheap and – for its day – wondrous. That’s where we are with digital distribution. 15 years ago, the technology and delivery mechanisms were not ready. Today, simple OTT (over the top) devices like Roku, Apple TV, and Google Chromecast all live outside the walled garden, allowing independent content makers to reach a paying audience and keep most of their revenues.

It appears that content makers are now able to leap past the gatekeepers and reach their own audience. Yes, I said “appears.” You see iTunes, Netflix, and Hulu are great, but let me share a secret – *they are gatekeepers too!* They have high transaction fees or low flat rate license fees for unlimited showings and they don’t accept all titles. Look to the next level of distribution to reach your audience directly via fundraising platforms such as Indiegogo or Kickstarter to see if your project is even viable. Completed content can recognize revenues directly by way of Vimeo or Distrify with their streamlined delivery mechanisms and easy to use transactional tools which enable high quality imagery to be presented in a great wrapper.

Over the past two years there have been some great stories about online content hitting a critical mass – meaning that the distribution actually paid off. Almost a year ago I saw an article on Huffington Post about a miniature alien being found in Chile. Accompanying the article was a captivating picture that linked to a clip of the tiny extraterrestrial being examined. Ridiculous, yet the clip had more than 1,000,000 clicks. A few months later a filmmaker walked into our office to pitch another project. It turned out that he was the producer of *Sirius*, the feature length documentary from which the alien clip was excerpted. I learned that a film distributor saw an opportunity and began negotiations for a theatrical release of *Sirius*. Despite the promise of a

decent advance, the filmmaker and his partners walked away from that deal. Instead, they calculated that the worldwide audience who had seen the clip wanted to watch this as a VOD event, at their convenience and on their own device. The filmmakers were right. By taking that gamble, all the revenues went into the filmmakers' pockets, with a fixed cost for the delivery platform. This is the new world, selling to your audience directly.

There is an even more prominent example. As a founder of WESTDOC, I had the good fortune to host a Pitchfest where a pair of relatively unknown filmmakers presented their work-in-progress. It was a feature-length doc about independent video game designers called *INDIE GAME: THE MOVIE*. (BTW – they won). They had funded the project through a successful Kickstarter campaign and pre-sold the film through their website to fans. What fans? The fans they discovered they had through social media. They knew their audience – video game aficionados – and courted them. The audience responded positively. When the film was complete, the filmmakers decided to forego iTunes and instead made their work available via an unconventional yet strangely perfect launch pad: Steam, a gaming platform not exactly known for selling documentaries. Unconventional, yes – but the crossover was perfect. While Steam made some money in the transaction and delivery, the film went on to financial success. *INDIE GAME* soon won awards at Sundance and Toronto, and a theatrical run ensued. HBO acquired the formatting rights for a possible series. Only then did the film find its way onto conventional platforms such as Netflix and iTunes. The filmmakers didn't wait around and hope to be discovered; they focused on their target audience and gave them what they wanted.

Marketing is constantly evolving. The digital imprint won't be about rising above all other content, it will be identifying your audience and targeting them directly. The sausage factory of Hollywood needs the iTunes and Netflixes as digital retailers to promote and transact the next Spider-Man, or other works that are meant for everybody at once. Your audience is looking for something else. If you want to succeed in today's marketplace, you need to focus on winning your viewers over one by one. The question you need to ask yourself is not "Where is my audience?" Instead, "*Who* is my audience?"

*Image: A scene from Indie Game: The Movie.*

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