

THE MODERN ART OF STORYTELLING

WITH A BUDGET OF €6 MILLION AND THE INVOLVEMENT OF SIX PUBLIC BROADCASTERS, *THE ARTISTS* IS ONE OF THE MOST AMBITIOUS TRANSMEDIA PROJECTS MADE IN EUROPE TO DATE. PRODUCER PETER DE MAEGD AND DIRECTOR HANS HERBOTS ARE RESPONSIBLE FOR MAKING SURE THE RESULT IS ADDICTIVE ENTERTAINMENT AS WELL AS A GROUND-BREAKING EXPERIMENT.

TEXT **IAN MUNDELL** PORTRAIT **BART DEWAELE**

'The most important thing is to tell a good story, whether that is transmedia or classical fiction,' says Herbots, whose credits include films such as *Stormforce* and *Bo*, and the TV series *The Divine Monster*. De Maegd agrees: 'The chemistry needs to be there for the audience.'

The impetus for the project came from Swedish broadcaster SVT, which wanted to build on the success of its 2007 'participation drama' *The Truth About Marika*. For the audience this began as a traditional TV drama about a missing person, but developed a surprise parallel storyline when a blogger (also part of the drama) claimed that the story was based on a real case. This thread was picked up in SVT's current affairs programming and on-line, allowing people to get involved in unravelling the conspiracy. Together with Flemish broadcaster VRT, which also wanted to explore the possibilities of transmedia storytelling, SVT started to look for other potential partners. In the end, four additional public broadcasters would join the project: Vara from the Netherlands, NRK from Norway, YLE from Finland and TV3 from Denmark.

participative storytelling

It was decided early on that a Belgian company would lead the production, since that would allow more money to be raised through the Tax Shelter, the country's tax break for investments in audiovisual production. 'In total about 25% of the finance is through the Tax Shelter,' says De Maegd. 'Without it we couldn't have produced this series.'

The contract was won by Brussels-based Caviar, a production company with experience of both TV series, most notably *The Emperor of Taste*, and movies. De Maegd was part of Caviar at the time and continues to work with the company as producer of *The Artists*. But he has also branched out as an independent producer, mainly focusing on transmedia projects. His initiation was *Where is Gary?*, a project that involved the on-line hunt for a con artist. 'That was my first experiment with truly participative storytelling,' he says. 'The experience was so exciting that I decided it was the road I wanted to continue on.'

Hans Herbots (l) and Peter De Maegd (r)



The Artists

'For people who grow up with these new kinds of media, in whose heads the media have already converged, when they start creating stories on a professional level it will be effortless. But the industry, broadcasters and funds need to be ready to welcome them'

– Peter De Maegd

The art world was chosen as the setting for the new project, partly because culture is something that unites the participating countries, partly because it provides a naturally international setting for the characters. There is nothing unusual about a group of artists from different countries coming together and, for the most part, talking in English. On top of that, the partners decided to make it a crime story, a genre that travels particularly well.

The TV drama element of the project will begin with six young artists who decide to pull a stunt. Exactly what this involves is a closely guarded secret until the broadcast date in September 2012, but the stunt goes wrong and they are drawn into a criminal investigation. 'There's a story that unfolds on TV, but also on-line and in reality,' De Maegd explains, 'and through that we create a story world. It's not just something that you consume passively as a TV series, but you can really become a co-character in the story.'

art-themed game

The innovation begins with the artists' community in which the protagonists meet. This was created over three days with the cast and 36 live-action role-players. In one sense these role-players are like extras in a traditional drama, but they are also the first participants in the story world, capturing images with cameras and their phones, creating authentic user-generated content.

Their involvement doesn't stop there. 'They stay in character, on-line, for the next year, most intensively during the period that the series is broadcast,' says De Maegd. 'When you go on-line, you can interact with these characters and that helps us build the story world outside of the TV series.'

As well as interacting with the characters, viewers will also be able to play an art-themed game, although details of that are also secret until the broadcast begins. 'The game play is built around the idea that everyone can contribute something valuable to art simply by gameplay and being creative.'

De Maegd admits that there is a constant risk of getting carried away with the innovative aspects of the project. They have to remember that the TV series remains the core, and it falls to Herbots to ensure that this traditional drama is as strong as it can be. 'It's six artists, and you really need to believe that they are friends who go back a long way together,' says De Maegd. 'That's why you need a director like Hans who has a very good feel for actors. And because of his experience in TV drama, in traditional storytelling, he is also making sure we don't pull the story in too many directions.'

This may seem like a very complicated and expensive way of making a five-episode TV series, but De Maegd takes the long view. 'This effort is not only about five episodes. It's to build experience and to be able to work in a better and more efficient way.'

In the future, this transmedia approach will be a natural way of working. 'For people who grow up with these new kinds of media, in whose heads the media have already converged, when they start creating stories on a professional level it will be effortless. But the industry, broadcasters and funds need to be ready to welcome them.' 

Guarding the Story

HANS HERBOTS' ROLE IN *THE ARTISTS* IS TO LOOK AFTER THE TV DRAMA. 'THE MAJORITY OF VIEWERS WILL SEE A SERIES, AND THEY HAVE TO SEE A GOOD SERIES,' HE SAYS, 'BUT FOR THOSE WHO WANT TO GET INVOLVED IN THE STORY THERE IS THE OPPORTUNITY TO GO DEEPER.'

He came to the project relatively late. 'Normally, as a director, you come into a fiction project quite early, but this one had been going on for two or three years,' he recalls. 'They had spent a lot of time balancing the transmedia elements, and the classical TV drama was one of the last things they started to develop.'

That meant some aspects of the story were off-limits if he wanted to make alterations. 'The script needed some more work, but because of the transmedia character of the project certain things couldn't change,' he says. 'The challenge there was to try to make the story as good as possible without touching the cornerstones that every level required.'

Among his first tasks was to select a cast from the actors put forward by the participating broadcasters. He was looking for a group of people who were similar enough to be credible as friends, yet distinctive enough to stand out in the drama. 'We did casting sessions and auditions for some of the parts, but for others we had a lot of conversations,' he explains. 'At this level, it's no longer about whether or not they can act, but how they fit in and whether we are on the same wavelength.'

Herbots prefers a minimalist style of acting, which fitted well with the Scandinavian approach, as well as that closer to home in Belgium and the Netherlands. However, asking all the actors to perform in English was a risk. 'I was curious to see if that would work,' he says. 'If you bring six people together from six different countries and they speak in English, which is not their mother tongue... I was concerned that it would not come over as a construct. But now that we are half way through shooting, it feels like an organic group.'

It was the chance to explore the international side of TV drama that attracted him to the project. 'It's very exciting working with a mixed crew, mostly from Denmark but also from Belgium. It was also a good opportunity to see how things are done abroad. And I was very curious to work with actors from Sweden, Norway, Denmark and Finland. The whole context was very intriguing.'

He has been less involved in the transmedia elements of the project, although he will still be busy when the project goes live. 'We will be shooting some extra scenes when the series is already airing, and we will edit them in before the last episode. So we will be very involved next September.'

So far the experience has been a positive one, and he says he would like to do more European storytelling. 'I was happy to find that it works.' But his next project is likely to be a return to the cinema, with a feature film to be produced by Eyeworks. 'It's a Carl Joos scenario. He wrote *Dossier K.* and *The Alzheimer Case*, and once again it's a high concept film, it's a very dark film. But I can't say much more than that at the moment.'



From left to right: Tuva Novotny, Teun Luijkx, Viktoria Winge, Elmer Bäck, Thomas Ryckewaert, Johan Leysen, Paw Hendriksomy