

The Creative Challenge For Digital Media Businesses And For Learning Institutions

"Bitzer", says Thomas Gradgrind, " your definition of a horse?"

"Quadruped. Graminivorous. Forty teeth, namely twenty -four grinders, four eye-teeth and twelve incisive. Sheds coat in the Spring: in marshy countries, sheds hoofs too. Hoofs hard but requiring to be shod with iron. Age known by marks in mouth".

"Now girl number twenty", said Mr. Gradgrind, " you know what a horse is".

Hard Times. Charles Dickens

Thankfully, we have shed such an utilitarian perspective.

Our sense of art and beauty has been awakened and heightened. Many make art of one form or another and most of us ensure that we experience it. We see it as rudimentary and an important dimension of our lives.

Several things assisted this blossoming - social and cultural growth and development, the dedication of the artistic community, the work of government funded Arts agencies, the efforts of the education system and commercial sponsorships.

Mass media has played it's part, not just as a means of dissemination, but also in the art and design values it espoused and realised in much of the content it created. How often have we commented that the advertisements were better than the programme they interrupted? There is now a discerning and critically aware user base which demands good design in the products it buys.

The advent of digital media technologies, in their scope and range, confront emerging digital media businesses with an unprecedented need to support in-company creativity, product innovation and high quality design. User values and client expectations continue to rise at a time when much of the product/content produced is unimaginative and lacking real inspiration and originality. Consumers are not rushing to purchase.

There is a failure to exploit the revolutionary potential intrinsic to digital media technologies. Much of the content produced merely transposes materials generated in conventional media, such as video, animation, film and graphic design, to packaged digital formats. In order to breathe life into the industry, businesses must produce fresh and striking designs which emanate, ab initio, from a thorough understanding and exploitation of digital media technologies.

In this way, we get started on a process which will eventually press the boundaries of digital media production. This is the most significant route to generating user demand and to growing businesses.

Creative Teams

To deliver new and quality digital media content / products with high production values, businesses should form creative teams to work on designing and delivering projects. Programmers, designers, information architects and clients should be members of the team. The process of producing innovative and interactive content is a collaborative activity. The designer, as a critical member of the team, possesses the idiom to mediate the needs and expectations of the client and those of the ultimate user. The designer incorporates these in fresh and imaginative design ideas and proposes solutions which are tested constructively by the team.

Synthesising visual arts, music and mathematics, James Tindall, distinguished Interactive designer, quoted in Creative Review, says: " I have always visualised sounds and melodies with shape, texture and colour. Musical harmonies were colour harmonies, and rhythms were divisions in a rectangular bar". Digital media, uniquely, facilitates the fusion of multiple art forms - visual and audio, graphics and text in new and ingenious ways which should result in innovative content and productions. The skills of the designer are fundamental and pivotal to this process. A truly creative team is multi-disciplinary and should include design students and those engaged in post-graduate research in digital media.

Digital media businesses must develop close links with leading design and digital media colleges and have an active policy of facilitating and securing high quality student placements. Businesses should work with media colleges to match the creative strengths and aspirations of the students coming on placement with the requirements of their businesses. In this way the students gets to advance their own unique projects and the business gets to exploit fresh and futuristic ideas. Businesses also get an opportunity to identify the designers who best fit their future design skills needs in advance of graduation.

Digital media businesses, seeking to lead the market rather than reacting to it, must take a long term view. They need to looking at the opportunities for new applications, content and products which arise when new technologies are being developed or deployed. In the future some of these applications might appeal to our sense of smell, touch and hearing and not just to vision. Companies might concern themselves with such questions as: what make content/products enjoyable to utilise? How do we exploit this emotional dimension of design? Innovation should be

seen within the company as an activity which is supported and practised as a core business activity.

The continued success of digital media businesses is, to some extent, contingent on practising innovation, establishing a creative environment where new ideas emerge and their feasibility tested. Success will always be associated with executing good, if not mould-breaking, design.

The challenge for learning institutions

"Now what I want is, Facts. Teach these boys and girls nothing but Facts. Facts alone are wanted in life. Plant nothing else, and root out everything else. You can only form the minds of reasoning animals upon facts". (Thomas Gradgrind)

Hard Times. Charles Dickens.

The broad sweep of today's curriculum and range of courses at all levels of education is indicative of an educational philosophy which seeks to provide a balanced and enriching experience to our students. A new curriculum at first level champions a constructivist approach to learning. The arts and culture are juxtaposed with science, mathematics and the humanities. Teaching methodologies favour inter-disciplinarity and team-driven project work.

Consequently, learning is experienced as a creative, interactive and, as far as is feasible for this age group, a self-directed activity.

However, much of this approach ceases or is put on hold when students reach second level. In common with most countries, the second level curriculum is organised around rigid subject disciplines. Learning becomes compartmentalised and an individual pursuit. The emphasis shifts to mastering great chunks of "knowledge" in preparation for entry to third level. The challenge for second level education is to refocus on facilitating collaborative and inter-disciplinary learning environments which foster creativity, experiential learning and a spirit of enterprise.

Irish universities and colleges of further and higher education have quickly responded to the demand for digital media skills. A number of key colleges offer an impressive range of media and design courses which, together, are capable of meeting skills needs. Typically, these colleges collaborate with businesses which offer student placement opportunities and their courses facilitate the development of entrepreneurial skills. One of the results of the close partnerships forged between Enterprise Ireland, the Universities and the Institutes of

Technology in supporting the development of start-up and on-campus companies is an infusion of a spirit of invention and an entrepreneurial outlook among final year students. A significant number of highly innovative digital media start-ups have been established by graduates.

However, the creative challenge for third level is to facilitate much more inter-disciplinarity with cross-programme students making up project-driven teams working with high-end digital media. Access to state-of-the-art digital media labs. is essential if students are to work with an integrated digital media platform from the start. The presence of Media Lab Europe (MLE) in The Digital Hub offers real and exciting opportunities for collaborative research between media colleges and post-graduates and for the development of fresh and bold ideas to the point of commercialisation. In order to encourage and facilitate this inter-college collaboration with MLE the Higher Education Authority administers a special fund. Other opportunities for potential digital media entrepreneurs will arise with the The Virtual Academy for Digital Arts and Technology, being planned by The Digital Hub. It will provide access to facilities where students and graduates of the participating colleges can develop and test new and innovative ideas for viability prior to start-up stage. As businesses (start-ups and growing) begin to locate in The Digital Hub and as company clusters and inter-trading emerge and grow there are plans to develop mentor/practitioner relationships between the Virtual Academy and the new businesses.

Ireland has become a world leader in the business of the Arts and our creativity and imagination has successfully expressed itself in music, music theatre, literature and the visual arts. The creative challenges for the digital media industry will be met as Ireland sets out on the road to become a world leader in digital media enterprise.